Choices

by Lindsay Brambles

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Introduction:

Although the events of the following story take place after the novel In Darkness Bound and the novella Zero-Option, this story was actually written before either. At the time I was slowly constructing my "Earth Empire" universe; and though In Darkness Bound (ISBN: 1-4241-6560-1) was very much on my mind at the time, the idea for this story was committed to paper first. Or perhaps it would be more appropriate to say "disk."

As with Zero-Option, I wrote this on a Commodore 64 using Paperclip II. The Commodore was the first "real" computer I owned; and all things considered, it was a marvelous little machine. Before that I had cranked out stories on a Smith-Corona Electronic typewriter (including one humongous novel, which for some reason I

still hold onto despite the fact that it's an unpublishable monstrosity).

I can't honestly recall the motivations that led to the writing of Choices. Sometimes ideas come spring from events you read in the newspaper or see on TV. Often it'll be some little thing that will then trigger an avalanche of thought and speculation. I do know that a great many of my ideas are fleshed out while bicycling. On my regular two or three hour rides I do some of my best thinking, working out the kinks in a story or novel while wandering the country roads around Ottawa.

I have yet another short novel of the Earth Empire (somewhat longer than Zero-Option) that I hope to put on the Internet at a later date. That one takes place during the height of the war, sometime after Zero-Option but well before Choices.

For now, however, I offer you the following short story. Just under twenty thousand words, I hope you'll find it a quick and stimulating read.

Happy reading!

Lindsay H.F. Brambles, Ottawa, 2007

1.

Whenever I see the panai, I am reminded of Kieara. Reminded of how she changed a world. Or worlds--hers and mine. I close my eyes and see her face, and above the chanting of the crowd, I hear her voice. A soft exhalation of words. Calm. Measured and reasoned. Not at all consumed with the impassioned zeal that one might have expected of someone rebelling against a centuries old way of life. A sharp contrast to the shrill and often violent denunciations of those who believed in all that she did not.

Before Kieara I'd never seen a panai--though, as with all offworlders new to Tradur, I had heard the rumors long before I'd arrived. Had heard them, and of course had quickly dismissed them as nothing more than xenophobia. And yet now, because of Kieara, those rumors have become a dreaded reality. I see the evidence of them before me, day after day, hour by hour. They haunt me, appearing before me as one long and seemingly endless chain of enraged humanity moving up the wide avenue like a deranged army, swaying to a music only they can hear as they wave their fists in the air and shout defiance at the guarded buildings of the offworlder embassies. Often, from the windows of the Federation's mission, I have stood and watched as they pause and gather outside the gates, pressing against one another in a suffocating mass, remaining thus just long enough to hurl their vitriol and fling their ineffectual stones against the energy shields that protect the building during each long hour of Tradur's thirty hour days. It has become a ritual for them. Almost as much as the panai has always been. And for those of us within the embassy, it has become as constant as the rising and the setting of the sun.

I wait and watch in discomfort, knowing that I'm at least partially to blame for this. Because of my relationship with Kieara I've made us all prisoners in these walls until the ship comes to take us away. I think of how things might have been if Kieara hadn't sought me out those many months ago, of how different this moment would be if the first real choice she'd made in her life hadn't been to choose me. Perhaps there'd be no chanting crowds thirsting for the blood of offworlders; and we'd have all remained blissfully ignorant of the true horror she dared reveal to us.

2.

Like all stories, this one has a beginning. But it starts at the end of another story--or perhaps at the end of many. Its beginnings are rooted in the conclusion of a long and bitter conflict from which the Empire is only now slowly emerging. If there can be said of such a hard fought war that there was a winner, then it was the

Federation that rose from the dust and rubble to claim victory. But in truth we're all losers in such struggles, and no more is that evident than in the existence of worlds like Tradur.

Our victory was bought at great expense. We sacrificed millions of men and women for the sake of principle, but in the end we sold those principles for a mess of potage. Peace came with compromise; and part of that was to allow worlds like Tradur to remain virtually sovereign, exempt from many of the provisions of the new constitution. It isn't something most people like, but after so much death and destruction no one wanted to continue the war simply for the rights and freedoms of a handful of people. Principles were what got us into this mess in the first place; and when all is said and done, just how many lives are worth sacrificing for the sake of ideals that many of the people on Tradur and worlds like it could care less about?

Some say that when we won the war against the Reds we should have wiped the religion off the face of the map. They argue that to have not done so is only asking for trouble later on; and it's true there are those among the Red Catholic polity who continue to agitate for rebellion. But even they realize the limitations of their cause, and understand that among their own there is no longer an appetite for war. Whole worlds were lost in the conflict. Hundreds of millions of people. No one is anxious to invite that upon the Empire again any time soon.

And so we live with conditions many of us find repugnant. We have no choice. There is neither the strength nor the will within the Federation to carry the fight beyond what we've achieved. One day we may well live to regret that, but for now we're happy enough to live at all.

I had seen the war first hand, having fought on the front lines during some of the worst of the conflict. I had watched many good people die. A lot of friends. A lot of people dear to me. I should have hated the Reds for that, and there was a part of me that did. But having been witness to the war in ways many had not, I understood better than most that we could never rid ourselves of the Reds. It's a difficult thing to fight ideas. More difficult still when those ideas take the form of religion and faith. Guns and bombs are ineffective against them. And to have tried to have done more than what we had, we would have had to have paid even more dearly than we already had. I didn't want to see any more graves, and most everyone else in Fleet felt the same. We'd had our fill of funerals.

In the early days following the war, Admiralty controlled the Federation. As I still held my commission, the powers-at-be decided that for the difficult posting of ambassador to Tradur they would prefer a person with a strong military background. I had captained the heavy cruiser FS Indomitable, and had been fleet captain when Chastity had fallen to Fleet warships. But my face was unknown to the Reds, which meant I could go into Tradur in the guise of a civilian.

Technically, as the Federation's ambassador, I was the most powerful person on the planet. But in reality the Federation's control over Tradur basically stopped a few hundred kilometres from the surface. The Reds still maintained an iron grip on the population, and to have replaced them with the sort of democratic government the Federation preferred would have been near to impossible given the unswerving allegiance many on the world had to the Red Catholic faith.

When I arrived I understood this pressure cooker I was stepping into, and the risk my background in the military posed. On Tradur there was still a lot of enmity for Fleet, who many regarded as their oppressor and enemy of the faith. They would never have knowingly countenanced the presence of a Fleet officer--active or retired.

Accordingly. I made every effort to play the part of diplomat--even to the point of hosting a reception not long after I arrived. It was here that I first met Kieara; and it is a moment I shall never forget. It changed my life forever--and may well have changed the future of entire worlds.

3.

"Probably the most powerful man on the planet," Burrye muttered to me in warning as a tall, elegantly-attired Tradurian approached us through the assembled guests. He was like a great ship whose prow cut the waves with impunity, the crowd parting before him without urging, while in his wake trailed an even dozen of his entourage, who, like gulls hovering above the transom of a yacht in hopes of food, waited to dart forward upon a summons. At the great man's side a young woman--surely too young to be one of his many wives--matched his pace without seeming effort, floating gracefully along in a billowing cloud of silver-blue silks. She was tall and slender and strikingly beautiful; and I wondered if the crowd parted as much for her as they did for the man whom she accompanied.

"It makes you wonder if we actually won the war," Burrye said in a surly undertone.

"It would have been a mistake to have completely crushed the Church," I said around a tight smile. "And on worlds like this they're still the dominant power."

"Like I said," Burrye growled: "It makes you wonder who won the damn war."

"Prelate Kuhn," I said, bowing deferentially as the head of the Tradurian Red Catholic Church halted before us and surveyed us with an imperious air.

"Our host, Tiae Morrisohn," said one of the courtiers in response to Kuhn's questioning look over his shoulder. "The new Federation ambassador from Earth, assari."

"Earth," said Kuhn, venting the word from his mouth as though it were an imprecation. "You are a long way from home, ambassador," he added, with a lowering glare of openly hostile contempt.

It was difficult to know what to say in response to the obvious. But as I regarded the prelate and his companion, I realized he wasn't talking about light-years. Indeed, the great gulf between our two worlds became markedly evident as we stood there facing one another.

"The people of Earth wish you long life and prosperity, assari," I said, filling the sudden and uncomfortable silence with this stilted bit of protocol I'd been instructed to follow.

"I do not need, nor do I desire the good wishes of your world," snarled the prelate. "It may well be the belief of the Federation that you have won a great victory and that you have somehow unified the Earth Empire, ambassador. But I can assure you that is not a sentiment shared by my people. We tolerate your presence here because the Terms of Surrender provide us no alternative. But beyond honoring the agreement signed by the cardinali, we are not obligated to embrace you and your heathen ways. We do not wish to be contaminated by the incursion of outside forces."

"It isn't our intention to threaten the integrity of your world in any way, assari," I assured him, although that was stretching the truth somewhat.

"Your very presence here threatens it," he said; and then he was gone, drifting away in his cloud of obsequious followers, targeting yet another of the offworld ambassadors as an audience for his litany of condemnation.

"You were lucky," said Burrye dryly. "He's not usually so pleasant." He had a glass of something potent in hand, and took a sip from it as his narrowed eyes followed the progress of the prelate through the room.

"I've met worse."

He shook his head, sober-faced. "No, Captain, I very much doubt you have. This is no ordinary man; and his feelings about offworlders are widely known. They carry considerable weight--even if the Church is no longer the force it once was in the Empire. When you've been here a bit longer you'll realize that while Tradur may outwardly appear to be a paradise, it's anything but."

"You make it seem so ominous," I teased.

Burrye didn't laugh. "I think it is," he said.

"Surely you don't put much stock in rumor."

"You've only been here a couple of days," he grunted as he took yet another draw from his drink. "You haven't seen much beyond the embassy and the shuttle port. Wait a few weeks. The allure of the scenery soon fades, I assure you. It won't be long before you'll realize there's something not quite right about this place."

"Maybe you're making the mistake of looking at it through the eyes of an offworlder," I suggested.

"They're the only eyes I have, Captain."

"We can't judge them as we would judge ourselves," I cautioned him. "They're tens of light-years and a dozen or so centuries removed from Earth."

"Clearly," Burrye muttered, with a distaste I found disquieting.

"Tell me," I said, wanting to change the subject, "who was the woman with the Kuhn?" I tried to sound casual in my inquiry, but was only partially successful. I could tell by the cautionary look Burrye gave me that he wasn't in the least bit fooled.

"Kieara Cjhar," he said, following my gaze as I watched her move with Kuhn from one offworld delegation to another. "One of his daughters. The eldest. She's a leading disciple within the Red Catholic Church. Like father like daughter, I suppose." He made a face. "Not someone you'd want to get involved with," he added pointedly.

"You speak from experience?" I asked, knowing that he didn't. At the official level relations between Tradurians and offworlders were severely constrained--one might even have gone so far as to suggest they were virtually non-existent. Not for lack of effort on the part of offworlders, however; it was the choice of the Tradurians to remain essentially isolated. Even on matters of trade the dealings were brief and to the point. Not that we'd anticipated much else when we'd begun this delicate process of bringing the worlds of Unity back into the fold of the Federation following the long harsh decades of war.

Burrye regarded me levelly. "I'm here to advise you, Captain."

"Advise, yes," agreed. "But I make the decisions, Mister Burrye."

"You're not on a ship anymore," he said bluntly. "There's none of that full speed ahead and damn the torpedoes business here."

"Thank you for reminding me," I drawled, none too sarcastically. "And yes, I'm not on a ship anymore. Haven't been for years. So you might be advised to be cautious when referring to me as Captain. I'm sure the Reds wouldn't be particularly enamored of the fact that the Federation embassy is headed by someone who once fought on the front lines against them."

"Aye,aye!" he said, snapping off a mock salute.

I shot him a dark look of disapproval, but knew it wouldn't change anything. Burrye was a career diplomat, a man genengineered for the foreign service. He knew no other line of work; and his life had been devoted to this one cause. So it was understandable that he might feel somewhat resentful of a spacer being given an essentially diplomatic assignment. He was undoubtedly convinced I'd been awarded this posting as something of a sop for years of service in a war for which we'd all paid a high price. It was unlikely I could disabuse him of that notion--though if he'd looked around, he'd have discovered that most of the ambassadorial positions that had opened up in the defeated Unity were occupied by former Fleet officers. And for good reason. The Federation didn't trust the Unity--or what remained of it. Unfortunately, one of the compromises that had brought about the peace had been to include a clause in the Terms of Surrender that had prohibited the placement of military attaches in any of the new embassies. To get around that, the Admiralty, which was handling the administration of peace for the Federation, had merely assigned former Fleet officers as heads of the various missions they'd opened throughout the Unity. We were here to make sure that the Unity couldn't re-establish itself militarily. So for now men and women like myself had assumed a different sort of command: One that was no less challenging and no less important than when we'd skippered those floating arsenals of democracy for which Fleet was better known.

But I was first and foremost a spacer. I'd been genengineered for it. From the moment of my conception my fate had been determined. Determined by the choices of my parents. I wasn't a diplomat, and Burrye knew it. As far as he was concerned, that meant I was a risk to the success of this mission. Maybe he was right.

"No offense," Burrye said, continuing in his earlier vein, "but it's a bit of a stretch from commanding a warship to heading a mission like this, don't you think?"

"Not at all," I assured him. "Being the captain of a ship can be the supreme test of diplomacy. When you're dealing with the lives of nearly a thousand men and women, not to mention the frequent confrontations with all manner of ships and worlds, you soon acquire quite a feel for this sort of thing. However, I trust that you'll keep me in line, should I make a misstep." I looked at him forcefully, making it clear that he had better work with me and not against me. If it were the latter, then he'd soon find himself catching the next ship out from Tradur. Not that I was sure he'd mind being chased from this world.

Burrye put down his drink and made a stiff bow. Then he straightened, as though coming to attention. "You can rest assured, Captain, that I'll serve to the best of my abilities."

That was what I was afraid of.

4.

If you imagine a tropical paradise on Earth, then you have a good impression of what an outsider sees upon arriving at the central shuttle port on Tradur. It's perhaps one of the most beautiful worlds in all the Earth Empire. Certainly among the prettiest I've ever had the good fortune to see.

From space one is immediately struck by the lack of continents. There are only islands girding the equator, strung like a necklace through azure seas. Few reach farther north or south than twenty degrees latitude; and given that the axial tilt of the world is little more than five degrees, this makes for what some call a monoclimatic situation--although in truth that is a condition supportable in only the most rigid of closed systems.

On the surface Tradur is every bit as beautiful as it is from space. Perhaps even more so. But that's the physical side of the world. Not the political one. And on the latter score Tradur isn't so pleasant. Indeed, as Burrye had warned me, it's easy to dismiss the scenery once one has become more accustomed to what

day-to-day life is like on this planet.

There is an air of guarded restraint whenever one has dealings with the locals. Even in the markets this is apparent, though the merchants are eager enough to part you from your coin. But they do so rather circumspectly, as though they're under the ever-watchful eye of the Church and its minions--which is more than likely true.

Everywhere you go you have the feeling of being under surveillance. For myself that isn't an altogether new experience. Before they gave me a ship to command, I spent several years in Naval Intelligence. As a field operative you learn quickly to be paranoid--it can sometimes mean the difference between life and death.

As ambassador to Tradur I was reminded of those days. No doubt it was partly because of those NI experiences that I ended up here. And it was perhaps also because of those experiences that I was wary when Kieara Cjhar first approached me.

5.

"You shouldn't go," said Burrye.

I looked at him squarely. "Are there valid reasons for this concern?" I asked.

"Only the obvious, like the fact they might try to kill you."

"They've had ample opportunity for that already."

"It would be quite easy for them to arrange compromising circumstances that could prove an embarrassment to the Federation."

"A risk we'll have to take," I said, smiling thinly. "We can hardly be effective in our mission if we allow ourselves to be governed by that particular fear."

"This whole cloak and dagger business is sheer nonsense!" he exclaimed. "What possible reason could the daughter of the prelate have for wanting to see you?"

"I suppose I'll find out soon enough. Perhaps she took a liking to me," I added, only half facetiously.

Burrye gave me an odd look. "I'm sure you're not serious," he said in an even tone. "The Church is still the power here, Captain. And Kieara Cjhar is very much a part of it. On any other world such a relationship would probably cause few problems. But not here. If she did take a fancy to you, she'd never dare breathe a word of it. Not to you or anyone. Certainly she'd never dare act upon it--even if she is the daughter of the prelate."

"I'm not a fool," I said, rather icy-toned.

He muttered something under his breath and shook his head. Then he said more loudly, "It's a fool's errand, Captain."

"I see no threat," I argued. "And I can hardly refuse the invitation. The purpose of our mission is to improve diplomatic relations, not hinder them."

"You might yet do that."

It would have been easy to have laughed off his reservations, but they were quite convincing ones. Indeed, when the request for a meeting between me and Kieara Cjhar had come through, I'd confronted myself with the very same concerns. Tradur, after all, wasn't like most of the worlds that had been a part of Unity. Few of those had begun as enclaves of the Church, and consequently their populations hadn't been almost exclusively composed of devoted practitioners of the faith. When the Unity had fallen, many had welcomed the end of Church tyranny elsewhere in the Empire. Here, however, nearly the entire population was of a fundamentalist bent; and though the Unity had been defeated here as elsewhere, the people of this world hadn't faltered in their beliefs. If anything, they'd become more devout in their adherence to the strictures of the Red Catholic Church. And despite the Federation's best efforts to temper the influence of the Church, its presence remained a powerful, overarching force. That was why a handful of priests and cardinali could continue to exert control over the people through the use of fear. Those who might try to turn their backs on the guardians of the faith did so at peril. The price they could pay for such audacity was dear.

Burrye was right in wondering just who had won the war. In the twentieth century, when Hilter's forces had fallen to the Allies, the Nazis had been crushed and virtually wiped from the face of the Earth. But when the Federation had finally prevailed in its long struggle against the Unity, Red Catholicism and all its many institutions had remained. Yet this was a religion responsible for the deaths of millions in the years since its fiery birth. In the name of the Red Catholic Popes who had reigned through the decades of conflict, tens of thousands of Empaths had been hunted down and slaughtered. Butchered like animals. And in its quest to broaden the compass of its reach, whole worlds had been razed to eliminate them as a threat to the faith.

"You should at least take someone with you," Burrye said.

I gave him a dry look. "That would hardly help foster trust, now would it?"

"With all due respect, Captain, I don't think the Reds are deserving of anyone's trust."

"You puzzle me, Jacob," I said.

He frowned.

"You act like someone with a grudge," I explained. "I've seen Empaths with less animosity towards the Unity than you seem to harbor."

Burrye's face coloured. "I just wonder why we're so magnanimous," he said. "They killed millions. You of all people should know the brutality they exhibited. You were there, on the front lines. You saw people die."

"Yes," I whispered. "I saw people die. Too many. Which is why I'm here. I've no desire to see more people join those who have already suffered our folly. I want to see this peace work, Jacob. And if that means showing a little humility when it comes to the Red Catholics, if it means accepting that they'll continue to be a part of this Empire, then so be it. That's infinitely preferable to war. Only someone who has never fought in one could think otherwise," I added pointedly.

"Perhaps, Captain, you've become too hardened by your years of service."

I arched a brow and regarded him quizzically. "Meaning?"

"Meaning that perhaps you can no longer understand the pain of those of us who lost loved ones because of the Reds."

I felt a small kernel of rage explode somewhere within me, but I didn't unleash it. What would have been gained by railing at him? How could he know his words were like a stinging slap across the face? Unless, of

course, he'd intended them to be just that.

"We in the ships weren't machines out there," I said in a slow, deliberate manner. "It wasn't easy killing people. It never is. And despite what some might suggest, you don't become hardened to it. The only way one ever kept one's sanity was to tell oneself that it was us or them. And better it be them than us."

Burrye shifted uncomfortably. "I didn't mean to imply--"

"I think I know what you meant," I said brusquely. "And now if you'll excuse me, I've a meeting to attend." I made to leave my office.

"Captain," Burrye called after me.

I turned and looked at him.

He stared back at me, looking somewhat contrite. "Good luck," he said at last.

"Luck is for the unprepared," I said, remembering an old adage from my days in the Academy. And then I left, hurrying out of the embassy on my way to my appointment with Kieara Cjhar--where I soon discovered I should have paid heed to another little tidbit of Academy advice: expect the unexpected.

6.

"Put this on," my guide said. He handed me a black, hooded cloak. "For the scanners," he explained, noting my perplexed look.

"I'd have thought that it would have taken something a little more sophisticated than this," I mused aloud as I donned the garment.

He laughed. "They are more pious on Tradur than they are on Chastity," he said in a lumbering baritone. "It has always allowed the Church to rule by fear. Little need for expensive security devices when you can achieve the same thing by threatening would-be transgressors with the wrath of God." He laughed again, a brittle, cynical laughter; and then he pulled the hood of his own cloak up over his head, burying his face in shadow. He started forward, motioning for me to follow.

We stepped from the safety of the embassy's encompassing shield and out onto the ill-lit avenue we'd all taken to calling "Embassy Row." There was no one in sight, which was the whole idea. Without checking to see whether or not I was following, the guide headed quickly up the avenue, towards the heart of the city.

I'm no stranger to the machinations of the underground, but the method by which I was conveyed to my rendezvous with Kieara Cjhar rivaled anything I'd ever experienced as an intelligence operative. We moved under cover of darkness, my guide and I wending our way through the narrow streets of Tradur's capital, Jehku, avoiding the more built-up areas of the city. Once we even descended into the murky depths of a maze of service tunnels, far from the prying eyes of the curatai, the morality police who patrolled the streets in search of strictures violators. The curatai made me mindful of the fact that there was a curfew in effect for Tradurian woman following the setting of the sun. This lasted until sunrise, at which point the women of Tradur exchanged the prison of their home for the prison of a society that saw them as little more than property.

As we moved through the oppressive heat of the tropical night, I was ever mindful of Burrye's fears. It would be easy for me to disappear in a situation like this. Or worse, perhaps, to be caught by the curatai doing what I shouldn't have been doing in the first place.

My fears were quelled somewhat when we reached what my guide claimed was our destination. I recognized it immediately as the Temple of Sentai, which, according to my research earlier in the day, was the known residence of Kieara Cjhar. I was ushered in through a narrow doorway that was far from the main entrance of the temple. My guide remained outside. Once within, I found myself alone, standing in my dark cape in the center of a small antechamber. I drew back my hood and looked around, but there was little to see. The room was poorly lit by a single glowtube. There were no markings on the walls, and no openings, save the door through which I'd come and another opposite it.

I waited.

Just when I had begun to think I'd been played the fool, a woman appeared at the other door. She beckoned in silence, gesturing me forth, deeper into the temple. Sentai was restricted to women. More particularly, to those women who had devoted their lives to the Church. They were known as the cjhavari, the daughters of the god-revered. No Tradurian male--including the prelate himself--was permitted within the walls of the temple. To violate this sanction was to risk certain censure from the Church--the least of which was excommunication, though punishments as severe as death weren't unheard of.

There was nothing impressive about the interior of the temple. It lacked the ornateness that was to be found in the palace of the cardinali and the cathedral of the prelate, or in any of the many churches that dominated much of the skyline of Jehku and the other cities of Tradur. Indeed, its simple appointments were a rather refreshing contrast to a faith that seemed mired in the cynicism of gaudy gold and jewel encrusted trappings.

We walked down several passageways, all of which were dimly lit by scattered glowtubes. There were doors set here and there in the thick walls, all of them closed, most of them no doubt concealing the spartan cells in which I imagined the occupants of the Sentai lived. At length the young acolyte who had been leading me through this labyrinth halted before one of these doors. She turned to me and bowed, lifted a hand indicatively towards the door, and then backed away, finally retreating down the corridor and leaving me to stand there bewildered.

After a moment or two I did the instinctual thing and knocked.

"Come in, Ambassador Morrisohn. The door is not locked."

I pushed, and the door, made of heavy wood and bound with iron, swung inwards on well-oiled hinges, opening to reveal a room quite like what I'd expected to find. It was spare, with a narrow cot in one corner, a desk placed before a window, and a tall clothes cupboard on the wall opposite the bed. There were a couple of chairs, one for the desk and one clearly for a guest--the latter looking somewhat out of place and no doubt there solely for my benefit.

Kieara Cjhar sat by the desk. She wore a simple white linen shift, quite unlike the stunning gown she'd worn to the embassy reception. Oddly enough, she seemed more fetching in this coarse garment, the simplicity of its design and material a marked understatement that permitted her natural beauty to radiate unblemished. She wore no jewellery, and her dark, lustrous hair was bound in a single braid that hung down her back and reached to her waist.

She smiled warmly, invitingly, and gestured towards the other chair.

I sat, easing myself into the seat, eyeing my host somewhat warily. For a moment we merely sat staring at one another. Or perhaps it was I who just stared at her, for I couldn't get over how beautiful she was. Beautiful, because her features weren't the stony, unrealistic perfection of the bioscultor. There were flaws and imperfections, which only seemed to make the face all that much more attractive. It had a character that so many sculpted ones like my own didn't.

The first thing she said was: "Foreigners are forbidden within the walls of the Sentai." And then she laughed, clearly amused by the way my face seemed to lose all color.

"Do not fret, Captain Morrisohn," Kieara went on. "I have taken precautions. Believe me, I have no desire to draw the wrath of my father. He would, in all his piety, find it necessary to make an example of me before the whole world. That is an experience the like of which I can guarantee no one would wish to endure."

"You called me Captain," I said, trying to ignore the sick feeling of apprehension that continued to gnaw at me.

"We are not without our sources, Captain." She smiled again, a smile that illuminated the entire room. "The Federation may well have won the war, but it has not rendered the Church entirely toothless. There are still many devoted followers of the faith throughout the Earth Empire. And not just in what was once known as the Unity," she added pointedly.

I nodded. "Of course," I conceded. She was merely confirming something Admiralty had long known. But to hear it from someone so well connected to the Church gave it a level of authenticity it had never quite held in my mind before.

"You are wondering why you are here," said Kieara.

"Curious, yes," I agreed. "You seem to have gone to a great deal of effort to arrange this encounter and ensure its privacy."

"It is amazing the things people will do for you when you are the daughter of the prelate, captain," she observed somewhat ruefully. "On this world people are governed much by their fears."

"Indeed." I regarded her directly. "And are you, too, governed by fear?"

She smiled wanly. "I am the daughter of a man who believes himself the vessel of God, Captain. He lives by a code, a set of standards by which we are all expected to set the course of our lives. He imagines himself the last bastion of the true faith. Chastity may well have been the center of the Red Catholic universe, but to my father it was always Tradur which paid greatest obeisance to the strictures of the faith."

"And you're your father's daughter," I said simply; but it was apparent by the fact that I was here, in a place that I shouldn't have been, that she wasn't.

"For many years I believed as he did," she conceded. She looked down at her hands, which she held together delicately in her lap, then raised her eyes to confront me once more with that bewitching liquid blue stare. "I had no reason not to. I was born and raised within the faith. It was the rule by which my life was measured."

"And now?"

"There were no offworlders on Tradur until the defeat of the Unity," she said, as though that were explanation enough.

I waited a moment before saying anything, then: "You saw a different way of life."

"I saw that the words of the faith had not run true. You were not the incarnations of all evil our leaders to us you were. The universe did not open up a great darkness and swallow us all for having looked upon your face."

"Whew! Glad to know that," I said, miming relief by wiping away imaginary sweat from my brow.

"You mock me," she said, looking hurt.

I sobered quickly, straightening up in my chair, and suddenly feeling apologetic. "Sorry," I said, suitably contrite. "I didn't mean to make light of what you're saying."

"I suppose we must seem rather primitive to you," she said.

"Different." I thought of the war, and of how they'd almost won it. No, they were hardly primitive, although Tradur might well have given one that impression. But then, Tradur wasn't like any of the other worlds of what had once been the Unity.

"This world has changed little since the first settlers arrived," Kieara continued. "There has always been a reluctance to embrace the new. And in the tenets of our faith we have strayed little from the original doctrines, save where it has been deemed necessary for survival."

"That must come at a cost."

"A far greater one than you can imagine, Captain," she said, her manner grave. "My father seeks only that which will ensure the survival of his faith. He will do whatever is necessary in his eyes to maintain it," she added. "When you are blinded by the unyielding light of a personal vision, Captain, it becomes a simple matter to find justification in any act. The leaders of our faith have done this for centuries, and many of us have paid a dear price because of it. The war with the Federation was but a small part of that."

"These are rather frank observations, coming from one who is said to be so devoted to the Church," I pointed out, somewhat cynically.

"Do not be deceived by all you see and here, Captain."

"And what is it I'm seeing and hearing now?"

"As with us all, you will see and hear what you wish to." Kieara smiled weakly. "I would show you honesty, Captain." She bowed her head demurely. "And I would hope that you would hear sincerity."

"Why?"

"So that I might gain your trust."

"And having done so?"

"Then I would ask of you a favor, and hope that you would not hesitate in granting it."

I swallowed, feeling a leaden lump slide down my throat and fall heavily into the pit of my stomach. It sat there, a rotting mass of anguish.

"What favor will you ask?" I heard myself whisper in a voice tight with anxiety.

"Not now, Captain," she said. "The asking will come when I am sure of your reply."

"And until then?"

"We shall meet, as we have met now. Again. And again. However many times it may be necessary. Or until I have no more time," she concluded cryptically.

I looked at her and saw a sense of desperation in her eyes: a plea for understanding and patience. And I thought to myself, then, that if she'd asked me her favor I wouldn't have hesitated in granting it--even if it had meant risking a career.

I started to say something, but she held up a hand to silence me. She motioned to the door, then turned her chair towards her desk and submerged herself in the shimmering text that floated in the cube of her com-link. I blinked, taken aback, slowly realizing I'd been dismissed. I rose sluggishly from the chair and turned to the door. The acolyte who had led me here was waiting in rigid silence.

"When will we meet again?" I asked Kieara Cjhar as I stood at the threshold of the doorway.

"You will be informed," she said without turning.

I followed the acolyte to the doorway through which I'd entered the Sentai. The guide was waiting in the narrow alleyway, hidden in the shadows by his hooded cloak. As the door into the Sentai closed behind me, he started forward, not waiting to see whether or not I followed. In silence he led me back to the embassy. Only once I was back within the safety of the embassy's shield did I realize how terrified I'd been. I had fought on the front line against the Unity, both in the field and on the ships, and had seen with my own eyes the horrors of which they were capable. But never once had I felt as vulnerable as I'd felt out there in those darkened streets, my life entrusted to people I had no right to trust. And yet, I did trust them. Or at least I trusted Kieara Cjhar.

I didn't sleep much that night. I couldn't help but wonder what favor it was she'd ask of me.

7.

"I don't believe her," said Burrye.

I swiveled in the chair behind my office desk and looked across the room at him. "You mean you don't want to believe her," I said.

He scowled, his dark glower seeming to drop the temperature of the room by degrees. "You don't know these people, Captain," he said. "I've been here for two years. Been here since the embassy was first established. I've watched Kuhn and his daughter, and believe me, nothing I've seen suggests to me she'd ever betray him."

"She never made it clear she would," I argued.

"What she did last night by meeting with you--in of all places the Sentai!--would be enough to get her killed." He shook his head. "No, I can't begin to accept for a moment that she'd have done what she's done without her father knowing about it. It's too great a risk if she were caught."

"Then you're convinced this is some sort of trap," I said.

"Of course it is!" he barked impatiently. "What else could it be? It makes no sense, otherwise."

"Unless, of course, there is indeed something she wants of me," I said. "Something only we can provide."

Burrye snorted loudly. "Next you'll be suggesting she might be thinking of seeking asylum with us."

"That had crossed my mind."

"Why?" he demanded. "Why would she need asylum? As daughter of the prelate she certainly doesn't want for anything. She has a coveted position on this world. Why would she want to give that up? There's no suffering for the likes of her."

"There are many definitions for suffering," I said.

"I'm sorry, Captain, but I just don't buy into it. You've met her once and that should be the end of it."

"And if it isn't?"

"If it isn't, we could end up with the sort of incident that can start a war."

"What if she's genuinely seeking our help?" I asked. "During the war we never turned our backs on those who sought our assistance," I reminded him.

"The war has been over almost five years now, Captain."

"So it has, Jacob. So it has. And perhaps that's good enough reason to start trusting once more."

"The Reds haven't accepted defeat," said Burrye. "The Church still preaches that we're the enemy. And Kieara Cjhar was raised in the Church, Captain."

"And you don't think she could have changed?"

He shook his head. "I've heard her preach to crowds," he said. "I'm not sure you could fake the kind of passion I've seen in her. She spoke like a true zealot--and not some wayward soul doubting the strength of her convictions."

"On the ships," I said quietly, "we often fooled even ourselves that we believed in the war we were fighting."

Burrye looked at me aghast. "The war with the Unity was wholly justified!" he exclaimed, his face coloring with indignation. "I've no doubts that what we did was necessary."

"How many did you kill with your own hands?" I demanded. "How many ships did you hunt down and destroy, knowing that inside them were hundreds of men? How many of your friends did you hold in your arms and watch die?" I could feel my rage growing, becoming that untameable beast that hadn't served me well in the past. I resented that he should think he could possibly understand the horrors of war when he hadn't been there. He hadn't stood on the bridge of a ship and ordered the deaths of thousands. He hadn't heard the screams of the dying, hadn't watched the life drain out of them. He'd never had to make the hard choices that every commanding officer has to make at some point within the context of war.

"Would you have had us all under the thumb of the likes of Kuhn?" Burrye challenged. "You, better than anyone else, should realize the war had to be waged to prevent that."

"I do, Jacob. I fought because I believed in what I was fighting for. Because I passionately believed in the freedoms the Unity would have denied many of us if they'd won." My face hardened. "You can't begin to imagine what I sacrificed to restore the Empire and prevent the Unity's growing reign of tyranny."

"And yet, you say you didn't believe in the war."

I looked at him blankly. "How can anyone believe in war?"

"You're a spacer. You were bred for it," he charged.

"Yes," I agreed, "they bred me to fight. But they didn't make me a bloody machine, Jacob. I still have the humanity to see the truth. And while it may seem a contradiction to you, I find nothing strange about not believing in a process that's inherently evil." I sighed wearily, feeling all those years of conflict suddenly settle upon me like a great weight. "To believe in war is to give up all hope, for surely it's the court of last resort."

"The Reds gave us no alternative," Burrye argued.

"That's for the historians to decide," I mused. "But I'm not the only one who thinks we gave ourselves no alternative. We made mistakes, Jacob. Big mistakes. The first ones were made hundreds of years ago when we allowed people to persecute the Reds. But our greatest folly may have been Obsidian. That was the seed of insurrection. We gave the Reds a cause. We gave them an enemy. We gave them a reason to rise up against us.

"Admiral Carter warned us this would happen," I went on. "He knew war was coming. And he knew it would be a bad one, and that it would cost us dearly. Because nothing good ever comes of war." I closed my eyes and wished I couldn't remember all those years of conflict, all those years of suffering. How many had died under my command? I didn't know. I didn't want to. I knew only that I never wanted to see such barbarity again. So many had come to me fresh-faced and eager, only to leave my ship in body bags--or worse.

I had grown sick of it. So sick of seeing the dead. So sick of sending them to their graves. So sick of thinking there could never be an end to it. And so like so many others in Fleet, I had jumped at the chance for peace. Even though it had meant selling out on so many of the principles that had once been so important to us, I and so many like me had thought it worth it. Because there comes a point when you know the dying has to stop--a point when you realize there's a fine line between fighting for something you believe in and simply fighting for the sake of fighting.

"You sound like one of those peace-freaks who did nothing more than march through the streets and make a nuisance of themselves," Burrye sneered. "They seemed to have the notion that we could somehow negotiate a peace with the Unity. And all the time they were saying this, the Unity was moving deeper and deeper into Federation space, swallowing up more and more free worlds."

I should have hit him. I wanted to. I had done so to better men than he. What right did he have to accuse me of being naïve and ignorant of the truth? I had the blood on my hands to prove otherwise. The blood of thousands. And I bore the scars of what I'd seen and done. The scars of war that even time can never completely erase. While he'd lived safely on some world in the Federation, I'd been out there risking my neck for the likes of him. For him and all those peace freaks of whom he was so contemptuous.

I should have hit him, but I didn't. I just said, "I don't disagree with you. But when you've fought in it long enough, and been intimate with its horrors, you find yourself believing that war can't possibly be the only answer. Somehow, to believe that it is, is dehumanizing. It's an admission of failure. And the longer we live with it, the more difficult it is to live without it. In time we risk becoming like the people of Inkasar, where war was a part of their culture. I didn't want that for us. I didn't want to go to my grave knowing the only thing I'd ever done in my life was kill people."

Burrye regarded me cynically. "And where does Kieara Cjhar fit into this grand philosophy of yours?"

"That's yet to be determined."

"She'll betray you, Captain."

I smiled crookedly, and said, "Maybe. But even if she does, it would hardly be the first time--and doubtless not the last."

8.

The same guide, the same acolyte, but a different room.

"It would not be prudent to be complacent," explained Kieara Cjhar. "I choose the room at the last possible moment. That way it is far more difficult for anyone to monitor us."

I arched an eyebrow in surprise. "Then you believe someone is suspicious of you?""

"It is clear you are new to Tradur, Captain," she said, with a hint of cheerless laughter in her voice and a forlorn look in her eye. "On this world no one is above suspicion. No one trusts anyone. The Church teaches us that from the moment we are born. On this world there are no innocents. All are guilty. We are taught that we must be forever vigilant, watchful for those who might stray from the path of the one true faith. No one is above reproach. Not even the daughter of one of the most powerful men within the Church."

"Yet you clearly trust some," I observed. I glanced telling towards the door. "The guide who has twice brought me to the Sentai, and the acolyte who brings me to you."

"Even within a society so rife with distrust there are those who manage to rise above the entrenched paranoia of our culture," she said matter-of-factly.

"It must take a lot of courage," I said.

"More than you can begin to imagine, Captain. This is not a world where transgressions are taken lightly. To defy the Church is to court death. The punishment for even the most innocuous trespass against the faith would be unconscionable on any truly civilized world."

"The Federation would frown upon executions," I warned.

She laughed bitterly. "A pity they do no more than frown," she whispered.

Those words stung, and I wish I could have said something to counter them. But in truth the Federation was pretty severely constrained when it came to enforcing the constitution on worlds like Tradur. We'd pretty much signed away those rights. Once in the atmosphere of this planet, Federation law was pretty well non-existent. Still...

"I'm sure the cardinali would prefer not to create a diplomatic incident," I said.

"I am afraid the cardinali are not much revered these days, Captain. Men like my father believe they sold us out. My father and his followers imagine that we could have won the war, and that their ambition of a unified Red Catholic state could have been realized if the cardinali had not been cowards and agents of the new Satan. Here on Tradur they have not given up the fight. For all your Federation's valiant efforts, the Church continues to go quietly about its business on this world as though the Unity had not ceased to exist. Nothing has changed, for all your embassies and your threats of blockades. They know Fleet is spread thin throughout the Empire. At the moment you don't even have a single warship in this system. Not even a ship of any kind that is capable of interstellar jumps."

"That could change."

She shrugged. "Perhaps. But my father and his people understand that the Federation is tired of war. They merely have to make the threat of such and Admiralty backs down. So you see, despite everything, despite all the blood that has been shed, the lives that have been lost, nothing has really changed for many of us. If it had, we would not now be sitting here discussing this; for I would not find it necessary to seek your assistance." She sighed wearily and shook her head.

"The end of the war and the restoration of the Federation has done little to change Tradur," she continued. "The theocracy remains; the Church has simply adapted. Like a chameleon, it has skilfully blended into the background, but it has by no means faded. It has simply learned to play a new game, working within the rules your people allowed it to dictate when the Terms of Surrender were drawn up." She looked straight at me, a piercing look of accusation. "You betrayed us, Captain. You and your Federation. We had such hopes when the Federation finally defeated the Unity. We dared to dream of freedom, to be rid of the Church's brutal reign. But it wasn't to be. And here, because the Church has for so long been such a powerful force, none have been able to throw off the shackles of its oppression. None would dare, for the fear in the hearts and minds of Tradur's citizens is too great."

"Some might dare," I insisted. "You. The guide. Even that acolyte."

"Perhaps I live in greater fear than any," she said--though looking at her one wouldn't have had the impression she was afraid of anything. "I, better than any, know the true horrors of which the Church is capable. You see, Captain, the people of this world have a right to fear. Men like my father are driven blindly by their faith; and in their blindness they are capable of the most unspeakable things. All in the name of religion. All because they are the true believers, and thus incapable of any wrong. God speaks through them. And what God says cannot be challenged."

There was a thread of anger in her voice that hadn't betrayed itself until now. It was a subtle thing, but somehow I had the feeling that for Kieara this was like a shout of rage.

"Things will change," I assured her. "The Church can't maintain its hold on Tradur forever. Not now that the Unity has been defeated. Not once people here see what's happening elsewhere in the Federation."

"The Federation defeated the Unity, Captain; it did not defeat the Church. It is our sorrow and your folly that you have left it essentially intact. The men with the blood of millions of innocent lives on their hands have paid nothing for their crimes. They roam free while we who crave freedom remain imprisoned."

"If we had destroyed the Church it would have meant chaos," I said defensively. "On many worlds it's the only authority; and however much we may dislike it, it's better to have its law and order than none at all. Better the evil you know than the one you don't. Without a strong, central authority, however onerous, there'd be only anarchy."

"Such a Pyrrhic Victory for the Federation, don't you think? How many lives were lost to restore the Federation and its much vaunted democracy in the Empire?" She shook her head, a mask of painful regret twisting the features of her face. "You did not crush the Church, and it was the Church that led us all to war in the first place. Can you be so sure their brand of governance is truly a lesser evil than the anarchy and chaos you so fear?"

"In time the Church will lose its hold," I insisted; but I was no longer sure I believed those words as I once had. As I had believed them in those days shortly after the Unity had capitulated. Back then we'd been so eager to see the war ended that we'd been willing to believe anything. And who could blame us? Especially those of us who had paid the highest costs of the conflict. I thought of how much I had lost, of the friends and

lovers that were gone forever. Looking at Kieara, however, made me realize that in our haste to end the fighting and all the death and destruction, we'd forgotten about the people on the other side. We'd forgotten about the people who had been held prisoner by the Church, forced into a way of life they didn't agree with but against which they couldn't rebel. Couldn't, because we'd betrayed them. We'd sold them out. Because we hadn't wanted to pay in bodies anymore. We had just wanted to end it all, before it had ended us.

"How many more must suffer before the Church does fall?" Kieara demanded. She looked away from me for a moment, then slowly turned that measuring stare of those brilliant blue eyes upon me again. "You cannot begin to imagine, Captain, what it is like to be a woman in the Red Catholic Church. In particular a woman in the Church on Tradur."

"No," I conceded, "I can't. But surely for someone like you the hardships aren't so great." I didn't mean it as criticism, though I realized it might easily be construed as such.

"In the eyes of the Church, I am no different from any other," she said tonelessly. "That my father is prelate does not mean that I am exempt from the Commandments. The panai will be as much a part of my life as it is for every childbearing woman on Tradur."

"The panai?" I echoed, pretending the word meant nothing to me. But of course it did; for I'd heard of it before, in the rumors of Tradur that had come to my attention long before I'd ever arrived on this planet.

"The panai, perhaps more than anything else, symbolizes the great gulf that exists between men and women on this world," said Kieara. "You see, Captain, on Tradur women are not even second class citizens. Indeed, we are not citizens at all. We are property. The possessions of the state, and consequently of the men who run it."

"That will change," I assured her, trying to throw as much conviction into my words as possible.

She smiled at me, the sort of patronizing smile one might expect a parent to offer a child who has said something foolish. "You speak with such confidence," she said. "I almost want to believe you. But it has been five years since the Unity fell. Two years since offworlders finally came to this world. In all that time you have not managed to penetrate even the surface of Tradurian society. You look out the windows of your great embassies and believe yourself to see a world. But you see nothing, Captain. Nothing the Church does not wish you to see. And there is not much truth in the things they wish you to observe. Particularly when it comes to the fate of women on this world."

"It takes time to change centuries of culture," I said. "But it'll happen. Eventually even Tradur will change. Even the Church isn't strong enough to prevent that."

She didn't look the least bit convinced. "You have such faith for someone who doesn't believe in God," she said. "Yet I, who do believe, see no hope at all."

"Change is inevitable," I reiterated. "It just takes time. But one day even on Tradur things will be different." I wasn't sure whether or not I truly believed that; but it was something I and others like me had wanted to believe. And sometimes when you tell yourself something often enough you begin to think it's true.

"Nothing is inevitable, captain. Except, perhaps, death. And amidst the devoted of the Church there are those who believe they will even circumvent that."

"The Church will change, Kieara, or it won't survive." Of that much I was certain. Not only was there no mood in the Assembly to brook a return to the conditions that had led to the formation of the Unity in the first place, but I felt sure that in time people would see the Church for what it truly was. But maybe that was being

naïve, given that after decades of war and terrible losses it still remained a potent force with the Empire. When the Unity had fallen people hadn't simply stopped believing and switched allegiances and faiths.

"The Church is cunning," Kieara warned. "When necessary it will disguise itself. It has had many faces over the centuries since its birth, but always its purpose has remained the same. The Federation will have to be willing to wage a new war if it truly wishes to change a world like Tradur."

"It's not our aim to force any world to fit a particular mold," I said. "But we're not willing to forever accept inequities that would see more than half of humanity treated as less than human. It's one reason why we fought this war in the first place."

"Were the reasons truly so altruistic?" she asked with unbridled skepticism.

"Few wars have ever been fought for any single reason," I ventured. "Often it's a culmination of things that leads both sides to embrace conflict as a means of resolution." I felt pedantic, and sounded to my own ears like one of my instructors from long ago in the Academy. But it was true enough; just as I had said it to Burrye. The war between the Federation and the Unity had had its roots long ago when the first Reds had been persecuted. But Obsidian had been the real catalyst. That had awakened the sleeping giant. What Carter and his people had done there had been to open a Pandora's Box that had very nearly meant the end of the Federation.

"You make it sound so difficult," said Keiara.

"Difficult?" I wasn't sure what she meant.

"One has the impression that the prospect of war was not greeted with enthusiasm in the Federation," she elaborated.

I blinked, startled. "No one wants a war."

Kieara smiled charitably and said, "All those years of fighting the Unity, Captain, and still you do not understand the cardinali."

"Probably not," I said with a shrug. "But I think I understood the men on the ships we fought against."

"And what did you understand of them?" she asked.

"That they were human too."

For years on the ships, when we had fought the war between the stars, we had tried to convince ourselves that we had held the moral high ground. It had always seemed so obvious. More so when one had distilled the Unity losses into nothing more substantial than numbers. We had seldom considered--or had purposely avoided doing so--the reality of each ship destroyed, each planetary base razed. Because we couldn't see their faces, because we couldn't touch them and hear them, they had been less real to us. They'd been no more tangible than the countless computer simulations we'd all fought throughout our years of training. Nothing more than statistics. A ship blown to dust here. A base turned to char there. To have thought of them as anything more would have been to have put a human face to them. And humanizing them would have imbued them with a quality we'd always preferred to believe was our exclusive domain. It had been better merely to think of them as the enemy. Better to think of them as numbers. To have thought otherwise would have made our job that much more difficult, and would have made the war that much harder to win.

And yet, for all that we might have pretended that we didn't care, I knew from personal experience that that

had never quite held true. There were always moments of silence out there in that great loneliness of space. Moments when you could sit and think, dwelling upon the truth. And the truth had always been that in those ships of the enemy there'd been real people. Real men. Men who had died hideous deaths when we'd destroyed their ships. Men who had become ashes and dust. Men who had had wives, and sons and daughters. Men who had been sons themselves. And brothers. Men who had left behind a broken legacy that could never be mended.

Often, when we would lie in wait for them, I would feel a certain ambivalence. I've heard it called the hunter's dilemma: the need to kill, but the total lack of desire to do so; you begin to empathize with your prey. You begin to doubt. It hadn't been something commanding officers had spoken of amidst themselves, or to anyone else for that matter. To have done so would have been to have admitted weakness. Any ship's captain who had dared confess to such feelings would have been stripped of his or her command. Perhaps rightfully so. For out there, in space, during the height of the war, there had never been any room for doubts. Doubts would have got you killed. And not just you, because as a commanding officer you'd had an entire ship and crew to think about.

So we had sat out there, waiting, and understanding that it was no simple war. Understanding that they, the enemy, also bled. That they, too, died. And that perhaps they, too, shed tears for fallen comrades.

9.

"Tell me," she asked upon our third encounter, "have you any children, Captain?"

"No," I said, with evident regret; for I'd often wished that time and circumstance would have afforded me that opportunity. It was one more reason to hate the war. One more reason to have wanted it to end.

And Kieara, as though reading my thoughts, said "The war."

"Yes," I whispered. "That and maybe..." I shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. I guess I didn't want to bring a child into this world. Not during a war. Not when there was so much uncertainty. I knew it was always possible I'd be killed, and it hardly seemed fair to give life to a child and then leave it an orphan." I had expected to die on every mission, and there'd always been a strange mix of relief and guilt that I hadn't. And each time we had arrived in our home port I had watched as fellow officers had been welcomed into the arms of their families and I had realized how much I regretted that I didn't have one of my own to greet me. But I'd never been able to bring myself to make that commitment. Not just for the reasons I'd given Kieara. I think there had also been the fear of becoming so connected to someone else, so attached to another living being. I had always been afraid it would affect the choices I made when I was in command, that somehow I would pass every decision through the filter of my bond to another human being. It had seemed to me, back then, that no commanding officer could afford to be compromised in such a way.

"You though it would change you," she said.

"I knew it would."

"But change isn't always bad."

"I couldn't afford to take the risk."

"You thought you were going to die," she said.

I nodded. "Every day I was out there. I saw so many friends and colleagues killed. I had no reason to believe my fate would be otherwise. A great deal of luck can be attributed to the fact that I survived the war, while

other, better officers didn't."

"Perhaps you underestimate yourself." She regarded me warmly. "On many fronts."

I laughed, though it was without mirth. "Perhaps," I conceded. "War has a way of humbling one."

"I have heard," Kieara began hesitantly, as though on the verge of broaching an extremely delicate subject, "that in the Federation men and women are no longer necessary for procreation."

"There are many children who are the product of technology," I agreed.

"Such things would be blasphemy within the Church," she said. "Children so conceived would be considered abominations."

"Even outside the Church there are those who have argued that it's going too far to create and nuture children in such a fashion. They say that if these creations could be said to have parents, those parents are the machines and the technologists who spliced the genes and nutured the cells in the artificial wombs. But we've been doing it for centuries and I don't think we're any the worse for it."

"And you, captain: Do you approve of this technological means of procreation?"

"There are places for such things," I said, somewhat more noncommittally than I had intended. "They've freed women from the tyranny of the womb."

"On Tradur women are quite familiar with that," said Kieara; and for the first time there was a distinct edge fear to her voice. "There are many who would embrace these technologies that would see women escape the burden of bearing young."

"They're not a panacea for all the ills that have beset women," I cautioned. "And they're not without their own complications. And even in the Federation, where such facilities are freely available, many women still choose to follow the more traditional path." But not spacers. None that I'd ever known, at least.

"Choose," Kieara said forcefully. "There is the difference, captain. In your world there are choices for women. But look around you. In mine you will see that there are no such choices here. Believe me when I say that such complications as you have alluded to would be a small price to pay when compared with what women on this world must now face."

I didn't know what to say. I knew little of what life was like for the women of Tradur. Despite winning the war, it was clear, as Kieara had suggested, that the Federation had been far from victorious in all regards. Sitting there with her, I was more conscious than ever of how little we knew about the enemy we had fought so hard against for so many decades. And surely, I thought, there was a serious threat in such ignorance.

"Tell me, Captain, have you seen much of Tradur beyond the walls of your embassy?"

"You know I haven't," I said. "And you know the Terms of Surrender are rather strict on how much access we can have without the authorization of the planetary authorities. Your people haven't been particularly forthcoming when it comes to granting our requests for more freedom of movement on the islands."

"Not my people, Captain. I am a woman; and I am a leader of none. On this world I am not even considered a person."

"The Church, then."

Kieara inclined her head slightly. "Of course," she said quietly. "They are afraid."

"Why?"

She blinked and looked up at me in surprise. "Why because they would not wish you to see the truth."

"The truth about what?" I asked, a chill running up my spine. I felt myself suddenly within grasping distance of what it was that was behind why we'd been meeting these last few nights.

"The truth about us, Captain. About the women of Tradur."

10.

"So what about them?" asked Burrye. He leaned forward in his chair and put his hands upon my desk. His eyes shone with a feverish intensity as he waited for me to answer. I couldn't help but note that his mood was in stark contrast to the somewhat reproving attitude he'd displayed only days earlier when I'd first undertaken this venture.

"There's nothing to tell," I said.

He frowned, and looked taken aback. "I'm your adviser, Captain," he said, sounding offended. "Anything that passes between us is in the strictest of confidence."

"It's not that I don't trust you, Jacob," I assured him. "It's simply that she told me no more. She couldn't. We were interrupted."

Burrye's eyes widened. "Not discovered, I hope."

I gave him a withering look. "I don't think the Reds would take my being in the Sentai so lightly," I drawled.

He settled himself in his chair, suddenly looking smug. "I take it, then, that this puts an end to these little nightly sojourns of yours," he said.

"Not at all," I said casually. "I've no intention of stopping until Kieara puts an end to it."

"But you were almost caught!"

"Almost, yes. But we weren't."

Burrye gritted his teeth and censured me with his eyes. "It's a senseless risk," he proclaimed. "You're jeopardizing the whole mission. The Terms of Surrender were quite explicit about this sort of thing. If you're caught--"

"The Reds will expel me," I finished for him. "It'll be a minor diplomatic embarrassment, quickly swept under the rug. Besides, wasn't it you who suggested the Terms of Surrender were a bunch of crap?"

He sat fuming, but said no more.

I got up from my chair and went to the windows of my office. Looking out I could see the broad avenue of Embassy Row. There was no groundcar traffic on it, and only the odd servobot hovering about, tending to the plants that grew in the median that ran down the middle of the broad avenue. I shivered, for in that silence and emptiness there was the suffocating weight of oppression.

"You've been here two years and you still don't know what the panai is," I said. "Nor much else about this world."

"The Terms of Surrender don't make it easy," Burrye grumped.

"True. And it's for that reason the Federation chose me for this assignment," I told him. "Because of my past, Jacob. Because of what I was. Because they knew I wouldn't allow myself to be as bound by the Terms of Surrender as would any ordinary diplomat." I looked over my shoulder at him and added, "I'm not here, as I suspect you imagine, as a reward for my years of service in the Navy. I'm here because of them. Because the Federation knows that ignorance is its worst enemy."

"I fail to see--"

I raised a hand to silence him. "Have you ever heard of the 'Angels of death,' Jacob?" I asked.

He stiffened and eyed me warily. "Of course," he said. "Who hasn't?"

"Then you know what they're capable of?"

He blanched slightly. "They were assassins in Naval Intelligence," he said. "Silas Jackson's people. Trained killing machines. They single-handedly killed thousands in the Unity command structure...if the tales are to be believed."

"Believe them," I said tonelessly. "I can personally vouch for their authenticity."

He gaped at me. "You?" he whispered incredulously. "But they were all Empaths."

"Not all. A few were Potentials."

He shook his head and swallowed, looked suddenly uncomfortable. "The Federation must be crazy. If the Reds found out, you'd never make it off this world alive. It's bad enough that you're military, but to be a potential Empath..." He wiped at his face, stared at me as though he'd never seen me before.

"It was a long time ago," I said, feeling it necessary to set him at ease. More than thirty years ago, in fact. Before I'd asked for a ship. Before those long and empty silences in space, where I'd waited for my prey and had learned to abhor the endless killing and the seeming senselessness of war.

For several minutes Burrye was silent. At length he said, "We'll pay for this. Mark my words: No good will come of it."

I would have like to have told him he was wrong, but history was against me.

I looked out the window again and thought of Obsidian and how it had brought me here. Who would have thought that something that had happened on a world hundreds of light-years away and decades in the past would have such consequence on the present?

My instructors at the Academy had always said that history was in the details. Sometimes it was those minor things that seemed of no importance at the time that ended up changing the fate of worlds.

Obsidian had changed all of ours.

11.

For more than a week I heard nothing from Kieara. I grew concerned that perhaps she'd been discovered, and found myself watching the local cube broadcasts for any clues as to her welfare. It was in this way that I saw the public side of Kieara Cjhar. The side that Burrye had warned me about.

There she was, standing on a podium beside her father, looking out over a massive crowd of followers. I was relieved to see she appeared unharmed, but somewhat less comforted by her participation in this rally. It was difficult to believe it was the same person to whom I had talked over the course of those nights. When she took her place before the assembled masses and began addressing them, it was as though she was another person altogether. Nothing of the calm and reasoned woman remained. Instead, I sat and listened to her excoriate the Federation and all it stood for, whipping the crowd into a fevered frenzy with her words of condemnation. She spoke of treachery, of the perfidy of the Admiralty, of how the offworlder invasion was eroding Tradurian culture, of how now, more than ever, there was a need to adhere to the faith and obey the laws set down by the cardinali. She spoke with a passion that stunned me; and for a long time after the broadcast I found myself wondering which was the act: her meetings with me, or that breathtaking display of fanaticism that had left the crowd chanting her name and crawling all over one another in an effort to get near her.

I began to have doubts. Perhaps, I told myself, Burrye had been right from the start. Perhaps this had all been a ruse, a carefully laid plot meant to capture the Federation in a compromising position. But if so, why wait so long? Why had they done nothing? It made no sense. And I could only trust that what I had seen of Kieara's public persona had been nothing more than a fiction, put on for the consumption of those like her father and the cardinali.

I waited anxiously for word from her, wanting to see her, wanting to know the truth.

"How will you know whether or not she's lying?" Burrye asked. "You're not an Empath."

"I'll know," I said, certain that I would. "Potentials can sometimes sense things." How many times had that "intuition" saved me during my long career in Fleet? I couldn't believe it would fail me now.

"If you're wrong..." He let his voice trail off into an ominous silence.

"Your views on that are well known, Jacob," I said crisply; and that was the end of that.

Two days later I met with Kieara again.

12.

I was in the market, rather enjoying the ambiance of one of the few places to which the Tradurians permitted offworlders unrestricted access, when I was confronted by the guide who had taken me to Kieara in the past. I scarce recognized him without his cloak and the darkness, but as soon as he spoke I knew it was he.

"Our mutual friend wishes to speak to you," he said, addressing me in a low voice while pretending to be interested in the fruit at one of the crowded open stalls. "Please follow me, assari."

I would have asked questions, but before I could say anything he was off, slipping into the jostling crowds like a shadow into night. I had to scurry to catch up, moving quickly while trying not to appear that I was tailing him.

The guide entered a shop and began conversing with the storekeeper. I hesitated before following him into the premises, but as soon as I did so I was hurriedly and surreptitiously conducted to a room in the back of the store. Kieara Cjhar was there, waiting, looking composed, and not at all like the woman that I'd watched in the

cube only days earlier.

"It is time to ask of you my favor, Captain," she said.

13.

I looked around the room. It was a storage facility, small, cramped, with barrels lining one wall and boxes piled along another. There was a dusty small window that let in some light, but a glowglobe hovering near the ceiling provided most of the illumination.

Kieara sat perched elegantly on one of the barrels. As the door to the room closed behind me with a soft hiss, she lifted a hand and indicated that I should sit. I dragged a box out into the small space that had been made in the middle of the room and sat down across from her.

"You're probably wondering what happened," she began.

Instead of responding to this I said, "I saw your little performance the other night."

"You were impressed, do doubt," she said somewhat sardonically.

"You don't make it easy to trust you."

She laughed. "What would you have me do, Captain? Get up in front of all those fanatics and declare my defiance of all that the Red Catholic Church stands for? How long do you think I would be of this world if I did such a thing?"

"I'm just wondering which is the real Kieara Cjhar," I said.

"This is, Captain." She clenched her fist and held it to her chest in what was the most passionate display I'd seen from her, outside of her public performance. "The real Kieara Cjhar is the woman before you. The woman who must ask of you a favor that perhaps I have no right asking of anyone."

I sat silent, staring at her, and sensing in her a level of desperation that was frightening. It was as though at any moment she might cease to exist. I could almost feel her clinging onto something. Hope, perhaps. Or maybe even life itself.

"I never explained to you the panai," she said.

I shifted in my seat and tensed with expectation.

"I have asked you many questions about women in the Federation," she went on. "You must have wondered why."

"Curiosity, I suppose."

A pallid smile creased her lips. "Much more than that, Captain. I do not think that satisfying one's curiosity would be worth risking premature death."

"If you wish asylum--" I started to say; but she silenced me with a curt shake of her head.

"It would not be possible," she whispered. "The cardinali would never permit me to leave this world, as they will never permit any woman to."

"Then this favor--"

"I am getting to that." She smiled again; but there was sorrow in her eyes.

I felt my heart hammering in my chest and I wasn't sure why I was so anxious. Afraid for her? Afraid that she might ask me to do something that would put me and my mission at risk.

"Perhaps now you have seen enough of this world, Captain, to have noticed there are few older women amidst the population."

"I assumed they didn't appear in public."

"If there were graves to mark the deaths of all those women sacrificed in the name of religion on Tradur, they might cover much of the land of this world," Kieara said soberly. "We are victims of tradition, captain. When the original settlers came to Tradur, they found themselves cursed. Some say it is a genetic flaw in the population. Some say it is something to do with Tradur itself. Regardless, it could no doubt have been corrected, but for the fact that our ancestors came to this world without the means by which to do so. There were no real scientists among the followers. Understandably so, I suppose. But the faithful were not without imagination. They were quite creative when it came to devising a means to circumvent the serious limitations the curse placed upon them."

"The panai," I said.

"Yes. The panai. A ritual that has stood the test of time. A rite that has become ingrained in our society, so much a fabric of it that it would destroy the Church on Tradur if it were removed from the lexicon of the social vocabulary."

Despite my efforts to conceal my skepticism, it must have shown in the frown that furrowed my brow.

"You do not believe," she said, as though she had expected as much.

"I don't tend to judge things until I've heard all the facts."

"Then listen carefully, Captain; for I would not wish you to judge wrongly."

14.

"I have already made it clear that the place of women within the Church is very narrowly defined," she said. "More so on Tradur than on any other world of what was once the Unity. We are little more than the means by which the race can be perpetuated. Our place is to serve men in whatever capacity the Church decrees. We have no rights; and there are no choices that we can make. From birth to death our life is dictated by the whims of men. Few are educated, beyond what is necessary to satisfy the needs of men--though over the years some, like myself, have found ways to circumvent that.

"It was not always this way. When our forebears first came to this world the lot of women was considerably better than what it is now--though men were still the dominant force, as it has always been in the Church. But the curse soon revealed itself. Few male offspring were born; indeed, for every male there were tens of females. To the men who were the leaders of the Church such a situation was unconscionable. It was clear that in a very short time women would outnumber men so dramatically that they would constitute a serious threat to the existence of the Church on Tradur.

"The Red Catholic Church, as you are probably aware, forbids genetic engineering of any sort. They believe only in the purity of humanity as passed on by God. Anything that does not fit their narrow parameters of what is acceptable must be eradicated, which is why they began the Purges against the Empaths. It is also why the curse that blighted Tradur could not be rectified as it might have been on a Federation world. So they did what religions have done through the millennia when posed with a threat to the sociological fabric of their world: they created a ritual that would exact a balance."

For the second time I said, "The panai."

Kieara nodded. "One cannot wholly blame them; certainly the male/female imbalance would have quickly doomed the world."

"Not if they'd availed themselves of the many scientific means by which such an imbalance could have been ameliorated."

"But as I have already made clear: they could not. It would have been breaking the faith. They were a fundamentalist sect, eschewing much of what the rest of the Empire of the time took for granted. Indeed, among Tradur's Church leaders there arose the belief that this was a test of their faith, that God had set before them this quandary and they must seek a means to resolve it without succumbing to the evils of the Empire they had sought to escape."

I was beginning to get a picture of what the panai was, and it wasn't a pleasant image forming in my mind.

"They were quite ingenious," Kieara continued. "They knew they could not simply dispose of all the female offspring. Culling would be best, but in a manner that would ensure the continued prosperity of Tradur. On Tradur they found that women seldom bore more than one male, and never outside the period of her earliest years of fertility. Even at that the percentages were still skewed towards females. But the panai, as they devised it, remedied this."

"Let me guess," I said. "Once a woman had done her bit for society by bearing a male, they disposed of her." It was difficult to keep the rage out of my voice; and I could feel a sickness in my stomach that was every bit the equal of anything I'd ever felt in the worst of the war.

"They raise us to believe it is the will of God, and that by serving him in this way we are assured a place in Heaven," Kieara said tonelessly. "It is our duty to bear the young and then willingly embrace death. They don't make it difficult. The alternative to being fruitful is a nightmare in itself. Those who are barren--and there are many--escape the tyranny of the panai, but theirs is a living hell. The young serve to satiate the sexual needs of those men whose appointed wives the panai takes from them. These women are kept like cattle; and when they have passed beyond the point of satisfying their owners, they are sold into servitude. Ours is a religion, Captain, that has institutionalized rape and slavery."

I thought of the Terms of Surrender, and wondered how we of the Federation could ever have agreed to such a document. It tied our hands, prohibiting us from snuffing out a nightmare like Tradur. We were impotent, bound by law to sit on the sidelines and watch this abomination of a society continue to function as it had for centuries. Bound by law to let the women of this world suffer unconscionably.

We could, of course, abrogate the Terms of Surrender. We could go back on our word. But that would risk reigniting the war; and I wasn't sure whether even the horrors Kieara spoke of would be worth that.

I yearned for the power that had once been mine to wield. With just one well-armed frigate I could have turned Tradur to dust; and I wouldn't feel the guilt and the anguish I'd sometimes suffered through when I'd ordered the destruction of enemy ships during the war. Indeed, I imagined that I'd take some pleasure in

excising this heinous cancer from the universe.

But I was only a diplomat, now, whose purpose here was to prevent another war from happening--not start one. I could observe and report, for all that that was worth. But so long as there was no military threat, nothing would come of what I sent back to my superiors. Nothing would come of it because they, too, were held hostage by the words of the negotiators and their fears of war.

The truth is undeniable: we screwed up. We'd been too eager for peace. There were few who had said that at the time; and those who had we had generally ignored. The fact was, we'd had enough; and those of us who had fought longest and hardest on the frontlines had welcomed an end to the fighting. Anything to stop the flow of blood. Probably because we'd known something others hadn't: that the Federation couldn't maintain the push against the enemy for much longer. A pity we hadn't realized at the time of exacting a surrender from the Unity that our enemy had been in a near state of total collapse.

If we had listened to the hardliners there'd be no Church. There'd be no Tradur. And no panai for the likes of Kieara Cjhar to suffer. But we of the Federation had thought ourselves wise, and compassionate, and so very civilized. We had thought we had learned from history and were determined not to make the same mistakes that had been made in the past. How ironic, then, that our noble ideals had permitted an obscenity like Tradur to actually thrive. If the Federation had just held on for a few more months, the Church would have been overthrown and I wouldn't be sitting here now thinking that we of Fleet had failed to do what we had sworn an oath to do.

What hurt most was that I couldn't even be sure I wouldn't have made the same decisions as those who had negotiated the peace. It was easy to criticize them now, but back then practically everybody had been clamoring for an end to the conflict. I had wanted the carnage to end as much as anyone else. I had been so tired of living on the edge, of never knowing whether I'd live to see another day. I had wanted to go to sleep at night knowing there'd be a tomorrow, knowing that if I ever had a child it would grow up in an empire free of the horrors of war.

The men and women negotiating the peace had had to have known that that was the prevailing sentiment in the Federation. And perhaps that had made them wilfully blind to the things they knew they couldn't change. And maybe the suffering of women on a world that lay at the fringes of the Earth Empire had seemed a petty thing at the time, and something that could maybe be resolved at a later date. Certainly it couldn't have been permitted to scuttle the chances for peace. Those women had been but a few hundred thousands compared with the hundreds of millions who had already been sacrificed and the millions more who would have died if the conflict hadn't ended. Surely a small price to pay.

But looking across at Kieara Cjhar, I thought it was too dear.

15.

"You came to ask me for a favor," I reminded her.

She drew a breath and let it out slowly. "I have already mothered two children," she said. "Both girls. The Church will not accept another female from me. If I give birth to another daughter, then we shall both perish in the panai."

"And if you have a son?" But by the look on her face I already knew the answer.

"He will live and I shall go my way as ritual dictates." She smiled grimly. "Once they are assured of their male offspring, the Church has no desire to risk the possibility of another female."

"Either way, you lose," I whispered.

Kieara chuckled dryly. "That is all a matter of interpretation. When you consider what a woman's life is on this world, you begin to realize that death is a welcome release, Captain. From the time I was thirteen I have been raped more times than I care remember. All officially, of course. All sanctioned by the Church. I am, after all, nothing more than a means by which to assure the continued prosperity of the Church on Tradur. When I have served my purpose, I am to be discarded. As you might dispose of a piece of worn out clothing."

I wasn't sure I could find words for how I felt. To say that I was outraged would have been an understatement. But I was also ashamed. Ashamed that I couldn't offer the women of Tradur the same rights and freedoms their sisters in the Federation enjoyed. Ashamed that even now there was a part of me that was thinking about the threat of another war, and afraid that what she was going to ask me to do would be a catalyst for renewed conflict.

"I am with child," Kieara said abruptly.

I felt myself go cold inside. I had known her for such a short period of time, over the course of but a few meetings. Yet in those few brief encounters a bond had formed. A bond of intimate friendship, as strong as any honed over the course of years.

I had fostered few such friendships in my life. Spacers seldom do, because we understand too well the harsh realities of space. During the long hard years of the war we'd all been even more wary of establishing anything more than a passing acquaintance with one another, fearful of growing close because we'd never known from one moment to the next whether or not one or the other of us might be killed. We'd kept our distance, because it had been the best way to keep our sanity. But I had broken that rule with Kieara. Perhaps I had let my guard down because I'd seen no need to keep it up, now that the hostilities were ended. Perhaps I'd been tired of closing everyone out. Or perhaps I had simply wanted a friendship of the sort that I hadn't had in years.

The reasons weren't important. All that mattered now was that I had opened myself to the sort of pain I'd always sought to avoid.

"What will you do?" I asked lamely. It was, of course, a foolish question. What could she do? She'd already made it clear there could be no asylum for the likes of Kieara Cjhar. And even if she had been willing to seek it, I knew Admiralty would never approve it. That would be just the sort of thing that would fire up the Reds and set us on the road to war again.

No, it didn't seem there were any avenues open to her; and clearly she understood that as well as I did.

"I have no choices," she said, "but for the favor I would ask of you."

"I'm listening."

"There is almost no medical care open to women on this world, Captain. Except for those who are believed to be carrying a male child. For the most part women have relied upon a black market of services. Not extremely reliable, and not particularly safe. I have seen many women, barely more than children themselves, die trying to get abortions."

My eyes widened and I regarded her with open-faced apprehension.

"If a woman suspects her first child may be male, she will sometimes risk the infection and disease of a clandestine abortion in order to prolong her life. Providing the Church does not discover her sin, she will have

at least the chance of extending her life the time it takes to carry two more children to term. After which, of course, there is the panai."

"You want me to get you an abortion?" I asked, not quite able to conceal my shock.

"No. It would be of no use. As I have said: male or female, this is the last child I shall be permitted to bear."

"Then how I can help you?"

"I have been able to determine that I am carrying twins. The Church does not know this, nor will they ever if you can assist me."

"I'll do whatever I can," I assured her soberly, even though I knew I was stepping far beyond what my mandate prescribed. Indeed, I had no right to make any assurances to her. No right at all. But in my mind--knowing now what I knew of Tradur--I had a moral obligation. By helping this one woman I might in some small way atone for the crime the Federation had committed in agreeing to the Terms of Surrender.

"You have access to advanced medical facilities," she said simply.

"Yes," I said. "We have a well-equipped infirmary in the embassy, and a fully trained medtech staff." I was trying not to anticipate what she was going to ask for, but it seemed clear enough. And in the next breath she confirmed my suspicions.

"They will happily take the male child in me," she said. "But I would ask of you that they not send to death this daughter I carry."

"What you're asking is complicated." In too many ways.

"But possible." The hope was so strong in her voice that it was almost a plea.

I should have said no. I should have walked a way and that would have been the end of it as far as I was concerned. But of course it wouldn't have been, because I could never have lived with myself if I had turned my back on her.

"I'm not a doctor," I said at last. "You'd have to see our medtech." And I knew, then, that the die was cast.

She nodded. "That can be arranged."

"The offworld embassies are closely monitored by your people," I reminded her. "It may be difficult to get you in."

"It has not been difficult to get you out, Captain," Kieara reminded me. "The curatai are not as diligent as you might think. And with the proper incentive they can be convinced to turn a blind eye." Abruptly she rose from her seat on the barrel and drew her cloak about her.

I scrambled to my feet. "When can we expect you?" I asked, dizzy with the implications of the commitment I was making.

"I will be there when I am there," she said; and then she was gone.

I stood silent for a moment, wondering if I'd made the right decision. But when I considered the alternatives, I didn't think there'd been anything else I could have done. Not anything else that I could have lived with, at

least. I suppose there are always choices. Sometimes, however, it just seems there's only one thing you can do; and when you feel strongly enough about someone, the choices are obvious--no matter what they may cost. And this one would likely cost me my short-lived career as a diplomat and probably my naval commission. But I thought of Kieara and of how much greater her sacrifice, and suddenly what I was doing seemed very small indeed.

16.

She came the following night, brought through the rain by the same guide who had conducted me through the streets of Jehku. Burrye was aghast at their presence in the embassy, and proclaimed that by permitting it I had doomed us all.

"This is unconscionable!" he cried. "If the cardinali find out about this we'll all be expelled. The Terms of Surrender give them that right." He threw up his arms in despair. "You've gone too far this time, Captain. You've jeopardized the whole mission. Maybe even the peace. We'll be lucky if we get off Tradur alive."

"She's risked far more than we have," I told him bluntly. We both looked at Kieara then, who stood silent in the hall of the embassy, her dark cloak slick with rain, her face half hidden in the shadows cast by the hood. Slowly she lifted her arms, her hands peeking from the voluminous folds of the cloak, starkly white against the black material as she pulled back the hood and shook out her long black tresses.

"If the cardinali cannot make me cower before them in fear," she said to Burrye, "then surely their power over you is far less."

I smiled as Burrye stood speechless, shifting uncomfortably, the wind knocked out of his sails by the same calm and reason that had so often doused my reservations in the last few days. "We're fools," he muttered; but he offered no more protests.

I had him summon the chief medtech and led Kieara to the embassy infirmary. While we waited, she marveled at the breath of technological devices available to us. "How our world could be changed if we had access to such things," she said.

"Minds must be changed first," I said.

"Too true. But with access to such facilities, women might gain a voice. A voice they have never had before. We would take control of our destinies out of the hands of men and put it where it belongs: in our own."

"That's not something that could happen overnight," I cautioned. "Long ago, back on Earth, women fought for centuries to gain empowerment. Their greatest obstacle was fear. The fear men had of losing the rigid control they'd wielded for so long. It was difficult for men to learn that sharing that power didn't mean they had to sacrifice what they were. Women weren't a threat to men, but for a long time men couldn't understand this. Perhaps they too readily perceived women as they perceived themselves. And since men had sought to dominate and be subservient to none, they couldn't help but believe that it was the aim of womankind to do to them what they'd done to women for so many thousands of years. That, indeed, must have been frightening."

"I pray that women on Tradur will not have to wait centuries for change," Kieara said, looking pointedly in my direction; and I had the sense of an obligation being placed upon me.

I looked at her, felt a tide of anguish wash over me, knowing as I did what her fate was to be. "Revolutions have to start somewhere," I said. "Perhaps on Tradur it simply needs one woman to be brave enough to make the start. One woman to defy tradition and stand against the Church."

"David had a stone and a sling with which to slay Goliath, Captain."

"Perhaps words can be your stone, Kieara."

"And my sling?"

"The courage with which to fling them."

"Words hardly seem adequate against the might of the Church."

"They can be the seeds, sowing doubt. A crop of new ideas might grow."

She smiled. "You're an optimist, Captain. How refreshing in a world so darkly pessimistic."

"I wouldn't have survived the war without hope."

"Then perhaps if I harbor such hope, I, too, will in some way survive." But I saw in her eyes that she didn't believe these words, didn't believe there was anything for her beyond the birth of her son.

"I wish I could offer you more," I said solemnly.

She reached out and took my hand in hers. "You offer me enough. All things must have a beginning. What we do here today is a start. Who knows what fruit it will bear?"

17.

"We've no artificial womb," the medtech cautioned. "The best I can do is keep the embryo in stasis."

"Could we get it off planet in stasis?" I asked.

Burrye interjected, saying, "That'd be impossible. The Terms of Surrender prohibit the transportation of any concealed material. And as backward as they might be, the Tradurians would recognize a stasis chamber. We'd be forced to open it up and the game would be over."

"Then we'll have to find some other means of smuggling it off world," I said.

"We've no right interfering in this way," Burrye argued.

"We have every right," I said. "We have the right of compassionate human beings. The conditions under which the women of Tradur have for so long suffered give us the right."

"You're letting emotions cloud your judgement, Captain. The Terms of Surrender--"

"The Terms of Surrender be damned!" I half shouted. "They were written by men and women desperate for an end to the long decades of bloodletting. They were impatient for a peace; and it was easy enough to ignore the issue of human rights in light of the circumstances. But I can't believe for a moment they'd ever have intended that we turn our backs on the people who need us most."

Burrye sighed and shook his head. "What difference will this make? You save one potential child, but what of all the others? It's not going to change anything, Captain. It's not going to suddenly give the women of Tradur what they've been denied for hundreds of years."

"It'll give them hope," I said, looking at Kieara as I said it. "It'll let them know that someone cares about them. It'll let them know that maybe, in time, if they have the courage, real change will come to Tradur."

"A false hope," he muttered. "You'll be offering them something we can't deliver. And they could never overthrow the government themselves."

"You may be right," Kieara said to him. "But perhaps all the women of Tradur need is to know that defiance is not wrong. Maybe we just need to know that it isn't necessary we live like this, that the world can be changed. Maybe we just need the beginnings of a revolution, and what will grow from that will be ours."

Burrye regarded her grimly. "And what if such mild rebellion brings an even more crushing oppression?" he asked.

"What will they threaten us with?" she laughed. "Death? Torture? These are things we already know well enough. As women in this society we are dead the moment we are born. But however powerful the leaders of the Church might believe themselves to be, in the end they need us. Without us they are doomed."

I was surprised when Burrye said, "You're a brave woman, Kieara Cjhar."

"It isn't so difficult to be brave," she said with a faint, melancholy smile, "when one knows the time and place of one's death. The brave will be those who do not cling so desperately to life as have I these many years. They will be the ones who will stand and fight for something they believe in."

With the medtech now having finished with her, she rose and gathered her cloak about her.

"You should rest a while before leaving," the medtech advised.

"There is no time for rest," said Kieara. "I have risked much and many by coming here. I dare not linger any longer."

Burrye and I conducted her through the embassy, back to the darkened doorway that led out into a darker night. We could see the shadow of the guide, and beyond him the faint glimmer of the shield wall. On the rain-slicked avenue there were no curatai to be seen, though that didn't mean the street was safe.

"We shall see no more of one another, Captain," Kieara said as she stood on the threshold of the door. "I cannot express the measure of my gratitude for what you have done."

"It should have been more," I insisted.

"It is enough," she said confidently--though I wonder if she truly believed that.

"It's still not too late to change your mind," I said. "You could still request asylum." I could hear Burrye nearly choking beside me, and didn't have to see his face to imagine it turning a bright shade of red.

"In my life I have seldom been permitted to make choices, Captain. But I have made the choices that I wanted to." She turned and started to walk away, moving towards the guide. A few meters from us she stopped and looked back. "Take care of my daughter, Captain," she called back. "Give her the life I never had. Give her the life that she deserves. And let her know it is always important to have choices. Let her know of the ones I made."

That was the last I saw of Kieara Cjhar until the day of her panai.

18.

Because of who she was they broadcast her panai for all the world to see. It was probably their greatest mistake. They had clearly thought to make a model of her, an example for all the women of Tradur. She had fooled them so well into believing that she was a fanatical adherent of the faith that they couldn't have begun to have imagined the horror she would unleash upon them that day.

I didn't want to watch her go to her death, but felt compelled to do so. No offworlder had ever seen the panai until that day, but by broadcasting it to the world the Church couldn't prevent us from seeing it. I wonder sometimes if it that might not have been intentional. Perhaps a thumbing of their noses at the Federation, reminding us of how our hands were tied. Or perhaps they were merely so strong in their faith that they couldn't believe that anything they did was wrong. Hopefully Kieara's actions on that day planted a seed of doubt in their minds.

The public part of the panai was an elaborate ceremony. Kieara Cjhar was carried through the streets of Jehku on an ornate sedan chair, the cjhavari surrounding her, each one of these "daughters of the revered" garbed in white linen robes, their hair bound in ribbons, the lower half of their faces veiled. Before them, clearing the way through the streets strode the priests and the minor functionaries of the Church. Behind them, in fleets of groundcars, rode the cardinali and the prelate.

On either side of the parade route men and women were gathered to watch. Hundreds of thousands of them, chanting and praying, watching the passing of the procession with eager eyes. Fevered eyes. The eyes of the devout.

Eventually the procession ended in the large central square that dominated the heart of the city. There, on a dais erected especially for this occasion, Kieara was put to death. They burned her alive.

But before it all ended, before they set torch to tender, she addressed the crowd one last time. It wasn't the impassioned tribute to the Church the cardinali and her father had no doubt expected. It was, instead, a last act of courage--of the sort that had so clearly defined the twilight of her life.

She chose her words carefully, knowing the curatai would stop her quickly once they realized what she was doing. "My daughter will live in a world of choices," she cried to the cjhavari who surrounded the dais, and to the women within the masses beyond. "They will not have her, as they have had me, and as they have had all women. It ends here; and there will be new beginnings. For we cannot be enslaved and powerless forever. I have sown a seed, my sisters. You must harvest the bounty."

Whatever else she might have said was drowned out by the roar of flames as fire leapt through the tender, spreading so quickly across the dried wood that Kieara was engulfed in seconds. Her words became one long, bloodcurdling scream, rising and then falling as her writhing body became still and toppled into the pyre.

The crowd roared approval--even many of the women among them. I wondered how far her words had penetrated, and feared they'd fallen on deaf ears. If only she'd had more time. If only she could have made her message clear. But the moment that she had opened her mouth the clock had wound down quickly; and the message she'd left was probably as much as she could give without endangering the life of the daughter she'd entrusted to my care.

Seemingly oblivious to her words, the mob carried her smoking remains through the streets, running wild, chanting at the top of their lungs, acting as though possessed. And perhaps in some way they had been: possessed by the insanity of their faith.

The cardinali and the prelate, however, had clearly seen the threat of her words. And as oblique as that

message had been, they'd somehow made a connection between it and offworlders. Whether they actually realized what had happened, or whether they were simply using it as a diversion to keep anyone from thinking too long and hard about what Kieara had said was anyone's guess. I know only that from that day on we became virtual prisoners within the embassy.

19.

"It'll be over soon," said Burrye.

"For us," I agreed. "The ship's waiting for us in orbit." But for the women of Tradur it had only just started.

"We still have to get past the curatai. They're looking for Kieara's daughter."

I laughed. "It's been months now. They'll be expecting a child."

"Thank goodness they're as ignorant as they are," he mused. "They'll never think of looking in the most obvious place."

"We hope."

20.

I stand in the observation lounge of the FS MacKenzie and stare out through the large ports, watching as Tradur drifts by beneath us. Such a paradise from afar; such a nightmare up close. A part of me feels that I'm abandoning those women down there at a time when they desperately need our help. But there are limits to what one person can do; and it isn't within my power, however much I might wish it otherwise, to change a world. I can, however, keep a promise.

A young ensign enters the lounge. She smiles at me warmly. I've been getting a lot of that lately; but then, they all know the truth.

I put my hand on my stomach and feel the swelling of life in there. "At least you'll have the choices your mother never had," I whisper. "At least you'll be free, Kieara...my daughter."

Afterword:

When I first released Choices for public consumption the story aroused debate as to the gender of Captain Morrisohn. Some insisted the character was female, merely because of the ending of the story. Others, arguing that the setting was in the future, maintained that the character was male. It was, of course, my intention from the start to keep the captain's gender ambiguous, leaving it to the reader to decide, one way or the other.

If you enjoyed Choices and would like to read more about the events that triggered the rise of the Unity and the eventual war between it and the Federation, go to www.freewebs.com/lindsaybrambles to find out about In Darkness Bound. In the novel you'll discover all about Obsidian, the events that occurred on that world that later led to a far greater conflict, and much, much more. In Darkness Bound is published by PublishAmerica (ISBN: 1-4241-6560-1) and is available directly from the publisher or from online retailers such as Amazon, Borders, Barnes & Noble, etc.

If you wish to write to me the old-fashioned way to tell me what you thought of the story or to send a donation (to help keep the series going), you can mail to:

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