

Chapter 1

Channa Harknell strode into the conference room and paused to study the Terran Peace Mediator. She hated him on sight, hated his smooth tanned flesh and his soft blond hair. A typical off-worlder! Fancy turning up to a peace mediation in those impractical flowing robes. What if there were an attack? He'd trip himself up if he tried to fight. The mere sight of him made bile rise in her throat. Those of the Galactic Confederation were slothful in habits, lax in morals and easy-going to a criminal degree – downright decadent, in fact. No wonder they avoided wars! You couldn't imagine this pretty creature even trying to fight for its life, let alone winning.

Her fists clenched at the thought of the war. So near, this time, so very near to victory. Damn the Galactic Confederation for intervening!

She took a deep breath and tried to keep her expression non-committal. The Supreme Commander had been furious when a Harknell had been chosen as Shavlan Envoy, but her father was jubilant. She was exhilarated by the responsibility and determined not to let Shavla down – or Faction Harknell, either.

Channa decided to wait for the Terran to speak first, however long that took. She was not stupid enough to make the first move in a new game. She scowled at the Terran. Why didn't he say something? What was he staring at?

Joran allowed his features to relax into a smile, a lazy smile, well rehearsed and nicely calculated to annoy anyone as earnest and vigorous as these Shavlans, or their close neighbours and permanent enemies, the Deorin, for that matter. Both nations were of very similar stock, loudly though they would deny that. He and his co-mediator had discussed tactics at length and had worked out their first moves carefully, as always, but he did not foresee any major difficulties in this assignment. He could see that the Shavlan Envoy was rising to the bait already.

The peace robot that had dogged Channa's footsteps since her arrival at the base stepped forward. 'Honoured humans, it is my task to introduce you to each other. Identities have been checked and fully verified, this being guaranteed by myself, in the name of my makers, the Sirian Tranquillity.'

Its voice was clear and bell-like, its movements slow and non-threatening, yet Channa flinched as it moved closer and flourished a bow in her direction. 'This person,' the metal fingers closed lightly round her arm so that there could be no mistake, 'is Zone Leader Channa Harknell, Peace Envoy of the Shavlan Unity, carrying full powers to negotiate on behalf of her people, so that peace may be regained for the planet Evral.'

Channa shuddered with relief as the thing let go of her arm and moved away. Confederation robots gave her the shivers. Why couldn't they use real people for something as important as this? In Shavla, such machines would not be allowed to mix with people or to behave like them. But then, Shavlan robots were crude contraptions compared to this elegant piece of gleaming equipment. She shuddered again. Counterfeit humans were an abomination and to have one touch you was demeaning.

The robot moved across to Joran's side, made an identical bow and grasped his arm. The Terran did not seem to mind; he even smiled at the thing as if it were alive. Filthy pervert! 'This person is Joran Lovrel, Accredited Peace Mediator, originating from the Terran System, currently holding senior rank in the Peace Corps of the Galactic Confederation.'

The robot inclined its head first to Joran, then to Channa, in a parody of a human gesture that made her lips curl in disgust. 'Honoured humans, the peace negotiations may now commence.' After that, it retired to a niche in the wall, from where it continued to scan the room, its 360-degree vision slit showing as a luminous gold band around its metallic silver face.

Why Those of the Confederation should expect trouble and insist on this robot bodyguard was beyond Channa's understanding. Their base was on an island, hundreds of kloms away from the main continent. No one could approach it unobserved. Perhaps Terrans were just timid by nature. She waited for the Mediator to say something, while keeping a wary eye on the robot. This one was a Sirian peace robot, the most complex and advanced type known, supposedly capable of a certain degree of independent thought. Channa was somewhat sceptical of that claim.

She stared at it sourly. When she had been informed that a robot would act as her personal bodyguard, she had protested vigorously. Did they think her so helpless that she needed to hide behind a piece of animated metal? She felt more comfortable now that the thing was not so close. Ugh! The touch of it still lingered on her arm.

Briefing tapes had provided a short history of the galactic peace movement, to her further disgust. Apparently the Sirians had never, in all their long and meticulously recorded years of existence, indulged in war. That was why

they called themselves a Tranquillity. They loathed the mere idea of conflict and since Confederation they had earned galactic trade credits by producing peacekeeping equipment – and by selling it to others at vastly inflated prices, no doubt!

It wasn't often that she, or any other Harknell, agreed with a Reinal, but for once the Supreme Commander had expressed everyone's thoughts in a nutshell: 'That's the biggest load of crap I've ever heard! Those Sirians sound more like war profiteers than benefactors to me. What they've actually done is play a major role in emasculating humankind! *Conflict is life! Those who stagnate are lost! Progress grows from dissent!*' Deslar had got a rousing cheer for that outburst. His speeches were always the same, full of well-worn military slogans.

She stared at the Terran, waiting stubbornly for him to break the silence. This truce was just a strategic withdrawal, she told herself firmly, and it was up to her, as Envoy, to gain the maximum benefit from it for Shavla.

Joran judged it time to speak. He did not want her to become too irritated and her scowl was deepening by the minute. 'I'm absolutely delighted to meet you at last, Channa.' He allowed his voice to drawl slightly and he spread his arms wide in a gesture of warmth and welcome.

She took an involuntary step backwards. For one dreadful moment, she'd thought he meant to embrace her. You liar! she thought, glaring at him. You've as little real desire to meet me as I have to meet you. You're just doing your job. She controlled her expression and inclined her head in acknowledgment of his remark, but she could not bring herself to return the compliment and say that she was delighted to meet him. She was *not!* And how dared he address her by her first name in a formal situation.

'A beautiful day, is it not?' He made a graceful gesture towards the window, hiding his amusement. It had been a perfect touch, that greeting, if he said so himself. Shavlans did not embrace each other in public or show open affection. It had really disturbed the Zone Leader when she thought he was about to touch her! How a planet as lovely as this one had spawned such a bellicose culture, he could not understand. These peace negotiations were not going to be very entertaining. He'd be bored silly by such a pompous militaristic idiot! He waited a few more minutes before speaking again. Give her anger time to simmer a little higher. Let her get lost in her thoughts, which

were clearly not happy ones.

When Channa realised that Joran had spoken again, she was furious with herself for letting her thoughts wander. 'I apologise!' she said crisply, clicking her heels together military-fashion and inclining her head. 'My thoughts strayed for a moment and I didn't catch what you said, Mediator.'

'I simply suggested that we sit down. So much more comfortable, don't you think?'

She inclined her head again and strode across the room, her heels beating out the familiar rhythm of an informal march, but the sound was swallowed up by the ridiculously impractical pink plush that covered the floor. Its softness felt wrong and the way it muffled sounds made her feel uncomfortable. Tramping footsteps on bare boards or plascrete had beaten out the rhythm of her days for as long as she could remember. Why bother with floor coverings in a temporary base like this, for heaven's sake? Decadent, that's what the Terrans were, and looked it, too.

She arrived at the chairs and sat down in one, wriggling uncomfortably against its enveloping softness. She would have preferred to sit upright at a table. She looked around for somewhere to put her portfolio of papers and maps.

'Oh, I'm sorry, Channa. We didn't provide a table, did we? Never mind. I don't suppose we'll get round to any paperwork today. Just put that document case down beside your chair.'

Her mouth a thin angry line, she did as he asked. Forgotten to provide a table, indeed! They'd forgotten nothing! It was a deliberate attempt to make her feel uncomfortable. And they'd succeeded, damn them! The whole room made her feel ill at ease. She lounged back, trying to convey the impression that she was relaxed and confident, but the chair was too soft and its angles were wrong. She sat up again, then found herself slipping gradually sideways. It required an effort to maintain any sort of alert posture.

Joran's lips twitched as he watched her. Those chairs were a masterpiece of discomfort. Human beings simply could not feel at ease in one, however they sat, well, not unless they knew about the adjustment switch. He sauntered across towards the other chair, pausing on the way to caress one of the flowers and to sniff its perfume. His gentle, vacuous smile did not once falter, though it in no way reflected the acuity of his thoughts.

The Zone Leader was rather beautiful, in a cold, marble-statue way, even dressed in that dull grey-green

uniform, with her glorious titian hair cut in a severe short brush. The jerkiness of her movements was ugly, though. Shavlans drilled their way through life, from the Children's Corps to the Oldsters' Support Brigade, and she was no exception. The planet Everal was one of the most totally militarised cultures the Confederation had ever come across, whether you looked at Shavla or Deora.

He pressed the adjustment switch and leaned back in his chair, smiling at her again, but making no effort to speak. Pity she looked so masculine, but then all the women did here, except for the brood mothers. She also looked very patrician. It was strange, but no matter what system was set up to run a newly colonised planet, some elite always developed which took for itself advantages that the average citizen could not access. Usually it wasn't until cultures achieved economic plenty and technological control of their environment that they managed to achieve true equality among their citizens.

He was well aware that Channa had been instructed to conclude the negotiations as quickly as possible and get rid of the Confederation presence, and was aware, too, that her people were already building up resources for the next round of hostilities. They must think Those of the Confederation very stupid to be taken in by such subterfuges. Well, the Shavlan Envoy had a lot to learn about Confederation ways and the imperatives of peace, and it was his job to teach her.

Who better to do that than a Terran? It was because of their planet's own war-ridden past that Terrans made such good Peace Mediators. 'As wily as a Terran,' they said in the Confederation, or 'Never trust a Terran who offers you gifts'. Terrans had tried every trick in the book of war games at one time or another, using an increasingly complex range of armaments. Only direct intervention a few thousand years previously by the Sirian Tranquillity had prevented them from destroying themselves and their planet, and it had taken many generations to eliminate their culture's tendency towards belligerence and re-channel it towards creativity.

Channa scowled at him, impatient at the delay. Then she realised that she was allowing her emotions to dominate her reason and hurriedly re-adjusted her expression to indifference. The chair sucked at her back, pulling her into its velvet depths. She straightened her spine yet again and looked across at the Peace Mediator, waiting for him to say something. However irritating he was, she would not allow this effete Terran to goad her into rash actions or speech.

'Have I offended you in some way, Channa?' Joran asked in his softest voice, looking at her soulfully. He smoothed a wrinkle from his caftan with one hand as he waited for her answer.

‘Offended me? How could you have, Mediator? We've hardly exchanged two words yet! In fact, don't you think we ought to start the . . . ’

‘What a relief! For a moment, I thought I might have offended you. You looked so angry! And that would have been *such* a bad beginning!’ He gestured towards the nearest vase. ‘Do you like our flowers? We grow them hydroponically.’

Channa stared at them. She had not been able to work out the reason for the flowers. Not just one pot of them, but several. Were they just there for decoration or did they contain spying devices?

Joran watched her eyes flicker from his face to the flowers and back again, and a slight frown pucker her brow. He had a fair idea of what she was thinking, and was amused, though not surprised, that a Shavlan could regard even flowers as suspicious.

Channa did not realise that her right foot was tapping out her impatience in the ceremonial slow march rhythm as she waited for him to start the negotiations. Joran noticed it, however. There was little that he missed. He let his gaze wander back to the flowers and murmured, ‘Yes, beautiful.’ It was hard not to chuckle at the expression of sheer disgust that passed across her face.

Decadent and effete, Channa thought. How *could* they send us a mediator like this one? And why couldn't those soft-bellies in the Confederation leave us to mind our own affairs in the first place? It was only a planetary war. *Our* war. A necessary war. None of their business. All her life devoted to Shavla's cause, and then to be obliged to submit to intervention by the Confederation, just as her Zone was preparing for a surprise offensive. It galled her. It had galled everyone.

She thought enviously about the Confederation skim-wing that had brought her to the base. Now, that was an aircraft! Swift and graceful as a bird, very different from the clumsy Shavlan personnel transports. Give her a hundred skim-wings and she would be able to wipe out the Deoran GHQ with one suicide squad or, at most, two. She sighed and swallowed her anger resolutely. No use chasing after spent bullets. It was up to her to retrieve what she could for her people from this mess.

‘The treaty outline,’ she said crisply, unable to bear further delay, ‘is not acceptable to us in its proposed form.’

He held up one hand. ‘One moment, Channa, please!’

‘It would be more seemly,’ she said, through gritted teeth, ‘for you to address me by my title, which is Envoy.’

This is a formal occasion.'

'Ah, but we no longer use titles on Terra. And they make us feel most *dreadfully* uncomfortable. I couldn't conduct the negotiations if I felt uncomfortable, I really couldn't!' He leaned forward, gesticulating with his hands in an intensity of emotion.

She felt nauseated by this theatrical behaviour. 'Very well, then, Mediator. Call me what you wish. Only let us now turn to the treaty.'

Again, a hand was held up and a flowing sleeve shaken back. 'Before we start to negotiate, Channa, long before we come to the treaty itself, we must discuss the terms of the mediation.'

She slumped back in frustration. 'I don't understand. You've already set the main terms. One envoy per nation, and so on.'

He ignored her comment and his tone became formal. 'The Confederation has judged it necessary to intervene in the planetary affairs of Evral, Channa – a decision not lightly taken, believe me. If this war had been allowed to continue, it could have destroyed your world and possibly your whole solar system. Those megachem-bombs your Central Science Corps is working on are much more dangerous than you realise.'

How in the name of all the Deoran devils did he know about those? 'It's our planet! Our war.'

'Not quite. There are two other planets in this system that could easily be made habitable for other species. They're of no use to oxygen breathers, but their destruction would be a great loss to the Confederation, with uninhabited worlds in short supply.'

'Tell that to the Deorin! It's they who started these hostilities.'

'Oh, we're telling it to the Deorin, don't worry.'

Her frustration overflowed. 'I have only your word for that. For all I know, you could be working with those scum against us. It would be better to conduct open, three-way negotiations, so that we could see what the Deorin were up to.'

'The Peace Corps uses standard procedures, tried and tested over many years.'

'Well, try some new ones, then! So far, this negotiation has been pure farce.'

He stood up and his voice was suddenly stern, his whole bearing different. 'I thought you'd come here to listen, Channa. I thought, as the Envoy chosen by your people to participate in the peace negotiations which *civilised* worlds use to settle their differences, that you would at least be prepared to listen to me.'

'I am listening!'

'No, you're not! You're so biased you don't hear what I'm saying and you're accusing me of things which I wouldn't, *couldn't* do.' He had reached the door of the negotiation chamber before she realised what he was doing.

'Don't go!' she cried, jumping to her feet. 'I apologise! I didn't mean . . . '

'I really cannot be expected to conduct peace negotiations in this atmosphere of mistrust. We shall try again tomorrow and see whether we can get any further. I can do no more today.'

As she started up to rush after him, the robot stepped from its niche, barring her way. 'Negotiations are concluded for the day.'

She tried to push it out of the way, but it held her back firmly, as if she had been a recalcitrant child, and it released her only when she stopped struggling. 'Let me show you to your room, Channa.'

She took a hasty step backwards, shuddering at its touch. Fists clenched into tight balls, she stared at the doorway, still amazed that Joran had left like that. How could a trained peace mediator be so easily offended? She answered that question herself almost as soon as it was formulated. He was not offended. Of course he wasn't! He was simply demonstrating that she must conform to his ways if she wished the negotiations to proceed.

She thumped one clenched fist into the open palm of her other hand several times. If only she knew more about the Peace Corps and the methods it used! If only Shavla had had time to develop space travel, perhaps her people would not now be at the mercy of those who had. Yech! She was indulging in children's dreams, which she should have grown out of by now. The fact that *she* had always wanted to see other worlds was irrelevant. What mattered, all that mattered, was Shavla and the peace terms Channa could negotiate for her people. For Shavla she would give her all. She straightened her shoulders at the mere thought of that familiar phrase.

'Please come to your quarters now, Channa,' said the robot.

'But we're wasting so much time! What am I going to do with myself for the rest of the day? When will he – Joran, I mean – when will he come back?'

'Tomorrow. He stated this very clearly.'

'He can't mean that! A whole day will be wasted!'

'The Mediator has made his decision and we are both bound by it. Please allow me to show you to your

quarters. Your things have already been checked and taken there. Regretfully, certain objects were not allowed. These have been returned to your people.'

She shrugged. They had not expected to get away with carrying potential weapons, but had felt obliged to make the attempt, in case Those of the Confederation were as slack as they looked and allowed the Deorin to bring weapons into the base. She would have felt much more comfortable, though, if she had had some means of defending herself. She could not remember the last time she had gone unarmed, even at her own faction headquarters.

'I'm sure you will find plenty to do here,' the robot went on soothingly.

She glared at it, but controlled her anger. How dared a machine patronise her like that!

'Your quarters have been well supplied with every comfort, and there is access to the library, to entertainment and to a gymnasium.' Gently but inexorably, the metal monster shepherded her out of the room and down the corridor, still talking to her as if she were a rather stupid child.

Outmanoeuvred, she thought grimly. They obviously mean to prolong the negotiations. Why, I could be here for days! I wonder if I've brought enough clothes? Well, they must have laundering facilities or I can always send for more. I'll just have to bear this setback in patience. But I mustn't let the Mediator goad me into anger again, mustn't question the terms of this farce. Squaring her shoulders, glad to be out of that chair, she began to march briskly along the corridor behind the robot. Unfortunately, there was no one around to admire her fine military bearing and her immaculate precision turns at corners. In fact, she saw no sign at all of other human beings. Where were all the Confederation soldiers, then?

The corridor ended at an absolutely featureless sheet of metal. Channa stared at it in puzzlement. Was this a door? If so, how did it open? After a few seconds the metal panel vanished, as far as she could tell of its own accord, and her spirits sank still further. She'd never be able to sneak in and out of such a door. She didn't even understand what had made it open.

Inside, her quarters were so luxurious that they took her breath away. 'I don't need all this!' she exclaimed sharply. 'Surely you have something more – more – something smaller.'

'I am sorry, Channa,' the robot shook its head in another filthy parody of a human gesture, 'but this is a special safety module for your protection. It is impossible to change the design, but if there is anything lacking, we can try to obtain it for you.'

‘I doubt I shall need anything else.’ There was too much here already! She was not used to such luxurious furnishings and it made her feel very uncomfortable to think of being all alone in here, unarmed and unable to operate the door – but she couldn’t admit that to a robot!

‘You have only to address the com-unit if there is anything you need, Channa. Let me show you how everything works.’ She followed the thing around the suite, rendered monosyllabic by the luxurious personal services it displayed so casually. ‘I shall be stationed outside your door,’ it concluded. ‘Simply call out if you need me. You may not leave these quarters without permission.’

‘How do I open the door?’

‘You cannot. You must call for me.’

‘What if you don’t hear me?’

‘I shall hear. My senses are far more acute than yours, and I am here solely for your service.’

She bit back further protests.

When the thing had left, Channa sank down on the bed, which was roomy enough to sleep three in comfort. It was resilient yet firm, the sort of bed you dreamed about on sorties in the desert, but not the sort of bed for a Shavlan Zone Leader on active service.

She stroked the shimmering coverlet absent-mindedly and gasped as her finger momentarily changed the patterns. It was as if she had dipped it into a liquid. After a minute or two, the pattern settled down into its previous design. Hesitantly, feeling very decadent, she drew her fingertip across the material and watched the colours dance and whirl before reverting again to their original patterns.

‘How wasteful!’ she said aloud. ‘Toys for adults! These people have never grown up.’ But how did they do it? How could material feel solid, yet behave like a liquid? She resisted the temptation to touch the jewel-coloured coverlet again and stood up, another brisk military movement for the benefit of the hidden watchers who would, she was sure, be monitoring her every movement. She marched across the room towards the food dispenser. She would get herself something to drink. That was not self-indulgence; it was simply attending to her body’s needs. Afterwards, she would see what information she could obtain from the library. She might be able to learn something of benefit to her people. *She* would not waste her time, even though the Terrans did.