

Stewards of the Flame

ALSO BY SYLVIA ENGDAHL

Enchantress from the Stars

The Far Side of Evil

Journey Between Worlds

AND THE TRILOGY

Children of the Star

WHICH INCLUDES

This Star Shall Abide

Beyond the Tomorrow Mountains

The Doors of the Universe

*Stewards
of the Flame*

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Contents

<i>Part One</i>	7
<i>Part Two</i>	73
<i>Part Three</i>	129
<i>Part Four</i>	214
<i>Part Five</i>	307
<i>Part Six</i>	371
<i>Afterword</i>	456
<i>About the Author</i>	459

Formerly, people rushed to embrace totalitarian states. Now they rush to embrace the therapeutic state. When they discover that the therapeutic state is about tyranny, not therapy, it will be too late.

—Thomas Szasz, *Pharmacracy*, 2001



Part One

~ 1 ~

When he opened his eyes he could not recall what world he was on. There had been so many. But he wasn't on a starship, Jesse realized, and . . . and he must return to the ship, right now. Memory flooded back. This was the colony planet Undine, and his ship was due to break orbit. He sat up, his face in his hands—and caught sight of the white-jacketed medic at the foot of the bed.

“I guess it's stupid to ask where I am,” Jesse said, revising his assumptions. It was obviously a hospital, and he did not remember entering it. He did not remember being ill, even; this felt more like one hell of a hangover. It was a familiar feeling. He'd waked with hangovers on all too many worlds in recent years. Never before, though, had they required hospitalization.

The medic said nothing. “Was there an accident?” Jesse inquired.

“No. You were lucky. We got to you before you tried to leave the bar.”

Puzzled, Jesse groped for recollection. Yes, he'd been in a bar. That was about the only place there was to go, onworld. He had not drunk enough to pass out, however. Besides, if he'd passed out in the bar, there would have been no question of his trying to leave it, and if he hadn't passed out, why would anyone have called the medics? He wasn't licensed to drive a

ground vehicle, so why would they even have detained him?

“Exactly where did I collapse?” he demanded.

“You weren’t quite that bad,” the man said. “You were out for only a minute or two, then came around. We sedated you in the ambulance. You wouldn’t remember.”

“But why was the ambulance there?” Jesse persisted. He was beginning to lose patience. What he’d seen of this colony so far, he had not liked, and his opinion of it wasn’t improving.

“Just cruising,” said the medic. “The guy next to you saw you had a problem and pushed his flag-stop button. It would have been better to come in sooner, on your own, you know. You’d need less treatment if you’d reported to admissions long ago.”

“Treatment for what?” There was some serious misunderstanding here. Perhaps he’d not yet been seen by a doctor.

“Alcohol abuse, what else?” A second medic had appeared in the doorway; the first one turned and said, “Denial. Typical. Why do they hide from care when they know the law?”

“This one’s from offworld,” said the second man. “Technically he’s not subject to health laws until he’s in custody.”

“Now, hold on!” said Jesse, rising. “I don’t know what kind of second-rate facilities you’ve got here, but diagnosis doesn’t seem to be your strong point. I am not an alcoholic. I am Jesse Sanders, Captain of the Unified Colonial Fleet star freighter *Eureka*—”

“Not anymore, you’re not,” the second medic told him. “The *Eureka* broke orbit yesterday, with the first mate in command. Did you think they’d lose a window while you were incapacitating yourself?”

Jesse’s knees buckled; he slipped back to the edge of the bunk. “God,” he said in shock. “Oh, God. What the hell have you people done to me?”

He was not an alcoholic. He never drank on shipboard, or excessively while onworld in the company of his crew. On shore leave, alone and without duties, he sometimes got drunk on purpose; but he had lost never track of time. He hadn’t passed out even briefly before, and had drunk no more than usual on this occasion. He’d have been awake to board the shuttle the next day, and the *Eureka*’s cargo wouldn’t have been fully

loaded until nightfall. The window for the latest departure required to keep the ship on schedule had lasted another thirty-five hours after that. They had sedated him for two days and three nights while his ship went on without him.

Why? What possible motive could anyone have for it? He knew no one on Undine. It had no political entanglements with other colonies. He had no enemies on the *Eureka*; it was a small, contented crew. He had no enemies in Fleet, either, as far as he knew. What did anyone have to gain by ending his career?

He would never get another command. The best he could hope for would be a mate's billet on the next freighter to touch here. The worst . . . well, if he couldn't get the record straightened out, he might not even get transport out of the colony. If it was entered as AWOL due to drunkenness, he would be on this outlying world for the rest of his life.

"I want to see the man in charge," he declared grimly.

"I'm your doctor," replied the second medic. "I can help you."

"Not you. The man, or woman, over you. The one who can tell me who authorized the sedation."

"Authorized? It's routine. The ambulance crew starts it; it's maintained until you're detoxified."

"I didn't need detox, and you know it. Somebody was paid."

The medics looked at each other meaningfully. "Paranoia?" asked the first one.

"We'd better check it out," agreed the doctor. "I'll send him up to Psych later today."

Perhaps, Jesse thought, he really had tied one on and was hallucinating. This could not be happening.

"I'll admit," the doctor said to him, "that you haven't damaged your body much with alcohol yet. You are very, very fortunate that this has been caught early. I know you may not feel you have a problem, but drinking to the point of intoxication is a danger sign. On Earth they don't treat everyone who's in danger. We do, here. We have the finest medical facility in the galaxy, and we take just pride in it. Don't worry about anything, Jesse. We can make you well."

"Sanders, to you," Jesse said grimly. "Captain Sanders."

"This isn't a social occasion," said the doctor. "We're here

to care for you. We call all our patients by their first names—”

“And do they call you by yours?” Jesse snapped. “I see a nametag there that says Dr. Yasir. I’ll not use that title unless you reciprocate.”

“Hostile,” said the other medic, as if Jesse were deaf. “Should I wait for the psych report before I schedule him for aversion therapy?”

Aversion therapy. God! But it was the standard treatment, of course; he knew that. He had never liked the idea of it, even in the case of people who really were substance abusers. Not that any spacer liked any medic much; there was antagonism of long standing between the two professions. There were, however, degrees of distastefulness.

“We’re not scheduling anything,” he said. “I’m checking myself out, right now.”

They started at him blankly. “I’m not drunk now,” he said, wondering if they were stupid as well as officious. “You can’t hold me here. I won’t sign the consent form.”

The younger medic, looking blanker still, asked, “What consent form?”

~ 2 ~

They sent him up to Psych. Jesse, dazed though he was, attempted to be cooperative; psych therapies were, after all, an even less inviting prospect than forced treatment for non-existent alcoholism. He took endless tests, answered endless questions. He lied only with regard to the most offensive ones.

He was put to bed in a cubicle which was, surprisingly, private. He hoped it was not part of the psych ward. He hoped he was there only for lights out.

He lay looking out the small window at the strip of dark sky visible over a vast complex of well-lit buildings. The sky, the only home he had known for the past twenty-odd years—he had no ties left on Earth, though he had grown up there. He’d gone into space young. He’d been eager then, excited. He’d

had dreams of exploring the universe. It had not turned out like that, of course. Things never did. You knew, after ten years or so, that they never would.

But you didn't expect them to take a turn like this, either.

It was not that he couldn't face the idea of being worldbound. Space actually didn't mean that much anymore. He was not exploring; he was on a milk run between colonized solar systems. There was little if anything to be seen from the bridge of a freighter, and one freighter was pretty much like another. One port was like another, too. You saw more of what went on in videos than through sightseeing.

But he enjoyed freighter command as much as he could enjoy any job, and it was the only work he knew. He was considered good at it. The very routine of it was insulation against . . . other things. Things you once believed in, cared about, and then stopped caring about. That was the worst: you stopped caring. You stopped thinking you'd someday find a meaning.

Would it have helped if he'd had a family? That had been a dream, once, too. It wasn't practical for a spacer to have a home base, but couples in mixed crews did marry. Fleet took pains to keep them together. They got free care and schooling for their kids. But an arrangement like that was very, very permanent. It lacked the flexibility of an onworld marriage; if it didn't work out, there you were. He'd had short-term relationships with crew women, but never one worth a binding commitment.

It was just as well he didn't have a family now. God, if he'd been involved with anyone aboard the *Eureka*—!

Yet if he had been, he wouldn't have been drinking alone. He wouldn't have tried to get drunk, and in any case would not have been taken into custody. No crew woman would have let an ambulance team misjudge his condition. At the worst, if they'd persisted, she'd have lodged a protest with the local authorities long before the end of the departure window.

As things were, the crew hadn't guessed the true cause of his disappearance. The fact that he'd been abandoned proved that. He might have no close friends aboard—the Captain always kept apart, except from lovers—but he was respected.

His habit of drinking on leave had never affected his duties; the mate wouldn't have believed a report of substance abuse. The *Eureka*, if told he'd been hospitalized, must have assumed a true medical emergency. The diagnosis would bypass them, be sent to Fleet headquarters without the chance for his crew to contest it.

Jesse's body ached with tension, and his heart constricted. What would happen to him, stuck on a world like this? What if the aversion therapy took? He would then lose the small solace drink could offer, and what else, in a port, was there to do?

Work? He was not qualified for onworld work, at least not in terms of official credentials, which on just about any world were all that mattered. Yet for any job not demanding credentials, he'd be called overqualified. There was small chance that anyone would hire him. He would not need to work; his credit was good, and his back pay had accumulated for years. It was enough to retire on. Jesse did not want to retire.

He turned onto his stomach and lay, for hours, in mute agony. There would be no sleep, he knew, after two days and three nights of sedation. Who had engineered that? He could see, on reflection, that no one had. The doctor had been honest. They did it here to all drunks. He was the victim not of foul play but of fate. It occurred to him suddenly to wonder how many other victims were imprisoned in this hellish excuse for a hospital. Not just drunks; if they knew nothing of consent forms here, they must treat everything else by force too. What had the doctor said, that as an offworlder he wasn't subject to the health laws until taken into custody?

This was not the kind of colony he wished to join as a citizen. And without transport, he might not have any choice.

Eventually, the room began to grow light. He looked back at the sky and saw the sun rising, a yellow sun much like Earth's. Buildings, of identical stark design and interconnected by elevated walkways, spread out in every direction; he was in one of the tallest. Were they all part of the hospital? The colony's population wasn't large enough to support such huge one. It seemed odd, now that he thought of it, that it dared claim "the finest medical facility in the galaxy."

The cubicle's curtain parted and a nurse came in. She was tall, dark-haired and slender; somehow the white uniform she wore didn't suit her. There was something a bit familiar about her. "Hello, Jesse," she said to him. "My name is Carla."

Jesse sat up. "Well, we're on an equal basis with names, anyway," he said, "even if you're my jailer."

Carla looked straight at him with green eyes that seemed almost luminous. "Your record says you're an alcoholic," she said. "Are you?"

"No."

"Why do you abuse alcohol, then?"

"I don't, as I'm sure you know." He remembered, now, where he had seen her before. She'd been present during the psych testing. He'd assumed she was a technician, but evidently she must be one of the therapists. They were cross-checking. They wanted to see if he would remain stubborn in his "denial of the problem."

"Jesse," she said. "You do drink—maybe not to the point of abuse, that's a subjective term, but you get drunk sometimes. I want to know why."

"Because I haven't anything better to do when I'm not on duty," he said honestly. And then, wondering why he felt compelled to confess to her, he added, "Because it helps me forget the emptiness."

She held his gaze for a long, long moment. Then she said quietly, "Thank you for telling me, Jesse." She started to leave the room, but turned back. "Don't tell anyone else," she advised. "If you do, you'll be put on antidepressants. And my guess is that you'd rather keep your brain intact."

But the psych tests would have revealed his underlying dissatisfaction with life, he realized in dismay. Why had he not already been drugged?

A few hours later, orderlies came for him. Hope, aroused against reason by Carla's presence, died at the sight of them. Jesse struggled to his feet and tried to regain the bearing of a starship captain. He had never been a coward, and he'd be damned if he'd let a bunch of frigging medics on a backwater world turn him into one.