

Main Characters

Carl Kester	<i>Captain of a patrol vessel</i>
Walter Duncan	<i>Captain of a light cruiser</i>
Bill Pershing	<i>First officer on a navy vessel</i>
Eric Huntsmill	<i>Lieutenant on a navy vessel</i>
Louise Yasuda	<i>Weapons officer on a navy vessel</i>
Ruth Appleyard	<i>Navigator on a navy vessel</i>
Rika Evans	<i>Physician on a navy vessel</i>
Petra Baird	<i>Colonel in charge of the Aries Sector</i>
Bill Johnson	<i>Commander of the navy base on Rockledge</i>
Earl Mackenzie	<i>Captain of the marines</i>
James Yonge	<i>Scientist on Rockledge</i>
Roy Litvak	<i>Captain of a cargo vessel</i>
Dor Baaksh	<i>Pirate</i>

INVERNESS •

AVALERO

• TIQUINA

• NOAKES

• YUMBEL

PLEIADES SECTOR

HORNEPAYNE •

• SALIS

• FOXBORO

BOLTON

PERLOS •

GROVER

OUTPOST
PL321

- TELAVERA
- MINAS
- ENDER

MAP NOT TO SCALE

ORION SECTOR

• DELMAR

ARIES SECTOR

Prologue

This is the story of Carl Kester, the final episode in his life which has been quite extraordinary. It has been closely tied to the life of Petra Baird.

Kester met Baird for the first time in a military campaign on Earth. After only a few short weeks their ways parted. And then, on a warm summer's day, they met for a second time, but in a far different environment. Both were officers on a warship. Their acquaintance lasted for several months. However, fate once more pulled them apart. A third time Kester stepped across the threshold and found himself embroiled in another conflict. He was part of a ranger team and Petra Baird was his partner. Their association lasted for two years before fate intervened for a third time.

There are many unexplained occurrences in this universe. After having been in strange environs several times in the past Kester did not question fate or himself when he found himself on Inverness as a patrol officer. He eventually made his way to Morgan's World where once again Petra Baird became part of his life. This time their alliance lasted for over half a dozen years, until the Saurian Affair came to an end. Through clever manipulation of events and asking pertinent questions at appropriate times his closest friends were able to piece together the extraordinary events of his life. And then an accident aboard a liner changed his life once more. Only this time Carl Kester had only the haziest memory of what had happened.

How will his existence progress? At this juncture in time I do not know. All I can say is that this is the final chapter in an extraordinary life lived by an extraordinary person. Why not join me? Let us travel together along the path fate has chosen for Carl Kester.

Chapter 1

Carl Kester halted. The forest was coming to an end and through the last of the trees he could see a meadow and houses some distance beyond it. Where there are houses there must also be people, he told himself. People meant food and shelter. And if they were not prepared to give it themselves they could get in touch with the authorities. It looked as if his ordeal was coming to an end. Not that he had suffered greatly as far as his physical condition was concerned. Sure he was hungry. But what bothered him much more was, where was he?

The last thing he remembered was - yes, what was it now? He was on that liner and Captain Alvarez had requested that he meet him at three in the afternoon in the officer's wardroom. Yes, that was how it had been. He had made his way along the corridor. He saw Captain Alvarez and his first officer waiting in the wardroom of the Star of Deneb. Carl Kester leaned against the bole of a tree.

He had been on Delmar, on his way back to Algocen via Lungaree. That was how it had been. It seemed as if his memory was gradually returning. The Star of Deneb was loading freight. The passengers had already boarded the vessel and were waiting for the ship's departure scheduled for shortly after midnight. Yes, he recalled that quite clearly.

He was about to greet the captain. He stepped across the threshold of the door to the wardroom and then -. What had happened then? Carl Kester wiped some imaginary cobwebs off his face. He straightened up and walked to the next tree closer to the edge of the forest. Placing his left hand against the trunk of the tree, he tried to remember. But there was only a void in his mind. He could not recall what had happened then, no matter how hard or how long his mind strove to recollect what had taken place then. All that he could remember was walking through this wilderness. And that had only been today, this afternoon, as far as he could recall.

Carl Kester let his eyes drop. There were grasses on the forest floor. Some unknown insects were crawling up the stem of one plant. And as his eyes traveled closer to his feet, he became aware of the boots he wore. And then he noticed his trousers. They seemed to be part of a uniform. Yes, and his tunic. He was indeed wearing a uniform, but not the uniform of the captain of a ship. It was not the uniform he had worn for the past several years. The whole thing was an enigma, a bad dream, a nightmare. He would wake up any minute now. But he did not wake up and it was no dream.

Once more he looked ahead. The houses were still there. They seemed to be part of a settlement or village. And was there not a man walking towards the forest? He, Kester, could inquire of that man where he could find help. Kester let go of the tree trunk and began to stroll towards the stranger. As he got closer the person seemed to lose his strangeness. He became ever more familiar. As Kester left the forest the man finally noticed him and changed directions towards him. And now Carl Kester could see that the man also wore a uniform, but it was a uniform he, Kester, could not identify.

Some twenty steps away the man stopped dead in his tracks. Then he belatedly saluted. Kester also halted and returned the salute. It was an automatic gesture. Then he slowly approached the soldier or sailor. Kester was not quite sure to what branch of service the uniform belonged. After he had covered half the distance, he halted again. The young man had not moved. For a few seconds Carl Kester felt himself tongue-tied.

"If I am not mistaken, I should say that I am looking at Eric Huntsmill," Kester said at last, "but it can't be!"

"I am indeed Eric Huntsmill," the uniformed person replied, still standing at attention. "Lieutenant Eric Huntsmill late of the cruiser HK673. Do I know you, Sir? I can't recall ever having met you, Commodore." Huntsmill was looking at a clean-cut person of average height with an athletic build. His face was tanned, yet it looked rather young. In fact the person seemed far too young to have achieved the rank of a commodore. Still, he exuded an air of authority tempered by modesty.

"At ease, Lieutenant," Kester said. He was not sure that he had heard correctly. He thought the young man in front of him had addressed him as commodore. But he was only a captain! It all made no sense.

"Did you say late of the cruiser HK673, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, Sir, Commodore. Currently I am on leave. I am awaiting reassignment. I am to report to navy headquarters on O'Brien Field, but not for several days yet. Let me see, not until next Monday. It is only Wednesday today, I mean this evening. I still have four days left before I have to return."

"O'Brien Field, did you say?"

"Yes, Sir. We just returned from a twelve-month tour of duty patrolling along the border between the Orion Sector and the Saurian sphere of influence. When we returned to Hornepayne, our company was given thirty days of furlough, but only those domiciled on Hornepayne. I left right away for home. I don't know what happened to the others, I mean the ones whose home planet was not Hornepayne."

"I see. So you left at once. I presume you live here."

"Yes, Sir. I do. I live here with my parents. Would you permit a question, Sir?"

"A question? I suppose so. You probably find it strange seeing me here."

"Yes, Commodore, Sir. I do indeed."

"My name is Kester, Lieutenant Huntsmill. What is your question?"

"You are Commodore Kester? I thought - we all thought that you had been killed when your craft crashed more than a month ago. I was still on active service then. I am not familiar with all the details but according to the news reports your shuttle crashed in the wilderness. There were no survivors. Apparently there was a fire at the crash site and nothing could be retrieved from the wreck. It was assumed that everybody perished. And now you are here! I can't believe this is true. They even broadcast your picture. And it is you, Sir. You have survived. This is truly a miracle!"

"Yes, Lieutenant Huntsmill. Sometimes there are seemingly strange events happening in this universe."

"If you have been wandering about for that long, Sir, you must be hungry and thirsty. Of course it is possible that you had some food with you when you miraculously escaped from that inferno, but I doubt if you had enough for a month. My family will be honored if you would accept our hospitality. May I offer you any help you may require?"

"Thank you, Lieutenant Huntsmill. Thank you very much. I should be happy to accept any assistance you may be able to render."

They slowly returned to the settlement. Once there Kester was invited to stay as long as necessary with the Huntsmill family.

After supper there was ample opportunity for conversation. So this was Hornepayne. Kester tried to recall how or when he had arrived here. But it was in vain. From Delmar to Hornepayne was an immense distance. Surely he must have retained something of that trip. And what had happened to his wife? He did have one, didn't he? Where was she? He most certainly would not have left her behind. What year was this? Questions, lots of questions and no answers, at least none which came to mind. By this time Kester was fully convinced that some considerable time must have passed since the Star of Deneb had arrived on Delmar in the Orion Sector. Ah yes, there was one additional item which he remembered. He had taken his wife to the observation lounge before he made his way to the officer's wardroom. And now his attention was required by the talk around the table.

"Tell us, Commodore Kester," Eric Huntsmill's father asked, "how did you manage to escape that inferno when your shuttle crashed? There was nothing left of it when the rescue team reached the crash site. The fire had consumed everything, according to the news reports. And how did you fare all alone in the wilderness for all these weeks?" Everybody around the table bent forward, eager to catch every word Kester might utter.

"I am sorry - I just don't know. I remember nothing of the accident. In fact I don't even recall now where we were headed nor why I was on that flight."

The disappointment of the family was quite obvious.

"Perhaps the commodore is not at liberty to disclose how he had survived the ordeal," young Eric Huntsmill ventured.

"To be quite frank," Carl Kester said, "I simply do not recall. Although our science has progressed immensely over the decades, there are still vast regions which await some future resolution, particularly in the realms of the mind."

As the evening wore on the conversation turned to the Orion Sector and why Lieutenant Eric Huntsmill had taken part in a year long patrol along the border between the Orion Sector and the Saurian territory.

"As you know, Commodore, we often have ships from the Warinski Sector patrol that region. The Orion Sector, while not poor, simply does not have the number of ships and crews necessary to patrol that vast region of space. Ever since the Saurian War we have been forced to guard that border with much more vigilance."

"Yes, I know, the Saurians are certainly a race which lacks compassion," Kester said.

"That sneak attack on Lungaree some two hundred years ago proved it conclusively," young Eric Huntsmill said. "Thank the stars that their intelligence was so poor."

"Yes," his father concurred, "we, that is we humans, had two bases out there near the border, Lungaree and Algocen. They, the Saurians, had planned to hit them both simultaneously, but instead of Algocen they destroyed Kron. And it was Commodore Eric Huntsmill, my great-grandfather, who stopped the Saurian invasion and prevailed over them. It was he alone who led our counterattack which eventually achieved victory for us."

"Yes, Commodore Kester, my father's great-grandfather was the one, and that is why my parents named me after him. My great-grandfather, my father's grandfather, transferred to the Warinski Sector when he was an officer of the Patrol, as our service was then called. And he was posted to Hornepayne and settled down here and raised a family."

"That's an interesting piece of personal history," Kester commented.

"My father's first name is Gary. He was named after his grandfather and I after his great-grandfather."

"That is true," Gary Huntsmill agreed. "My great-grandfather who was named Eric Huntsmill - I hope that is not too confusing, Commodore - was still in good health when I was a boy. He often took me on camping trips and evenings over a campfire he talked about the time when he was in command of Algocen. I believe that was the happiest period in his life. What he often said was that his best friend was a captain by the name of Carl Kester, and that it really was this Carl Kester who had imparted to him the knowledge necessary to defeat the Saurians. This Carl Kester, although he was the captain of a patrol vessel, had a mysterious background. My great-grandfather was sure that he had taken part in the

Second War of Survival which, as we all know, took place more than five hundred years ago."

"And my parents named me Eric, hoping that I would follow in my father's great-grandfather's footsteps, that I would also become a famous historical figure at some future time."

"That was not the reason," Gary Huntsmill said and laughed. "But I am curious, Mr. Kester, I mean Commodore. I have left the navy, as we call the service now, a good number of years ago. So you must excuse me when I use civilian terms on occasion. Your first name would not be Carl by any chance, would it?"

"It is indeed, Mr. Huntsmill."

"I am Gary to you."

"Gary? Sure, why not. And I am Carl to you."

"That calls for a toast, Carl. You do drink on occasion, don't you?"

"Very rarely, Gary. Very, very rarely. It befuddles my mind."

Gary Huntsmill laughed out loud. "Do you know something, Carl? My great-grandfather said exactly the same thing about the Carl Kester he knew."

"Did he really?"

Gary Huntsmill looked at the clock. "I think we should notify the High Command on O'Brien Field, Eric, that Commodore Kester is alive."

"Sure, Dad. I'll get in touch with them right away. Their offices should be open now. We are ten time zones behind them. It is now midnight here. How the time has flown. I should have been more alert. I should have been in touch with them two hours ago." Eric Huntsmill left the room.

"Tell me, Carl, Eric said that you knew his name, that you recognized him when you saw him. But he had never heard of you before the shuttle crashed and your name was all over the news. How could that be?"

Kester looked at his host. What should he say? What could he say?

"It's a difficult thing to explain, Gary. There is a good deal of information available on Commodore Eric Huntsmill, even though he lived a long time ago. And of course there are many pictures of him. You see"

"Yes, that could be it. They say that Eric looks a lot like his great great-grandfather. And even I must concede that he could be.... Say, you must have a terrific memory to have identified my son so quickly."

Young Eric Huntsmill came back into the living room.

"Commodore, Sir, I have a connection with Admiral Mellaby. He is the number one person of the High Command. But I am sure you know that. He wants to speak with you."

"Admiral Mellaby? We must not let him wait too long, mustn't we? Excuse me, Gary." Kester rose and went to the communications niche.

Chapter 2

Admiral Mellaby sat in his chair at his desk looking out the window at busy O'Brien Field. The fingers of his right hand drummed on the desk. There was always something going wrong. What could have caused the shuttle to crash? The rescue team had been unable to save a single item from the crash site. Even the flight recorder had been nothing more than a lump of molten metal and plastic, although it was supposed to have been fireproof and tested at a temperature of 2500 degrees. It had taken an entire month to find the right person for the job ahead. The shuttle had crashed a month ago and it was high time that another search was instituted. It would be difficult to find a person with the necessary skills and experience.

Two months ago they - the High Command - had received an urgent request for help from Colonel Baird who was in charge of the New Territories out there somewhere beyond the Pleiades Sector. Admiral Mellaby rose and walked over to the huge wall map. The New Territories! If only they were not so very far away! And what help could the Warinski Sector give? They were fully committed in patrolling the border between the Orion Sector and the Saurian territory. It had taken an entire month for the computer to come up with the name of a person who could pacify the New Territories. They ought to find a better name than that, Mellaby thought. While they were new now, they would not remain so. In another century or two a different region even farther away would be the New Territories. At any rate, the computer had searched through the personnel files of the entire combined navies of the Home Sector, the Warinski Sector and the Orion Sector. And it had finally come up with one name, only one, a commodore by the name of Carl Kester. And now the shuttle bringing him here had crashed in the wilderness halfway around the planet.

Admiral Mellaby sighed. They would have to go through the files again. It could well take another month to find a replacement. He hoped that Colonel Baird and the small garrison could hold out until then. And once they had a replacement he would have to be brought here, interviewed, and if found acceptable, sent out to the New Territories.

Mellaby walked back to his desk and let himself fall into the chair. He sat there thinking about the cruelty of fate. But no matter what, a replacement had to be found. The New Territories were under the jurisdiction of the Warinski Sector and it was the Warinski Sector which was responsible for its security and administration. Mellaby reached for the

communicator and pressed one of its buttons. Thirty seconds later a major entered the office.

"You called, Sir?" the major asked, standing at attention.

"At ease, Major Pershing. Yes, I did. There is nothing we can do about the crashed shuttle on which Commodore Kester had hitched a ride. But we must have somebody to take charge. Run another search through the personnel files, Major. We are responsible for the New Territories. And see to it that a message is sent to Colonel Baird that we will send help as quickly as possible."

"It will take at least another month for the computer to come up with a replacement, Admiral."

"Yes, I know. But what choice do we have? The person we need has to have a certain background and experience and to find a person like that by manually checking the dossiers will take a year or more, always provided that we can put enough people to the task and that they all work diligently."

"I shall get at it immediately, Admiral."

"Yes, and let me know the minute you come up with a name. Dismissed."

Pershing saluted and left the room. He marched over to his office at a quick pace. Once there he sat down at his terminal and programmed the computer to begin the search. Naturally he had saved all the parameters from his previous search. He thought that this time it might take less than a month, but probably not much less.

There were a multitude of jobs for him to do. He had just moved from the terminal to his desk and was looking at the long list of tasks for today. He was somewhat reluctant to start any of them as he felt they were unpleasant to do, boring to do, and he really was not in the mood to do anything. With distaste he went over the list when the computer beeped.

What's wrong now, he thought as he rose and walked over to the terminal. He sighed and glanced at the screen. "Search completed," he read. "Person recommended for the task as outlined: Commodore Carl Kester."

Major Bill Pershing swore. "Commodore Carl Kester perished in the crash of shuttle HK3," he typed into the keyboard. He did not like computers which were voice activated. He always felt it left too much of a margin for errors, particularly in a sensitive position such as he held. If you had to write it down, whatever it was, it required clear instructions and hopefully left no room for ambiguities. "Repeat search," he added.

Pershing moved back to his desk. He had barely sat down in his chair when the computer beeped again. What now, he thought as he heaved himself out of his chair and walked over to the terminal. This time he swore heartily when he saw the message on the screen: "Search completed. Person recommended for the task as outlined: Commodore Carl Kester."

"The shuttle on which Carl Kester was traveling crashed more than a month ago. There were no survivors," Pershing typed into the terminal for a second time. He looked at the clock hanging on the wall above the terminal. It was an old-fashioned clock with three hands and the numbers in a circular dial. The numbers only went up to twelve instead of the normal twenty-four. Not quite ten o'clock yet. "REPEAT SEARCH," he typed into the terminal in capital letters. This time he stayed in front of the terminal to see what would happen.

"Checking records," Pershing read on the screen. Good, he thought. The computer has finally grasped that the commodore is dead. Pershing was about to go back to his desk when the computer beeped again. "Search completed," the message on the screen read. "Person recommended for the task as outlined: Commodore Carl Kester."

This time Major Bill Pershing swore for almost a full minute before he felt calm enough to ask the computer to check for programming faults or a virus, or even an invasion by several viruses. It took almost five minutes and the answer came back negative.

What can I do now, Pershing thought. First of all I must make Admiral Mellaby aware of the problem and then decide what to do next. Yes, that would be the proper path to follow. And if the admiral became upset - what then? It was a bridge to be crossed when that time came. Very reluctantly Pershing made his way over to the admiral's office.

"You have a replacement already?" Admiral Mellaby asked, astonishment in his voice. "That was fast. Who is it?"

"We must have a computer malfunction, Admiral, Sir," Pershing said. Big drops of perspiration were forming on his brow.

"A computer malfunction? You are the computer expert. So correct it. What do you want from me? Why do you think you are here?"

"I have run the programming checks for faults and they came back negative. I asked the computer three times to search for a replacement, and in each case it has recommended Commodore Carl Kester, although I have informed the machine on two occasions that the commodore perished when the shuttle crashed."

"And the computer insisted that Carl Kester was the man to do the job?"

"Yes, Sir."

The communicator rang. "On audio," Mellaby said in a loud voice, still looking at the major with piercing eyes. Pershing was well aware that the admiral was close to an outburst, maybe even ready to demote him on the spot.

"Sir, I have a Lieutenant Huntsmill at the other end who says that Commodore"

"Can't you look after the crank calls, Lieutenant?" Mellaby yelled.

"Yes, Sir. But Lieutenant Huntsmill swears that he is telling the truth."

"What's this Huntsmill saying that is so important?"

"He says that Commodore Carl Kester is alive and at his father's residence. Lieutenant Huntsmill is on leave from the navy and spending his furlough at his parent's place."

"Did you say Commodore Kester is alive?"

"No, Sir. Lieutenant Huntsmill says so."

"Let me talk to this Huntsmill."

"Yes, Sir. At once, Sir." Mellaby waited for a few seconds. Then he heard several clicking noises. And then a timid voice issued from the speaker.

"This is Lieutenant Eric Huntsmill, late of the cruiser HK673. I am on leave at present. And Commodore Carl Kester is here with our family."

"Is the commodore injured, Lieutenant? Perhaps badly burned?"

"No, Sir. He is uninjured."

"Let me talk to Commodore Kester. And this better not be a joke!"

"Yes, Sir. At once, Sir. Hold on, Sir."

After a short while there was another click. "Kester speaking," the admiral heard.

"Commodore Carl Kester?"

"Yes, Sir. I am Carl Kester."

"How did you escape from the crashed shuttle, Commodore Kester? When our rescue teams arrived at the scene, they found that the entire craft had been consumed. Even the outer metal skin had melted. And there was a forest fire, presumably started by the crashed shuttle. How could you have survived such an inferno?"

"I am sorry, Admiral, I cannot recall anything about it."

Their conversation continued for some considerable time. When it ended Admiral Mellaby would arrange to have Kester picked up as soon as it was daylight at his location.

"How did it go?" Gary Huntsmill asked, his curiosity poorly concealed, when Kester came back into the living room.

"Apparently the admiral wants me for some unspecified task. I have no idea what it might be. He is sending a craft of some kind over after daybreak tomorrow. That is all I know at present."

"Sir," Eric Huntsmill asked, "would it be possible if I accompanied you? I am between assignments, so to speak, and if you needed an aide -- I mean to say"

"You want to come along to wherever the admiral is going to send me, is that it?"

"Yes, Sir. That's it. My father has told me a great deal about his great-grandfather and the Captain Kester of that time. And now you are here, unexpected and out of the blue, and you have the same name as the Captain Kester of my father's great-grandfather's time, and my name is also Eric Huntsmill, and maybe, just maybe fate has thrown us together

for some reason." The words had tumbled out of young Huntsmill's mouth. Now that he realized what he had done he looked at the table top in front of him. "I am sorry," he apologized. "I got carried away."

"You sure did, son," his father said in the ensuing silence. "You must forgive Eric," Gary Huntsmill added, turning towards Kester. "He is young. He is full of enthusiasm. And his navy rating is outstanding. He was one of only three persons to be promoted to lieutenant out of a class of thirty-five. I hope this will not put a blemish on his career."

Kester glanced at Gary Huntsmill and then looked at his son. "I know nothing about you, about your background, Eric. May I call you Eric?"

"Yes, Sir. Certainly, Sir. I joined the navy six years ago as an officer candidate. I am twenty-five years old. I have been on two different ships since graduating from the academy two years ago. The last one was the cruiser HK673. We were on a year long- stint out to the Orion Sector."

"Hm. You don't know anything about me. It may be very difficult to serve under my command, providing I get one. You may live to regret your request. A far better alternative may come your way."

"Perhaps, Commodore, Sir. But I doubt it. You see, there is an aura about you. I can't really describe it. I had this strange feeling when I first met you."

"What kind of feeling, what kind of aura, Lieutenant?"

"I can't think of the right word, Sir. To put it bluntly it was like a feeling, like an essence, and it seemed to say to me 'I am different', I mean you were different. I don't know in which way. But it was very clear and explicit."

The conversation went on for some time. When Carl Kester's transport arrived the next day halfway through the morning, Eric Huntsmill accompanied him to O'Brien Field.