



## *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?”

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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.

“Therapy, I suppose,” he said resignedly. “Don’t you at least issue bathrobes?”

“Where you’re going, you won’t need one.” And without it, wearing only the skimpy gown in which he’d slept, he could hardly make for the exit, Jesse realized. Not that these burly escorts would let him escape in any case.

They took him to an examining room large for an operating theater, where, unceremoniously, he was stripped naked and strapped to a table. White-garbed technicians clustered round. Equipment carts were pushed toward him, closing in. He was conscious of more tubes and electronics than there were on the bridge of a starship.

Above the other voices, one stood out. Carla’s voice. “There’s been a mistake,” she was saying. “This man isn’t scheduled for a full workup. He’s under Psych’s jurisdiction.”

“Psych ordered it,” someone replied. “Dr. Kelstrom.”

“No! That couldn’t have happened. A computer error, maybe.”

“See for yourself. Kelstrom’s signature. You’re from his office, aren’t you? You’ll recognize it.”

Evidently Carla did recognize it. Jesse heard no more from her as they turned up the lights and plunged a large needle into his hip.

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Carla Francesco hurried down the corridor from the stairwell, her face flushed as she strode into the office of the one man in the Hospital she fully trusted. “There’s some sort of snafu,” she declared with anger. “Since when have you been signing off on orders without reading them?”

He was calm, composed, as always—yet strangely distant. “I do read them.”

“Not this morning, apparently, unless somebody’s learned to forge your seal. They have Jesse Sanders in the demonstration room; they’re about to do a full workup with student techs.”

“I know that. In this case, I’m allowing it.”

She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Upon finding Jesse’s bed empty, she’d run a computer trace; the result had been so surprising—so unlike Kelstrom—that it hadn’t occurred to her it could be anything but an error. “There’s nothing wrong with the man, no possible reason to subject him to that,” she protested. “It would be hell for him even if he were used to such things.”

“Anybody who works for Fleet is used to medical workups, I imagine.” He turned to his computer, not looking at her.

“Not like ours. Offworld they’re not like ours, not unless there are symptoms serious enough to warrant the stress. *You* told me that.” Furious, confused because he was holding back in a way not at all characteristic of him, Carla paused. Her heart was pounding, and not just from rushing upstairs.

“Carla. They wanted a subject on whom there were no recent records; the computer tagged Sanders. The official view’s that we’re doing him a favor. He’s getting tests that would cost twice his annual pay on worlds like Earth where preventative care’s not free.”

His voice was level; none of the irony she’d have expected came through. “That’s not *your* view,” she insisted, baffled. “We spend half our time knocking ourselves out to protect patients assigned to you from that sort of thinking.”

Still not meeting her gaze, Kelstrom agreed, “I don’t order physical workups often enough to suit my colleagues. Well, for once I saw a chance to display orthodoxy. My position here will be strengthened by it.”

Incredulous, Carla could only stare. He had never been so cold before. He’d shown no lack of feeling even yesterday—when she’d shown him the results of Jesse’s initial psych tests, he’d shared her outrage at the injustice already done. “We’ll get the man out of here,” he’d assured her. “Action’s clearly called for, from what I can see at first glance. He’s not a true substance abuser, and certainly not paranoid. There’ll be no problem with a quick discharge.”

And then, about to close the file, he had taken a closer look at its biographical section. “Carla,” he’d said in a low voice,

tinged with excitement. “This man is a *starship captain*.”

She had known what lay beneath his reaction. The responsibilities he bore obscured boyish enthusiasms, at least within Hospital walls—but like herself and most of her friends, he was stirred by the mere thought of starships. Not that offworld travel would ever be possible for any of them, but space was a symbol. It meant freedom from the problems they faced on Undine.

Their eyes met, and as usual, their emotions; voicing them wasn’t necessary. “I’ll call up his chart at home tonight, and review it carefully,” he’d said, clearing the screen. “Meanwhile, he does have a drinking problem—not one that warrants intervention, but a problem nonetheless. Find out what’s back of it.”

“Frustration, don’t you think? If his case had gone to anyone but you, I’d have tweaked the test results.” By most staff doctors, Jesse’s underlying discontent would have been labeled “illness” and antidepressants would have been ordered in high enough doses to distort his natural response to what was happening to him. “How can I learn anything more specific?”

“Try asking him. He’ll reveal more than he says in words, to you. I don’t want to talk to him myself—he won’t trust me in this setting.”

“He’d be a fool if he did,” she’d agreed. Now she wondered if her own trust had been misplaced. Yet it couldn’t have been. The grounds for it had been unquestionable. How could anyone, let alone this man, change so totally?

“I believe what Jesse told me this morning,” Carla said, “as I reported in the first place. He was open with me, and our minds—touched.” The moment was vivid in her memory: an ordinary-looking man, light brown hair, skin pale from a life spent aboard starships . . . and yet his grey-blue eyes had met hers in a way that was not ordinary. “I think he’s more of a workaholic than an alcoholic,” she added. “He drinks to fill the hours away from his job. That’s not the kind of problem we should mess with here. How can you use him like a lab animal, let him be tortured, his body exposed and probed without regard for his human dignity—”

She broke off, aware with dismay of her sensations. She

had seen Jesse's nakedness in the examining room, and unlike the others present, had been embarrassed by it. She was a psych technician, not a medical nurse. Her attitude toward bodies was not clinical. In view of her longstanding hatred of Hospital policy, she had taken pride in that. Now, unaccountably, she felt vulnerable and a little afraid. Remembering, she saw not just a helpless patient, but a man. She had never reacted to a man's body before, except one, her former husband's; though he was dead, such feelings had been reserved for him. . . .

"Carla." The man across the desk stretched out his hand, then quickly withdrew it. It was as if on the verge of reassurance, he drew back from the bond of friendship that they normally shared. "Is it possible that you're feeling what I think you are—and for an offworlder?" he asked softly.

"And why shouldn't I? Is an offworlder less than we are? Is that why you're violating all your own rules?"

"My rules have always permitted ruthlessness. People I work with do suffer at times, as you know."

"Not without their consent. That's how your rules differ from the Hospital's, isn't it? Jesse Sanders has not consented to *anything*, let alone to a three-day invasive workup that serves no purpose except to train tech personnel and produce a standard file on him! Or to aversion therapy. Are you going to allow that, too?"

Kelstrom nodded. "Yes, I think so. It will be expected by the staff. There's an experimental protocol they've been wanting try, but most patients aren't in shape for it. I see no reason to deprive them of this one."

"Experimental?" Appalled, Carla felt her knees weaken. She was up-to-date on the research discussed in the department, though much of it was repugnant to her. The idea she'd heard advanced with regard to aversion therapy was so repellent that she'd assumed not even the Administration took it seriously.

"I'm sorry," Kelstrom told her, not showing any genuine regret. "My goal here is to help as many patients as possible. That means sparing the weak ones, not the strong. Sanders can handle himself—or if he can't, I want to know. I think

under these circumstances it's justifiable to ignore his not having consented."

Bitterly, Carla burst out, "I never thought I'd see you compromise your ideals on an end-justifies-the-means basis. And I won't stand by and let it happen, either! If you're expecting me to go along with you, you'll be surprised."

"I doubt it," the psychiatrist declared. "I was surprised a moment ago, I'll admit. I've watched you a long time, wondering when you'd let your sexual awareness resurface. Perhaps you wouldn't have dropped your guard if this man were one of us. In a way it's too bad it happened. Personal feelings may make the case tough for you; I want you to go on visiting him, keep me informed of his reactions. But I don't think you can surprise me further, Carla."

We'll see about that, she thought grimly. There were ways around Hospital orders. She'd find opportunity to intervene, as she had many times in the past. But without her supervisor on her side, the risk was going to be a great deal bigger.

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Jesse lay flat, not daring to move, wondering if there was any portion of his anatomy not sore from internal probing. Local anesthetic had, of course, been used for the most traumatic flesh punctures. With that added to repeated blood samplings, he'd felt more needles than he could count. The feeling of sensitive inner parts, however, had not been dulled. His stomach hurt. His throat hurt, though the apparatus thrust into his windpipe had long since been withdrawn. His ass and a good portion of his gut hurt—what he'd once thought a mere vulgar expression had been carried out all too literally.

Wearily he forced his eyes open, sensing someone's approach. To his relief, it was Carla who stood beside him. "Keep your spirits up," she said gently, straightening the sheet with which he'd at last, mercifully, been covered. "This phase lasts just one more day."

“What will they do to me tomorrow?” he asked, feeling that there was little left they could do. In addition to getting a variety of scans, they had directly examined every nook and cranny of his body’s interior; not only all orifices, but arteries had been explored. They had inserted miles of tubing. They had injected dyes, taken tissue samples. They had probed the very marrow of his bones.

Now, for the night anyway, he had been granted respite, perhaps only because the supervising doctors were tired. There seemed to be an endless succession of technicians and interns. Last night he had been left alone, but hardly at peace; he’d undergone violent purging in preparation for this morning’s intestinal studies. Tonight the only procedure in progress appeared to be IV feeding, necessitated by the past two days’ required fast and the fact that his stomach was too badly abused from inner inspection to hold liquid nourishment. Tomorrow . . .

“What will they do tomorrow?” he repeated, for Carla’s face was averted; she seemed reluctant to reply.

“You don’t want to know.”

“Yes, I do. Nothing’s worse than trying to guess.” This woman would be honest, he felt. She would not resort to stock, patronizing phrases. Perhaps she might even offer *reasons*.

She pressed his hand with cool, smooth fingers. “Biopsies of internal organs to start with, I think. The ones they couldn’t reach with endoscopy. Liver, kidney and so forth.”

“You’re kidding. Needles in my *liver*? But there’s nothing to look for, no symptoms that would suggest—”

“They don’t wait for symptoms. There might be something wrong, you see, that could be found long before symptoms showed up.”

“But there isn’t. I’m healthy! At least I assume so—they haven’t by any chance discovered a problem, have they?” Dismaying as that thought was, it was almost better than the idea of so much invasive work having being done by mistake.

“No!” Carla exclaimed. “Don’t start thinking that way, Jesse! There is nothing wrong with your body. The problem is with the system we’ve got here. It can’t tolerate an incomplete file.”

“You mean all this is done to every patient who’s admitted for some minor complaint?” She wasn’t a psychologist after all, he realized, for she didn’t speak as a member of the system’s hierarchy.

“To every citizen of this colony,” Carla replied. “Not all at once like this, of course. And not so many invasive tests for young people. Besides telemetry of data from our homes, we have scheduled checks and rechecks according to age.”

“Oh, my God, Carla. That’s carrying annual physicals too far.”

She said slowly, “Not really—it’s the logical extension of the concept.” She paused, almost as if waiting for a retort.

“Well, it’s a tradeoff between stress and benefit,” Jesse said, trying to be tactful. “Not to mention economics. The chances of finding anything serious enough to warrant such tests on a routine basis must be pretty small.”

“That’s not the point. The theory is that preventing illness is worth *any* cost, either in discomfort or in resources.”

“I’m not sure I feel up to arguing with you, but there’s a flaw in that logic. If you subject people to this much regular stress, and make them worry enough about their health to put up with it, they’re going to get problems that might never have developed otherwise.”

“Exactly,” Carla said, her eyes lighting. “That’s one reason statistics support the testing. It does turn up potential problems. Sometimes it actually creates problems, because none of these things are wholly risk-free.”

Jesse grimaced. “Instruments poked into bladders, you mean? Catheters shoved up arteries into hearts? I tried to tell myself they couldn’t really slip, but—”

“They can and do, especially in the hands of student medics. It’s not dangerous, you understand. We’re skilled here in repairing damage.” She sounded bitter.

“You mean I needn’t be afraid they’ll kill me.”

Carla turned white. “No,” she declared with strange intensity. “That’s the one thing they will *never* do.”

He frowned. Something was wrong in this place, something more than the hospital’s gung-ho policies and its obvious vio-

lations of patients' rights and privacy. "You seem to share my skepticism," he said to Carla. "Yet you said 'we' as if you get checked like everyone else."

"We aren't given a choice."

"God! Is that what's meant by the health laws someone mentioned?"

"That's part of it."

"I guess maybe I don't want to know the other part," Jesse admitted, wishing only to be light-years away.

"Believe me, you don't. You've got enough to face right now."

He saw she was really troubled. "Don't worry, I can stand another day of this, Carla," he said with such cheerfulness as he could muster. "Internal organ biopsies can't hurt more than the spinal tap and the bone marrow sampling."

"That's not what I'm thinking about. I wish—I wish I could get you out of here before they start the treatment phase."

"What? Oh, you mean the aversion therapy. I can stand that too," he declared grimly. "They can't keep me nauseous all the time, after all; I'm supposed to associate it with drinking." Presumably, he thought sardonically, I will forget all about associating it with having my guts turned inside out for the inspection of assembled interns. "So it won't be bad compared to this—just brief episodes."

"Do you know anything about the theory behind aversion therapy, Jesse?" Carla asked, seeming reluctant. She drew a chair to his bedside, sat close to him; he was aware of the sweet, fresh scent of her hair.

"Well, it's a standard conditioning technique, I guess. Behavior modification. They make you drink and then punish you, so you'll connect suffering with the act of drinking."

"No. The induced nausea isn't punishment; it works on the principle that makes animals reject poisonous foods. We have a built-in genetic mechanism for avoiding things that make us sick when we ingest them. Ordinary aversive conditioning, using shocks, isn't nearly as effective."

"But it doesn't always work, at least not permanently."

"Because we have minds that override associations. Humans know, underneath, that alcohol doesn't produce nausea."

A person has to be awfully suggestible to be fooled subconsciously, even for a little while.”

“That’s some comfort,” Jesse remarked, trying to make light of it. “I don’t think I’m the suggestible sort.”

“Definitely not. Your psych tests show you’re not. And the Meds know that, of course. Aversion therapy’s standard procedure, but they’re aware that it has a worse record here than on worlds where submission to it’s voluntary. That’s a problem they’ve been trying to get around.”

“Well, they might try eliminating the force.”

“The Meds? Never; that’s contrary to their goal of curing everyone.”

“Much as I’d like to prove them wrong, Carla, I want to get out of here—and *stay* out. So I’ll pretend to be ‘cured.’”

“Never getting drunk again would be wise, certainly. But are you ready to give up social drinking, too?”

“Well, temporarily—in public, anyway. But I’m not an addict, after all. I can drink small amounts with meals.”

“I’m sure you can. But the authorities here won’t recognize that. Being drunk just once is interpreted as susceptibility to addiction; they don’t rely on DNA data, which has proven unreliable for predicting behavior.”

“Then why isn’t liquor banned entirely?” This had been puzzling him; it seemed the kind of world where prohibitions would flourish.

“There’s no need for a ban. Alcohol really isn’t a problem here. Anyone drunk enough to cause trouble is treated, and that’s the end of it—except there’s a small amount of recidivism. Medical science hopes to eliminate that.” Carla paused, then added painfully, “You’ve been chosen as the guinea pig, Jesse.”

That figured. He was stranded, friendless, and strong enough to withstand unlimited therapy—no wonder they were verifying his health. “Tell me what they’ll try,” he urged, steeling himself.

“You’ll be given drugs that cause real sickness when combined with alcohol. Not just nausea—heart symptoms, difficulty breathing, and so forth.”

“But that’s an ancient technique! They were doing that on

Earth as far back as the twentieth century. It doesn't work on anyone who won't keep taking the stuff."

"You won't have to take it. They'll implant an internal device for timed release, just as they do to treat chronic diseases—a much more sophisticated one, of course, than the cheap near-surface implants used on most worlds."

"It's *permanent*?" He swallowed, repelled not so much by the loss of drinking pleasure as by the thought of unauthorized tampering with his body's reactions.

"Effectively so, unless you leave this world and have it removed. They'll bring you in for frequent maintenance checks."

He might not get a chance to leave, Jesse thought grimly. Not soon, anyway. "What's experimental about this?" he asked, thinking the pieces didn't quite fit. Implants were not experimental. Besides their medical uses such devices were routinely used for contraception; he'd had one since adolescence, though unlike female contraceptive implants it was not of the drug-dispensing type. He'd always wondered how women put up with those.

"The dosage," Carla informed him. "It's been tried with low, safe doses, but some addicts become inured to them and drink anyway. You will be made seriously ill, to a degree that would be risky if ambulances weren't constantly on patrol. There'll be an implanted microchip transmitting heart and tracking data constantly so that they can find you anywhere, just like anybody else on the planet who's not in perfect health. One taste of wine and you'll truly need to be hospitalized."

"Isn't that overkill, even in the case of real alcoholics?" he protested, knowing as he said it that protest was useless. Overkill was the name of the game here. The hospital seemed to run the entire colony.

"It is," Carla agreed, "and so it's controversial. All sickness is considered evil here, to an extent you probably can't imagine. It is rooted out. No natural form of discomfort is left untreated. But side effects of treatment aren't counted as bad; they're tolerated to minimize future risks."

"I've always doubted the reasoning behind that practice. Better a small risk of illness than a lifetime of sure misery."

“The authorities don’t see it that way. They claim the right to decide what’s ‘minor’ compared to the reduced risk. In this case, though, the effects can’t be called minor by anybody’s standards, so it’s taken a while for the substance abuse people to get the go-ahead.”

Jesse frowned. “Politics, maybe? Eliminate drunkenness at any cost before somebody gets the idea of banning liquor after all?”

“That’s about the size of it,” Carla said, “though the main political consideration is the points they’ll score by proving it can be done. In any case, the Administration has agreed to stamp out substance abuse at the risk of more serious illness. The hope, of course, is that it won’t come to that; the implant is supposed to act as a deterrent.”

“I expect it will,” Jesse said dryly. “I’m not going to chance getting picked up by an ambulance again. I wouldn’t, even without the implant.”

“A real alcoholic might, though. Even apart from craving liquor, he wouldn’t mind the Hospital itself. Your view—and mine—isn’t typical; most people view this as a place of refuge. The Meds’ policies aren’t widely opposed.”

“If that’s the case, why do they expect any deterrent effect?”

“Because the illness itself is so awful—and you will experience it repeatedly before you’re released. They’ll make you drink while they adjust dosage, and then more after the implant’s in place.”

Jesse tried not to let his feelings show. “I guess I’ll survive that,” he assured her. “It doesn’t worry me as much as the implant does—and a heart monitor implant, too? Broadcasting my location day and night?” Perplexed by the strength of his repugnance he went on, “I’m not sure why I mind so much. It’s not the end of the world if I can’t drink socially. I could give it up easily if I chose, so why does the idea of having to seem so bad?”

“It doesn’t,” Carla said with conviction. “You mind losing your privacy to a tracking device, of course. But more than that, it’s the manipulation of your body that’s horrible. The violation. It’s—obscene.”

“Some of the tests were,” he agreed, surprised that he felt able to speak of them to this charming young woman. “I never before asked myself why white coats on the assailants should change anyone’s perception of what’s otherwise classed as rape.”

“It’s custom, not logic. People who submit by choice tune out their natural feelings toward such things.”

“I suppose it’s medically necessary, sometimes.”

“That’s a matter of opinion. Where it’s warranted by serious symptoms, the choice may be wise—but even then, tuning out’s a mistake. Doing that leads, step by step, to what we’ve got here.”

He looked quickly at her, seeing how grave she was. It was more than a matter of sympathy for him. Something deeper was involved. She evidently had not tuned out her own feelings, and they matched his, not her society’s. “You’re not a medical professional,” he said, sure of this.

“No, I’m a data technician, though I assist with some kinds of psych therapy.”

“Why do you work in this place?”

Carla hesitated. Finally she said, “The world is the world. One way or another, we’ve got to live in it. Here, I’m useful, if only to victims like you.”

“Worse things are done to some of them,” Jesse observed.

“Yes.”

“Electroshock, psychosurgery—things like that?”

“Yes, sometimes. And various drug protocols that are comparable.”

“Am I in danger, Carla?”

“Not because of alcoholism. If you should be diagnosed as hostile—”

“Oh, God. Either I submit or they make me submissive, is that it?”

Carla nodded. “In theory, yes. There are sometimes—alternatives.”

Again Jesse looked at her, taking in the attractiveness not only of her body—though that did attract him—but of her face, her whole manner. She was poised, serene, yet at the same

time warmth glowed in her. Warmth toward him, and heat too, against a system she clearly disliked. She was involved, caring—he *knew*.

“You said you wished you could get me out,” he reflected. “Is that possible?”

“Maybe. I have friends. It’s been done before.”

“I don’t want you to run risks on my account.” He realized that this was true. He was not in any serious danger; Carla might be. She could lose her job, or worse, she might be judged unstable. . . .

“I’ve never been caught,” she assured him, smiling, “and I’ve done worse things, by Hospital standards, then restore clothes to a diagnosed substance abuser. I’ve gotten people out who were doomed to the Vaults.”

“The Vaults?” Jesse was chilled, not merely by the ominous-sounding term but by the tone in which Carla spoke it.

“Forget I said that,” she said hastily. “We’ve got to leave now, if you want to. The shift’s about to change.” She rose to retrieve a sack that she had set by the curtained entrance to his cubicle.

It contained his Fleet uniform. Jesse sat up; she was already committed, had come prepared, and he certainly did want to get out of the place. “What happens to you if we do get caught?” he asked.

“Never mind about me. Attempted escape will count against *you*,” Carla said soberly. “You’re under Dr. Kelstrom’s care, so normally I wouldn’t worry—but he’s not himself right now. I can’t predict. All the same, I’ve got strong reasons to trust him. I’m sure the worst that can happen is that the implants will proceed as scheduled.”

Jesse pulled himself out of bed and dressed quickly, ignoring his various aches, which seemed to have lessened considerably during the past half hour. Attempted escape, she’d said, as if this were a true prison—did Carla herself view the hospital that way? Why had the colonists here given it so much autonomous power?

They ventured into the corridor. Carla gripped his arm, steadying him. “Walk normally, head up,” she said. “We won’t

be noticed until we reach the checkpoint at the lobby entrance. The security officer coming on duty there is my friend.”

As she'd said, the shift was changing; the hallways and elevators were crowded. Uniformed hospital personnel mingled with people in street clothes. A black silver-trimmed Fleet uniform was a bit conspicuous, Jesse felt, yet no one paid any attention to him. Probably there were hospital visitors mingled with the employees. Like colonists everywhere, they seemed healthy, and neither happier or unhappier than average. They didn't have the look of citizens repressed by force.

As they left the elevator at ground level, Carla held back, waiting for the tall redheaded security officer to take her seat. People were thumbing a plate at the exit barrier; there was an ID check! Jesse, fighting panic, glanced at Carla in dismay. Surely she must have known . . .

“Put in your thumbprint as if you expected the computer to pass it,” she said, in a low but calm voice. “Anne will hit the alarm override. She knows what to do.”

Carla moved forward and joined the line, Jesse close behind her. She smiled at the redhead. “Hello, Anne,” she said. “Will we be seeing you on the Island next offshift?”

“Wait just a minute, will you, Carla?” Anne replied, motioning Carla back. The man in front of her had gone through. Jesse had no choice but to press his thumb firmly against the plate, holding his breath while the computer scanned its print.

The alarm began to scream.

The gate locked. Jesse stumbled back, almost colliding with the people in line behind him. Carla, beside the desk, had frozen in shock. If for an instant he'd thought she had betrayed him, he knew better when he saw her face. It was pale with dismay and bewilderment. Anne was evidently not as good a friend as she'd believed.

“I'm sorry, Carla,” Anne said smoothly. “Dr. Kelstrom called me. He warned me to watch for you two. You're to report to his office now, before you leave for the night.”

“Both of us?” Carla asked, as if doubting what she heard.

“Of course not. The patient will be taken back to his ward.”

Orderlies were waiting; they must have been called in advance. Despairingly, Jesse left Carla to her fate and went with them.

~ 5 ~

The first time he was made sick, they used low dosage. His heart raced, but did not falter, and his breathing wasn't seriously impaired. All the same, it was worse than Jesse had expected. He had somehow thought that youthful experience with spacesickness would make induced nausea easier to bear. He remained in anguish for a long time afterward, and eventually he perceived that this had something to do with his general situation. He was unable to muster much optimism.

The memory of Carla tore him in two. It was a light in the darkness; he closed his eyes and recalled her scent, her touch, and it seemed that no world she lived in could be all bad. Yet at the same time, he worried.

How would they punish her? She'd violated rules, not law—surely no more than her job had been at stake. She'd be better off without it unless jobs were hard to come by in the colony. He didn't know, and in his blacker moments imagined her destitute, forced to seek welfare because she had risked herself for him. The local authorities weren't the sort she'd want to appeal to. Nor, perhaps, were her friends, if Anne was a sample! If only he were free. . . .

To his impatience for release was now added a burning wish to see Carla again. He knew this was more than desire to repay her kindness.

They moved him to another floor. He was given pajamas, but no robe; the rooms and corridors were kept at an even temperature. Nobody displayed any antagonism toward him, and he was forced to concede that they meant no cruelty. They really believed themselves to be helping a sick man. They behaved with uniform cheerfulness, even as they administered injections that—combined with the drinks they forced on him—

would send him into agonizing, uncontrollable spasms of retching, followed by hours of lingering nausea combined with evermore severe headache, palpitations, and labored breathing.

After several sessions of this, during one of his brief periods of relative calm, new orderlies appeared with a gurney. "You're going back to Psych for a while," they announced. He was not given the option of walking there under his own power.

Jesse's spirits rose momentarily; Psych was where Carla worked—or had worked. But he was not taken to the same area as before. After an endless trip through the grid of corridors they wheeled him into a small room filled with ominous electrical equipment and proceeded to strap him into a reclining chair, over which hovered an elaborate metal headpiece bristling with wires.

Electroshock? Undoubtedly, Jesse thought, striving to conceal his terror as they lowered the headpiece, encasing his scalp, and attached electrodes to his temples. Or something else that would even more disastrously alter his brain. . . . Carla had admitted that such things went on here. He was not sure what he had done to provoke it; perhaps it was merely that the initial psych testing had revealed too much of his personality for him to be judged on the basis of behavior alone. Dr. Kelstrom, or whoever else had looked at the records, must have realized that it would take more than "friendly health advice" to subdue his inner rebellion.

The room dimmed and various lights on the instrument board beside him began to glow, accompanied by a nerve-jarring electronic hum. The technicians had disappeared; whatever was going to happen to him was evidently remotely controlled. He waited . . . and waited. Nothing seemed to have happened yet; he could still think clearly—but perhaps the shock was yet to come. There was no way to judge time; it seemed as if hours had passed. At length he heard the door open and someone outside saying, "All right, now inject him. Kelstrom said to use truth serum."

Jesse was past the capacity for protest. He lay mute while the technician inserted an IV into his arm. After that things got hazy.

He knew, later, that he had been extensively and repeatedly interrogated, probably for psychiatric reasons rather than as any sort of conspiracy suspect—although the latter, he felt, would have been preferable. The voice of the unseen interviewer was absolutely emotionless, devoid even of supercilious courtesy. Having nothing to hide, he had not tried to resist the questioning. They'd already known he hated them. They'd known Carla had helped him, and that he found her attractive. What had they possibly hoped to gain?

When he woke he was back in the substance abuse unit, with his brain intact, as far as he could tell. Emotionally, however, he was deeply shaken. He felt stripped, violated, now that the last vestige of personal privacy had been taken from him. The physical indignities paled beside the callous probing of his inmost thoughts. It scarcely mattered that within minutes he was called for another session of aversion therapy, one of many to which he was subjected during the next few days.

Though normally, these sessions would have been held in a room outfitted as a bar, the experimenters dispensed with that in favor of one with a gallery from which medical students could watch. "We're not trying to condition you," he was told. "This is simply what will happen if you drink, from now on, for the rest of your life. Awareness of it is necessary for your future safety."

For the rest of his life, then, his decisions were to be based on their standards of well-being instead of his own? No one suggested that he might ever leave the planet, and indeed Jesse had begun to doubt it. If they'd believed him still in the employ of Fleet, they would not have chosen him as a guinea pig. They planned to turn him into a healthy colonial citizen. That was acknowledged, in fact; several people remarked on how lucky he was not to be deported. They seemed genuinely unable to conceive of anyone's not appreciating the protection of the galaxy's finest medical facility.

As the drug dosage was increased, each drinking session made him sicker than the previous one. The goal was to find, then stop short of, the point at which he'd pass out before feeling distress. By the third day, Jesse feared struggling for breath

more than he feared the nausea. Still, he drained the glass given him without protest, for it had been made plain that if he refused, the liquor would be poured down his throat. The less indignity, the better. He had few enough chances to avoid it.

The seriousness of the attacks was now such that they were terminated by antidote, leaving him with no worse than residual nausea and weakness. He could thus have multiple “treatments” per day, which was desirable, one nurse said, because hospital beds were in demand. This news was half-way welcome; it meant that he might get out soon. On the other hand, he’d have the implants before he got out. That would be soon, too. It was too final for his liking: a symbol of permanent subjugation to this world’s medical authorities.

During the last session of the fifth day, just before he drank the proffered whiskey, Jesse looked into the observers’ gallery and saw Carla.

She wasn’t in her own uniform; instead, she wore the gown of an intern. She was holding a mask, briefly removed so that he could recognize her. He nodded quickly, almost imperceptibly; she caught the gesture almost before he knew what he was doing. When he looked again, her face was covered.

Yet he felt as if she had spoken to him. He had never met anyone before from whom he got such a feeling. He knew, as positively as if he’d been told, that she would come to his room. The knowledge sustained him. He found he hardly minded getting ill. He did not even react to the announcement, made by the night nurse, that he was scheduled to receive the implants in the morning.

Carla didn’t appear until past midnight, when the corridor was quiet. She still wore the intern’s gown. “Oh, God, Carla,” Jesse said, torn between relief and fear for her. “You shouldn’t be here. If you’ve got to wear a disguise—”

“I’m all right,” she said calmly. “I got only a reprimand, and that not even from Dr. Kelstrom. He hadn’t time to see me and left it to a subordinate. But I was ordered to stop visiting you, so someone might report me if I were noticed—” She stared at him, frowning. “When did they shave that patch of your hair?”

He told her about it, futilely attempting to hide what he felt at the memory of interrogation under truth serum. "I still don't know what the aim was. If it was meant to change me somehow, I don't think it worked."

"The machine only records brain activity. It's a experimental protocol of Dr. Kelstrom's; he's into research of that kind. I've—assisted with it, sometimes." Carla's frown deepened. "It should have been explained to you! He should have been there personally to oversee! To deliberately terrify you that way—it just doesn't add up. And as for the truth serum, Dr. Kelstrom *couldn't* have ordered that! Not for an unconsenting subject. Whoever mentioned his name must have misread your chart."

"I heard 'Kelstrom said,' Carla, not anything about charted orders."

She shook her head. "There had to have been miscommunication somewhere. But we haven't time to wonder about it. There's just one chance left now to prevent the implants."

"To escape, you mean? We can't try the front door again."

"No, right now there's nobody I can trust, since Anne—" She broke off, obviously deeply concerned; the implications of Anne's betrayal, he guessed, went further than this one incident. Bending down, searching his face, she went on, "Jesse, how badly do you want to get out with your body unaltered?"

"You don't have to ask, do you?" He was sure, somehow, that the strong rapport between them made discussion unnecessary.

"Just checking," Carla acknowledged. "We can manage it, but you'll have to run some risk. That is, you'll have to trust *me*. There'll be no real danger, but it will take nerve."

Jesse's heart stirred. Action, even dangerous action, would be welcome at this point, and the thought that Carla cared enough for him to initiate it was even more welcome. He trusted her completely, without asking himself why he should.

She drew a small flask from under her gown. Measuring him, she said, "This is brandy. Are you willing to drink it?"

"Carla, I don't suppose I can. They give the injections on a regular schedule, simulating the implant, I think. I had one just a couple of hours ago; I doubt if it's worn off."

“It hasn’t. That’s the point. They won’t guess, of course, that any liquor could have been smuggled to you, or that you’d have touched it if it had. So if you have an attack now—if you are unconscious, an emergency case—they will assume continued high dosage has unpredictable side effects.”

He nodded, seeing the strategy. “Then what? Will they release me?”

“Maybe, after a standard course of aversion therapy. We won’t wait to see; there are other routes of escape—but none that can be used before tomorrow morning.”

Drawing breath, Jesse said, “Okay. Why not? They’ll do it to me again anyway; I’ve nothing to lose.” She had watched from the gallery, he realized, to learn what to expect of the attacks, so she could judge when to call for help. He would be a real emergency case, and there was no heart monitor in place yet. He could die if Carla waited too long. . . .

It did not worry him. With her, he was utterly safe. He seized the flask from her hands and took several swallows.

The illness hit fast. Before he had time to gasp for breath, his heart lurched wildly, erratically; he clutched at his chest, for once in too much pain to vomit. It passed quickly—her hands touched his and for an instant he knew a strange sense of peace, even well-being. Then he felt himself seized by convulsions. Carla screamed, whether in terror or by plan he was not sure. As people rushed into the room, he blacked out.

When he opened his eyes, it was morning. Carla was gone.

That day they repeated much of the physical exam, omitting only the most invasive portions. A succession of frowning doctors shook their heads over him. “Observation,” one of them declared finally. “Start with light dosage tomorrow, then work up again—and get a video cam in here to watch for symptoms.”

In the early evening the familiar pair of orderlies appeared, this time with a wheelchair. God, Jesse thought, is there to be no respite? So far, when allowed, he’d been able to walk. No doubt the chair was deemed necessary for return from whatever horror they now would subject him to. He bit his lip and put on as brave a face as he could manage.

They took him not to the treatment room but to the front

desk of the substance abuse unit. “There’s been a mix-up,” the clerk announced. “Somebody in Psych ordered your discharge this morning. We weren’t told here.”

They gave him a bag containing his possessions. In a small dressing room, Jesse donned the Fleet uniform, not daring to let himself feel joy. He wasn’t out yet. The wheelchair waited, standard transport for discharges—he must be kept helpless, he judged, as long as he remained within the walls.

Not until they were at the security checkpoint did they release him. He entered his thumbprint gingerly, but the computer raised no alarm.

Dazed, unbelieving, Jesse found himself free on the sidewalk. It was dark. He had no idea what to do beyond getting as far away from the hospital complex as possible. The colony’s city was unknown to him; he’d seen only the bar near the spaceport, into which he’d not venture again, and at the spaceport itself his welcome might not be too warm.

A cab pulled up. The door opened and someone waved to him, beckoning. Even before he saw her face, he knew it was Carla.

~ 6 ~

They went to a restaurant on a side branch near the island’s main waterway. Undine was a water world, and canals permeated the seaward areas of the city. “Like Venice,” Carla said, “on ancient Earth.”

He wanted little to do with food, but Carla ordered for him anyway. She also ordered wine, and poured him some. Jesse accepted the glass gingerly. “You’re offering me this?” he asked in amazement.

“The drug they gave you wore off hours ago. I checked the file on it to be sure.”

“But all the same—”

“I believed you when you said you’re not an alcoholic,” she said. “I want to know.”

“Whether I can stop with one or two, you mean? Carla, I’m not going to want any of this for quite a long time.”

“Yes, you are. To hell with their goddamned aversion games! A few days of treatment can’t affect you unless you let it. Don’t.”

Impressed, he took up the glass and sipped it. Her eyes were on him. Presently he began to eat, and found he was hungry.

Carla seemed radiant, even elated, as if it were she who had escaped from prison. Her color was high. “You won!” she said. “It’s good to see you able to celebrate.”

“With wine, you mean?” He raised his glass. “It’s nice, but not worth the price. Was it for this I let you risk your job, and God knows what else?”

“Not for this. For a principle. And in the end, there wasn’t much risk.”

“You managed an official discharge,” he agreed. “How?”

She averted her gaze. “I’ve got a close friend on the staff. He—does favors for me sometimes.”

“Then I was not really cleared for release.”

“No. The substance abuse unit would never have let you go. Psych had to override, which required some hacking. That part was easy, but without the staff signature seal you wouldn’t have got past the door.”

He frowned; hacking could be a criminal offense. “Why should you stick your neck out for me, Carla? Before you brought my clothes the first time, you’d only talked to me for five minutes.”

“Sometimes that’s enough.” She smiled at him. “I do what I can, Jesse, and you’re from offworld. It’s bad enough for the rest of us, but when they start in on offworlders—”

“Medics are a pain everywhere,” he said, trying to be fair. “I suppose they mean well. Here, they seem to have got hold of all the funds they want, and I’d judge that makes them even more arrogant than on Earth.” That was the root of it, of course. Compulsory treatment couldn’t have been established without unlimited funding. He knew, without wanting to know, that the thing itself would not be hard to get people to vote for. Ongoing medical care was a blessing; most people would be-

lieve anything they were told about the need to force it on those who didn't want to be blessed.

"They mean well," Carla agreed. "So did the Verquistas, I'm told."

"It's not quite as bad as that," Jesse said. "The Verquistas were a political party. They had the citizens of New America so thoroughly sold on their platform that there was no opposition to them; bit by bit, people on that planet voted away their own freedom."

"And how do you think it is here?" she demanded, with some bitterness.

"Well, I guess the majority supports the medical lobby," he said, "since they do seem to get the funding. I must say I don't see how they get so much in a colony as small as this, though my ship's cargo manifest showed that it's a rich colony. But they're not the government, after all."

"But Jesse," Carla said, "they are. Didn't you know that?"

"Know what?"

"That the Meds are the government here, literally. There is no colonial administrator other than the Hospital Administrator. There is no legislative body other than the Medical Review Board. There's no police force apart from the ambulance officers; all crime is classed as illness, and untreated illness is considered crime. That's why they picked you up."

"God!" Jesse said, staring at her. For the moment he couldn't think of anything more to say.

"It's one reason the Hospital's so large," Carla went on. "All our government offices are in it. As for funding, the Board levies taxes and skims health care costs off the top. They say all treatment's free, of course, but we pay through the highest tax rates of any colony in the League."

Horrified, Jesse protested, "All colonies have free elections now; that's Colonial League law."

"Oh, the Board is elected. The Administrator's elected, too. We have campaigns just like anyplace else; there are lots of candidates and the vote's close sometimes. But they are all Meds. It's in our constitution—you can't run for office without a medical degree."

He sat for a moment, toying with his wine, absorbing all this. "How did it get into the constitution?" he asked finally.

Carla said, "It was approved by vote, of course. People thought it would be a waste of money to duplicate too much in a new colony. Obviously medical judgment had top priority. The history books say we have a unique arrangement that eliminates unnecessary bureaucracy."

"And nobody pushes for constitutional change?"

"Oh, no. Almost everyone's happy with this system. People feel secure with it; they know their health is being protected. Those who've grown up here don't object to forced treatment even for themselves. But I—well, I knew that you, being from offworld, probably would."

"Carla," he said shakily, "I haven't even said thanks."

"It's not necessary," she told him, her green eyes glowing. Changing the subject abruptly, she went on, "Tell me about your ship."

Jesse told her. He spoke of all the things that had been in his mind the past few days: the monotony, the hopelessness, the frustration. She was a good listener. They talked a long time, until the restaurant was empty and the waiter had dimmed the lamps. When they rose to go, he felt that Carla understood him better than anyone else ever had, anywhere.

"It's late," he said. "I've got to find a hotel somewhere."

"You can come home with me for tonight," Carla said easily.

He drew breath, his heart beating fast, but stepped back and let go of her hand. They had shared only a few hours. He hadn't thought of her as a woman who would say that.

Carla gave him a smile, the clear, guileless yet knowing smile he had come to look forward to. "It's not what you think," she told him. "You'll sleep on the couch. What I'm saying is that I trust you, Jesse."

They went to her apartment, said goodnight. Carla went into her room and closed the door. Jesse stood for a while watching boats pass beneath the window, then settled himself with a blanket on the couch. He slept soundly. He felt more at home than he ever had before onworld.