Main Characters

Roy Litvak Trader

Carl Kester Officer of the Patrol

Eric Huntsmill Captain of a Patrol Vessel

Louise Yasuda Liaison Officer, Member of the Patrol

Earl Mackenzie Mayor of Morgan's World

Sarah Mackenzie His wife

Larry Mackenzie His son

Bill Johnson Agricultural Scientist on Morgan's World

Petra Baird Physician on Morgan's World

James Yonge Commander of the Patrol Base on Lungaree

Dor Baaksh Settler on Morgan's World

Chapter 1

Carl Kester halted on the first step leading up to the entrance of the building. Looking back the way he had come he marveled at the huge trees lining the street. A flush of excitement raced through his veins. He felt exactly the same as when he had set foot on Inverness for the first time, now more than two years in the past. His glance took in the bright blue sky. Not a single cloud marred the view right down to the far horizon. The air was crystal clear without the slightest hint of pollution. He took a deep breath and then continued up the fieldstone steps.

Upon reaching the top he halted once more. Next to the entrance was a plaque embedded in the granite of the facade.

"In memory of Admiral Mario Salvana (562 - 679) who gave his life in the defence of Hornepayne," he read. "By his gallant action he bought the Federation of the Warinski Sector the time needed to rally its forces in the Second War of Survival and defeat the menace of the Coleoptera, thus insuring the survival of our race."

For a long minute Kester stood there, in his mind's eye seeing the battle for Perlos, the place where the Coleoptera were finally beaten. For a second time he cast a glance along the avenue. And then he moved towards the front door.

In the mirror-like plate glass he saw his reflection. He pulled the tunic of his uniform down. His hat was at a cocky angle. But that did not matter. As soon as he was inside he would take it off. He nodded to himself. He liked what he saw. The picture of a dashing patrol officer looked back at him from the mirror-like plate glass. Taking a deep breath he pulled the door open and walked through the entrance, removing his hat with his left hand.

"May I be of assistance?" the young ensign behind the information desk asked.

"I hope so," Kester replied. "I am looking for Admiral Desrosiers."

"And who, may I ask, wishes to see him?"

"Kester. Commander Carl Kester. I have been ordered to report to him."

"Ah yes," the ensign said, pushing a number of keys on her computer.

"Do they still use those ancient models?" Kester asked, pointing to the machine. "I thought that they had been phased out centuries ago."

The ensign smiled. "It would be far too noisy if everybody communicated verbally with the machines. It is still early. A couple of hours from now this place will be humming with activity. Go right ahead.

The admiral is expecting you. Suite 1608, sixteenth floor."

"Much obliged." Kester saluted and walked towards the lifts.

Much to his surprise for an instant it felt as if the elevator was descending when he pushed number sixteen on the panel. Then there was no sensation of any motion at all. After what seemed like only a couple of seconds the door opened and a friendly voice from above said: "Sixteenth floor."

Kester stepped into a corridor which appeared to be bathed in sunshine. Suite 1608 was halfway down the hall to his right. The door was open and he walked through it.

"Commander Kester?" a lieutenant sitting behind a desk to the left questioned him.

"Aye." Kester came to attention.

"The admiral is expecting you, Sir. Right through that door." The lieutenant pointed to the opposite wall.

Kester briskly walked across the room and knocked on the door.

"Come in," he heard somebody say. The sound of the voice was muffled.

This is it, Kester thought. Once more he pulled the tunic of his uniform down. He felt the adrenaline wash through his arteries and he experienced a strange light-headedness. Taking a deep breath he put his hand on the door knob, twisted it and pushed the door open. Admiral Desrosiers was sitting behind a huge desk. As Kester stepped into the office the door closed silently behind him. Desrosiers briefly looked up from the papers he was studying. Kester stood at attention, saluting.

"At ease," the admiral said, acknowledging the salute with a nod. Then he went back to reading the report in front of him.

As Kester waited for the admiral to finish his eyes roved over the room. It was stark, even by patrol standards. A huge window was centered in the opposite wall. A window? Here? Was he really sixteen floors below the surface? Kester stared at it. There was sunshine outside. A light breeze was rustling the leaves of a few bushes. Some birds warbled in the distance. And was there not the faint odor of jasmine?

"Realistic, isn't it?"

Kester experienced an involuntary spasmodic muscular movement of his shoulders and arms. "Yes, - yes, Sir," he stammered.

"Relax, Commander," the admiral said. "Take a seat." He waved to a chair to the left of the desk. "Isn't it marvelous what modern technology can do? If you didn't know differently you would never suspect that we are far below the surface. Unless, of course, you tried to look out the window."

"For a second there I was wondering, Sir. When I stepped into the elevator I distinctly felt it descend, at least for an instant. How is it done?"

"Hologram. Nothing to it. How do you like Hornepayne, Commander Kester?"

"I only arrived here yesterday afternoon, Admiral. I like it fine so far. Clean air, friendly people. It seems like a nice place."

"It's different from Inverness, I take it."

"Oh yes, quite different, Sir. Not nearly as crowded. Like any planet it has its distinctive redolence. I was on Inverness for only a short time. I have been stationed on Perlos for most of the past two years."

"Hm," Desrosiers grunted. For a couple of seconds he looked at the report in front of him. "This dossier of you here," he tapped his right middle finger at the pages, "is rather incomplete. As a matter of fact it only goes back two years. Tell me, Commander Kester, where were you born?"

Carl Kester again felt that uncomfortable twitch in his shoulders. "I was born on Earth."

"Really? Did your family emigrate to the Warinski Sector when you were still a small child?"

"Oh no, Admiral. I joined the Patrol on Earth. It is called the Service there. I had just graduated from the academy and been promoted to third officer when an opportunity arose to transfer to the Warinski Sector. I took the chance and here I am. I must say that I have not regretted it."

"I see." Desrosiers had made notes as Kester talked. "I don't even have your age. When were you born?"

"Oh! I was born in thirty-four."

"Thirty-four? Aren't you rather young to have achieved the rank of commander?"

"I suppose so. But then I have not been a commander for very long, Sir."

"Ah, indeed. Hm, the reason you are here is not so that I can complete this dossier on you although I must say that our brief chat has given me some additional information. Well now, let me see. Have you ever heard anything about the Saurians?"

"The Saurians, Sir? The race of - of reptiles which is supposed to live out there beyond the Orion Sector? Not much, really. Only the rumors which keep circulating through the grapevine from time to time. Nothing official, Sir."

"You may take this as an official notification. They do exist. They are real, and they are a potential threat to the Federation. At least to the Federation of the Orion Sector. Are you surprised?"

Kester sat bolt upright, his eyes on the admiral's mouth.

"Surprised is not the word, Sir. I am speechless."

"Yes, you see, we have not exactly been broadcasting the situation all over. There have been - let me call them encounters. This time the Federation did not hesitate to act. Contact was established at once and we have been able to negotiate a treaty."

"You have negotiated a treaty? So there is no longer any need for

volunteers for a special and perhaps dangerous mission." The disappointment in Kester's voice was quite obvious, although he tried his best to disguise it. Admiral Desrosiers studied him for some time. Then he slowly shook his head.

"No, Mr. Kester, that is where you are wrong. The special mission is still on and the need for urgency is much greater than we had hoped for. So is the danger. That is why we asked for volunteers. We are putting together a small fleet headquartered at Lungaree in the Orion Sector. It could well prove to be a touchy mission, maybe much more perilous than we originally anticipated. If you wish to reconsider and withdraw your offer to be part of this mission, now is the time to do so. There will be no repercussions and it will not affect your future with the Patrol in any way. Conversely, if you decide to maintain your status as a volunteer there will be no special consideration given to you in the form of rapid future promotions nor will the Patrol feel obligated in any way to offer you any extraordinary support should you become incapacitated in any way as a result of this mission. Do you understand what I am saying, Commander?"

"Yes, Sir, Admiral. I do understand fully and wish to volunteer for this mission, whatever its dangers."

"Do you have any family, Mr. Kester? Parents, mate, children?"

"No, Sir. I have nobody."

A long time ago he had met a girl on Perlos, a lieutenant in the ranger forces. But that had been in a different reality and nothing became of it. There was nobody who would miss him now. Nobody at all.

"Very well, Commander Kester, you will refrain from repeating anything we discuss here. Consider this meeting classified. There will be no further opportunity to back out or resign now until the mission has been successfully completed. You have one more chance to reconsider."

"I fully understand, Sir. The mission intrigues me although I know hardly anything at all about it. In some way I expect it to involve the Saurians. I would not think of reconsidering."

"Very well. As I said the Federation signed a treaty with the Saurians. I expect it will be honored by us and, I hope, also by them, at least for a few standard years. Unfortunately we, that is the Federation of the Orion Sector, have not been able to retain all the planets we wanted to. But neither have the Saurians. A few of the planets which we had to give up have been settled. Not legally, mind you, but that does not matter now. The most distant planet in - shall we say the Saurian sphere of influence? - is a planet called Morgan's World. It will have to be evacuated as well as Minerva, and Vestal and Rama and a number of others. Altogether we will have to move some two million humans. We have two standard years in which to do it. Two measly years!"

"I see, Sir."

"No, Commander Kester, you do not see. We will only be able to

move the people. We cannot move any of their belongings except for the most basic personal possessions. It will be your job and the job of the other volunteers to make the people leave, even if they are dead set against it."

"I understand, Admiral. If they resist we simply use force and remove them. I can see now that there will be an element of risk in it. But with sufficiently large numbers of service personnel, I mean volunteers, that should not be too much of a problem."

"There will be no use of force, Commander. You will use persuasion. That will be the only avenue open to you. We will have similar planets waiting for the settlers within the Orion Sector. But I must stress, the use of force will not be condoned."

"And if they refuse to move?"

"We will have a problem. It will be up to you volunteers to see that they do not refuse."

"But if we cannot use force and if the settlers reject our offer, I mean the offer of the Federation, there will be ..."

"There will be dissent. You can count on it, Mr. Kester. There will be non-compliance with anything you say or order. Those settlers are a strong-willed bunch. It won't be easy."

"Then why don't we just leave them there, Admiral?"

"We can't, Commander. That will not be a viable choice. They must be removed."

"I am not questioning you, Admiral. But if those settlers do not want to move and we cannot use force I fail to see what we can do. And I see no reason why we can't leave them there."

Admiral Desrosiers took a deep breath. All the volunteers said the same things, used the same arguments. Carl Kester was the tenth person he was interviewing that week.

"They are humans. That is why we cannot leave them."

"So they are humans and the worlds belong to the Saurians. I fail to see the significance."

"We, that is the Federation, signed a treaty with the Saurians setting out the borders between our respective spheres of influence. We were forced to guarantee that no human would be left behind. Similarly the Saurians gave us assurances that no member of their species would be left occupying a planet ceded to us. They are now in the process of removing their colonies. We have no choice but to do the same. There must be no exceptions."

"It looks like a tough assignment, Sir."

"It is, Commander Kester. Any human left behind by us will be treated by the Saurians as part of the indigenous fauna. All the planets in question have no native intelligent life."

"Ah, I see now what it means, Admiral. It will indeed be a tough problem to solve."

The admiral rose. "We have a ship leaving for Lungaree in the Orion Sector the day after tomorrow. They need a first officer."

"Thank you, Sir. I shall get my things at once."

"Captain Morsen is in command. See the portmaster. He'll look after ground transport."

Kester had risen as well. Admiral Desrosiers walked around his desk.

"All the best, Commander," he said, taking Kester's hand and shaking it.

"Thank you, Sir." Kester moved back one step and saluted. Then he turned around and, walking briskly, left the office.

Desrosiers moved back behind his desk. He crossed Kester's name off his list. There were another two dozen officers to be interviewed that week, including four liaison officers. The liaison officers were most important. It fell to them to present the arguments to the illegal settlers in such a way that they would leave willingly. He looked at his chronometer. Thirty minutes until the next appointment, a liaison officer by the name of Louise Yasuda. He wondered what she might be like. There was ample time for some refreshments. A cup of tea would be just the thing right now.

Outside the admiral's office Kester paused, taking a deep breath. He had committed himself. There was no way out now. What kind of venture had he agreed to? What personal dangers would it entail? He shrugged and walked to the exit. Time would tell.

"How did it go, Commander?" the lieutenant behind the desk asked as Kester passed him. Kester halted.

"All right. Whatever it is, the admiral has accepted me. How is he to work for? Pretty tough?" Kester scrutinized the young lieutenant. It was strange that the lieutenant should address him. In fact, it was quite out of the ordinary.

"No tougher than any other superior officer, I guess. You do what is expected of you and you'll have no problem."

"I see. And if the Patrol should fail in its mission?"

"I am sure that we have sufficiently competent officers in the force that failure of a mission is only an academic conjecture. Here are your traveling papers, Commander. And good luck." Rising, the lieutenant handed Kester an envelope and then saluted faultlessly.

"Thank you." Kester took the package, automatically returned the salute and marched out the door.

The hallway again gave the impression as if it were bathed in bright sunshine. There were even the shadows of the window frames on the floor. The elevator, when he reached it, was open and waiting for him. Kester stepped inside and pushed the button for the main floor. He expected it to descend but instead it rose. For an instant he felt surprise, but then he remembered that he was below the surface.

The main lobby was much busier than it had been earlier. Uniformed patrol personnel and civilians were briskly walking everywhere, every person having his own purpose and destination. Kester stood next to the elevator door for several minutes taking it all in. The huge lobby was quite noisy now with conversations and footsteps. Then he walked to the big doors leading to the outside. How strange, Kester thought, that the doors to the outside were not self-opening. Yes, very strange indeed.

As he reached the doors he saw a young lady outside, wearing a patrol uniform with the insignia of a lieutenant. She was about to put her hand on the door handle. Kester took one step forward, pushing the door open and holding it for her.

"Thank you," the young lady said, smiling faintly. Briefly she locked eyes with Kester and then walked past him. Kester was too stunned to make a reply or even a gesture. An instant recognition flashed through his mind. He had seen that face before. And the figure! But where? It took only a second to overcome his surprise. However, by then the young lady had disappeared among the throng of people.

Kester let go of the door and went back inside. Where had he seen her before? Ah yes, Perlos and Tremaine! A long time ago on Perlos he had ... There she was, walking towards the elevators. But he was too far away. By the time he was only halfway across the lobby the elevator door closed. Kester had missed his opportunity.

He waited in the lobby for an hour and a half but she did not return. A long time ago on Tremaine they had landed a ranger contingent and the young pilot who went with the rangers had looked exactly like the girl who had disappeared through the door of the elevator. What had been her name? Louise? Yes, that was it. And her surname had sounded strange, unusual to him. What had it been? As he paced up and down it came to him. Louise Yasuda. And on Perlos, much later, he had met a captain fresh out from Tremaine, who had looked like the identical twin of the girl he had just seen. Her name had also been Louise Yasuda. With his left hand Kester wiped some imaginary cobwebs off his face.

For the hour and a half that he waited Kester did not let the elevator doors out of his sight. At last he had to leave. Reluctantly he made his way to the exit.

Not quite a minute later liaison officer Lieutenant Louise Yasuda stepped into the lobby and purposefully walked across it.

Chapter 2

"Good morning, Mr. Mackenzie." Petra Baird was passing the Mackenzie homestead on her way to the storage compound which the small community shared. Earl Mackenzie had just closed the kitchen door behind him and stood on the porch.

"Morning, Petra. How is your mother?"

"I'm afraid there is no change. I don't think that she'll make it. She keeps telling me she wants to die. Her heart is getting weaker. She is accumulating fluids in her body, and she has trouble breathing. Besides she gets these spells where she does not even recognize me any more."

Mackenzie cleared his throat. "It is only a temporary situation, I am certain of it. In a few more days she will have passed the crisis and she'll start getting better, you'll see."

"No, Mr. Mackenzie, I don't think so. Ever since Dad's accident she has been going downhill. If we had a full-fledged hospital with modern equipment - but it's no use complaining. We'll have to make do with what we have as best we can. Still, sometimes I wish that it were different, better."

"Now, now, Petra. They chose this life, your mother and dad. They came to Morgan's World more than thirty years ago of their own free will. They found freedom and happiness here. Both your mom and dad couldn't take the rigidly confining civilization of Delmar any more. Martha will get better soon, I am sure of it."

"I hope so, Mr. Mackenzie. I must run now."

"I'll send Bill over later to see if you need any help."

"Thanks, Mr. Mackenzie." Petra Baird hurried on.

"What was that all about?" Sarah, Earl Mackenzie's wife called out from behind the closed kitchen door. Mackenzie opened the door and went back inside.

"That was Petra. Her mother is in poor shape. She doesn't think that she'll pull through. Poor girl."

"We can't take her, Earl. We've got our hands full with young Bill. We are not that wealthy, you know."

"Sarah, Bill Johnson is your brother's son. Who besides us could have looked after him when Max and Eve drowned? And Petra is a grown woman. She is quite able to stand on her own two feet."

"I never complained about looking after Bill. But Petra is different. She is no relation to us. She probably got her head full of ideas she picked

up when they sent her away to study medicine. The same as Bill. We worked our fingers to the bone and saved every penny to have him study agriculture and now that he is back all he ever talks about is Lungaree. As if this world were third rate!"

"I know, I know. I feel bitter about it too. But what can I do? What can we do? If we would have known ..."

"I'll tell you one thing, Earl. Larry and Lois are not going to leave this world. Not as long as I am alive."

"Larry is only ten and Lois twelve. It'll be some time before they will be finished with school here. And besides, I quite agree. They'll remain with us. They are our children and we have control over them. Why don't you go over in the afternoon and see how Martha is doing? The Bairds have been good neighbors to us for over thirty years."

Sarah Mackenzie gathered up the dirty dishes and put them in the sink. "Maybe I will," she said.

"I told Petra I would send Bill over later to see if anything needs doing."

Sarah only grunted to that.

"I guess I'd best go out to the fields and get the seeding finished. We should have a bumper crop this season. Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea to send Bill to the agricultural college. He sure learned a few things there."

"And in the process got his values all mixed up," Sarah added, but Earl Mackenzie had already gone outside. Still, she had to concede, since his return two years ago the spices had yielded a much greater harvest and had required a good deal less care. When the trading vessel arrived they would have a surplus for the first time in many years.

An hour later Bill Johnson came in.

"You are late," Sarah chided.

"I couldn't help it, Auntie. One of the fish traps broke. I had to fix it before all the fish escaped."

"Did we lose many?"

"No, I don't think so. We'll soon have to make a bigger pond. Or we'll have to let some of the small fry out into the lakes. I'll take it up with Uncle Earl at noon."

"Oh, that reminds me. Uncle Earl wants you to go over to Petra and see if she needs any help. Her mother is not at all well."

"Do I have to? I am somewhat short of time, Auntie Sarah."

"Yes, you'd better go. The Bairds have been ..."

"I know, the Bairds have been good neighbors for over thirty years. Okay, I'll go."

"Why don't you take a greater interest in Petra? She is about your age, well educated, a professional like you. Why don't you marry her?"

"She is just not my type, Auntie. I'd prefer somebody a little less well endowed. Not that she is ..."

"Yes, yes, you want somebody as skinny as yourself, with all the bones sticking out."

They both laughed.

Bill Johnson went over to see what help Petra Baird needed. In the afternoon Sarah Mackenzie paid her a visit. When she saw Martha lying in her bed, her skin pallid and her eyes unfocused, she got a shock.

"I can't believe that your mother's condition has worsened so much in only two days, Petra."

"It often goes downhill very fast once the body's resistance has been broken, Mrs. Mackenzie. My mother has lost the will to live. There is nothing I can do. Sometimes I get the feeling that she has willed herself to die."

"Come now, Petra! We don't live in the Middle Ages any more. We live in the tenth century of the Galactic Era!"

"Sure we live in the year 966. But that does not mean that we know everything. There are still plenty of things we don't fully understand yet. Mother's wish to die is one such thing."

"We have the year 966? It is hard to believe how the time flies. We will all be old before we know it."

"You have quite a few years ahead of you yet, Mrs. Mackenzie. Mother should also be looking forward to at least another couple of centuries. Instead she has simply given up and told herself it is time to leave this life."

"Petra, we live in the age of science and technology. None of this hocus-pocus about willing yourself to die."

"There is not much technology around here, Mrs. Mackenzie."

"That is by choice, Petra. That is by choice. But it does exist."

"Sure it does. Only we do not benefit much from it here. Had we had more of it maybe I could have saved mother. And then again, maybe I could not have. When Dad had his accident Mom was in perfect health. I know. I had just returned from Lungaree. I checked her over when I got back. Dad too. And after Dad's accident she began to wilt like a cut flower. She willed herself to die, Mrs. Mackenzie. I am sure of it."

Sarah Mackenzie shook her head. "I don't understand it. You, a fully trained medical practitioner telling me that. How can it be?"

"I wish I knew, Mrs. Mackenzie. I wish I knew."

"I must go and make supper, Petra. If you need any kind of help, we are your closest neighbors and ..." She hugged the younger woman and then left.

Martha Baird died late that evening.