

Main Characters

Barry Masters	<i>Journalist</i>
Bill Grainger	<i>Captain of the Alcyone</i>
Roger Burke	<i>Pilot</i>
Christine Rupert	<i>Nurse</i>
Dr. Arne Viborg	<i>Expedition leader</i>
Dr. Marlene Kruger	<i>Geologist</i>
Dr. Marsha Gelina	<i>Chemist</i>
Dr. Roger Nelson	<i>Botanist</i>
Dr. Anne Stadler	<i>Biologist</i>
Dr. Olga Mihalas	<i>Climatologist</i>
Dr. Eugene Flanders	<i>Physician</i>
Dr. Elvina Price	<i>Microbiologist</i>
Dr. Alfonse Bishop	<i>Planetologist</i>
Dr. Ursula Smith	<i>Meteorologist</i>
Dr. Fernando Degasio	<i>Oceanographer</i>
Roy Nealon	<i>Ranger</i>

Prologue

What you are about to read happened many years ago. It concerns my first - and only - visit to the Pleiades Sector. We were a group of scientists, at least my companions were. My job consisted of making a series of reports of what we found there. I am sure that you will recall reading about it in the daily press. The adventure - and it was a first rate adventure - was condensed into a series of holograms which were shown on all the planets which we had settled and on which we had outposts.

Now some twenty-odd years later another generation has grown up. There was some agitation to duplicate the events of some two decades ago. However, the authorities have wisely declined to copy our efforts of more than twenty years ago.

I am the first person to admit that the Pleiades Sector will be explored. It will have to be explored. But it will have to be done differently from the way it was attempted in my youth. I was then in my early thirties. As you can see by that single fact alone I was quite young. We were all young if you hold it against our average life span of well over two hundred years.

As I mentioned above I accompanied a group of scientists on an expedition whose aim it was to explore a small portion of the Pleiades Sector. We had no experience. I looked forward to it as a great adventure and in many ways it was one. It also left its scars on me and even to this day I have not been able to overcome the personal loss I suffered there.

What follows is a reconstruction of events as they actually happened. The events have no clear-cut beginning nor do they have an ending since I am still alive. There is really no plot, no unexpected victory of the main characters. How can there be in a real life situation? If there is a message, it would be that even highly placed officials and learned experts make mistakes. I for one do not blame them for what has happened, for they all did the best they were capable of.

In a different reality I might have acted with more maturity myself and I now realize that I should have prevented my heart from getting involved. The Pleiades expedition should have been

no different from any other assignment I had undertaken before I joined the Alcyone and her complement. Yet you don't know what Pilz is like. And now I know why we have not yet settled the world called Pilz. Perhaps we never will.

I am writing some of this from memory. Of course I also have my notes and the official reports I sent to my employer, the Interstellar News Service. But while the news reports were made from the viewpoint of the expedition, this account is made from the viewpoint of a single person, myself. It took me more than twenty years to gather enough strength to get started. Actually it was Doc Flanders who got me working on it.

Let me say again that all the events did happen and they happened in the sequence in which I recorded them. It is an adventure story which stands out far above any other I have experienced in all the years I have been a reporter and journalist. But see for yourself.

Barry Masters
Restigouche, Warinski Sector
648 S.Y.G.C.

Chapter 1

If one stands on the world known as Inverness on a dark, cloudless summer's night and looks at the sky one can see an open star cluster almost overhead. There are ten stars visible to the unaided eye in this cluster. If your eyesight is very acute you might even distinguish twelve. Yet you cannot be sure because they are difficult to count.

Now, if you take an optical aid, say, a pair of binoculars, you will be almost overwhelmed by the sight of dozens of stars which look like sparkling gems set against a black velvet cloth. Next suppose you became curious. You go to a library in order to find out more about what you have seen.

In the reference section you will find a good many monographs on this collection of stars and you will also find many photographs. As you study the pictures you realize that many hundreds of suns belong to this group. Another big surprise is the huge luminous cloak which envelopes almost the entire cluster. This nebulosity is a cloud of gas which fills the vacuum between the stars. It is the major reason why to this date no ship has ever visited the open cluster, although it is barely four hundred and fifty light-years away from Inverness. Surely you have guessed its name by now. No, you have not? It is the Pleiades Cluster. What else could fit the description?

Before I get into the story proper permit me to digress for another minute or two. At the time before recorded history began or perhaps shortly thereafter - I am no historian - the ancients gave names to the brightest stars. That is the reason why today we have names such as Rigel, and Arcturus, and Procyon, and Bellatrix and many others. Somewhat later many stars received letter designations. The sky was divided into segments called constellations, and the stars belonging to each constellation were given identifying letters, starting with alpha for the brightest and then continuing on to beta, gamma, delta, and so on.

But that did not work either. Astronomers soon ran out of letters. Over the years various other methods of identifying stars were in use

until we evolved our present system. Luckily it was realized fairly early that it would be almost impossible to identify every star in our Milky Way galaxy by a number. Sure it could be done, but the numbers would soon become far too unwieldy. There are an estimated two hundred billion stars in our galaxy, but nobody knows for sure. I am told that a trillion could be possible, however, that number seems rather high in view of the presently known distribution of stars and star densities. Yet two hundred billion appears low. Anyway, it makes little difference to me or to my story. Let me conclude by saying that, when interstellar travel changed from a dream to reality, from fiction to fact, no star has been given a name. We simply divided the regions of space into sectors. Then we only gave names to the worlds we have settled, or at least to the worlds we have tried to settle.

Among all the worlds on which our forebears had established themselves, Inverness stands unique. It is the world which kept up the spirit of our race in one of its darkest hours when we first met another intelligent species which, as it turned out, was a ruthless and capable enemy. Fortunately for us our leaders were firm and at tremendous cost overcame this menace. It took well over a decade. But it is all history now. You can look up the facts in any library on any world. It all happened over two centuries ago.

I am a reporter or rather a journalist by profession. My employer is the Interstellar News Service. It is a conglomerate whose tentacles stretch over the enormous distances of the known, or perhaps I should say explored, universe. I was born on the planet Hornepayne in 589 S.Y.G.C. Hornepayne is the seat of government of a huge region of space called the Warinski Sector and is located over six hundred light-years from Inverness in the direction of the center of the galaxy. Inverness is forty light-years distant from Earth. Hornepayne is the site of a very large military base. Both my parents worked on the base as civilians.

After I had completed my basic education I picked journalism as the field in which I was most interested. I approached my father with my choice and to my utter astonishment he did not put up a single argument against it. He agreed that it would be an interesting field to enter and I owe it to him that the University of Inverness accepted me without the usual hassle. As you undoubtedly know, of all the universities Inverness has by far the best reputation. It is also the largest.

I arrived on Inverness aboard a military vessel. That in itself was rather unusual. Among other things I discovered that I was not military material. It also gave me a rare insight into life aboard an interstellar ship. It took us eighty standard days to reach our destination because on the way there we stopped by at several other worlds. As I found out later I was one of the most traveled about students in our journalism class.

I graduated with honors at the end of the three year term. I was going to return to my home planet of Hornepayne and then face the next problem, the one of securing a position where I could make use of what I had learned. As an alternative I could continue my education and eventually become an instructor. I had about three weeks left on Inverness before I was slated to depart for home. I chose to spend them in the vicinity of the civilian space port. One always finds all kinds of tales circulating there, most of them very intriguing.

One day while I was idling my time away, dreaming of success, adventure, travel, and a lot more, dreams every young university graduate has, I noticed a foreigner who was having difficulties. He appeared to be lost. I approached him and offered my assistance. We quickly became acquainted. We got along well together. He was awaiting a connecting liner for one of the planets in the Shloblanka Sector. His destination was the world known as Tarn. I told him that I had just graduated from the University of Inverness with a degree in journalism.

"How would you like to put to use some of the things you have learned?" he asked me a couple of days later.

"Do you mean to work as a reporter? As a journalist?" I replied with a question of my own.

"No, not as a journalist. That is my profession. But as a reporter. Have you ever been in the Shloblanka Sector?"

"No, never. It is almost impossible to get there, I am told."

"Almost, yes, that is the key word," he agreed.

As it turned out he was the senior journalist of the Interstellar News Service on an assignment to Tarn. The Interstellar News Service has its headquarters on Earth. For some reason unknown to me - I did not dare to ask him and he did not volunteer the information - the reporter who was to have accompanied him missed the ship and he was all alone now. He would hire me if I was willing to take over his former partner's place. The pay would consist of transportation and food and lodging.

“Look at this as a learning experience,” he said to me. “You gain valuable practical experience without having to pay for it. What do you say?”

What did I say? Of course I agreed. I agreed in less time than it takes to blink an eye. Thus I was launched on a career which fulfilled all the dreams I had had that day on Inverness ten years ago. Success, adventure, and travel, they all came my way in varying quantities, and I have savored them all, never tiring of them, and never regretting my snap decision.

We spent a standard year on Tarn. When we returned our recordings and my reports were enthusiastically received by the senior executives of the Interstellar News Service and subsequently by the public at large. You yourself may well recall some of the programs. I was hired for life, as they say in the field. My next assignment took me to Hornepayne. Then I spent time on Tremaine, Tora, Kralinka, Astra and a number of other planets.

As I pointed out, the Interstellar News Service is very powerful and has almost unlimited connections. It also has unlimited funds, or nearly so. When it comes right down to it, it is not almost impossible to visit the Shloblanka Sector. It is only impossibly expensive for ordinary citizens. By the Treaty of Tarn contact between the two sectors is limited to two small ships, one of theirs and one of ours. Additional contacts must be approved by both governing bodies, our Department of Exoracial Relations and their equivalent body. But this is not intended to be a monograph on interstellar relations. I have merely tried to point out a few of the experiences which I hope will be adequate for the job ahead. But as they say in journalism, bring on the bear!

It is summer on Inverness. An interstellar vessel is in orbit around the planet, ready to leave for the first detailed scientific exploration of a small portion of the Pleiades Cluster. The expedition leader is Dr. Arne Viborg. It is his job to make all the major decisions. Our main base is the ship, the Alcyone, commanded by Bill Grainger. In theory Bill Grainger and Arne Viborg have equal authority. They are more or less evenly matched in personality. They both have their strong points and their less desirable qualities. That is why I have the deciding vote in case of a tie. Ideally the two leaders should agree on every step to be taken. And by and large that is what I expect will happen. I don't believe that I have introduced myself properly yet. My name is Barry Masters.

Chapter 2

As I said our ship was in orbit around Inverness. It was a converted military ship of the LC class. Actually it was quite old. Ships are very expensive to build and there is always a long waiting list for retired navy vessels. Whenever one becomes available it is allotted to the government department or private enterprise which has the most urgent need for it. This need is in turn determined by a complex system of numbers which are assigned according to government priorities and wishes and a whole series of other factors which change from time to time, depending on what the government decides is in the best interest of our race as a whole.

Our ship, the Alcyone, had been commissioned about a hundred and fifty years ago. It was a fighting ship of awesome power. About thirty standard years ago the navy began replacing their vessels with ships of the newer HC class which are much larger and even more powerful. The LC class vessels had been in operation basically unchanged for well over two hundred years, since the final stages of the War of Survival. One of the first ships to become available was the Alcyone. Previously it had had the designation of LC462. When the navy relinquished control of LC462 it was at once transferred to the newly established Department of Exploration and Settlement. It was not rebuilt or altered. Even the armaments were left untouched.

About two years ago Captain Bill Grainger retired from the navy. He chose early retirement but that was only a formality. He immediately took over command of the Alcyone. The vessel had changed its name from the designation LC462 to Alcyone when it became part of the fleet of government craft. The University of Inverness was chosen as the base for the Department of Exploration and Settlement. A couple of years ago the outgoing head of this department set a series of steps in motion to commence exploring the Pleiades Sector. Dr. Arne Viborg was to head the expedition, a position he readily accepted as long as he was free to choose the members of the expedition. Naturally there was a great deal more to it than what I have mentioned here.

Practically no exploration work had been done for over two centuries. A great many planets had been surveyed at that time. The intervening twenty decades had been used to settle a number of them. There still remained dozens of them suitable for human habitation. As soon as people could be found small colonies would be established on them.

But they wanted to get back into exploration. The universe is so unbelievably large that it will take many millions of years to have it all explored. Perhaps we shall never accomplish it. To settle the Milky Way galaxy alone will take hundreds of thousands of years. The government felt it would have to make a determined effort to start, and the Department of Exploration and Settlement would be the agency best suited to carry out that task.

Dr. Viborg had chosen his team of scientists. They were scattered over many worlds and it took time to gather them all aboard the Alcyone. Only one problem remained to be overcome: How to go about exploring planets. As I mentioned above no exploration work had been done for more than two centuries. The art of checking out a planet had been lost. And that is where I joined the team.

In my capacity as a journalist I had visited many worlds and most importantly, I had spent time on a number of planets not yet well explored. Adventure stories are always in demand, even more so if they are actually true. And the Interstellar News Service had prepared me as well as they could for participating in this greatest adventure since the War of Survival some two hundred years ago.

I joined Captain Grainger, Dr. Viborg and the Alcyone, our ship, on the rather remote and backward planet of Kralinka. Most of the team was already aboard. We only had one more scientist to pick up, Dr. Elvina Price, our microbiologist. She had concluded her studies on the mushroom planet called Pilz, a good third of the way to the Pleiades Sector. Instead of coming all the way to Inverness and thereby delaying the expedition for many weeks it had been decided to have her remain on Pilz. I found that most advantageous, since it permitted me to stay on Kralinka for an extra two weeks. I like backward worlds.

Pilz, of course, is not really a mushroom planet. It is only called that because the dominant native plants are not trees as we recognize them but plants which look like giant mushrooms and attain heights of over twenty meters. I had been on Pilz once before, years ago, and looked forward to stopping by again.

When the Alcyone arrived at Kralinka the captain and most of the expedition members came down to the planet. It was winter. Winter on Kralinka is a relative term. The entire planet is tropical. Its axis is inclined to the ecliptic only a couple of degrees. That means that there is almost no variance in temperature for any particular point on its surface. Yet Kralinka has a distinct summer and winter. You have guessed by now what causes the seasons. Its orbit around its sun is very elliptical. In winter the planet is considerably farther away from its sun than in summer. Consequently the temperature in the temperate zones, which averages more than thirty-five degrees in summer, drops to about twenty-five degrees in winter. The most pleasant climate is in the two polar regions.

I had given my reports to the local office of the Interstellar News Service a couple of weeks before and spent ten days doing nothing. It was a real vacation. When I was back at the space port I eagerly looked forward to the arrival of the Alcyone. Four days later Captain Grainger stepped off the shuttle. I liked him at first sight. He looked like a typical navy captain, except that he seemed to be very young. I guessed his age to be about forty standard years. He introduced all the accompanying scientists to the reception committee to which I had attached myself. We had never met before, and when I shook hands with him, saying "Barry Masters," he replied: "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Masters." By his accent and his friendly manners I immediately guessed that he grew up on Inverness.

"How are things at home on Inverness?" I asked him.

"Oh, fine, very well, thank you," he replied, "but tell me, Mr. Masters, how did you know I was born and raised on Inverness?"

"Call me Barry. Your accent gave you away."

"My accent? How could you place it that quickly? Kralinka is not exactly the center of the universe."

"I have been around a bit, Captain. I studied at the University of Inverness. Your accent coupled with your genial ways could only originate on Inverness."

"Really? You are the first person to tell me that, Barry. Call me Bill. Gosh, it's hot here. Is there any place where a person could get a few cold drinks?"

"Just follow me, Bill. It's not far."

Since I was the last person to greet the new arrivals I had more time for conversation than the others. We walked the few steps over to the restaurant and when I looked back before climbing the

couple of stairs up to the large dining hall I saw that everybody was following us.

Captain Grainger had several cold drinks. We took a liking to each other and he stayed with me, making light conversation.

“You know, Barry,” he said, “I am here to pick up a journalist from the Interstellar News Service. I wonder how we’ll get along. You wouldn’t know him, would you? Perhaps you could tell me where I could locate him.”

“I think he’ll be along shortly, and I also think that you and that journalist will get along just dandy,” I replied. I was having trouble keeping a straight face.

“Is it always so hot here?”

“No, Bill, just in the spring. In summer it gets a lot warmer yet. And wait till you see the tropics.”

“I don’t know how you manage to survive in this heat. I find it really oppressive. I am still soaking wet from standing outside in the sun for those few minutes.”

“No doubt you would if you are not used to it.”

“Yes, and particularly since we were on Devlin only a couple of weeks ago. I don’t want to sound ungrateful or make your world sound unpleasant”

“I understand, Bill. Devlin with its ice fields is certainly a lot different from Kralinka.”

“You have been on Devlin?”

“Yes, twice.”

“Now that I come to think about it you strike me as if you are not from here either. And you do have a trace of a strange accent. Let me think, yes, I should put your place of birth on Tremaine or Hornepayne.”

“Bill Grainger, I do think that the journalist from the Interstellar News Service and you are going to get along real well.”

We left Kralinka the next day for the jump to Pilz. Distances being what they are, it took well over a week. Let me again digress for a minute or two. If you are well traveled you can skip the next couple of paragraphs. However, statistics indicate that only two percent of a planet’s population ever visits another world. That means that ninety-eight percent will never experience the thrill of stepping on another celestial body. And it is a thrill, believe me. It is a thrill which never wears off, because each planet is different. It is a thrill of the first magnitude.

Pilz is one of the most unusual worlds which I had visited up to that time. When I come to think about it, every planet has its peculiarities. Kralinka, Devlin, Torreon, Hornepayne, Inverness, they each have something which makes them unique. And Pilz is no exception. Since I was the only one who had been there before, I was beseeched with requests by my shipmates to tell them what to expect.

“Wait until you get there,” I kept saying to them. “There is no point in telling you. It must be experienced.”

“But you have been there before. Surely you can give us an idea. It is your job to communicate feelings.”

“Wait until you set foot upon Pilz. How can I convey to you the thrill of passing through the atmosphere with its ever-changing colors, the feeling of lightness, the springy ground underfoot, the low gravity, the unusual scents? No, I can’t. You must experience the thrill yourselves.”

Dr. Viborg himself became so caught up in anticipation that he declared a three day stopover long before we were anywhere near the system. I was on the bridge when he informed Bill Grainger of his decision. I believe it came as a big surprise to our captain, particularly since Arne Viborg had begrudged the few hours which they had spent on Kralinka collecting me.

We had arrived at the planet called Pilz. Our ship was in a polar orbit, rather close to the surface. I estimated we were no more than a thousand kilometers up. This time everybody wanted to go down. Captain Grainger was not very enthused about it, but he could see our point and he acceded to our requests. The shuttle only held twenty persons at a time. We drew lots as to who would be on the first trip down and who would be on the second and subsequent ones. My acquaintance with Lady Luck had not changed over the years. It remained rotten. I was on the last trip.

And so it came that the entire contingent of scientists visited the mushroom planet called Pilz.