

Envoy

by Shannah Jay

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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. Yech! 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 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 which 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 Evral 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 even flowers could be regarded as suspicious by a Shavlan.

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 which 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 which 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 that 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.

2

Channa slept very little that night. Once she had begun to view the info-tapes offered by the library, she could not stop. One thing led to another until she suddenly realised that half the night had passed and that she must get some sleep if she were to hold her own in the negotiations the next day. She lay tossing and turning for a while, then gave up the struggle. 'I need some sleeping tablets,' she said aloud.

'No drugs are permitted, Channa.'

'But I need to get some sleep, you stupid machine! These negotiations are important!'

'No drugs are permitted for any purpose, except relief of pain or illness.'

The damned machine even sounded disapproving! Frustrated, for she was accustomed to using drugs to

change her body rhythms at need, she lay on the over-large bed and tried by every means in her power to calm her turbulent thoughts. To no avail. The alien things she had viewed were still marching through her mind. Decadent indeed, the Terrans, but - she rolled the word around her mouth before allowing it to define her thoughts - yes, but talented, too. Producers of so many bright, wonderful art forms, so many imaginative creations, that the rest of the Confederation queued up to purchase them. The Terrans were clearly not short of galactic trade credits.

The mechanical voice of the com-unit had assured her that no worlds of the Confederation were poor, in the sense of not having enough resources to feed and clothe their people - that would not have been allowed - but the voice had agreed, when questioned carefully, that some worlds, Terra included, did earn more than others, which allowed them a more luxurious way of life. Reluctantly Channa had to admit to herself that this might be because some worlds and some species possessed very special gifts. She had underestimated the Confederation, she now realised, she and her people both. And the Terrans, too, no doubt. Not that the Shavians sought riches or wished to waste their time producing useless things like sensoral symphonies. They were not self-indulgent in those ways.

On and on her thoughts twisted, the crucial nature of her mission and her unaccustomed solitude weighing her spirits down. Eventually, just as she had given up hope and decided to get up and view some more tapes, she fell asleep.

She had asked to be woken soon after dawn, intending to take some exercise before going to the negotiation chamber. Instead, she found herself waking naturally at a late hour in the morning. Furious, she berated the com-unit for not rousing her and was told that the Mediator had ordered her to be left to sleep for as long as her body needed. There was no hurry. Negotiations were best conducted by people who were well rested and comfortable. She bit off an angry retort. What use was there in shouting at a machine?

She hurried through her ablutions and ordered a sustabar for breakfast. The com-unit buzzed and hissed, then a soft voice told her that the nutrition system was not programmed to produce sustabars. Would she like to see some standard breakfast dishes instead, or did she have any specific desires for other food? She thought briefly of demanding that they send for her usual food, then shrugged. Why bother? 'Yes. A standard breakfast, or whatever is quickest. Just get me something to eat!'

Two minutes later, she stared in amazement as a dozen dishes appeared on the dispenser shelf. There was enough food there for a whole fighting cell and, to her annoyance, the dishes were decorated with still more flowers. What was this thing the Terrans had about flowers? She tossed the golden blossoms aside. Their languid beauty and cloying perfume seemed to mock the urgency of her task. 'I can't eat all this!' she snapped. 'Why did you give me so much? That's sheer waste!'

'It is not required that you eat it all, Channa. The intention is simply to allow you a choice. What is not consumed will be used to replenish the fertilising elements needed for the hydroponics unit.'

She noted this fact for reference, but was still annoyed. 'I'm in a hurry. This is a waste of time. What do I care about choice? In future, just send me a preselected meal. I shall not complain.'

Again, there was a hissing sound. 'There is no programme set up to do this, Channa. A choice is always offered. Please select what you wish to eat and the other dishes will be removed.'

Futile to argue further. She examined the food. She did not recognise anything, but did not wish to display her ignorance to a mere robot. 'That one - and that!' she said, at random.

More hissing. 'It is regretted, Channa, but that will not give you a balanced meal. Please choose some fruit as well.'

Anger could not be held back. 'You choose some fruit! How do you expect me to recognise your food? It's ridiculous!'

'This is deeply regretted, Channa. It was not realised that the differences were so great.'

'Well, they are! We've been fighting a war in Shavla, not creating fancy gourmet food to titillate jaded palates!'

A third dish slid forward to join the ones she had chosen. It contained some bright pink and orange cubes of what could have been either fruit or vegetables. The unwanted food simply faded from sight. That

made her feel uneasy. How did they do it?

She sat down at the table in front of the dispenser and jumped in shock as utensils appeared next to her hand, followed by a carafe of something pale yellow in colour.

'The drink is lemon juice, a favourite on Terra because of its astringent taste,' the voice told her, and she could have sworn its tone was apologetic. 'However, if you prefer to try something else, Channa, we can offer you . . . '

'No!' she shouted in exasperation. 'Just let me eat in peace, damn you! The juice will do! And stop calling me Channa!'

'Is that not your name?'

'My personal name, yes. But I would expect a machine to use my title! Envoy! You should call me Envoy!'

There was silence, then, 'It is much regretted, Channa, but titles are disliked by Terrans and this nutrition system is not authorised to use them.'

'Never mind! Just - just go away and let me eat!' What was the use? Even the machines here were disgustingly friendly and informal. She picked up her utensils and her indifference to food vanished almost immediately. This was wonderful, better than anything she had eaten in her whole life before. She ate every scrap and drank all the juice, which was tangy and very refreshing. She had not realised that food could taste so good.

'Are you satisfied, Channa?' asked that quiet mechanical voice the moment she had finished, proving that they were keeping her under observation. 'Or would you like to order something else?'

She had herself under control again. 'I'm quite satisfied, thank you. The food was excellent. I'm now ready to resume the negotiations.'

There was no response.

'Did you hear what I said? Please send someone - or something - to show me to the negotiation chamber.' She wondered whether the robot would come if she called it?

'Some exercise would be very beneficial to your body, Channa. A safeguarded woodland walk was constructed during the night. Joran left instructions that you were to be informed of its existence and taken there for a walk before the negotiations started. He was sure that you would appreciate the opportunity to maintain your fitness level.'

'If these Deoran-blessed negotiations ever do start, I shall probably die of shock!' She bit off further words. Why did she keep arguing with machines? 'Very well. Show me where this place is. I'll go for a brisk walk. Then perhaps we can get on with what we're here for!'

There were giant trees and a meandering stream, fringed by bushes and plants she did not recognise. She knew there had been no trees on the island before and only sparse scrubby vegetation, for there was no fresh water. The island had not been seized by either nation because it was not capable of supporting a settlement and because it was too far from both continents, in the middle of the Great Ocean. These trees must have been planted during the brief period since its annexation by the Confederation and that meant that they had been grown in only a few days. She stared up at them in awe. They were massive, forming a huge leafy canopy all along the path.

She walked slowly at first, studying the vegetation carefully. The trees must have been garnered on many worlds, because she recognised only one or two of them and much of the foliage was - well, alien-looking. She felt smaller and more helpless by the minute. If Those of the Confederation had set out to impress her with the scope of their technological superiority, they had succeeded beyond measure. She did not allow herself to acknowledge the beauty of the park. Beauty was a luxury for those with time and resources to spare. One day, Shavla would reach this enviable state, but not for many generations to come. She knew that. They all knew and accepted that.

After a while she fell into a steady jog-march and allowed her thoughts to wander where they would as she followed a circuit of woodland paths. The robot trailed behind, but did not speak or otherwise intrude on her privacy, thank goodness.

Half an hour later, she found another peace robot waiting for them at the end of a long, curving alley. She

came to a halt somewhat reluctantly, for she had been enjoying the exercise.

The other robot addressed her as soon as she drew near. 'Joran wishes to know whether you would prefer the negotiations to be conducted out here or in the conference chamber, Channa.'

'In the chamber,' she said without hesitation. She did not wish anything to distract her from the task at hand. Her people were relying on her.

Joran was waiting for her at the door. 'Good afternoon, Channa. Do you feel well rested now?'

'Yes. Thank you. The exercise was - er - very beneficial.' She was determined to be polite today, if it killed her.

He accompanied her to the chairs and waited for her to choose one. Perversely, she chose the one facing the window, although it was nearer to him. She felt she had not done well in the other chair the previous day. Superstitious behaviour, perhaps, but it made her feel better, which was all that counted. However, the second chair was just as uncomfortable as the first one. She wriggled about for a while and then sat determinedly still.

'Did you find your quarters to your liking?' he asked, eyes twinkling as he pressed the adjustment switch on his own chair and settled into its comfortable depths.

What was the fool smiling at? 'Yes, thank you. But I would prefer to have my meals sent in ready to eat. A lot of time was wasted in choosing the dishes. And even then, the dispenser insisted on supplementing my choice.'

'Oh dear! I'm afraid it would cause a great deal of trouble to send you Shavlan-type meals. If we were on a Confederation planet, we could re-programme the nutrition system in a matter of minutes, but here, we just don't have the spare labour. Our systems are all occupied in laying out the grounds and extending the perimeter defences. Most of our people are still up on the space transport, you know. And anyway, the nutrition system has built-in dietary expertise and the standard selections are quite good. Is there some problem with the food?'

'No problem at all - if you recognise the food provided.'

'Ah! I see. Well, if it'll make matters easier, you and I can eat our meals together and you can simply copy my selections until you learn about our food. It'll be a pleasure to have your company.'

She frowned at him. What lay behind that suggestion? Did he need sexual relief? If so, there were surely enough women available on the space transport. She had no intention of obliging him - unless it seemed a good move politically, of course. But she had brought no precautionary equipment with her and she did not wish to risk impregnation. She was not obliged to make a reproductive contribution to her people for at least two years yet, longer if she could prove herself indispensable. If and when she did agree to reproduce - she shuddered at the thought - it would not be the offspring of an effete alien, but of a mate carefully chosen for his strength, intelligence and useful political connections.

Mostly she preferred to remain celibate, the better to concentrate her energy on the tasks in hand. Only occasionally did she indulge in mating, either for the physical relief which everyone needed from time to time, or to gain some political benefit for herself or her kinfolk. She had obliged her father a few times by making her body available to people he found useful, but in fact she was not all that taken by the mating process. It was clumsy and degrading, to her mind, that intelligent people should need to do such things.

Joran seemed to read her thoughts. 'I think, Channa, that you misunderstand me. There's a dining chamber attached to this suite. The peace robot will necessarily be in attendance at all times when you're out of your quarters and, like you, I'm a professional who is devoted to his work. I wasn't trying to involve you in - er, I'm sorry, but I've forgotten your people's word for a sexual encounter.'

'Mating,' she said and blushed, as she had not blushed since she was in pre-puberty sex instruction classes. To be caught out jumping to conclusions like that and then to have to discuss mating so openly in a formal situation with an enemy! Well, more or less an enemy. He was certainly no friend. Had he no shame? But she must not offend him today. 'I apologise for my mistake,' she said stiffly, wishing her colour would subside.

'No need. Such misunderstandings are bound to occur when two cultures interact closely for the first time. We must both be open about what offends us, so that we can avoid a repetition of embarrassment.'

Er - I gather that mating is not openly discussed by your people?' He was well aware of that, but it amused him to make her squirm.

'Certainly not! We aren't animals!'

'I see. I'll try to remember that. You don't mind killing people in great numbers, but we mustn't talk of love.'

She breathed deeply, but said nothing.

He looked amused, rather than contrite. 'I'll arrange for the robot to fetch you here later for the evening meal if you wish, Channa. Otherwise you may, if you prefer it, eat in your quarters and I'll pre-select a meal for you.'

He had retrieved an embarrassing situation. She could only nod agreement. 'Thank you. I shall be - er - happy to join you.'

He smiled again.

Why did he grin at her so often? Was it a Terran trait? Or did the amusement have some basis? Were they tricking her? She sighed. Who could tell with Terrans?

'Now,' he said, 'to business.'

She leaned forward in relief. At last!

'Today, it would be appropriate for us to go through the terms for First Stage mediation.'

'Go through the terms! But the terms have been set already!' The Supreme Commander would have a fit if any more conditions were added.

'There are just a few more things we need to discuss.'

'That won't take us all day!'

'I'm afraid it will, Channa, and perhaps tomorrow as well. Our terms are very detailed. It was specified when you were chosen as Envoy that any further terms necessary would be explained to you, and that's our first task today.' He saw her irritation and added, 'Please bear with me.'

'Very well. Let's make a start!'

His voice changed slightly, taking on a formal tone at last. 'Firstly, Envoy, you are required to recognise me as official Peace Mediator to the Shavlan Unity.'

She gaped at him. 'The Supreme Council has already done that!'

'I now require formal acceptance by you, as Envoy.' His tone was patient.

'Ridiculous!' The word escaped before she could stop it.

He raised his eyebrows.

'I didn't mean - it wasn't intended as an insult to you, Mediator,' she gritted out, terrified that he might walk out on her again. 'It's just that - all this fuss - well, it delays things unnecessarily!'

He shrugged. 'I'm bound by my regulations, Channa, as you are by yours.'

She sighed. 'Well then, on behalf of the Shavlan Unity, I hereby recognise you as official Peace Mediator. Now, may we start the negotiations?'

'Not quite. As Mediator, I must take up residence on this planet. You are required to cede this island to the protection of the Confederation until the conclusion of negotiations, to renounce all right to it and to guarantee that your people will not attack it.'

'Cede this island? What does this devil-ridden place matter? It has no strategic value and it's barren - or at least, it was. Why are you planting things here, by the way? Why go to such lengths for negotiations which will last only a few days?'

'Because we like to be comfortable and because we might have to defend ourselves against hostile actions during the negotiations. It has been known with primitive planets.'

'Primitive planets!' she echoed, shocked to the core. She knew her people were less advanced than the Terrans, but she would not have called them primitive!

'By our standards, Channa, the two nations on Evral are very primitive.' For once, his expression was absolutely serious. 'Not even past the belligerent stage, let alone approaching space travel.'

She swallowed her anger, terrified of stopping the negotiations again. Primitive! That word hurt, and so did the kindly understanding in his eyes, and yet she could not refute it, seeing what his people had done

almost overnight - grown a forest and who knew what else? And those info-tapes - what wonders they had shown her last night! Would it, she worried, be possible to fool these people, as the Supreme Council had so blithely assumed? What would Joran demand as a guarantee of peace? If it were hostages, that would cause no problems. Any of her people would be happy to die for Shavla. As she would herself. But what if it were something else?

He did not bother to hide the fact that he was studying her reactions carefully. The word 'primitive' had hurt her feelings, as it had been meant to do, and her thoughtful expression suggested that she had grasped its implications for the negotiations. Primitive or not, if they proved resilient and adaptable enough, her people would be able to gain full membership of the Confederation within a few generations. Channa would demonstrate the Shavlans' innate capacities within the next few months, one way or another. He was making no judgements at this early stage, only estimating possibilities.

'Is it - courteous - to emphasise our - our primitive state to me?' she asked at last.

'Not courteous, no, but necessary. Before we go any further you must start to recognise how very primitive your people and their wars seem to us. You and I cannot conduct a true negotiation if we have false assumptions about each other.'

She looked at him and recoiled from the kindness in his gaze. Primitive! Did he really see them as the Shavlans saw the indigenes at Extremity Island? She had been there once to recover from an injury - it was more or less neutral territory, since there was nothing on the island for either side to covet.

It was a strange place. One could relax in the open air there without any fear of bombardment. Like this island base, it was too far away from the theatre of war and too lacking in natural resources to be attractive to either side. Deora used one end of the island, Shavla the other, and by tacit agreement each nation kept to its own territory. Hostilities were totally suspended on Extremity, though there was no contact between the two nations, well, not officially. No one knew how that tradition of neutrality had developed, but the island was not worth fighting over, so no one broke it.

Channa could still remember the shock she had felt at seeing the way the indigenes lived, their minimal clothing, their crude houses, the lack of hygiene, the rudimentary methods of agriculture. But the biggest shock of all had been the openness of life. She had felt very vulnerable there at first, with houses and streets above the ground, free movement wherever anyone chose and no sentry turrets to guard access to buildings. Just walking down a street of selling booths had been an adventure in itself.

She dismissed the memory and summoned up the strength to look him in the eyes. 'Is that all you need before we start, Mediator? Temporary possession of this island?'

'Well, I've also asked you to call me Joran. Titles really do make me feel uncomfortable, Channa. That wasn't a ploy.'

'I'm surprised that you wish to be so informal with a primitive person!'

His eyes were still gentle. 'A person is never primitive in the same way as a whole culture. People are usually very complex, whatever their social conditioning.'

'Is that sophistry supposed to make me feel better? How kind!'

'It's not supposed to do anything. It's simply the truth. When your people have outgrown their childish preoccupation with belligerence, they'll realise just how fascinating the study of sentient beings can be, and that there is no need to fight or conquer anyone but the self.' He allowed a moment of two for her to digest that, then he smiled warmly at her. 'Let me send for some refreshments now. We need a break.'

'I'd prefer to continue the negotiations. Time is pressing. I have no need of refreshments.'

'But I'm hungry, and quite thirsty, too, actually.'

She must not anger him again. 'Very well. Whatever you wish.' She couldn't stop him, anyway. She was too primitive! That thought was still hurting, hurting all the more because he had obviously been speaking what he saw as the truth - and doing it as kindly as he could. The Shavlans were backward, compared to the Terrans. How backward she was only just beginning to realise. Well, at least the Shavlan Unity was more civilised than the Deoran Empire. The Deorin were brutes without any feelings, utterly ruthless, even with their own people. Never trust Deorin, even in their death throes!

Joran raised his voice very slightly and ordered refreshments for the two of them. These arrived almost

immediately, materialising from a large dispenser in the wall. She watched grimly. One must not allow oneself to be overwhelmed by all this technological superiority.

‘Please join me, Channa. This drink is called tropical fruit juice, and it’s a great favourite with my children.’

She made an attempt to converse. She must not offend him again today. ‘You’ve reproduced, then, Medi - er - Joran?’

He grinned. ‘Is that what you call it? We say that we’ve “had children”. I’ve had four children, actually - though it seemed to me that the women did most of the having. I helped raise the kids, though.’

‘Women? Do you have polygamy, then?’ There had been nothing about that in the info-tapes.

‘There are no fixed forms of relationships on Terra. Most of us live in co-habitation groups with friends for as long as it pleases us. I’ve had satisfying relationships with several of the women in my group, some of them lasting a decade or more. I’ve been with the same cohabitation group now for over seven decades. The membership has changed little. One person has died in that time, and five others have joined us permanently. We’re a very closely-bonded group by now.’

Another deliberate lesson, she thought, feeling cold inside at the implications of his remarks. ‘How old are you, then, Joran? I had thought . . .’ She studied him. ‘Well, you don’t seem much older than me, and I’m twenty-seven.’

‘I’m a hundred and forty-three years old, Channa. I can expect to live about two hundred and fifty years, as long as I look after this body and don’t abuse it.’

She gaped at him, shocked by this claim. It was, it must be, a trick.

‘It’s quite true!’ he said quietly, and suddenly, looking at his eyes, she believed him. Those eyes were old and far too knowing for his youthful face.

‘And we live to seventy, if we’re lucky!’ Few were so lucky. Most Shavlans perished in combat well before that age. That was why most women of Channa’s age were busy fulfilling their breeding quotas. Only those with exceptional military value escaped the requirement to reproduce. Of course, there were some women who chose not to fight or undertake any war service at all and who did little with their lives but produce babies. Brood mothers were necessary, but not respected. And for all my military success, she thought bitterly, I can’t put the decision about my first breeding contract off much longer. Already there have been offers to my family, especially by Nerlin Harravay on behalf of his son, Kristan. She shuddered at the thought of Kristan Harravay. The knowledge that her father wished for that alliance to be cemented was beginning to haunt her dreams.

‘Yes. We know about your short life-span. Such a waste of human potential! Maybe that will start to change now. Peace brings many rewards.’

‘And you wanted me to know how much longer your people live than we do,’ she said thoughtfully.

‘That was why you mentioned your children, wasn’t it? May I ask why I need to know that at this stage?’

‘So that you can begin to understand the differences between your way of life and ours in the Confederation, the benefits, if you like, of a true mediation. Once the conflict is settled, we shall be happy to share our medical knowledge with you. The life-span doubles almost immediately and then increases at a slower rate. Your people are descended from Terran stock, after all.’

‘I think I’m already beginning to understand something of what we’re facing.’ She was in a state of mild shock and spoke the truth without thinking.

‘Yes. You’re a very intelligent woman. That’s one of the main reasons why you were selected as Envoy.’

‘The Supreme Commander didn’t expect a Harknell to be chosen, or he would not have allowed me to be included among the candidates.’

‘We were pleased to be offered you as Envoy, Channa. Sometimes, we have to go through several groups of applicants before we find someone with the right kind of intelligence.’

‘Primitive intelligence!’

He leaned forward to clasp her hand in his, and though she tried to pull hers away, she found him much stronger than she had expected. ‘You’ll also have to learn, Channa, that true communication is of the

body, as well as of the mind. Why are you so afraid of being touched? I'm carrying no weapons, you know. And I repeat: we do not consider an individual to be primitive in the same way as a culture. People are very complex - even when they come from the most primitive cultures of all, and yours is not that. Your people have reached the heavy industrial phase without anyone's help, even if you are locked into belligerence just now.'

He let go of her hand. 'Now, please try the tropical fruit juice. It's one of my personal indulgences to have this juice included in the nutrition system's repertoire. It reminds me of home, although it never seems quite as rich in taste as freshly-squeezed juice. The members of my cohabitation group live on an island in Micronesia, where this is a common drink - except, of course, when we're away from home on assignments like this one. Several of us are in the Peace Corps, in one capacity or another.'

She sipped the liquid, but found it too sweet for her taste. She could not feel much interest in something as trivial as the flavour of a drink. But after the previous day's debacle, she must continue to show politeness, so she sipped again and nodded, as if in appreciation, before she set the container down.

'What now?' she asked, since he still did not speak. 'Are all the terms set? May we start the negotiations?'

'We've already done that. Prime rule: in order to negotiate, get to know one another.'

'I'm learning all the time, believe me.'

'We both are. You have remarkable self-control and resilience, Channa. Do you consider yourself typical of your people?'

She shrugged. 'I suppose so. Typical of the high nobility, anyway. How could I not be? I'm a Harknell. My family have bred carefully for many generations and we're proud of our inheritance.'

'Then Shavlans must have considerable intelligence - with creativity stunted by the narrow focus on war and the brevity of life, as it inevitably is. That'll help in the rehabilitation phase. Intelligence is the best resource there is, at whatever stage of development the culture. Some species are markedly less intelligent, even among humanoids or those of Terran descent.'

'If that compliment's designed to soothe my feelings, there is no need, Mediator. I'm here to negotiate on behalf of my people. In that cause, I will do what I must, learn what I must, accept what insults I must. Just as I'll give my life for Shavla without hesitation, if it's needed.'

He nodded. 'Yes, I'm sure you will. But we won't ask that of you.' Then he smiled and stretched lazily.

'Well, I think that's enough for today.'

'But we've barely started! Please!' How had she offended him this time?

'We've done more than I expected to, believe me! And no, you haven't offended me.' What he had said was the literal truth. She had surprised him today. No bluster, no refuting the facts. Just careful consideration, excellent handling of the shock and then acceptance, albeit with a tinge of bitterness. He was beginning to find her interesting as a person, which was a relief. It was much harder to conduct a successful mediation when you could not build up genuine empathy with your subject.

The peace robot stepped forward. 'Allow me to conduct you to your quarters, Channa.'

Joran smiled. 'It really is better to stop now, Channa. Believe me, we've done enough for one day. You have a lot to think about.'

Helplessly, she watched him walk out, and this time she did not call after him. What was the use? He seemed determined to work through the negotiations slowly and he had the power to enforce his wishes. She sighed as she followed the robot out into the corridor. This time she did not march in brisk military fashion; she walked along slowly, free-step, frowning, trying to come to terms with the way the mediation was progressing, trying to calculate where this was all leading.

She felt - she searched for the word - yes, she felt vulnerable. How had Joran done this to her so quickly? She shook her head. For all his effete behaviour, that man was dangerous, as dangerous as a limpet grenade, which clung to the skin, set to explode at any minute.

At a hundred and forty-three years old, he had so many years of experience! And was backed by such sophisticated technology. There was only her to protect Shavla's interests. A shiver ran down her spine. Could she?

That evening, Channa was scheduled to contact her government and almost immediately found herself being reprimanded for her lack of progress. She tried to make the Supreme Commander understand that although what was happening was very subtle, it was progress nonetheless, but she failed. Stony-faced, she accepted his verbal reprimand and his snarled command to try harder in future.

‘We had expected the negotiations to be nearly concluded by now,’ Deslar Reinal concluded sternly.

‘The Supreme Council is not satisfied with your performance, Zone Leader Harknell!’

The use of her military title was significant. He had never liked acknowledging someone from Faction Harknell as Envoy. A sentence to the breeding pens loomed before her - Reinal would love that - and she barely repressed a shudder. She refrained from making any further comment while Reinal finished his tirade, abusing her in a most unprofessional manner. She had no doubt Those of the Confederation were watching, and were amused by this primitive behaviour. When Reinal glared at her and grunted, ‘Well?’ she reiterated her promise to do better.

Beneath her calm acceptance, she was disgusted. Was this Shavla's great leader, this foul-mouthed tyrant? Reinal had put on weight lately and was looking flabby and debauched. And no good officer lost his temper like that, especially when he did not understand the circumstances in which his subordinates were performing. Her father had always said that Reinal was ill-bred. He was right. Ill-bred and unworthy.

When the limited contact with her people was over, she expected to join Joran for a meal, as arranged, but the robot informed her that a problem had arisen which would prevent the Mediator from dining with her. Joran had, however, selected a particularly delicious meal for her which would be served in her quarters.

She was surprised to find herself feeling disappointed. How foolish! It must be because she was unused to this isolation. No doubt, she told herself, wallowing in her misery at being reprimanded for the first time in her military career, Joran had had all the primitive conversation he could take for one day!

She spent another evening devouring the information presented to her by the library, then decided that it was time to go to bed. For some reason, this time she had no trouble in falling asleep.

When she awoke, at standard rising time, a light was blinking on the com-unit, so she asked aloud if there were any messages. Joran invited her to take breakfast with him on the terrace. He would await her convenience.

She accepted curtly, then shook her head and rubbed her eyes, trying to clear the mists of sleep from her brain. How often as a child had she been chastised for her slowness in the early mornings! How hard she had worked to overcome this fault, and mostly in vain. Her body did not respond well for at least half an hour after she had risen.

She entered the ablutions area. The com-unit asked her to state her requirements and began to list the options. She cut it short. ‘Cold shower, unscented soap.’ She had stunk like a recreation whore the day before because she hadn't bothered to test what came out of the soap dispenser.

There was a perceptible pause, then the unit informed her that unscented soap was not available, but that all the perfumes were guaranteed hypo-allergenic. Would she please make her choice?

‘There wasn't all this fuss yesterday!’ she snapped. ‘I was able to take a shower in peace without all these delays.’

‘Yesterday, Channa, the ablutions system was not completely set up and the perfume mixer not installed. The lack of choice was greatly regretted. Today, all equipment is functional.’

‘And yet you can't provide me with unscented soap!’

‘This is much regretted. Such a thing is not in our programmes. Your desires have been noted, however,

and as soon as there is some spare capacity, they will be accommodated.'

Wearily, she chose something called Sandalwood, because it sounded less flowery than the other perfumes. Decadence loomed before her. If she went back to her base smelling of perfume, she would be punished for self-indulgence while on duty. Shavlans only used perfume to stimulate the senses for breeding or for recreational mating. Her superior officers would be watching her very closely when she returned, to see if she had been corrupted in any way. If they suspected any taint, she would be sent to a Correction Centre, so she must be very careful to keep in mind that she was not here to enjoy the luxuries of an advanced civilisation, only to serve Shavla.

She did not waste time in the shower, but even though she rinsed herself thoroughly, she could still smell perfume on her skin afterwards. Well, there was nothing she could do about that. At least it was not a sickly-sweet perfume. But even that chance thought displeased her. There she went again, thinking only of her own comfort! What did it matter whether the perfume was pleasant or not? Shavla's needs, not her own, were to be served!

Very briskly, to make up for her involuntary decadence, she walked across to the com-unit and banged it. 'Please tell the Mediator that I'm ready for breakfast.'

'Joran is already waiting for you on the terrace, Channa.'

'And how do I find my way there?' She was ashamed of her own inability to remember her way around the building, but however hard she tried to memorise the route, she lost all sense of direction within seconds and the numbers of turns were never the same. It was probably done deliberately, to confuse the primitives, she thought angrily, but she did not really believe that. The building must be larger than it appeared from outside.

'Your robot is waiting outside the door, Channa. It will take you to Joran. Is there anything else you require?'

'No, thank you.'

'It is not necessary to thank me, Channa. A com-system has no feelings. It is merely an extension of the central computer system.'

'Well, I'm not used to computers in my personal quarters, so you'll just have to put up with a few good manners!'

'As you wish, Channa.'

At least the peace robot did not attempt to converse with her as it guided her towards the terrace. It led her outside through a maze of passages, surely a much longer walk than before, then it withdrew to stand against the outer wall of the building in an unobtrusive position from which it could survey the whole area. Good tactical positioning, she noted automatically and with reluctant approval.

Joran was waiting for her at the far end of a quaint, old-fashioned paved area set in an angle of the main building. There were low stone balustrades along the two external sides, just like the pictures of Old Earth in the history tapes she had been scanning. The view from the terrace showed a vista through the newly-grown forest towards a lake, behind which soaring mountains rose to touch the clouds. A picturesque white building stood on a promontory and was reflected in the lake. She looked thoughtfully at the view. There had been no lakes on the island, though there had been mountains - nothing but mountains, in fact, which was one of the reasons why it was so barren.

Joran came towards her. 'Spectacular view, isn't it?' he asked, with another of his warm smiles. 'All it needed was a lake to set it off.'

She tried to keep her face expressionless, the Supreme Commander's rebuke still lingering in her mind. 'In an artistic sense, I suppose, yes. In a practical sense, it would be difficult to defend such a position. And I must confess that I was unaware of any lake in this region.'

'We created one. It not only provides a pleasant backdrop; it's also good for the island's ecology. The buildings house some of our equipment.'

'You made a lake?' And so rapidly!

'Yes. We always bring a terraforming team with us.'

She wasn't sure he would answer, but she asked anyway. 'What equipment is in the building?'

'The machinery which protects the base.'

'You really do expect to be attacked?'

'I told you - it has been known. We always guard our perimeters, and keep an umbrella-watch overhead, just in case. No attack on a base has been successful for many centuries, though. We usually have considerable technological superiority when we make an intervention.'

That showed the limitations of his thinking. Or else, he was telling lies. Nowhere was impregnable. Some attacks must succeed from time to time, by sheer random chance, whatever the defences. It was an elementary fact of war. But perhaps Those of the Confederation had lost some of their capacity to understand war.

Joran shook his head in a mock rebuke. 'Channa, your expression betrays your feelings. I'm not telling lies. In fact, it's time you became aware that it's part of our code of ethics that mediators don't lie to envoys. The most I can do is refuse to answer a question or offer you only part of the truth.'

She did not believe him, but did not bother to say so. 'Well then, I hope your confidence in your defences is justified. But please remember that the Deorin are not to be trusted, not ever, not under any circumstances!'

'And what about the Shavlans? Are they to be trusted?'

He was actually laughing at her as he mocked her people! She could feel her expression going rigid.

'Why not? We're here negotiating, aren't we?'

'The Deoran Envoy is here, too.'

'Here? In the same building?'

'Of course.'

Her flesh crawled. She had expected the Deoran to be located somewhere else on the island. Suddenly she felt very exposed, and could not help looking round. A Deoran in the same building and herself unarmed!

'No need to worry, Channa. Like you, the Deoran Envoy is unarmed and has a peace robot with him at all times. Your own robot will guard you when you're outside your suite and once inside it, you're quite safe. The walls there are made of an alloy which can withstand even direct explosive attacks. That's why there are no windows. The whole unit is Sirian-made. And believe me, the lock's intricacies are beyond the technical understanding of the Deorin - or of the Shavlans.' Or even the Terrans, he thought, but I shan't mention that.

'In other words, I'm a prisoner!'

'Only because your own safety demands it in an environment whose technology you don't understand.'

She bit off a sharp retort. 'We're wasting time again. Could we please eat quickly and then get on with the negotiations? The Supreme Commander is not pleased with my progress.'

'Was that reprimand serious?'

She could feel her face reddening. 'I consider it so. I've never been reprimanded since I joined the Officers' Corps. And it was in part deserved. My tardiness yesterday wasted most of the day,' she swallowed hard and added, 'as did my maladroit remarks the day before. I must make up for that today. I beg your help in that, Mediator.'

'Joran.'

'I prefer the formal title. It reminds me of why I'm here.'

'But I refuse to answer to a formal title, Channa. If we hide behind titles, we can't get to know one another.'

'If we make no progress in the peace negotiations, I shall be recalled, and then it won't matter whether we know one another or not.' She could not prevent a sharp tone from creeping into her voice.

'You can't be recalled unless I request it. And I won't.' He had decided that yesterday.

'I don't understand.'

'They didn't tell you all the terms, did they?'

'Apparently not. Are you going to enlighten me, or am I to be kept in ignorance?'

'I'll tell you what you need to know.'

And that, she thought, is an ambiguous statement if ever I heard one. But she did not challenge him, merely looked at him expectantly. Her father would be proud of her forbearance and self-control. He always said she was too impulsive.

Joran returned the look with one of obvious concern. Her frustration with the delays was transparently obvious and her patience a herculean achievement for an action-oriented Shavlan officer. 'My first task has been to decide whether you really are a suitable envoy,' he said, in that gentle, kindly tone that never failed to irritate her, 'and whether I feel that there's a possibility of you and I succeeding in this mediation. If not, we would have to start again, choose another envoy. But I'm the only person who has the right to ask for your recall. And that doesn't often happen. We take great care with our preliminary selection procedures.'

'Oh.' So she need not fear Reinal's threats! Not until she returned to Shavla, anyway.

'The terms are exactly the same for the Deoran.' Another warm smile confused her, making her uncertain how to respond. 'I have already informed your people, Channa, that you're fully acceptable as Envoy. They've also been told the rest of the terms for the next stage. By the time you communicate with them tonight, they'll have had a little time to think things over, and if the Supreme Commander should prove difficult, I think his colleagues will be able to moderate his views - as they did when you were chosen.' 'Do we Shavlan really have any choices in these negotiations?' she asked, weary of all these delaying tactics.

'Oh, yes. There are always choices, real choices. If the disputants refuse to reach agreement on the peace terms, this planet can be declared an occupied world. By the disputants' own choice, not ours, please note. We're bound by our rules to make every effort to negotiate a true peace, but under no circumstances, no circumstances at all, will either Shavla or Deora be allowed to resume the war.'

His voice had grown stern, all traces of friendliness gone, and its tone made Channa feel yet again like a child being humoured. Or a primitive.

'We do not intend to lose three habitable planets. We do not intend to permit mass genocide with those megachem-bombs of yours.' He continued to hold her eyes with his own as he added slowly and emphatically, 'Under no circumstances at all, Channa Harknell, will we negotiate or permit anything but a permanent and genuine peace.'

She responded as seriously as he had spoken. 'I wonder if that's possible on Everal, Joran,' then clamped her lips together, annoyed with herself for admitting even this much to a non-aligned person.

'It's possible almost anywhere, as the Peace Corps has demonstrated - time after time.'

She shook her head, not sure whether she believed him or not. 'Peace is not what either nation on Everal wants. The antipathy is ingrained in us now.'

'We know that. Peace rarely is what the combatants want.'

'And it's I who will be blamed if the negotiation agreement displeases the Supreme Council. It will be counted as my failure.'

He nodded, the warmth returning to his eyes. 'Yes. It's very common for disputants to blame their envoys afterwards. But we have ways of dealing with that.'

'What ways?'

'I can't tell you at this stage.'

She looked at him bleakly. No one could prevent Deslar Reinal's fury from falling on her head if she failed in her mission. This Terran just did not understand the absolute and immutable Shavlan commitment to defeating the Deorin. 'Why do you bother to go through this charade of mediation? Why don't you just tell us what you require of us? People who can develop spaceships that size must have the power to destroy our whole planet. We don't really have any choice.'

'You do, as I've already explained. And it's a very real choice. A mediated peace will leave your people free to run their own world, free to develop, to choose their own way of life - to become, in due course, full members of the Galactic Confederation. An occupied world loses those privileges and all hope of full membership for several generations to come. We ensure that occupied nations do as they're told, until enough time has passed for succeeding generations to have been educated to a different way of life. And

our technological superiority gives us full capacity to enforce that, believe me, Channa, however reluctant we may be to do so.'

What was the use of arguing? She was beginning to suspect that she had damaged her career, not furthered it, by volunteering for this assignment. Did her father realise yet what harm this might do to Faction Harknell and its kin-alliances? Or did he count the risk worthwhile? Who knew Sandur Harknell's deepest thoughts? Not even his daughter. 'And what will you do if the Supreme Commander recalls me anyway and refuses to accept the negotiations?' she asked.

'Refuse to return you. Tell your people to choose a new Supreme Commander or offer them the choice of submitting to occupied nation status. What do you think their response would be to that?'

She decided to answer honestly. 'As a final resort, they might choose a new commander - if you could convince them of the necessity - if it were for Shavla's good.'

'I think so, too.'

She said nothing more, but her thoughts ran on. Reinal's popularity was slipping, even before the Confederation intervened. He was wasteful of people. That was not liked. It wasn't the Shavlan way to sacrifice loyal soldiers unnecessarily.

'Well,' Joran said, 'we'll see what happens soon enough. Reinal has now been made aware that I shall be working mainly with you during the next stage, with very limited communication permitted between you and your people. He's also been told that peace negotiations take longer than he had expected, though of course we weren't able to tell him exactly how long, because one never knows. He wasn't best pleased, but I made it clear that the more he harasses you about making progress, the less progress you will be able to make.'

'But I . . .'

'You didn't expect to stay here for more than a few days?'

'No. If that.'

'Are there any reasons why you can't stay? Family reasons?'

She was horrified at the mere idea. 'I would never put family reasons ahead of the good of Shavla! I'll do whatever I must in these negotiations.'

'Excellent! Then I shan't have to start procedures to occupy Shavla just yet.'

She frowned. Was he joking or serious?

Joran looked at Channa with satisfaction. Good material, here. Lilla, the other Mediator, was not optimistic about her prospects of a successful mediation with the Deoran Envoy, who was proving very hostile to everything she said, not to mention physically violent at times.

Channa looked at the Mediator sideways. 'And you won't have to make someone else realise how primitive the Shavlan culture is.' She permitted herself a slight smile to show that this was a joke.

Joran threw back his head and laughed. 'You look beautiful when you smile, Channa.' Before she could protest at this personal remark, he added, 'Your culture is primitive, yes, but not the people. I've told you that before and I shall keep on repeating it until it sinks in. Actually, your people are of above average intelligence for a humanoid race, but held back in their development by the wars and by their short lives.'

She watched him carefully, trying to understand what made him behave as he did, why he chose to emphasise these things. She snapped to full mental attention as he added casually, 'I think there's a high probability that the Shavlans will eventually adapt to peace - one way or another. We've already made considerable progress in these negotiations, though perhaps not in the way your Supreme Commander calculates progress. Deslar Reinal has a very limited outlook, does he not? We would never have accepted someone like him as Envoy.' And may have made an error in accepting Van Makass as Deoran Envoy, Lilla says - though as the Emperor offered no other candidates, we had little choice, since Van Makass did demonstrate the potential to succeed, if not with the highest probability. Joran realised that Channa was speaking and cut those musings off abruptly.

'The most important thing, Peace Mediator,' she said stiffly, 'is that you and I succeed in negotiating a solution that's acceptable to the Supreme Council. Ultimately, the acceptance of peace is their decision.' Another broad smile. 'Oh, Channa, you surely don't think we believe that tale? We know as well as you

do that Deslar Reinal has only been allowed to hold formal power in Shavla by your father's tolerance.' He was still grinning at her. 'And whether Deslar Reinal approves of what you're doing or not, Channa, he won't be able to change the Shavlan Envoy. You're it. Either you negotiate a peace settlement on behalf of your people, or no one does. As I've just told you, I've accepted you formally as Envoy. We're here together now until death or a successful peace settlement separate us.'

Her eyes flew open in shock. 'What do you mean by that?' Her question came out as a hoarse whisper. 'Exactly what I say. You're the Shavlan Envoy. In every sense of the word. Everything depends on you.' 'Everything!' She gulped audibly. 'Do you mean that I shall have to take unilateral decisions?' It would be a total disaster for her career!

'Of course you will. Who else is there?'

She sat there staring at him like one transfixed, horror engraved on every feature. 'But that's - that's totally un-Shavlan! I can't!' And they'll make me pay for it afterwards if I try.

'Things will have to change, Channa, as we prepare for peace. Even in Shavla.' He decided that she had had enough shocks for the time being. 'Now, shall we see to our own needs! And shall I choose breakfast for you, to save time?'

'Please.' What did she care about food? He'd given her so much to think about that she wished she could retreat to her suite now to mull things over. She even toyed with the idea of suggesting this, but decided against it as being self-indulgent. Fortunately, he was concentrating on his eating and it was not necessary to make polite conversation. Did he guess how she was feeling about this? Probably. He was not stupid. In fact, she would guess that he had known exactly how the things he said would affect her. He must therefore consider upsetting her to be essential to the negotiations. Shavla be cherished, what would he say next?

After consuming another beautifully-presented meal, this time with little appreciation of its delights, Channa turned to him resolutely. 'Now, Med-er - Joran, can you please tell me . . .'

'Not now, Channa. We need some exercise!'

She exhaled in exasperation. 'It won't hurt to do without for a few days! Surely these negotiations are more important than our personal needs?'

'Who's talking about a few days? You'll be here for far longer than that, even if the negotiations go well.'

'Longer than that?' Her voice came out harshly as this further shock hit home. 'I'm here for longer than that?'

Again that sympathetic smile, that rueful understanding of how he was tearing her apart. 'Yes. Much longer, I'm afraid.'

'How long?' she whispered. 'Tell me how long! Weeks?'

He nodded. 'At least.'

'How many weeks?' The Correction Officers would suspect everything about her if she was away from supervision for so long. A stay in a Correction Centre would be inevitable. She would need realigning!

'Well, actually, it's not likely to be weeks, Channa, but months. In fact, it could be anything up to two or three of your years. We can't tell at this stage? It takes a while for those dedicated to war to accept even the concept of peace.'

The terrace seemed to whirl around her and she closed her eyes in shock. How would she ever make the Supreme Commander believe that she was doing her best for her people if the negotiations took so long? She would be accused of treason even before she returned, and tried for it after she returned. It seemed highly possible that she would be publicly executed, because they would need a scapegoat upon whom to blame their failure to win a peace on terms advantageous to Shavla's war effort.

Joran did not attempt to intrude upon her mental privacy, but excused himself, then returned a few moments later clad in a jumpsuit similar to her own. He took her for a brisk walk through the forest, so brisk that she could not help realising that he was much fitter than she had assumed from his initial appearance. He did not become flushed, he matched her jog-march pace with ease and he showed no signs of breathlessness when he spoke.

The exercise calmed her down and she found after a while that she was enjoying the walk. As they

moved along the tree-lined paths, she listened carefully to what she soon began to realise was additional important information for Shavla.

'Your people haven't had time to explore the intricacies of ecological balance, have they?' he asked after a while, seeing her wonderment as she studied the luxuriant vegetation around them.

'I'm not sure what you mean by that, but I think I can safely say that we haven't. All our efforts have necessarily been geared towards winning the war.' It still felt strange to her to wake up and not have to attend strategy meetings or set off on sorties.

'If I'm boring you . . . ?'

'No! On the contrary.' She made an attempt to concentrate better. 'I find the ideas you present very stimulating and would like to pursue the topic further - but surely we should now return to the negotiations?'

His smile was pure mischief. 'We have.'

She stopped dead. 'I thought you weren't allowed to lie to me!'

'I'm not lying. Perhaps you don't realise that your wars have seriously damaged the ecology of the planet, the plant and animal life, how they renew themselves, that sort of thing. The first term of the peace treaty will be that you let us help you to repair the damage. That's an absolute requirement, by the way, not up for negotiation or amendment. It's my task to make you aware of what we consider to be the main issues, Channa, and this is the first of them. We always deal with the planetary ecology in the early stages of an intervention. Even belligerents rarely object to our help in rehabilitating their planet, or in producing better crops, and while that's happening tempers have time to cool.'

'I can see that you have useful information to share, Joran, but this is very . . . '

'Unexpected? Well, if we worked as you expected us to, your people would be able to start a war again the minute we left, wouldn't they?' That rare tone of authority had crept into his voice. 'Peace mediations lead to peace, Channa, not to a renewal of the war once the space transport has left. We shall only negotiate a true and lasting peace here.'

She believed him and stared at him aghast. Were their intentions so transparent?

He was grinning again.

'I don't know what you mean,' she said carefully, refusing to admit anything. This could be yet another ploy, or a test, or whatever peace mediators did to their victims.

'You're bound to deny it,' he agreed with great cheerfulness, 'but I just thought I'd let you know from the beginning how aware we are of your people's true intentions in engaging in these negotiations.' He laid a hand on her shoulder and she forced herself to tolerate his touch. 'Don't try to deny it, Channa. I wouldn't believe you.'

She just stood and looked at him.

'Now, we've forged ahead with the negotiations today, just as you wished and I'm sure it's given you a lot of things to think about. I think it's time we went back. There's an info-program on forest regeneration and another on accelerated plant growth, which you may like to view - they'll show you what we can offer to Shavla. I'm afraid I have a meeting scheduled with my fellow mediator now.' It sounded like Lilla needed help.

'The one negotiating with the Deoran Envoy?' she asked, expecting a rebuff, but still alert to the need for gathering information.

'Yes. But Lilla doesn't seem to be making as much progress as we are. Tell me, are the Deorin all so stubborn?'

Her lips curled. 'Not only pig-headed beyond reason, but stupid, too. Why do you think we fight them? As you've already admitted, we aren't stupid.'

'Mmm. Poor old Lilla! She's going to have a difficult assignment, I think.'

'And you aren't? Am I so easy to understand and manipulate?' Her hands curled into fists.

'My task will be tricky, but not too difficult, I'd say at this stage - though one never knows for certain. Because of your high level of intelligence, my dear Channa, not because you're an easy victim to manipulate. As I've already stated, I have hopes of a positive outcome to this mediation.'

‘Yes, but you're only dealing with me at the moment. There's still the Supreme Council to convince. What can you actually do if a nation refuses to ratify the terms agreed by their envoy?’

‘Demonstrate our power to compel the ratification.’

‘And if that fails?’

‘Give Shavla temporary occupied nation status and educate the next generation to be more open-minded. That situation is slightly different from a total refusal to negotiate. You see, it really does all depend on the envoy.’

‘So you keep telling me.’ She shivered. ‘I don't find it a comfortable thought. It's very un-Shavlan.’

‘Poor Channa.’ His hand rested briefly on her shoulder again.

She ignored the touch of his hand. If it was a Terran trait to paw people, then she would just have to get used to that sort of thing. ‘What if one nation reaches a peace settlement and the other doesn't?’ As well to know all your options.

‘We treat each nation according to how it responds to the mediation - or rather, according to how the envoy responds. It's quite easy for us to put up a barrier along the borders and contain the unmediated nation behind it until we do achieve a successful outcome or until we decide to occupy their territory.’

She looked at him and frowned. That had possibilities which might just turn the scales with the Supreme Council, for she couldn't imagine those mud-brained Deorin agreeing to anything which might lead to real peace. Perhaps therein lay her chance to gain an advantage for Shavla? But was Joran telling her the truth? How could she be sure of him - or of anything he told her? Her task seemed to grow more difficult by the minute, and she felt its weight lying heavily on her shoulders, while he continued to look happy and relaxed.

Oh, Father, she thought, if only we had known. This could prove a disaster for our faction, a total disaster! Unless I can negotiate a genuine peace and persuade the Supreme Council to accept it. But I can't see Deslar Reinal ever agreeing to a real peace, however advantageous. He hates the Deorin more than anyone I've ever met, hates them personally, in a way no good commander should. In which case, the trained tactician within her reasoned, we shall have to get rid of Reinal. Father is a man of considerable power, even if he does prefer to lead from the shadows. I'll have to depend upon him to deal with Reinal, if the man acts unreasonably.

They arrived back at the base. Totally overwhelmed by what Joran had told her, and desperately in need of some time for thought, Channa followed him back into the building, said goodbye absent-mindedly and allowed the robot to guide her back to her quarters. For the first time, the rooms felt like home.

4

Channa was glad to get back to her rooms this time, glad to be alone - and that, too, was a new experience for her. She had so much to think about that she felt as if her head would burst. Two or three years, he had said! Years! She could not imagine Reinal allowing negotiations to be prolonged beyond two or three weeks, let alone two or three years. Her guess was that if he felt that this peace negotiation was going on for too long, Reinal would find some way to get rid of her, rules or no rules, then repeat the process of feigned mediation with someone who would obey his orders to get the spurious mediation over and done with, while the Shavlan forces continued to rearm themselves secretly and regroup for the next offensive.

She therefore had several serious problems: one, how to continue the peace negotiations; two, how to protect Shavla long-term, so that the Deorin gained no advantage; three, how to protect herself. Was she being disloyal in caring so much about herself? she worried. Was she putting her own safety before that of Shavla? No. It was the Supreme Commander who was being disloyal, who was putting his own interests first. He had sworn to devote himself heart and soul to Shavla, but he had not kept that oath. Already his faction and kinfolk had gained marked strategical advantages.

She had not noticed the man's lust for personal dominance until recently, because she had been fighting in the most desperate battles the Shavlan forces had ever known. When she had shared her fears with her father, he had hinted to her that this matter of Reinal's empire-building would be attended to in the fullness of time, and had smiled tightly.

She rubbed her aching forehead. Only since coming to this base had she had the time to think like this, with more free time punctuating her days than ever in her life before. And only since she had begun talking to the Mediator, she suddenly realised, had she even wanted to think about the way Shavla was ruled. What was there about the Terran that did this to people?

She gasped aloud as the realisation sank in. Whatever it was, that was what made him a good peace mediator. The way he provoked her to thought could even be, no, it must be, a part of the mediation process. A shiver of apprehension ran down her spine. Where would it lead, all this unsupervised thinking? What if everyone had time to think their own patterns through life? Why, that would create so many divergent ideas that no one would know which was right! And what would happen to Shavla then? How would they keep the common people united in the fight against the Deorin?

She stood up and began to pace to and fro across the room. Oh, if only she could discuss this with her father! He was so much wiser than she was. She had turned to him for help at every crisis in her life and had always found him there, ready.

After a while, she flung herself on the bed and tried to relax, but a few minutes saw her up again and pacing the room. In the end, she went over to the com-unit. 'I'd like to go outside again. I need some more exercise. A walk in the forest, perhaps?'

'It is regretted, Channa, but work is being done on establishing the ecology of the undergrowth for the rest of the day. It would not be convenient for you to walk in the forest. The gymnasium is available, however, or the swimming pool, if you would care to exercise there.'

'The gymnasium.'

An hour later, having worked herself to a standstill, she asked the patiently waiting peace robot to take her back to her quarters. Strange, she thought, following it down yet another featureless corridor, how you got used to something, even an abomination like this . . .

The breath was banged out of her as the robot pushed her roughly to one side. Before she could protest, a metal hand clamped across her mouth and the thing gestured towards the corridor in front of them. There was obviously danger ahead.

She nodded, surprised to find how much she trusted the robot. The metal hand let go. Furious to find herself in such a predicament unarmed, she could do nothing but keep out of its way and watch as it stood and listened. She tried to keep absolutely still, but she could hear nothing. The creature's senses were undoubtedly more finely tuned than hers.

Suddenly, something skittered round the corner. Before she could do more than register the fact that it was a shatter-grenade, the robot became a blur of movement as it scooped up the grey globe and hurled it down the corridor they had just traversed. The force of the explosion knocked her back against the wall and made the robot rock on its feet, but the grenade was far enough away to do her no more harm than give her a few bruises from the impact and one graze from a flying splinter.

The robot mimed continued silence and stillness before turning back to keep watch. At least the thing seemed to know its business. Had she been dependent upon her own senses and reactions, she would be dead by now. Metal abomination or not, she owed it her life.

The faintest susurrations of footsteps betrayed the approach of whoever had thrown the grenade. She froze. Closer and closer the almost subliminal sounds came. She watched the robot. It was poised like a cat she had once known which had kept the vermin down in the Youth Barracks. Strange how similarly graceful this thing seemed, though it was only a machine.

The footsteps stopped briefly, then began whispering along the corridor again. Had she not known to listen for something, she would not even have heard the assassin's approach. She raged internally at her own helplessness, but she could do nothing other than remain perfectly still and trust the robot to defend her.

Again, that blur of movement, a sharp cry, and then a struggling figure was dragged round the corner. It was, it must be, a Deoran, though the clothing gave no clues to identity. The man nodded his head, as if to say, 'You win!' then slumped lifeless in the arms of the robot. She'd seen death too often to mistake that look.

There was another blur of movement, too fast for her eyes to distinguish what was happening, and then the blur vanished.

'Wait!' She stood frozen in astonishment. The robot had left her alone and unarmed in the aftermath of an ambush - a robot dedicated to keeping her safe! What if there were a second assassin nearby? Furious at herself for trusting it, not to mention feeling grateful to the damned thing, she remained where she was, listening, ready to fight.

Nothing happened. She could hear no movement, no sound at all except for her own slow, careful breaths. The safest place would be her quarters, but dared she move? And could she find them again? All the corridors here looked alike. She continued to listen, but there were no further sounds. Well, she could not just stay here and wait for something to pop round the corner; it was not in her nature. She began to slide along the wall, fingerspan by fingerspan, breathing slowly and quietly.

Just before she reached the corner, an alarm clanged and a greyness slammed down across the corridor directly in front of her; another grey barrier appeared several paces behind her. The two misty walls had shut her in. She exclaimed aloud in annoyance. What now?

She waited. Nothing happened. She studied the greyness, but could not think what it was. It seemed neither solid nor gaseous, but rather a combination of both. She tried to touch it, but her hand slid away. When she risked kicking it, her foot rebounded and sent her spinning round as if it had changed direction of its own volition. Growing bolder, she attempted to bounce her whole body against it, and once again found herself repelled, her body gently but inexorably turned in another direction.

She decided to leave it alone. If she could not pass through it, neither could a would-be assassin. It must be part of the base's defence system, which suggested that someone was still trying to protect her. Well, she was not accustomed to cowering like a breeding woman in a bomb shelter, but it might be the best thing to do here, when she knew so little about the building. She began to pace up and down the short stretch of corridor between the two grey barriers. Where had that damned robot gone? Why had it left her alone like this when it was supposed to be her protector?

'Are you all right, Channa?' a disembodied voice asked. 'No injuries?'

'I'm fine. No injuries apart from a few bruises. What's happening?'

'The intruder is being revived. It was necessary to act quickly to get him to the Medi-centre. You will be escorted back to your quarters as soon as the rest of the building has been checked. In the meantime, you are safer remaining where you are. If you would like some refreshments, the next section of corridor can be unlocked, which will give you access to a food dispenser.'

A human voice interrupted. 'Channa?'

'Yes, Mediator?'

'You're sure you're not injured?'

'Of course I'm sure. That peace robot is very good. I suspected nothing. If I'd been alone, the attack would have succeeded.'

'Good. I'll be in touch again shortly.'

'Mediator?' she called, then, 'Joran?' No answer. She sagged back against the wall, fists clenched. Was there a further threat, then? Damn them for leaving her there unarmed! Damn them for not at least letting her know what was happening!

Several minutes later, the mechanical voice spoke again. 'Your pardon, Channa. A second intruder was discovered near the Deoran wing. The Deoran Envoy was injured, but it was a minor wound only. His peace robot was destroyed, however.'

'An intruder near the Deoran wing? The Envoy injured! But - but surely the assassins were Deorin?'

'That has yet to be verified, Channa. It is by no means certain. Please be patient for a little longer. You are safest of all where you are for the moment, but we regret the inconvenience. We will arrange for you

to have access to the refreshment dispenser.' One patch of greyness faded slowly and she moved forward into the next stretch of corridor, which could have been the old stretch, except for the dispenser. Ahead of her lay another grey barrier; behind her, the barrier that had vanished winked into existence again, trapping her in the next section.

It was a while before Joran contacted her again. 'Sorry to leave you so abruptly, Channa. We managed to revive your attacker.'

'And?'

'We discovered very little. The poison was one which damages the brain cell connections. His memories were randomised.'

'But surely you must know if he was a Deoran or not?'

'We're not sure. He's equally fluent in both languages, yours and theirs, and as I said, his memories are fragmented. They make no sense whatsoever. My colleagues will continue to interrogate him, but it will be sheer luck if they find anything coherent in that mess.'

She could hear the disgust in his voice. Not used to coming face to face with the casualties of war, she guessed, but her own lack of squeamishness was not something to gloat over. It was too hard won, at the cost of her friends' and her kinfolk's lives and bodies. She had never been one to glory in destruction. 'Is the building clear now?' She would like to return to her own quarters.

'We thought the building was clear before.' There was a grimness to Joran's voice that she had never heard before. 'As soon as your robot gets back to you, you'll be taken along to your quarters one section at a time. The robot will be able to double-check for us all the way.'

'Whatever you say, Mediator.' This was no time to argue. This time, they were on the same side in a combat and he was in charge. For once, he did not grumble at her use of his formal title. * * *

Joran was waiting for her outside her quarters, another robot at his side. 'We'll keep watch on Channa here while you check inside,' he said to her own robot, just as if it were a human soldier under his command.

The robot entered her quarters, but came out again in a few minutes. A human could not have checked the area so quickly, she thought. Another use for this equipment. Maybe we were wrong not to develop more sophisticated robots ourselves. Foolish thought - Shavla did not have the technology to develop robots like these. Shavlans were too primitive. Crude explosives, thrust and counter-thrust, that was all Shavlans were capable of - underpinned, of course, by a web of treachery and espionage. Never let loyalty blind you to your own side's faults and weaknesses, they had told her during Senior Officer Training. That applied just as much to her situation here.

'Everything is clear inside,' the robot announced, 'but it would be best for me to stay inside the quarters with Channa from now on, and to station another peace robot outside.'

'Permission granted.'

Channa was not standing for this arbitrary decision. 'Now look here! I'm not having that - that thing breathing down my neck all night!' She was grateful that it had saved her life, but enough was enough.

'You have no choice. We must be able to ensure your safety. We've given an absolute, unconditional guarantee of that to your people. It's part of the contract. The default payment we would have to make if you were killed means nothing to the Confederation, though it's quite sizeable, but it does matter to those of us who serve in the Peace Corps that we fulfil our part of any bargain. We have a reputation to maintain and we take a pride in our work.'

Part of the contract. Default payment. She stared at him, her mouth slightly open, as a cold feeling of dread slithered down her spine. A thought she had been keeping at bay ever since the attack refused to be submerged any longer. Could it be - was this the action of her own people? Was she so expendable that they would kill her to gain a monetary advantage?

The answer was easy. Yes. Everyone was expendable. Only Shavla mattered. And winning the war. But was this a case of winning the war, or of furthering Faction Reinal's interests? Was the Supreme Commander killing two birds with one stone - removing an envoy who came from another faction and replenishing the national coffers?

Joran was watching her closely, but to her great relief he did not voice similar suspicions. Instead, he laid his hand gently on her shoulder and guided her towards the doorway. And she was too stunned to protest further. 'Go inside now, Channa. I must check a few things, then I'll return. I'll eat with you in your quarters tonight for safety, if you'll allow it. We need to discuss this further, I think.'

'What's to discuss?' she asked, trying to disguise her shock. 'There was a Deoran assassination attempt, which your peace robot foiled. You will no doubt be able to guard against future recurrences. The peace robot is a very good bodyguard. We need say nothing of it to my people, if that worries you.'

'Are you refusing to allow me to visit you in your quarters, Channa? I may not do so without permission, but . . . ' Again, he did not bring his suspicions into the open, but she knew what he was holding back, because she was holding back the same thoughts too.

She looked at the floor to hide her exasperation, then grimaced. She might need his support against Reinal. This was not a time to antagonise him. 'No, of course I'm not refusing. Come back when you've finished.'

When he had left, she stared at the robot. 'Are you intending to follow me around the rooms or will you wait here by the door?'

'I must be in the same room as you, Channa, at all times, but I shall endeavour to respect your feelings and to remain as unobtrusive as possible.'

'If you think a big silver machine like you can remain unobtrusive,' she said tartly, 'then you've been badly programmed!' She went into the ablutions area and took a shower, trying to ignore the thing, which continued to watch her, or she presumed it was watching her, through its unblinking golden eye-slit. To her disgust, she uttered the wrong command and her shower was scented with some flowery perfume. She tried to wash it off, and failed. 'Hey, you! Robot! Can't you tell them to give me some plain unperfumed water? I want to rinse away this stink!'

It was the com-unit which answered. 'The perfumes are designed for an eight-hour release, Channa,' it said. 'Unfortunately, once one is on the skin, rinsing will not remove it.'

'Oh, of course not! Especially if I want it removed!' she shouted savagely, thumping the shiny white wall. 'Why do these Terrans like to stink all the time - or do they have a natural body odour that they need to disguise? No, don't answer that! I don't want to know. Just send me some clean clothes. Mine were torn, and they reek of the explosive, which is nearly as bad as this perfume! And my other uniforms are dirty. I hadn't realised that I would be staying for so long. Why in hell's name did the Terrans not warn me before I left Shavla, so that I could bring more clothes?'

'Clean clothes are always available from the dispenser, Channa,' the com-unit told her helpfully. 'Any needs can be met within seconds.'

She ignored that remark and went into the wardrobe. There she dragged on her last set of clean underclothing, annoyed by the wall of mirrors. Fancy having a whole room just to keep clothes in - a culpable waste of resources, if ever she saw one! She stalked back into the bedroom clad only in the underclothes, the robot moving a few paces behind her, silver, noiseless and somehow ominous.

'What do you wish to wear, Channa?' the com-unit asked, which proved yet again that they were spying on her. 'Your own garments are damaged and unfortunately there is not, at this stage, the capacity to make copies. All resources are involved in checking the security of the base. Only standard garments can be dispensed.'

'What do I care? This is no mating party,' she said, deliberately crude. 'Give me something like I was wearing today. Casual uniform. Or something dark, at least. And don't, for Unity's sake, make me have to choose!'

It was no relief to insult robots. They just ignored the insult and answered you in sweetly reasonable voices. 'It is regretted, Channa, but the computer is not programmed to produce uniforms. They are no longer worn by Terrans. In fact, they are very much disliked and any suggestion of a uniform is carefully avoided. I can screen you some examples of the types of garments currently in vogue, but a personal design facility is not yet included at this base. And I am not programmed to choose for you.'

She glared at the peace robot, but it remained silent as it hovered behind her. She felt deeply

embarrassed at being semi-nude in its presence, she who had been taught to disregard her own body and those of others. She was furious with herself for being embarrassed. It was only a machine, after all! Why, in the name of all Shavla's forebears, was she allowing it to upset her like this?

She threw herself down on the couch and transferred her glare to the images on the screen. Diaphanous gowns, flowing trousers in pastel shades, tunics in bright acid colours - there was everything but what she wanted. In the end she settled for a white jumpsuit, which unfortunately came with a silver edging, but there was nothing the dispenser could do about that - or so it said.

The jumpsuit was delivered almost immediately and she put it on, staring at herself in the mirror. Her utilitarian underclothing showed clearly through the light fabric of the jumpsuit, and it looked ridiculous.

'Damn them all!' she muttered aloud, then yelled. 'Com-unit! Get me some other underclothing - something that goes with this stupid bloody garment! Mine is wrong.'

'Yes, Channa. Please choose from this selection.'

She did not waste time trying to argue, just selected the plainest things she could find, lustrous white edged in lace. She gritted her teeth and put them on. This time, the jumpsuit looked right, if a trifle provocative. If she had been intending to mate, it would have encouraged arousal in the male. She fingered the silver edging of the suit. Frivolity! Waste! But . . . pretty. If you liked that sort of thing. Which she did not! Those of the Confederation were not going to infect her with their own decadence. She sat down to wait for Joran. The robot stood in the corner, but every now and then it moved to the doorways to scan her other rooms. Without intending to, she drifted into sleep.

Joran arrived two hours later, waking her up when he requested entrance. Her sleepiness must have shown. Why could she not wake alert, as others did?

'I'm sorry, Channa. The com-unit didn't inform me that you were sleeping. I could come back later.'

'It doesn't matter.' She shrugged. 'It was probably reaction to the shock.'

'You still look tired. Shall I leave?'

'No, of course not. If you must know, I'm always dopey when I wake up. It's - it's just how my body works. I can't do anything about it. I'll be fully functional in a moment or two.'

'If you wish not to be disturbed in future, tell the com-unit and it'll keep me outside. You have every right to do as you wish in your own quarters.'

'Except get rid of that thing.' She pointed to the robot.

'Yes. Except get rid of that thing. For your own safety, I'm afraid you must allow one robot to stay with you at all times from now on.'

She saw that he too was looking somewhat weary and she sighed. She knew herself to be in the wrong in being so short-tempered with him, when all his concern was for her safety and comfort. 'Yes. You're right, really, Joran. I'm sorry to be so unco-operative when you're trying to protect me. I just - well, I'll get used to that thing eventually, I suppose. And it is a good defence mechanism, as it's already shown.' A glimmer of a smile flickered across his face. 'That's a noble admission, Channa.'

Her own lips twitched slightly. 'Yes, isn't it?' She had often been in trouble for her levity when she was in the Junior Corps, but had eventually got her sense of humour under control. Before he could take advantage of her moment's weakness, she added sharply, 'Well, are you going to sit down, or do you intend to eat standing up?'

'I was waiting for you to invite me to sit.'

'Why in the name of all the Deoran devils do you need permission to sit?'

It was his turn to look surprised. 'Because these are your quarters, and it's only by your invitation that I'm here. I must defer to your wishes - or don't you Shavlans bother about manners?'

'Not if they mean you have to remain standing when common sense tells you that you need to sit down. Manners like that get in the way of action.' Without thinking, she added automatically. 'Shavla is all that counts.'

'Dear me. I wonder if I can learn to forget my manners when I'm with you! I can't guarantee it I'm afraid, Channa. I hope you won't take offence.'

'You must do as you please. Now, for goodness' sake, Joran, sit down!' She wished he would not make

such a fuss about trivialities. It made everything seem unreal to her, when she was here at the base on such serious business, when her own life and the survival of her nation were both at stake.

She hesitated, but it had to be done. 'You saved my life,' she began, 'and I acknowledge the obligation. My life is yours to dispose of as you see fit.'

She had assumed that he would be aware of that ritual, but as he sat staring at her in puzzlement, she realised that he was not. 'It's a traditional response to this situation, but we mean it.'

'Does that mean I now have to take you with me wherever I go?' he said.

'Please don't be sarcastic about something so important!' she snapped.

'I'm sorry. I obviously didn't realise its importance. Will you please explain?'

'I must do anything you ask of me,' she said curtly, 'in return for your saving my life. Short of harming Shavla, of course.'

'It was the robot which saved you, actually.'

Trust him to be facetious. 'Obviously the obligation cannot be to the robot. It's only a machine. Since you're in charge of this mediation, the obligation must be to you. If you don't need anything from me, you can just release me from the obligation. In fact, that's what usually happens.'

'And how do I do that?'

'You just say that you release me from the obligation.'

He looked thoughtful for a moment, then nodded. 'Very well, Channa, I release you from the obligation.'

She sagged back in relief. She had been worried that he might demand something totally unreasonable.

'Thank you, Joran.'

'My pleasure.'

He ordered a meal for them and they ate in near silence. Afterwards he looked at her, his expression serious. 'We need to talk about what happened, really talk about it, Channa. Openly and honestly.'

She did not pretend to misunderstand. 'Yes. I know. As allies. Temporary allies, anyway.'

'Somehow, your people have got wind of the assassination attempt and they're demanding to speak to you.'

She sat bolt upright. 'How could they have known? Did one of your people release the information?'

'No. I can vouch for my people, believe me. I would stake my life that it wasn't them.'

She hoped that he had not drawn the same conclusions from this news as she had, but on second thoughts, she doubted that he would have missed any of the implications. Stupid he was not. Her first impressions of him had been wrong, very wrong. Terrans were just - different. Brought up in another way entirely, they seemed silly only at first. When you got to know them, you realised that some of them had good brains, even if they were decadent and self-indulgent in their lifestyle. 'How could they have known, then?' she repeated slowly.

'I've been wondering the same thing.' He leaned forward and laid his hand on hers. 'Channa - you look so very tired. Would you like me to stall them until the morning?'

'I'd like it,' she admitted, allowing herself a moment's honesty, even if it did betray weakness, 'but I'd better not. It'd only give Reinal more ammunition against me.' She found the warmth of Joran's hand comforting after the shiny sterility of her robotic companion and did not pull away.

'You're aware of the possibility that your own people set up the attack?'

'I think it's a probability, not a possibility, Joran. I realised that immediately you said you couldn't tell whether the assassin was a Deoran or a Shavlan. Then, when you talked about having to make penalty payments if I were killed, well, it made even more sense. Reinal was never one to miss an opportunity for gain, whatever the human cost.'

The grip on her hand tightened, as if in sympathy, and she repeated, slowly and painfully, 'Oh yes, Joran, I realised that probability almost immediately. It was a gut feeling, too strong to have no truth in it.' She'd been taught always to give full consideration to a conclusion based on intuition, always to consider every possibility. You did not win wars by remaining always predictable, by following only a narrow logical pathway.

‘This adds another dimension to our game, then. Do you trust me enough, Channa, to allow me to help you deal with your own people tonight?’ He removed his hand and she missed the comfort of the contact. It was like that in battle. A comrade’s support could help a great deal. And this was a kind of battle.

She did not reply at once, sitting for a moment slumped in the chair, her eyes unfocused, then she looked at him. ‘Yes, I think I do trust you enough. But I don’t think this assassination is an official step, nor will it have been sanctioned by the Council. It is, it must be, the Supreme Commander and his faction who have set it up, without consulting the Council. I have too many breeding links among other groups in the high nobility. And my father is still there to protect my interests. My death would be a serious loss to my faction and therefore to my kin-alliances.’ And her father would not have agreed to it for any reason less than outright winning of the war. She knew that. He had never spoken of his affection for her, but she knew it was there, knew it beyond doubt.

She fell silent for a moment, then looked Joran straight in the eyes. ‘I must admit, however, to being surprised that the assassins got past your defences. I had thought that your technology, being so superior to ours, would have coped with anything the Shavlan or the Deorin could try.’

‘They didn’t penetrate our defences, exactly. They were here already, drugged and buried in life pods beneath the ground. It was the only logical site on the island for a base, after all. Had they been conscious we’d have noticed them. Their body processes must have been slowed down dramatically, dangerously so.’

‘Body plants. An old technique, used by both sides. A high proportion of them die. There were two of them, then? Only two? There are usually spares.’

‘We’re checking that now. I’ll let you know if we find anything.’

‘Did the other assassin yield any useful information?’

‘No. There wasn’t enough left of her to revive and interrogate.’

‘The clothing, then? Any clues from that?’

‘Could have been made anywhere on the planet. All your peasants wear the same sort of clothes. The same as peasants everywhere, in fact.’

‘Physical types?’

‘Both like the one you saw. Could have come from anywhere on the planet. Totally nondescript. Your two nations are descended from the same stock, after all. There are no major physical differences, only the ideological ones.’

‘Those are enough.’ She stood up and began to pace. She always found it easier to think on her feet.

‘Joran, I would appreciate some time to think things through before I report back to the Council. Can you stall my people for another hour? Say I’m sleeping or something?’

‘Yes, of course. I’ll come back for you.’

‘Very well.’

She hardly noticed him go, nor did she now notice the presence of the robot. She ran through the exercises she had been taught to promote intense concentration, then paced up and down, thinking steadily for most of that hour. She rather suspected that her life depended upon her conclusions, and she had always been at her best under pressure.

5

When Joran returned, Channa was ready for him, standing facing the door in one of the ultra-militaristic postures her people favoured.

‘Please sit down!’ she said crisply, but she herself remained standing. ‘Now, let me get a few things straight. Did you tell my people where the attack took place?’

‘We gave them no details, except to say that you were uninjured and would report in as soon as you

were awake.'

'Then can we pretend that the attack took place in my quarters and that my uniforms were all destroyed?'

'If you wish.' He could not hide his surprise at the triviality of this request.

She guessed what he was thinking. 'They'll not like me being out of uniform, Joran. We rarely wear anything else. Something as frivolous as that could give Reinal ammunition against me. Details can be crucial when an opponent wants an edge over you.'

'Then I'll release someone to programme another uniform for you. It won't take long.'

She was instantly suspicious. 'The com-unit told me that wasn't possible.'

'It wasn't while we were checking the base, and while it had a low priority, but if I give it a high priority, we can put someone on to it at once. Would it really help you that much?'

'Yes.'

He spoke briefly into the com-unit, then asked her to put her torn uniform into the dispenser to provide the system with an exact sample of what was required. That done, he looked at her questioningly. 'What else?'

'I need to know the precise reasons you gave them to explain why I was not immediately available.'

'I said that the medic had given you a drug to make you sleep and counteract the shock.'

'It's a pity you told them that. Could you manage to inform them that it was done without my consent, do you think? I don't want to give Reinal any grounds for accusing me of weakness.'

'As you wish. Do you intend to share your strategies with me?'

'I don't have any, not exactly. I'll have to play it by ear. I can't hamper myself with preconceptions when I don't know all the facts. But I may at one stage demand to be returned to my own people - which demand you will refuse, I hope?'

'Of course. I would anyway. Once an envoy has been selected, no replacements are allowed, except at my request. No exceptions made.'

'That gives Reinal a very good reason for further attempts to get rid of me. Still, it's the lesser of two evils. Another thing - have they any idea of how long you expect these negotiations to last?'

'No.'

'Then please don't tell them yet! If they think I'm going to be away for so long, whether I want to be away or not, they'll find it suspicious.'

'I gather that they're not very trusting, even of someone like you.'

'Neither would I be, in their place, not with a lone envoy from another alliance group. Besides, one person is too easy to subvert. That term of negotiation was very much disliked. I myself would prefer to be one of a team. For my own safety.'

'Not possible, I'm afraid. Incompatible with our processes. And your enemies in Shavla? The ones who arranged the attack against you? How will you deal with them?'

'I don't know yet. I haven't ruled out absolutely the possibility that it was your people or the Deorin who staged the attack, though I think the probability is that it was my own people - or Reinal's, rather. I shall need to allow for all possibilities in my actions. I intend to succeed in this mediation, even though your terms are most unfavourable to my personal survival.'

Joran was shaken. 'You don't seem as upset as I would have expected at the idea of your own people conspiring to kill you.'

She shrugged. 'All life is a struggle.'

I wonder if we're becoming rather too civilised on Terra, he thought. Such resilience has to be admired. I must pursue that hypothesis later. If I'm right, we can build a little more stress into our mediator training processes, or even send our trainees off-world in the early stages. Perhaps that's a future possibility for Shavla to earn some trade credits offering training for those working in physically dangerous fields.

Channa's voice interrupted his cogitations. 'I'd accept death willingly, Joran, if I thought it would help the war effort. Make no mistake about that. I would give my life for Shavla without a second thought. But it wouldn't help Shavla, or my faction, for me to die now; it would only advantage Reinal and his faction.'

Therefore I shall continue to fight for my life. I rather suspect that the Supreme Commander has been just the tiniest bit stupid, showing his hand so early. My kinfolk will be alerted.'

'Who are your kinfolk?'

'As I've told you before, I have rather broad connections across the old nobility, unusually broad, though the Harravays are closest. My family has always mated cleverly. For that reason, the rights to father one of my children will be much sought after and I may even have to have more than my quota of offspring.'

She shuddered slightly. 'Families have been bidding for me for years. My father keeps them guessing. It gains him important connections. And it keeps me from the breeding pens. He knows how I feel.'

'You don't want children?'

'Of course not! Breeding women live like animals, penned for safety, sheltered from attack. Afterwards, one has to go to a Correction Centre before one is allowed to resume duties, to verify that the experience has not weakened the brain.'

'If all women feel like that, I'm surprised that you have such a high rate of population growth.'

'They don't all feel like that. Some women choose to become brood mothers rather than join the military, just as some men opt for behind-the-lines duties - men of low rank, usually.' The words rang with contempt.

'And your own breeding links? Are they so important?'

'Crucial, as for all those of the nobility. Because they share common interests, it's breeding kin who are most likely to support each other. Not always, but most likely. When I report to the Supreme Commander now, I must try to alert my faction and kin to the possibility that someone back in Shavla is trying to kill me, though my words, however well disguised, will also warn Reinal to be more careful in future. That can't be helped. I must warn those who are of my allegiance. I think the only way would be - Joran, can you insist that a Decision Group be assembled to speak to me, not just Reinal and his aides? It would be well worth a further delay.'

'Easily.' Again, he gave a series of crisp orders into the com-unit, some of which made sense to Channa, and some of which seemed strange. She must pursue the matter of Joran's allegiances and kin-ties more closely, if possible. How did Terrans choose allies? Surely they did not function alone in their societies, however advanced? Was his cohabitation group such an alliance? How had he chosen his breeding partners? There might be weaknesses there that she could turn to her own personal advantage.

While they were waiting for a response, her uniform arrived and she went to change into it with great relief. She had felt most uncomfortable in such a provocative garment.

After a few minutes, the metallic voice informed them that a Decision Group was already waiting to speak to the Envoy.

'Ah,' Channa smiled. 'My kinfolk must be suspicious already, or at least keeping a very careful eye on Reinal. That's good.'

'Are you ready or do you need more time?'

'I'm ready.' But she could feel the tension crawling slowly through her guts. This meeting was life or death to her. She must not let her anger at Reinal show. She must be alert to every nuance of every word spoken. Now was not the time to think of revenge, though that must, and would, come later.

The interview with the Supreme Commander was conducted from a special com-room which had only just been completed. It was unnerving, as if they were in the same room. Joran watched Channa closely and had to admire her self-control as well as her acting ability. Throughout the interview she managed to appear younger, a little afraid, awed by those to whom she spoke, but eager to do her duty. He noted this with appreciation, but kept his own expression bland and relaxed, playing to perfection the decadent Terran they expected to see. Lilla would be chuckling as she watched this.

Channa remained standing, clicking her heels and saluting like an automaton, but internally she was exultant. Nerlin Harravay was a member of the Decision Group. Their closest kin-alliance. Her father had done well.

'Zone Leader Harknell,' Reinal acknowledged, his voice as harsh as ever. 'Are you all right? No injuries?'

'I'm fine, Supreme Commander. Nothing but a few bruises. The assassination attempt failed, thanks to the peace robot.'

'Why were you not immediately available to speak to me? You must have known I'd want a first-hand account.'

'It's our fault, I'm afraid,' Joran interposed. 'Our medic had given Envoy Harknell a sedative. She didn't realise what he was doing and has already made her displeasure abundantly clear, so can we please let the matter drop now!' He sighed petulantly, threw an irritated look at Channa and lounged back in his chair, watching disgust register on all the faces of the Decision Group. These Shavlan are too easily influenced by outward appearances, he thought idly. That's a weakness. I wonder how Channa would react if I changed her outward appearance, maybe forcing her to wear our clothes?

'I'm feeling perfectly lucid now, sir,' said Channa crisply, clicking her heels together again, and ignoring Joran's exaggerated wince, 'and eager to make my report.'

'Well, see that you take no medication in future. We prefer you to remain alert and in full control of yourself at all times.'

'Yes, sir!'

'These people may be working on your mind without you even realising it.' Reinal made no attempt to disguise his distrust of the Peace Mediator.

'You become offensive, Supreme Commander,' said Joran mildly. 'Are you deliberately trying to provoke me? You won't do it, you know. If you become too insulting, I shall simply end this com-session. Your choice.'

The woman next to Reinal leaned forward. 'No offence intended, Mediator.'

Joran smiled mockingly, but did not pursue the matter.

Reinal's face was ominously flushed. 'Well then, Zone Leader Harknell, proceed with your report!'

In a calm voice, Channa gave an amended version of the attack. She volunteered the information that the assassin had not been identifiable, and followed that by a seemingly careless aside that it could even have been a Shavlan attack, for all the Terrans had been able to find out about him, since he spoke both languages fluently.

'Your permission to put a question to my kinswoman, Supreme Commander?' Nerlin Harravay did not wait for that permission, but addressed Channa immediately. 'Are you sure of this, kinswoman, sure that it could even have been a Shavlan attack? There are factions who disapprove of the peace negotiations, and who would prefer to kill their own accredited envoy rather than submit to an enforced peace. We are aware of that.'

Joran watched with delight as Channa hesitated, seeming slightly flustered. Not bad, he thought, not bad at all, Channa Harknell. I must take particular care when you start to seem young and innocent like that. You've got it down to a fine art.

'Well,' she said reluctantly, 'I was only making a casual remark, kinsman. I hadn't really thought it through . . . perhaps I shouldn't have spoken . . . but, yes, I am sure of my facts. There was nothing to indicate the man's nationality.'

'Did you interrogate him yourself?'

'No - but I did observe him closely at the time of the attack. The mediator said he could have been of either nationality and I'm told that mediators are not allowed to lie to us. I think that might be true - though of course, we must allow for the converse. And the peace robot's evidence corroborates everything the Mediator told me. I'm told that robots can't lie, either, and I think that there's an even higher likelihood of that being true. I've viewed a lot of Confederation info-tapes and they all suggest the same thing.'

Her kinsman's face showed his revulsion. 'Robots! Abominations, all of them! Be careful. You're beginning to sound as if you approve of them, Channa.'

'Like you, I have always considered them abominations, kinsman, but I've now seen some important uses for them - after all, one of them did save my life - and I'd be a fool not to report that. We do use them ourselves when there is a genuine need - in the mines, for instance. It's Shavla's future that concerns

me, not our own dislike of counterfeit humans.’ She allowed a wistful tone to creep into her voice. You would have sworn there were tears in her eyes. She looked about twenty.

Nerlin nodded, murmuring, ‘We all bow to Shavla’s need,’ and looked sideways at the Supreme Commander in a way that showed the two men were not friends, or even willing allies.

‘I request permission to return to Shavla,’ Channa said, before Reinal could do more than open his mouth. ‘The good of the Unity is the most important thing, and this incident may have affected my ability to gain the best terms.’

‘Agreed,’ said Reinal at once. ‘Very proper sentiments.’

‘Sorry, but that’s just not possible!’ drawled Joran.

Reinal glared at him.

‘We never change envoys in the middle of a mediation. It’s a firm rule. This was made perfectly clear to all concerned before we began.’

‘But if the Zone Leader feels unsure of her own capacities . . .’

‘There’s nothing wrong with her capacities. She’s just tired and not thinking as clearly as normal. Your Envoy has a fine mind, though she is a trifle suspicious of everything.’

Channa cast him a convincing glance of suppressed annoyance. ‘Rules should be broken if they prove to be a hindrance to speedy resolution, Mediator.’

‘Indeed they should - but you also forget that we have made considerable progress, Envoy.’

‘Progress?’ Reinal’s voice was sharp. ‘How can you have made progress without consulting the Supreme Council?’

‘Your Envoy has acknowledged that the first of our terms is reasonable,’ Joran volunteered.

‘Explain that, Zone Leader!’ Reinal’s tone was distinctly threatening.

Channa cast another glance of dislike at Joran, this time not assumed, then faced her interrogators. ‘I’ve done no more than admit to the Mediator that a restoration of the ecological balance would be an advantage to Shavla, and I’ve said that I thought it likely that the Supreme Council would accede to that term,’ she said sharply. ‘I didn’t think I was overstepping my brief in doing that.’

‘Explain your terminology! What do you mean by ecological balance? And you will accept a written reprimand for making any sort of comment upon a term offered before consulting us!’

Her kinsman did not protest that. Pity. It meant that he too was suspicious that she might be subverted, kin-ties or not. She had a fleeting wish that they would withdraw her - it’d be safer by far than this. Then she admitted to herself that she would hate to leave just now. If only she hadn’t been the sole envoy, though!

She realised that Reinal was still waiting for her to speak. ‘Reprimand accepted. I bow to Shavla’s need.’

She lowered her head briefly, then continued, in the same crisp impersonal tones, ‘Honoured leader, Confederation technology permits rapid restoration of the vegetation and unbelievably rapid re-forestation. Trees can be grown overnight. I had intended to discuss this when making my next report and have been studying info-tapes on the subject in the evenings in order to . . .’

‘Evenings!’ interrupted Reinal, seizing another opportunity to find fault. ‘Why don’t the negotiations continue throughout your waking hours? You’re being incredibly remiss, Harknell.’

‘My fault again,’ said Joran, raising his eyes to the ceiling. ‘Dear me, it is hard to please some people! I choose not to work through the evenings, Supreme Commander. One must have some relaxation, otherwise one becomes stale. Your Envoy has already indicated her preference for working every hour of the day, but I refused to do it.’

Reinal looked sour, not pleased to lose a chance to administer a reprimand. ‘I see. Continue, please, Zone Leader.’

‘. . . in order to be able to furnish full background knowledge to our Scientific Corps. I could see no possible disadvantage in that term and a great many advantages for Shavla in a rapidly restored supply of wood and food. But I did not accept the term; I only said I thought it reasonable. However, if I have done wrong, I accept your reprimand and . . .’

Her kinsman leaned forward. ‘Those of our kin-alliance have always been among the first to sense an

advantage for Shavla,' he said mildly. 'Let us not be precipitate with our reprimands, Deslar. This is only the eagerness of youth. Is what you say possible, Channa? Can trees indeed be grown overnight, and will Those of the Confederation share this knowledge freely with us?'

His use of her first name was a sign of restored approval, just as addressing Reinal by his first name in public was a put-down and a warning. Of course, the Harravays owned large tracts of forest and cropland, so naturally Nerlin would be interested in restoring the ecological balance. It would make his faction even richer. Sheer chance in the terms of settlement had given her a lever to motivate her potential ally in this Decision Group. The only question was the price she would have to pay for Nerlin's full support. Kristan, probably. The Harravays always drove hard bargains. They were renowned for it. Her face betrayed nothing of her thoughts, just the alert attention of a dutiful subordinate. 'Yes, it's possible, kinsman. I've seen it done here myself. And yes, they intend to share this knowledge freely with us, do you not, Mediator?'

Joran nodded. 'Of course. We always require restoration of the ecological balance as a preliminary condition of mediation if the environment has been damaged - and yours has been very badly damaged. Our knowledge of this field is completely at your service to ensure rapid implementation, my dear sir. So ugly, those burnt-out tracts! And the air pollution is escalating rapidly in your manufacturing areas.' Now it was Channa's turn to admire his talented performance. The more she got to know him, the more she realised that his languidness was just a pose, probably designed to irritate her - which it had done at first - as it was irritating Reinal now.

The members of the Decision Group looked at one other, and a grey-haired woman spoke. 'This was not, then, precipitate on Envoy Harknell's part, Deslar. I too would have welcomed such a condition, for Shavla's sake. It's common knowledge that we're short of food, as well as wood. If trees can be grown overnight, so can grains and vegetables. The Envoy's actions do not merit a reprimand and I move that it be deleted from the records.'

Channa hid her satisfaction. Meran Thilsen was an unknown quantity who was too well-connected to be tampered with by the Reinals. She rarely gave open support to any faction. There had even been rumours that she disapproved of war, but her prowess in battle had scotched that effectively. Best of all, Meran belonged to another loosely-knit allegiance group with large country estates in the hotlands which supplied a large percentage of Shavla's fruit and vegetables.

Channa spoke brightly. 'I've been given access to their library in the evenings, honoured officials, and am trying to gain as much knowledge as possible for Shavla, so that my time here is not wasted.'

Reinal glared at Meran then turned back to Channa. 'There seems to be nothing to cavil about in that term, then - but the Supreme Council will need to discuss it before it can be ratified. You will refrain from making any comments in future without our approval, Zone Leader, however favourable the terms they offer may seem to you!'

'I hear and obey, Supreme Commander.'

Joran intervened. 'I'm afraid that's just not possible, Supreme Commander. It really isn't! Our conditions specify that the Envoy must be given the power to comment on any term we propose.' His tone was distinctly pettish.

'She can decide nothing!' Reinal thumped the table.

'No, but her comments are necessary and will save us all a great deal of time.'

Another member of the decision group intervened. Georn Jansiv's faction was closely allied to the Reinals. 'Zone Leader Harknell is only required to give an opinion, Supreme Commander, not to make a commitment.'

Channa was internally jubilant. Reinal was allowing his annoyance that she had been chosen as Envoy and his desire to replace her to show much too clearly. Faction Harknell allies would now keep a more careful watch on him. They would not want to lose what they thought of as the advantage of having her as Envoy. She knew how tenuous that advantage was, but she did not intend to enlighten them at the moment. Perhaps, if she were really careful, she might yet be able to preserve her career.

Reinal grunted. 'Continue your report, then, Zone Leader.'

'I have some documentation ready to send, sir, which will help our understanding of how the restoration of the ecological balance can be achieved. Technical aid will be supplied freely by Those of the Confederation if we accept this condition - and it will be supplied immediately.'

'Send the information, then.' Reinal turned to the other members of the committee. 'Is that term provisionally agreed?' All four nodded without hesitation.

'I'll take it to the Supreme Council, then, for ratification.' This was a mere formality, as they all knew.

'And about the Envoy's request to be reassigned?' put in Nerlin.

'Denied.' Meran.

'Put on pend. Behaviour to be reviewed regularly.' Georn.

'Refused.' Sharifa Bessle. Another dark horse. Who knew what side she would take in a crisis? Her kin groups were mostly newcomers to the high nobility, though the family had made one or two useful connections in recent decades. Unfortunately they were urban-based, like the Reinals.

Nerlin spoke again. 'This ecological aid will be of great use to our people. Are we all agreed that the reprimand be deleted from the record? My kinswoman is young. She allowed her desire to help Shavla to overcome her knowledge of protocol. Not an uncommon fault in the young. We must not penalise her too heavily. Her devotion to Shavla is beyond doubt.'

Channa waited with bated breath. Until the Supreme Commander agreed officially to it being expunged from the records, the reprimand still stood.

Reinal, lips tight and disapproving, looked round at his colleagues. 'Agreed, then.' The glance he cast at Meran was anything but friendly. Obviously she had been chosen for her possible support, or at least neutrality, and he considered himself let down. Well, the Thilsens had good connections and there was nothing to stop the Harknells forming an alliance with them if it came to a crisis. There was no bad blood between the factions.

Her kinsman leaned forward. 'I have a personal message for you, Channa. My son sends his greetings.' Channa was relieved when Reinal roared at Nerlin to keep personal considerations out of this. Nerlin begged his pardon, but sent a questioning glance to Channa, who shrugged her shoulders and nodded very slightly to signify a possible yes.

Joran decided it was time to intervene. There were messages passing here which he did not fully understand. 'I think before we break contact I should repeat what I said earlier, Supreme Commander, so that the Confederation's inflexibility on the point may be fully understood. No matter what your Envoy wishes, no matter what you wish or demand, we do not allow envoys to be removed once they have been selected - the only exceptions being death or our own request. These are serious negotiations and the terms, to which you have already agreed, are immutable. They must be adhered to, or the negotiations will cease.'

Reinal sneered openly. 'If we decide to disown an envoy, what can you do? How will you get any peace terms accepted then?'

Joran smiled sweetly. 'We don't need to have them accepted, Supreme Commander. It's you who need that. We can proceed quite well with establishing peace on this world if Shavla is given occupied nation status. In fact, in many ways, it's the easiest path to tread. Much less trouble for the mediator! None of this tedious wrangling with an overly suspicious Envoy.' He cast a long-suffering look at Channa as he spoke. 'Oh, and by the way, your Envoy was correct when she said that I tell only the truth - though I do not guarantee to tell all of it.'

'You dare not impose occupied nation status on us!' Reinal was puce with suppressed fury.

'We dare do anything, Supreme Commander - such a mouthful, that title, how do you stand it? We abandoned titles aeons ago. But you see, unfortunately for me, our regulations specify that we must first try mediation. And regulations are regulations. We all understand that, don't we? So the choice is quite literally yours at this stage, not mine.' He grinned and left it at that. 'Anyway, I'm fairly satisfied with this choice of envoy, though I could wish for more flexibility. She is highly intelligent, if somewhat suspicious of everything I do. And she is still alive.' He sat back, smiling gently, as though he had not just delivered a very severe ultimatum.

Channa kept her face expressionless, but only with difficulty. Point to you, Joran Lovrel, she thought exultantly. Her kinsman did not even attempt to hide his amusement and smiled openly at Reinal. Even Meran had the hint of a curve on her thin lips.

Before anyone could say anything else, Joran declared, 'Time is up. We don't like to spend too long on these reports. They distract the envoys from their main task, which is to negotiate a permanent peace for their people.'

Reinal had not stopped scowling. 'See that you keep better watch over our Envoy this time, then, Mediator! And you, Zone Leader Harknell, stay very alert! They will try to subvert you; they're trying already. Keep faith with Shavla! Do not let them destroy all we have fought for!'

'They will never succeed!' she cried in ringing martial tones, giving a raised hand salute. 'Shavla nourished me and for Shavla will I give my all!'

Joran's voice was gentle, bored. 'Well, Supreme Commander, as you can see, your Envoy is still loyal to Shavla. Remarkable, in the circumstances, is it not?'

For a moment, he caught Reinal's eyes and the two men stared at each other, hatred showing in the black eyes, the blue ones remaining bland and expressionless.

Nerlin nodded gently, as if pleased by this turn of events.

Joran continued smoothly, 'And please believe me, Supreme Commander, when I tell you, as I have told you from the first, that we are not trying to destroy Shavla. The Deorin will gain no advantage over you from these negotiations. Or you over them.' He lounged back in his chair. 'Now, we must, we really must, break contact. Your Envoy is in desperate need of rest, and I'm already contravening our medic's instructions by allowing her to speak to you for so long.'

He raised a hand, as if to turn off a switch, then leaned forward again, 'Oh, and by the way, you need not worry about your Envoy's future safety. We've upgraded our defences - not to mention running a depth check under the base. We found two more body plants, but unfortunately, they were no longer - er - usable by the time we had retrieved them.'

'I'm pleased to hear of your vigilance,' Reinal said, but his expression was sour.

'Yes, we none of us want any more attacks on your Envoy's life, eh? We of the Confederation care very greatly about her continuing safety, you see - as does the Supreme Council, I'm sure. Oh, and we mustn't forget her kinfolk, must we? Such a delightful young woman is bound to have a lot of friends who care about her welfare.' He glanced at Nerlin, who nodded very slightly.

Joran broke the circuit, then leaned back in his chair, grinning broadly at Channa. 'That's given them a few things to think of, eh?'

She sat down in the nearest chair and let out her breath in a whoosh of relief, looking at him with more respect than previously. 'That was masterly.'

'You were rather clever, too, Channa. I congratulate you.'

'It was fortuitous that Nerlin was a member of the Decision Group.'

'Oh, come! Fortuitous indeed! How your father must have schemed to place him there!'

She shrugged. 'Well, Nerlin does like to be in the thick of things. He's a cousin of sorts, you know.' Her face clouded suddenly.

'Something wrong?'

'Nerlin's been seeking our agreement to my breeding with his son for years. That's why he risked Reinal's wrath to make that personal remark. It was an open statement of terms. If I accept Nerlin's help, and obviously I shall have to, I must also bear his son a child.' She did not attempt to conceal her revulsion at the thought.

'What's wrong with the son?'

'Kristan has a vicious nature. Our family estates are close enough for us to have grown up together, though he was a few years older than me, of course. He bullied me mercilessly as a child, going beyond normal childish play. It was quite painful at times, though my maternal uncle kept an eye on me. Kristan hasn't changed, only grown worse. To live in his breeding pens would be - extremely unpleasant. He treats his women roughly. And he's a very large, strong person.' She glanced down at her own petite

figure with regret.

‘Couldn't your family help?’

‘Not till after the birth. One loses all personal rights when one's pregnant, you know. One becomes both the responsibility and the property of the baby's father. If the father is not kind, life can be difficult. I shall not breed to Kristan, except as a final resort. And even then, only on very special terms. I must rely on my father's help there. He knows my feelings about Kristan, knows what Kristan's like, too. But I had to leave Nerlin with some hope.’

She sighed and allowed herself to sag against the back of the couch. I'm exhausted, she thought tiredly. Fortunately, there was no one who mattered to see her weakness now. It did not occur to her that Joran could see it. She was growing used to his presence, even coming to trust him a little - as far as her personal safety was concerned, anyway.

‘Are you sure you're all right, Channa?’

‘Yes.’ But to her annoyance her voice trembled just a little as she spoke. And she was not acting this time.

‘You're not all right.’ He moved forward and studied her face closely. ‘It's probably delayed shock.’ Trust him to notice.

‘You need a good rest. Let me take you back to your quarters.’

They walked slowly along the corridors, a robot in front and one behind. When they arrived, Joran put an arm round her shoulders in a comradely hug. ‘It's been a hard day for you, Channa. There's no shame in being tired.’

She clung to him for a minute, finding the sensation of closeness comforting and his body firmer than she would have expected in one so decadent. Her words came out hesitantly, for it was something she had not admitted before, even to herself. ‘It's just - I didn't realise when I agreed to become Envoy how alone I would be, nor did I realise how much I would have to guard myself from my own people. Stupid of me, really. I underestimated Reinal's power base, and his ruthlessness. As we all have.’ She was quiet for a moment, then raised her head to look him directly in the face. ‘I thank you for your support just now, Joran Lovrel.’

‘My pleasure. Are you tired?’ He ran a fingertip lightly along her arm, sending a frisson of desire down her spine. Strange, that, she thought. She rarely experienced such a response. With her, sex was usually a bargaining point.

She watched his face through her eyelashes.

He smiled down at her. He had noted the sudden transition from frankness to calculation. Of course Channa Harknell had realised that treachery would be attempted by Reinal's faction once she became Envoy, though not, perhaps, that they would seek her death so soon.

‘I'm very grateful for your help just now,’ she said softly. The words were formal, a ritual acknowledgment, but her expression was inviting as she leaned slightly against him and sighed.

He hid a grin. Did she think he was as gullible as Reinal? She was as tough as the alloy from which they made peace robots. This display of girlish weakness had some purpose. He put his arm around her again, since it seemed to be expected. Pity her hair was so short. He preferred long hair on redheads. ‘It's common for people to feel like that after a tough experience,’ he said soothingly. ‘It's just physical reaction to the stress of your own people's treachery.’

‘Yes. I know that, of course. But it doesn't stop me feeling - well, upset.’

She turned towards the bed chamber, brushing her breasts against him, and allowing her breathing to deepen very slightly. Gently he stroked her cheek and her quick intake of breath and lack of attempt to repulse him made him raise her chin again and look into her eyes. ‘If you wish, we could suspend formalities for an hour or two, Channa, and pretend that we're just a man and woman with needs to satisfy.’

‘I - I don't th . . . ’ But her tone was unconvincing and she did not pull away.

He began to kiss her with great expertise and she relaxed in his arms. She might as well enjoy this. Which she did, though he prolonged the preliminaries more than she was accustomed to. Sexual frustration, she

told herself, could cloud the judgement as much as any other tension. She was surprised when her body responded to his with frantic eagerness. Well, it had been a while since she had visited a relaxation centre. It was better to satisfy the needs of the body, even with a Terran, than to let tension build up. Only afterwards, when Joran had left her quarters, did she realise that neither of them had taken any precautions. She was annoyed with herself, but it seemed hardly likely that a Terran would take risks with a primitive. With their advanced civilisation, they probably had unobtrusive means of birth control. And if he had impregnated her, they could no doubt arrange for a quick abortion just as easily. Such things were common enough among the Shavlan nobility and must be even easier with Terran technology.

The mating had been surprisingly pleasant, though. Joran was much more skilful than her other partners had been. Did the Terrans make an art of everything? She stretched languorously and lay there with a smile lurking at the corners of her mouth. Now it was obvious why they chose mediators of the opposite sex. He had shown no reluctance to indulge in a mating session. Well, two could play at that game. The mating was, she considered, more than justified by its potential to gain her some advantage. If she read the man aright, he would not be able to banish a certain tenderness of feeling for her after this, especially if they repeated the exercise a few times. Affection had certainly been apparent when he spoke of the mothers of his children, even so long after the breeding connections.

Another thought occurred to her, an intriguing idea. Could it be that Terrans did not even need breeding pens, with war long extinct on their planet? None of the info-tapes had referred to their breeding customs. What if she were to breed with him? That might have certain advantages if peace really was achieved. She had a moral obligation to breed three times, but there were no rules about who with. Breeding with an off-worlder might allow her to remain at the Harknell residence during her pregnancy. After she had done her childbearing duty, she would avoid further pregnancies if she possibly could, whatever her father said about childbearing paying dividends. He did not have to retire to breeding pens! He did not have to lose his citizen's rights! He did not have to go through verification afterwards! No, the risks of breeding were too great for a woman with ambitions. That path was not for her. Apart from fulfilling her quota, of course. Shavla's need, not hers, there.

It did not occur to Channa for quite some time that feelings of tenderness towards a regular sex partner could work both ways, though it did to Joran, who was delighted by the day's conclusion. She was an enthusiastic lover, if a trifle direct, and much more appealing to him personally than his last disputant had been. He could grow quite fond of Channa Harknell. He hoped she would grow fond of him, too. It would make the negotiations so much easier.

6

When Channa awoke, the lighting automatically increased to something like daylight and the robot moved away from her side to stand near the wall. She did not force herself to jump out of bed, but allowed her body the indulgence of lying there and waking up slowly.

She smiled to herself. Nothing like a good night's sleep for keeping you in top form. Perhaps it was the mating - that had been superb! She still felt warm and satisfied from it. Maybe she had underestimated the possibilities of mating.

A soft chime from the com-unit announced that it had noted her return to consciousness and had something to communicate. Perversely, she kept it waiting, and it did not intrude again. Very polite, these machines, in their own way. How easy life must be in a civilisation not geared to war. You could grow quite used to living with machines which took the hard toil out of life. However, she had better not grow

too used to the convenience. There was nothing like that in Shavla.

'Yes?' she asked at last, curious to know what Joran wanted. It could only be Joran. She was beginning to wonder if there were any other humans in this part of the base. And where exactly were Joran's quarters? She would have preferred to know that, for safety's sake.

'Joran invites you to breakfast with him on the terrace, Channa.' It never failed to annoy her that the machines addressed her by her first name. 'He assures you that the base is now completely safe. And System Control has indicated that you will find your bathing area complete now.'

'Very well. I'll see Joran in an hour, perhaps. I'd like to get some exercise first.' Not good strategy to appear too eager to see him after the mating.

She got out of bed, studiously ignoring the robot, and went into the ablutions unit. Of course, the damned thing followed, peering round the ceramoplast cavern as if it expected to find something hiding in the conduits. Just imagine wasting all this space on an ablutions unit for one person. Her lips curled scornfully as she looked around. And imagine being rich enough to make even such a place attractive!

These thoughts cut off abruptly as she stared at the walls. They had changed from their pristine white of the previous day and the surface now glistened and rippled like water. Shadowy sea plants waved their fronds and she could see semi-transparent fish shapes moving to and fro among the weeds. Yet the surface was solid and still felt like normal ceramoplast when she touched it, as she was impelled to do several times. Another of their marvels to dazzle the primitives with, she thought bitterly.

She could not help feeling envious of the Terrans, living a life of luxury, but it was the thought of their libraries which made her most envious. She wished there were even a tenth of those library facilities in Shavla. To fill your life with learning! To understand the universe you lived in! Now, there was the ultimate richness. Knowledge was power, she had always been taught, but she knew that she loved knowing things for their own sake, Shavla forgive her.

Ablutions over, she ordered some garments suitable for exercise, frowned at their over-bright colours, but donned them nonetheless. After all, no one from the Unity would see her wearing them.

She exercised her body ruthlessly in the gymnasium, then took another shower, arguing with the com-unit on principle about the perfumed soap. She would not let the matter drop! She was sure they could do something about it if they wanted. Look how quickly Joran had got her a uniform. Just for good measure, she also complained to the com-unit about the poor choice of clothes, the garish colours and the sloppy styling. They were not to think that they were subverting her to their effete ways, just because . . . She cut off the thought of Joran's skill abruptly. One did not dwell upon such things.

In the end she chose a blue jumpsuit to wear, though she could have ordered another standard uniform since the wardrobe dispenser was now programmed to produce them. That choice was deliberate on her part, of course. Joran would not easily be convinced that she was succumbing to the lures of luxury, but the jumpsuit might make him wonder if she was not softening just a little. She did not even consider ordering one of the flowing gowns that both sexes seemed to favour. There were more of them than anything else in the clothing catalogue. They resembled breeding gowns too much for her ever to feel comfortable in one. And personal discomfort would reduce her capacity to turn whatever occurred to Shavla's advantage.

She followed the robot down to the terrace. The sun was shining outside, and the woods looked particularly mellow and lush. She had forgotten that it was autumn, a good time for raiding. How had they programmed the fast-growing plants to resume normal growth at the correct stage in their cycles?

Joran was sitting waiting for her. 'Did you sleep well?' He raised a hand in a lazy greeting.

'Yes, thank you.' She made no reference to their mating and he did not either, thank goodness. Even to someone as prepared to be flexible as she was, it would have been embarrassing if he had talked about it openly. Mating was necessary, but it was crass vulgarity to refer to it afterwards, or to show any special affection towards a sex partner. Affection was best reserved for fighting companions. Affection and mutual support could help win whole campaigns.

She smiled her best smile at him, one she had rehearsed in front of the mirror until she could summon it up at will. It made her, she thought, appear genuinely happy each time. Joran smiled back and reached

out to clasp her hand briefly. 'A lovely day, isn't it, Channa? After a lovely night.'

He felt her stiffen as he spoke. Oh, the delight of provoking her! He wondered when she would allow him to make love to her again. Mating, she'd called it. What a cold, utilitarian word for one of life's pleasures! He'd guess that it would be quite soon, unless she changed her mind about the efficacy of binding him to her in this way. Poor Channa! What a stunted, spartan life she must have led. No warmth. No real affection. Only political manoeuvring, gruelling training and a perilous existence fighting the Deorin.

Observation tapes were now coming in regularly from concealed tracer devices in both parts of the planet's single butterfly-shaped continent and his knowledge of the subtleties of Shavlan culture was therefore increasing every day. It was a culture with much to admire, he had decided, in spite of the total dedication to belligerence. People were sacrificed to the war effort in every facet of their lives, taught to think only of Shavla or Deora, but how much they achieved, considering their stage of development! They had no individually developed codes of ethics at all, but they did have an enviable unity.

He left the finer points of Deora to Lilla and concentrated his attention on the Shavlans. An intelligent nation, taking everything into consideration - as Channa would no doubt demonstrate, although she did not yet realise that such a demonstration was the main purpose of isolating her here. If she could adapt, her people could adapt, most of them, anyway. A mediation was as simple as that.

Van Makass, the Deoran Envoy, was a more difficult proposition. Lilla said he was a surly brute, suspicious of everything she said or did and prone to violent outbursts of temper. She had not reached the coital stage with him and admitted that she was glad of the presence of the robot, just in case he turned his violence against her. Joran had studied some of the observation tapes and he had to agree with her analysis, though there was something about the Deoran that did not quite ring true. More to the man than appeared on the surface.

Lilla would work hard to earn her money on this contract, though Van was not as difficult to deal with as the female envoy Joran had worked with on his last assignment on Fethran III. She had been hideously tattooed from head to toe and had been as impervious to his personal sexual attractions as she was to any form of change. Sad culture, Fethran, the most regressive on record. In the end, all that the Confederation had been able to do was to separate the combatants, give their world Protected Status and leave the poor creatures to live out their endless iterations and rituals to the bitter end as the population declined in numbers.

He studied Channa thoughtfully. She had a beautiful body, though somewhat over-muscled for his taste. Unusually healthy, too. She had been pronounced disease-free at the pre-arrival medical, and a study was now going on to find out why the Shavlans and the Deorin were relatively free of the viruses and infections usual to planets at their stage of industrial development.

He must definitely try to persuade her to grow her hair, he mused. That shade of red looked particularly good worn long, especially with a hint of curl in it. He felt that he was beginning to build an empathy with her, and she with him, for all her watchfulness. Sex was only part of that rapport, though it could be an important facilitator of affection. And last night her own people had kindly furnished the need for the two of them to form a genuine alliance. Perfect timing, too. Very helpful of Reinal, that!

He smiled warmly across at Channa and nearly burst out laughing as she gave him another of her artificially-bright smiles. How naïve she was about some things! Still, the lack of uniform was a good sign, whatever the motives behind it, and he was sure that there was some ulterior motive there, if he knew anything at all about Channa Harknell. Well, time to shake her confidence in herself a little.

'Would you like me to order for us both?' he asked, in a lightly indifferent voice, which he could see galled her. Oh Channa, you didn't really think you could enthrall me with one sexual encounter, did you? And you so unskilled, too!

'Please. Something different. I'd like to taste as many of your foods as possible.' How could she have found him so attractive last night? she wondered in sudden annoyance. This morning he looked as degenerate as anyone she'd ever seen, behaving as though it was an effort even to speak to her. She gave him another brilliant smile, nonetheless, and was puzzled when he chuckled aloud. She paused and stared

at him, frowning slightly. We'll see how we go today, Joran Lovrel, she thought. I think your decadence will trap you, one way or another, before we're through, but I shall be on the watch every minute. And if mating is one of the keys to using you, then it will be a pleasure to provide the opportunity.

'Dear me,' he said, with lazy amusement, 'is this another way of serving Shavla, to sample our whole cuisine? Shall you have a debriefing when you get back in which you list all the foods you've tasted here? It could start a new sort of war, where you kill the enemy with overfeeding!'

She took a deep breath and refused to be provoked. How dared he joke about something as serious as serving Shavla! 'Not at all, Mediator. It's pure self-gratification. You'd understand my motives if you'd ever eaten a sustabar.' She hadn't realised herself until she came here how delicious food could taste, or the variety that there was elsewhere. Since joining the military, she had grown used to sustabars, varied by field rations and forage when on a sortie. Protein-enriched grain mash and vegetable stew were a common feature of the military's daily diet, except on celebration days, when they made the mash sweet and served stewed fruit with it. How the common soldiers relished that!

She ate better food at the Harknell residence, of course, but not nearly as good as that at the base, where you could have sweet things any time of day or night. A harmless indulgence, surely? Sugar increased your energy levels. Her eyes glistened as the food was served.

After breakfast, Joran seemed immersed in his own thoughts and the view from the terrace. He answered two of her questions absent-mindedly, and even asked her to repeat one remark. 'Aren't we going to continue the negotiations?' she prompted at last, unable to bear the delay any longer. 'I must be able to report continuing progress at each briefing if I'm to survive this task. You know the danger I'm in!' It was as near as she could get to a plea for co-operation.

'Is it that bad?' he asked with mild interest. 'Do you doubt your ability even to come out of this alive?' She nodded, the admission of vulnerability sticking in her throat. 'You saw what they were like last night. Reinal's only waiting for a chance to discredit me. And even if I do survive this, I dread to think of the price I'll have to pay when I return. Already I'm half-committed to breeding with Kristan Harravay, and we're only just beginning the negotiations if what you say is correct. It's highly likely that I shall also have to undergo a full session in a Correction Centre when I do get back, after being away from supervision for so long. And that's not an easy thing to face, even for me.' She shivered at the thought. Everyone had to go through the ordeal of a Correction Centre before they were granted citizenship and no one wished ever to have to repeat the exercise.

'Tell me about Correction Centres,' he suggested, stifling a yawn and twirling one of the ever-present flowers in his fingers.

Why was he obsessed by flowers? 'Which type of Correction Centre?'

'Are there so many?'

'Yes. There are the standard Correction Centres, through which we must all pass after adolescence before we're granted full citizenship. Some have Verification Units, for women who've had a child. And there are Special Correction Centres for exceptional circumstances.' Her eyes became unfocused.

'Some people fail the tests and are never seen again afterwards.'

'What happens to them?'

'They go to serve in the manufactories or the mines or the public breeding pens, because they haven't proved worthy of serving Shavla in a higher capacity. Or, if the women are not considered fit to breed, they're sterilised and trained as recreation whores. Though all service is of value to Shavla, of course.'

'Does this even happen to those of the nobility?'

'It can happen to anyone. I had a cousin once, Mirral. I admired her greatly. She had such a capacity for enjoying life. We were all shocked when she didn't return from Correction. No one said anything, of course - it was as if she'd never existed - but I can't help remembering her sometimes. Thank goodness they didn't ask me about her at my own Correction! I might have said the wrong thing and suffered the same fate, or at least had to undergo minor realignment. And those who've been realigned never get promoted, however well they fight. I hadn't stopped missing Mirral then, I'm afraid.'

'Tell me about her.'

She looked across at him, puzzled.

‘Tell me what makes you look so sad when you remember her!’ he commanded.

‘It’s nothing, not worth talking about.’ Her own emotional reaction shocked her. She had believed she had buried the memory of Mirral long ago. Fool that she was even to have mentioned her to Joran!

Hastily she set her face in tranquil lines, then nearly jumped out of her skin as Joran banged his fist down on the table.

‘Tell me!’

‘It’s nothing, believe me, just something personal, not at all relevant to Shavla.’

‘Tell me!’

‘No!’ She banged her own fist on the table, upsetting the remains of his drink. ‘No! No! No! It’s none of your business! You have no right to pry into my private life!’

His smile was regretful as he stood up. ‘Enjoy your day, Channa.’ He turned to leave.

She sat there for a moment, stunned. Oh no! She’d done it again. Whatever had got into her? ‘I’m sorry! Joran, please come back!’ she managed to choke out.

He remained where he was, looking down at her coldly now. ‘When I ask for some information, there’s always a good reason, Channa. I thought we’d already established the fact that I expect all my questions to be answered without prevarication, as was agreed in the basic terms of negotiation, if you remember. What you may consider unimportant is not necessarily so for me. I’m sorry, but you need to think much more carefully about that. I’ll see you tomorrow.’

‘Please!’ she called after him. ‘Joran, please!’ She tried to follow him, but the robot barred her path.

She stood still then, watching as he left without even a backward glance. No doubt he was pleased to have an excuse not to spend the day with such a primitive person! He’d hardly been able to bother to listen to her this morning, yawning and sighing all through breakfast, not to mention sniffing at his flowers. She picked one up, stared at it in puzzlement, then crumpled it and hurled it to the ground. Damn him! Damn them all! She’d now delayed progress still further and for that, she did deserve a reprimand.

How could Joran be so kind one minute and so capricious the next? But was he capricious? Perhaps he was just serving his people in his own way. His personal loyalties were not the same as hers. She must never forget that. This was the second time he’d made it absolutely plain to her that he would direct the path of their discussions or they would not continue. Why had she betrayed herself so easily? It was unlike her. Until this assignment she had never had even the suspicion of a black mark against her, never behaved in anything but the most correct way. How else would she have been promoted to Zone Leader so young? Now, she was in trouble with Reinal, she was half-committed to breeding with Kristan and she didn’t seem to know herself any more. She was not doing her best for Shavla! Or for her kin-alliances. She was letting her own feelings take precedence. Shame flooded her face with crimson and tears welled in her eyes, but she managed to blink them away.

Joran, watching her on the com-unit, which monitored her every movement, was pleased by her reactions. Poor child! How carefully he was going to play on her emotions. She was as much a sacrificial victim as any in early Terran history. But better to upset one person than to permit genocide. And he would personally guarantee Channa’s survival afterwards, although he could not prevent her from being hurt and changed by the negotiations. First prove you can change the envoy, then deal with the society in which that envoy had grown up.

The robot spoke, interrupting Channa’s musings. ‘Would you like to return to your quarters now, Channa, or would you prefer to take some more exercise?’

Shock made her frank with the creature and Joran, still watching her, was again twisted with pity. ‘What I’d really like is to mix with people. Aren’t there any other people in this base? Can’t I just go and talk to someone? Anyone! We needn’t discuss the negotiations.’

‘I am afraid that would be too dangerous, Channa. Your safety is our prime concern. We cannot risk it.’ She sighed. Long hours of unaccustomed solitude loomed once more before her. ‘Am I allowed to go for a walk, then?’

‘I will check.’ It stood still for a moment, then said, ‘You may go for a walk if you take both robots.’

She bit off a sharp retort. 'Very well.'

The second robot joined them shortly afterwards, but neither made a move.

'Well, can we set off now?' she demanded, impatient to be doing something. Another whole day to be got through alone. And her own fault that it was wasted. Oh, Shavla! She deserved to undergo Correction! What would her father say? She frowned at the two motionless robots. They were identical. If they had not remained where they were, she would not have known which was which.

The one nearest to her, the one she thought of as her personal robot, spoke. 'There is a slight problem, Channa. We shall not be sure which of us you are addressing when you speak. That might affect your safety. You must give us both personal names, as the Terrans do, and we shall display these on our ID panels.'

That shook her out of her misery. 'Names! For pieces of machinery! Ridiculous.'

They stood there, waiting with their usual patience. 'We need names, Channa,' her own robot repeated. After a moment she snapped, 'Oh, very well. You!'

'Yes, Channa?'

'I shall name you - er - Fess.' A panel lit up on the robot's shoulder with the word Fess written in blue-green light. She'd had a playmate called Fess when she was little, a peasant, but a nice lad. Her father had sent him away when she grew older and had refused to tell her where, though he had assured her that Fess and his parents had been well rewarded for the lad's services. It had been her first formal lesson in not growing too attached to the lower orders. 'And you . . .' she stared at the second robot, 'Oh, I don't know. What would you like to be called?'

It simply stood and stared, then, when she didn't continue, it said, 'It is not my place to make such a decision. It is for you to choose a name, Channa.'

She sighed loudly. 'Er - Rolly, then.' The word appeared on that robot's shoulder panel in orange light. She tried to shake off the memories it evoked. Why had she chosen that name? Sentimentality was unproductive. But the memory refused to go away. Her first Junior Corps trainer had been called Rolly, and she'd admired the woman very much - until she grew older, that was, and began to mix with her senior kinfolk among the high nobility. She had soon realised how mechanistic and rigid Rolly's thinking processes were, even though Rolly's training of junior cadets was among the best you could get. Trust her father to have found that out and pulled a few strings to get the woman assigned to his district's Junior Corps. Rolly was so good at disciplining children that she'd even been able to keep Kristan in his place - most of the time, anyway. At the thought of Kristan, Channa scowled. The less she thought of him the happier she would be.

Accompanied by the robots, Channa began to walk through the forest. Fess mainly let her lead the way, but occasionally moved forward and refused, always with the utmost politeness, to allow her to turn along one of the paths.

'Why not?' she demanded, indulging her desire to be as awkward as possible with them, unfeeling machines or not.

'Work is in progress in that section, Channa.'

'More ecological adjustments?' she sneered. 'Haven't you finished that yet?'

'No, not ecological work. New defences being installed. Our security systems are being upgraded after the two attacks inside the base.'

'Oh, yes! We've got to keep ourselves safe, haven't we?' She kicked at a pebble and tore off a branch, shredding its leaves as she walked. Stupid damned off-worlders! Acting all superior! Well, Joran hadn't been so bloody superior when offered the chance to mate, had he? He'd been just like other men, then. Always ready for it. No difference! Except in the matter of skill, her conscience forced her to add. He'd been much more skilful than the other men she'd known, and more caring of her needs, too. Junior sex instruction taught men how to arouse a woman so that there could be maximum mutual benefit, but no man had ever brought her to such a pitch of ecstasy before. Her body throbbed at the memory. Damn him! She began to jog, but the memories would not go away. Or the feeling of arousal.

The unproductive day dragged on. The robots refused to answer unless she addressed them by name.

They also refused to let her continue walking in the woods after an hour or so. Other humans needed exercise, Fess said severely. No, not severely! Why did she keep ascribing emotions to pieces of metal? She was getting as bad as the Terrans.

The swimming pool would be available later, Rolly added, should she wish to use it.

After several hours in her quarters studying an info-program on Terra itself, one which awed her more than she would have admitted to anyone, she signified that she did wish to use the pool as soon as it was available.

When she entered the indoor swimming area, a sparkling expanse of water set in a miniature jungle setting, featuring lush undergrowth and overhanging flower vines, she saw Joran leaving it at the opposite side with a woman. A tall woman with long dark hair and strange, dark-coloured skin. They were laughing together and his arm was around her shoulders. Although he must have seen Channa, he did not even nod a greeting.

She said nothing, just stood and watched the door close behind the two of them. Then she threw herself headfirst into the water and began to thrash up and down the pool as fast as she could move her arms and legs. She did not stop until she was exhausted.

7

In Shavla, Channa's interview with the Decision Group had resulted in a great deal of subtle activity in elevated circles, not to mention rethinking of allegiances. Some of this was obvious to Those of the Confederation on the space transport, for their job it was to study the output of the many hidden monitoring devices. Joran read the summary reports of those observers, as well as viewing as many of the key recordings as he could for himself.

Once the Decision Group had dispersed to their estates, Nerlin Harravay lost no time in contacting Channa's father. He found an official reason for doing so, but he lingered on the vid-phone afterwards to chat. 'I saw my son a few days ago. He's won the unarmed combat finals again.' He laughed. 'Must get it from me. I was always ready for a scrap when I was young. Do you remember us having that fight when we were eleven?'

Sandur Harknell nodded, his face expressionless. It was not like Nerlin to waste time gossiping.

'Mind,' added Nerlin, gently loquacious, 'we were soon found out, weren't we? Our parents realised what had happened.'

'And made us regret it, too.' They had both been beaten for non-co-operation with kinfolk. Publicly beaten, in front of their families at a joint session to reinforce an important lesson in what one owed to those who were both kin and allies, and therefore not allowed to become objects of private hostility. A public beating was not the sort of thing one forgot, even after so many years. He had never beaten his own children in public. There were other ways to ensure obedience. Besides, Channa had rarely needed correcting. It was a pleasure to have a daughter like her.

'I never walk past that place without remembering our fight,' Nerlin continued. 'Do you ever go there?'

'No, not recently. I've been too busy.'

'You should. It's a pleasant walk and regular exercise helps us all to serve Shavla better.' He smiled blandly and quirked one eyebrow interrogatively.

'You're right. I do need more exercise.'

'We must reminisce some more one day. It's good to remember one's roots. Reinforces one's commitment to Shavla.'

'Yes, indeed.'

'Well, I can't waste any more time chatting, Sandur. Serve Shavla! See you very soon.'

Sandur nodded. 'Yes. Serve Shavla!' He walked away from the vid-phone with a thoughtful expression on his face.

Both men went immediately to the rendezvous using the excuse that they needed exercise. Although they were in their fifties, they were in excellent physical condition and made nothing of an eight kлом run. Their destination was a cave hidden in some low rocky hills, midway between their estates.

Sandur was still checking the cave when Nerlin arrived. He had found nothing to suggest that anyone had even visited it recently, let alone planted any spying devices, but it was better to be careful. Secret meetings, if discovered, often led to summary arrest and interrogation, especially since Deslar had become Supreme Commander. 'No sign of intruders.'

Nerlin nodded. 'And this part of the cave is deep in the hillside. We're likely to be as safe here as anywhere, I suppose.' He looked round with a proprietorial air. 'There are no devices that can listen through so much solid rock. I always did like this cave.'

Joran, who was viewing the meeting from his quarters at the Base, smiled. He had been notified the moment it became obvious that a secret rendezvous was being planned. Both men now had a monitoring beam permanently focused on them because of their connection with Channa, a beam capable of eavesdropping through anything.

Nerlin removed an object from his pocket. 'Er - you won't be offended if I just run over the place again myself? I have an improved model of an anti-spying device that my science staff have just designed. One can't be too careful.'

'Of course I don't mind! I'm as anxious to keep this meeting quiet as you are. Reinal is growing importunate and I'm not quite ready to deal with him.'

When Nerlin's equipment had shown the same results as Sandur's, they sat down on the rocky ledge which generations of young Harknells and Harravays had rediscovered and used in the fond belief that their parents did not know where they were. Although the two men were not close blood kin, they could easily have been taken for brothers. Nerlin was considerably taller and Sandur's hair had a reddish tinge to it, but there was a marked resemblance about the face, as much in expression as in features.

'How did the Decision Group meeting go?' Sandur asked, impatient for news of Channa. 'Reinal's put an interdict on publication of information, even to our own Envoy's kin - security of Shavla's the excuse, of course - and I'd rather not challenge him at the moment.'

'Security of Deslar Reinal, more like. We were fools to let him into office. A bad mistake, that.'

'He was more amenable to guidance then,' Sandur said thoughtfully, 'but he's become rather headstrong, not to mention having a tendency to favour his kin blatantly in making senior appointments. That's not appreciated in certain quarters. You may leave the political realignments in my hands.'

Nerlin nodded. 'You're sure you can gain enough support?'

'Oh yes, very sure. It'll just take a little time, that's all. Now, tell me about the meeting with Channa. How did it go?'

'Badly. Reinal was in a foul mood, totally unreasonable. Did you realise they'd put in body plants to assassinate your daughter?'

'What?' Sandur's face became grim, and his eyes flashed ominously in his thin face in a way that always made his subordinates tiptoe around in anticipation of storms to come. After a moment, he said harshly, 'Of course I didn't know! Do you think I'd waste my Channa like that? She has excellent political potential, better than any of my sons. And there are the breeding rights, too.'

Both men were well aware that Nerlin was eager to secure breeding rights with Channa for his son, just as they knew how much Channa disliked Kristan. Of course, she would have to agree eventually - an alliance was inevitable - but Sandur intended to get special terms for her that would keep her away from Kristan's sole control.

In concise phrases, Nerlin communicated the essence of the previous night's interview to his kinsman, perhaps exaggerating the strength of Channa's agreement to breeding with Kristan, but on the whole very accurately reflecting what had happened. He was well aware that the part he had played would place a heavy obligation upon Sandur, so he did not belabour the point.

When he had finished, they sat in silence for a while. They knew each other too well to have to fill every moment with talk.

‘So,’ said Sandur eventually, ‘it seems as if we could become even closer kin - joint grandfathers, no less. But on very special terms, Nerlin, or there's no agreement. You know as well as I do that Kristan has a rough streak in him.’

Nerlin shrugged. ‘I'm sure we can come to some accommodation on that point. Besides, the same traits make him one of our best Interrogators. You can't have it every way.’

‘An Interrogator?’

‘Yes. A Senior Interrogator, the youngest there's ever been.’

‘We of the nobility don't usually offer ourselves as Interrogators.’ Disapproval was evident in his tone.

Nerlin shrugged. ‘He has a gift for it. Shavla's needs be served, not our own.’

‘Did you realise just how friendly Kristan has become with the younger element in Reinal's faction? Not very wise, in view of probable developments.’

Nerlin permitted himself a tight smile. ‘My idea, that. He's pretending that he's had enough of my - er - dictatorial and unreasonable attitude. And as it's known that I keep him on a tight leash, that ploy has some credibility. He may get us some useful information about Reinal's alliances. It's always a help to know who may cause trouble after a coup. Give me a couple of days' warning before you act against Faction Reinal, if you can. We don't want Kristan's name irrevocably linked with theirs.’

Sandur nodded. ‘Very well. And what about the rest of the Decision Group? How did they line up?’

‘Not as dear Deslar expected. Meran showed her displeasure with the way he's going about things quite plainly.’

‘Excellent. What caused that?’

‘Channa told us that Those of the Confederation want to rehabilitate our plant and animal life. Meran's strongly in favour of it, of course, but Reinal tried to rebuke Channa for agreeing to it in principle as a term of peace.’

‘The man's a fool. If Those of the Confederation can help us overcome these food shortages, it'll boost morale more than anything else could. Have you tasted a standard sustabar lately?’

Nerlin shuddered.

‘Did they say how they'd help us?’

‘Not exactly, but they can apparently grow trees almost overnight.’

Even the imperturbable Sandur betrayed amazement. ‘Overnight? Whole trees?’

‘Unless Channa's lying.’

‘She wouldn't lie about something like that. It's too easily verified.’ Sandur whistled softly in amazement.

‘Well, that's going to change a lot of alliances, isn't it? Those with country holdings as their main financial base will be much more inclined to take the negotiations seriously, I should think. Of course, Reinals are town-based. They won't see much advantage to that term.’

‘I'm beginning to see some advantages myself,’ Nerlin said softly.

Sandur nodded. ‘Depends on the terms. Could be.’ Beyond that, he was not prepared to commit himself, even to Nerlin. ‘How did Channa play it at the interview?’

‘Young and enthusiastic.’

Channa's father laughed indulgently. ‘We worked hard on that role. She's not a bad little actress. Did Reinal believe it?’

‘She almost had me convinced. And I know her rather better than most.’

Sandur chuckled again. ‘Yes. She's very good. Your Kristan could learn a lot from her. There are times when brute force is not the answer.’ His face became thoughtful. ‘What's this Peace Mediator like?’

‘He comes through as effete and petulant, but there's steel underneath, and it shows occasionally.’

Personally, I don't believe the Confederation would have chosen someone as decadent as he seems for the negotiations here, so it's my guess that his behaviour is a ploy. On the other hand, who can tell what all those years of peace have done to the Terrans? We may be descended from Terran stock, but they're bound to have grown rather soft, after all those years of peace. I don't blame our founding families for breaking away. Anyway, the Mediator certainly set my teeth on edge and Channa flashed him a few disgusted looks.’

Sandur's brows drew together. 'That means nothing. If she really detested him, she wouldn't have shown it.'

'Do you think so?'

'It's a strong likelihood, knowing her.' Sandur started walking up and down, not hiding his frustration from his friend. 'If only we had a way of getting someone on to that space transport! We're stuck down here in total ignorance of everything about them, except what they tell us. It makes it very difficult to plan properly.'

'They have some powerful armaments and they had no trouble destroying our munitions factories,' said Nerlin. 'That hit the Reinaldians hard.'

'Anything else come out of the meeting?'

'Channa took considerable trouble to inform us that mediators don't tell lies. It's part of their professional code, I gather. She seemed to believe it, too. We might give that one a high level of potential credibility in our calculations.'

'That's a strange limitation to set on oneself.'

'It's a strange set-up altogether.'

'What happens if we don't negotiate a peace settlement that satisfies them?'

'They'll impose what they call occupied world status on us. That means they'll be hanging round our necks for generations to come, re-educating our offspring.'

Sandur bared his teeth briefly. 'I rather like the way we raise our children, personally. Let's leave decadence to the Terrans. One should be able to defend oneself, whatever the circumstances.'

'Mmm, but Those of the Confederation certainly seem to mean business.' In a moment of weakness, Nerlin added, 'Sandur - have you thought what would happen if we really could make a permanent peace? What life would be like in Shavla?'

'Yes. Who hasn't? We're not quite as devoted to belligerence as Those of the Confederation seem to think. If I could only be sure of the Deorin, I would not object to peace. But peace backed by strength. And who can ever be sure of the Deorin?'

'No one. I wouldn't trust those bastards one finger's breadth.'

'Do you think the Deoran Envoy will fool the Mediator with a simulated acceptance of peace?'

'No. We might, but they've got no finesse. Just brute force.'

Sandur picked up a handful of sand and let it sift through his fingers. 'What happens if we agree to a mediation and the Deorin don't? Did you ask the Mediator that?'

'Of course we asked! Apparently, in that case, the Confederation erects some sort of physical barrier between the two countries. Can you imagine the scope of that? This Joran was quite confident of their ability to give Deora occupied nation status, while allowing us our freedom - or vice versa.'

They both paused and stared at each other. 'Is it really possible?' Sandur asked at last. 'I mean - what sort of a barrier would keep the whole of the Deoran nation at bay?'

Nerlin shrugged. 'Your guess is as good as mine.'

'Anyway, I can't see Reinaldians accepting peace on any terms.'

'No. He hates the Deorin more than anyone I've ever met. He was there hidden when they tortured his mother and siblings to death, you know. His hatred of Deora is not assumed, believe me. That's one of the reasons for his popularity with some groups.'

Sandur brushed the sand off his hands. 'We'll have to replace him as soon as possible, or the negotiations will grind to a complete halt. Then we'll play for time so that we can work out how best to handle Those of the Confederation. If you can, try to hint that to Channa.'

'Do you think she could manage to prolong the negotiations for a few extra days?'

'I'm sure of it.' Sandur's grin was most unfatherly. 'If I know her, she'll be working on the Terran at a personal level already. Men find her very attractive - it's one of her most useful talents. She's sparing in its use, but this is an exceptional moment in our history. She'll not let us down, whatever we ask of her.'

'And - you will consider a breeding contract if we build in special terms.' It was a statement, not a question.

'I'd be a fool not to. Besides, our families have always kept up the links. She knows that as well as we do.'

'But are you sure Channa can be brought round to the idea? She's never liked Kristan. They were always quarelling when they were young.' Nerlin smiled reminiscently. 'He might have been bigger and stronger than her, but she was a cunning little bitch.'

'She still is. Don't worry, coz. She'll come round to the idea. She's developing a fine sense of political necessity. You'll have more trouble getting Kristan to agree to special conditions.'

Nerlin shrugged. 'If he pushes too hard against what we agree, I shall simply threaten to breed with her myself.'

Sandur raised his eyebrows. 'Now that would be interesting! I wonder how she'd react to that offer.'

Nerlin's teeth showed briefly. 'I'm more concerned with your reactions. It's no use threatening what one can't deliver.'

'I'd have to think about it. Besides, do you really want to rear more offspring at your age? I wouldn't fancy it, myself.'

Nerlin shook his head. 'No, of course not. I might not live long enough to place the child well. But I'd do it if there were no other alternative. The Harravays and the Harknells have a long history of kin-links, to our mutual benefit. It'd be a pity to let them lapse.'

'We shan't do that.'

8

Channa woke up early the following morning, in spite of a poor night's sleep. She had tossed and turned for hours, racked with guilt at the thought of how her refusal to answer Joran's question had wasted yet another day's negotiating time. Yet it would have seemed like a betrayal of all Shavla stood for to have answered him, not to mention putting herself at risk if she admitted how she still felt about Mirral's sudden disappearance.

She stared sourly around the room, whose lighting had brightened the minute she began to stir. They were out to destroy her with all this decadence and luxury. Although she was not yet fully awake, she swung herself out of bed and did some exercises to get her blood flowing. She must not wallow in her sense of failure, or she'd be in no fit state to face another day with the Mediator. And as a start to this new phase, she vowed that never again would she linger in bed in such a sloppy manner. Wars were not won in bed! One step down sloth hill slides quickly into another.

As she showered, she continued to harangue herself. Joran was deliberately making her soft. She had let Shavla down by forgetting her training. But that was all over! Today, whatever he asked, whatever it was, whatever, she would answer - if not truthfully, then promptly. She scrubbed her teeth so furiously that she spat blood into the water disposal chute and was obscurely pleased by this minor sacrifice. That was it, she told herself. She must toughen up again, return to Shavlan ways in everything - and above all, oh yes, above all, she must not let anything interrupt the negotiations. They would be right to send her to a Correction Centre if she continued to do such an incompetent job as Envoy. She must and she would improve her performance.

The com-unit chimed as she was putting on her uniform. She squared her shoulders and called, 'Yes?' as briskly as if she were talking to a fellow officer.

'Joran here.'

How slow and soft his voice was! As soft as the philosophies he lived by. She had lost sight of that because of the man's personal charm, but she would remember it from now on. Decadent, effete, un-Shavlan! She chanted the words inside her head like a litany.

Joran recognised the tone in her voice. So she'd been making good resolutions, had she? Well, they would soon be overset. He was an expert at oversetting people's resolutions. 'Good morning, Channa. I

thought we might make an early start to the negotiations today. How about a brisk walk in the woods before breakfast? We can talk as we exercise.'

'Fine. I'll come straight down.' She turned to the robot and hesitated. It was un-Shavlan to address a machine by name, but would the damned thing answer if she didn't? And why was she worrying about something so trivial? What in the name of all the Deoran devils did it matter? 'Fess! Please take me to Joran.'

'Certainly, Channa. The weather is beautiful today, just right for a walk.'

Outside, the other robot was waiting for them. She ignored its greeting. Mechanical abominations, both of them! Fess continued to lead the way and Rolly fell in behind. Channa moved smartly along at an informal march pace, heels drumming out the rhythm as she would have done in a Shavlan barrack-house. The sound was familiar and comforting.

She concentrated on keeping an impeccable military posture and observing everything she passed extra carefully. She really must learn her way around the base. She did not admit to herself that she was soon lost, as usual. Although she had wondered yesterday whether they kept changing the rooms and passages near her quarters, she would have been astounded to find that this was true, so far-fetched did the idea seem. She counted the turns - that was a logical starting point - but to her intense frustration there was a different number of turns to the last time they had gone down to the terrace.

She felt a moment's embarrassment when she joined Joran, remembering the way he had dismissed her the day before. The image of the laughing woman at the swimming pool came back to her. She banished it resolutely and tried to smile at Joran as cheerfully as possible, but in vain. Somehow, she could not summon up the smile she had rehearsed so carefully. Realising that her attempt was a failure, she abandoned the smile and adopted instead an alert and interested look - a look she had cultivated to perfection over the years and one which always put superior officers in a good frame of mind towards her.

Joran chuckled.

Why was he laughing at her? With some difficulty, she refrained from asking, not wishing to disturb the day in any way, but that chuckle had upset her equilibrium. What was so funny? she thought resentfully. Why was he forever grinning like an idiot, as if he found everything amusing? As if he found her amusing! These negotiations were serious. Or they would be, if Joran would only behave in a responsible manner. 'Shall we go? Fess, you go first.' Joran followed the robot across the gently-sloping green lawns and headed towards the woods. Channa fell in beside him. The other robot followed them, like a rear scout. 'Do they have to come with us?' she asked, letting her irritation show. 'Surely we're safe enough here!' 'What? Oh, the robots. Yes, I'm afraid so. There's been a lot of Deoran aerial activity to the north of the base, so we're now on alert at all times.'

She was so startled by this remark that she stopped abruptly. 'On alert? Here?' She realised that she had been treating the base as a safe retreat, fool that she was! Shavla, I am not worthy! She began scanning the skies and the nearby terrain instinctively as she spoke. 'Are the woods not safe, then? Should we even be out here?' Who could trust the Deorin? Or the Terrans? Damn! And she had no weapon of any description! Her fingers twitched for the comforting feel of a handgun.

'They should be safe. As safe as the base itself, anyway, since the whole area is now on an integrated defence system. It'd be a million to one chance if anything happened to breach that system. It rarely has in the past and we've been using similar ones for hundreds of years. But you can never be too careful, can you? So we'll continue to take the robots everywhere. Their senses are far more acute than ours.'

Channa nodded. For once he was making sense. But robots or not, she continued to scan their surroundings herself, as if they were on a sortie. It made it more difficult to concentrate on what Joran was saying and you could not scan properly with such lush foliage encouraged to grow everywhere. Why on earth had the fools not left the ground clear under the trees when they landscaped the base? Anyone could launch an attack and guarantee to get some troops through with this undergrowth as cover.

'These woods are badly designed for defence,' she said angrily after a while. 'Perhaps we'd better return to the base.'

‘The woods are just as safe as the base. I told you - they’re on the same defence system now. Haven’t you been listening to me, Channa?’

What could you say to an arrogant Terran who thought he knew everything better than anyone else?

‘Yes, Mediator,’ she said and closed her mouth firmly on the words she would have liked to hurl at him. She would not let him provoke her. For Shavla’s sake.

Joran watched her from the corner of his eyes. She was very military this morning, upright, crisp in all she said, taut with intention and dressed in that ugly uniform once more. There was no doubt in his mind that she had vowed to let nothing stop the negotiations today. It showed in her face. Well, they’d see about that. The lead she’d given him yesterday about her cousin was promising, but he’d let her stew for a while before he pursued it. He set a brisk pace and she strode along comfortably beside him. It’d be a pleasure to take someone like her walking in one of Terra’s Planetary Parks, he thought, admiring her look of glowing health. Maybe he would one day. She’d be a good companion for a week or two’s trekking and camping.

They continued for a few minutes in silence and Channa was annoyed to find that she could think of nothing neutral to say, annoyed too that the Mediator did not start a serious discussion, as she had expected. She stole one or two glances at him, but though he looked relaxed, he said nothing and was making no attempt to look at her. He was humming to himself as they went along, a happy little tune whose rhythm upset her marching pace.

At last, as they turned into a wide alley bordered by tall trees with an elegant lower-level display of ferns and broad-leaved ground plants, Joran broke his silence to ask with brutal casualness, ‘So - tell me what makes you look so sad when you remember your cousin Mirral.’

Channa gasped aloud and stopped dead, shocked that he had returned so abruptly to that topic. Then she made herself draw a very slow breath and continue walking. He had obviously planned this. Well, she must answer, for Shavla’s sake. She must and would answer any question he asked today. ‘I’m not refusing to tell you, Joran, please don’t think that,’ she began carefully, ‘but I - I find it very hard to speak about such a topic - one we regard as forbidden. And besides, I’m,’ she gulped down a lump of panic in her throat, ‘I’m concerned about confidentiality.’

‘Confidentiality?’

His voice was devoid of emotion. She could not tell from his expression what he was thinking, but she must not anger him today. ‘Joran,’ her hand half rose in a plea, then was jerked back to her side, ‘Joran, if anyone - any of my people, I mean - were to find out that I’d been talking to you about - about such a topic, then I, like Mirral, would have my citizenship rights rescinded and - and I’d be sent to serve on the production lines or as a recreation whore or in the common breeding pens.’ Her shudder was not feigned as she added, ‘Probably the latter, because of my age and gene inheritance.’

Joran reached across the gap between them to squeeze her shoulder in a gesture of friendly support.

Since he stopped walking to do this, so perforce did Channa. She stood looking at him as warily as any cornered animal. It’s better than I expected, he thought in jubilation. Nothing I’ve done so far has penetrated that hard shell of hers like this. What a stroke of luck!

Aloud he said calmly and slowly, as if he were talking to a child, ‘Channa, I can absolutely guarantee that your people will be told nothing of what you say to me on such topics. Nothing. But that guarantee doesn’t extend to my own people. Lilla and I discuss our progress regularly. What’s more, if what you tell me at any time seems to be what we call a salient fact, then it will be relayed to Sector Central immediately.’

She swallowed and searched his face, trying to decide whether to believe him. For all her training in self-control, her face and her body betrayed her. He had touched a wound. She was bleeding internally already.

If she had been a Terran woman, he would have pulled her into his arms or held her hand for comfort.

With Channa, he dared not risk such a move. The most he dared do was to squeeze her shoulder again and continue speaking soothingly. ‘We need to learn about the emotions of your people, you see,

Channa, and about their inner feelings. Not just their public attitudes. The two are not the same. Some of

our knowledge comes from our observations of your people; some we must learn from you directly.’ She looked at him in a puzzled way, her body still rigid with suspicion and self-control. ‘Your - observations?’

She was obviously playing for time, but he would humour her for a little longer. He leaned against a tree. ‘Well, yes. As you must realise, our technology is considerably in advance of yours and we find it relatively easy to study your people in all aspects of their lives - all aspects, Channa, wherever they are, whatever they’re doing.’

He saw her jerk with shock.

‘Spying machines?’

‘You could call them that, Channa. I’ll show you some of them one day, later in the negotiations. You’ll find them quite fascinating, I’m sure. Fortunately, we’ve also developed a range of counter-eavesdropping devices to negate them, since we do like our own privacy back home. The most notable of these is the privacy cube.’

‘Privacy cube?’

‘Yes. It’s just what it sounds like. We can project a cube of impenetrable privacy around any designated area - more Sirian technology, of course, and only they know how it works or how to penetrate the privacy zone it sets up. As a result, the use of - er - spying machines has now been virtually abandoned on advanced planets. But for this sort of work they’re ideal.’

‘We should have guessed,’ she said dully, thinking how many of Shavla’s most intimate secrets Those of the Galactic Confederation must know by now.

‘We don’t exactly broadcast such details when we make an Intervention,’ he said dryly. ‘I’ll demonstrate the privacy cube to you now, if you like.’

Her interest was genuine. ‘Please.’

He used his belt controls and suddenly they were alone in a square of greenery three paces wide, bordered by grey walls and ceiling. A little cramped for my purpose, he decided, and made some adjustments. The hazy grey walls receded a few more paces, but not far enough to include the robots. For what he had in mind, Channa would be more amenable if they had total privacy.

‘It’s the same as the barriers that came down at the base when I was attacked, isn’t it?’

‘Yes. There are many uses and many shapes for it, apart from the basic cube. A major use for the device is to keep warring nations apart. We can project such barriers over very large areas - along national borders, for instance.’

She looked at him and exhaled slowly as this sank in.

‘A fairly easy way to enforce co-operation, isn’t it, Channa? We can make the barrier as high and as long as necessary, and it’s very easy to maintain. Why don’t you examine it? You can’t take my word for anything. When you next report to Reinal, you must be able to confirm from your own experience that the privacy cube really does defy penetration. We’ll use a handgun, one of your own nation’s weapons, against a cube from outside later, just to complete the tests.’

She strode over to the nearest grey wall, knowing what she would find, but acknowledging that he was right about Reinal. She must be able to give the Supreme Commander her personal assurance that the barrier was impregnable. Grimly, she set about throwing herself at the walls, poking the ground at the base with a sharp stick, battering the slick greyness with a rock. She found a suitable tree near one side of the cube and climbed up that, which enabled her to reach the place where the wall became ceiling, a sharp, right-angled join. It showed no more weakness than the walls. When she had tried every test she could think of, she returned to where Joran was still leaning against the tree, watching her impassively.

‘Very impressive.’ Her voice was quiet and betrayed no feelings.

She expected him to switch the device off then, but he didn’t. Instead, he reached out, grasped her shoulder and swung her round to lean against a tree trunk and face him. She wished that he would not keep touching her, but she did not protest or shake his hand off. Today he would not find her unco-operative in any way.

‘Now that we’ve got that out of the way, Channa,’ he said lazily, his fingers cupping her chin, so that she

was forced to look him in the eyes, 'let's return to the main topic. We were talking about your cousin . . .

She was betrayed into a gasp of dismay. His face was close to hers, but it was stern, and the tree trunk prevented her from pulling away without an undignified struggle. She drew a shuddering breath, trying desperately to work out what she could or could not say.

Abruptly he released her. 'Are you again refusing to answer me, Envoy?' He allowed his voice to grow chill and he saw her swallow hard. He made a move as if to turn away.

'No! Joran, I'm not! I'm not!' She reached out to grab his arm.

He stopped and looked at her gravely. 'Well, then? Why haven't you answered my question? I warn you, I'm running out of patience.'

She sucked in air and then flung a torrent of words at him. 'I don't - I can't - Joran, I don't know what makes me sad! I don't - I've never tried to - to analyse my feelings, only to stop thinking about such a forbidden topic.' Her words came out in little spurts. 'That's why I can't answer you easily. I'm not refusing!'

'Go on.'

'No one's ever mentioned Mirral's name to me since the day she failed to return,' she gulped. 'And I've never asked. They don't give explanations, you know! When someone is rejected by a Correction Centre, that person just vanishes. The Correction Officers came and cleared out Mirral's things, then the house steward assigned her room to someone else - and that was it! Even when we were alone, we children didn't mention her name again. We all knew better. And I - I shouldn't still be remembering. It's dangerous! It's - it's un-Shavlan!'

Her speech was punctuated with wild gesticulations, almost as if she were dragging the words from the air around her. He could feel her pain, but was trained not to respond to it - though for him, this was always one of the hardest parts of his job.

'But you do remember, don't you?' he probed. 'You do remember Mirral and you've often wondered why she failed to gain her citizenship?'

She had her arms folded across her chest, as if in protection, and she was rocking her body to and fro as she stood there, like an upset child. There was anguish in every line of her body, and Joran could see that her feelings were warring with years of rigid training.

'You do remember, don't you?' he reiterated.

'Yes. Yes. Yes!'

'And that makes you feel guilty.'

'Of course it does! I don't even understand why I keep remembering. I've always tried to serve Shavla - serve in every way possible! To do my duty. For my country. I don't understand why I keep remembering Mirral, wondering about her.' The rocking grew faster and a sob escaped.

Channa was aghast. She was getting out of control. Other sobs were welling up in her chest. She couldn't, must not cry! She had to regain control. She began to repeat some of the prime truths to herself. They were designed to help Shavlans in crisis and had never failed her before. Those who cannot control themselves cannot properly serve Shavla. For Shavla, she would give her all. Those who cannot . . .

His question was fired at her sharply and stopped her mental recitation in mid phrase. 'What was she like, your cousin Mirral?'

Channa swallowed another sob.

'If you don't answer me, we'll have to waste another day, Channa. And I shall still ask you the same question tomorrow.'

She clasped her hands together to stop them trembling. For Shavla. She must answer - for Shavla.

'Mirral was - she was the only real friend I've ever had. She was - we could talk about anything. There's a cave. Near the estate. We used to go there and talk. It felt safe there. Mirral was,' another sob came out in a gasp of tortured breath, and Channa rushed on, trying to block the sobs in her throat with words.

'She was older than me, you see, though not as old as Kristan. She - she helped me to understand how

to - how to deal with the system. We weren't disloyal, never that, but it's hard for children to get used to the - the discipline, the restrictions.'

'She sounds to have been a nice person.'

'She was - is - I don't even know if she's still alive. And she had a brilliant intellect! She was destined for the scientific stream, not for combat. I can't understand - I've never understood - why she failed at the Correction Centre. I know she was loyal to Shavla!'

To her horror, the sobs could not be contained. 'Damn you!' she shouted, between the harsh sounds that would not stop erupting from her mouth, sounds she had not made since she was a tiny child, sounds which absolutely terrified her. 'Why are you doing this to me? Why?' The sobs scraped their way up her throat in sharp lumps that prevented her from continuing.

She turned away as if to flee, and this time Joran did allow his instincts the upper hand. He reached out and pulled her towards him. She tried to shake off his embrace, but she was too upset to fight him efficiently. She could only beat against his chest, then crumple against him and sob her heart out.

He did nothing but hold her close and rock her gently.

The storm of sobs went on for a long time, then lessened gradually. When it was over Channa was amazed to find how weak she felt. She had to continue clutching Joran for support.

'Sit down.' Gently he pulled her to the ground, still holding her close, and she made no attempt to resist him. 'Shh! It doesn't matter. People cry all the time on Terra. Shh, now.'

She subsided against him again, the echoes of her sobs still shaking her body from time to time.

'There's a considerable body of research,' he said softly, stroking her hair, 'which suggests that in cultures where people are not allowed to cry, the citizens suffer from more stress-induced diseases and have a lower life expectancy than in cultures which allow their citizens to acknowledge their emotions openly.'

'R-really?' She was grateful for this talk of neutral, factual things, grateful even for the arms around her. 'Really and truly. Remember, I don't lie to you, Channa.'

'I find it - hard to - to believe that.'

'Well, you would, wouldn't you? It goes against everything which Shavla has inculcated in you.' At the disloyal thought of going against Shavlan ideology, she tried to pull away, but Joran kept tight hold of her.

'No, Channa! This is a very important moment for the negotiations. If you avoid confronting your emotions now, we'll only have to do it all again another day, in another way.'

She sat rigid, shocked by what he said. Had he done this to her on purpose? 'But - but why? How can this - how can my succumbing to such a - a disgusting display of weakness possibly help something like the peace negotiations?'

'Oh, it can, believe me. We consider that people who deny their emotions are only half alive. Full Galactic citizenship is not attainable by cultures which cannot achieve a sane balance of emotion and reason.'

She was listening hard. Even his voice was different. It was vibrant with power and certainty, as unlike the effete tones he normally adopted as her own voice had been when it broke on the sobs.

'It would be just as bad,' he went on, 'every bit as unacceptable to us, if your people lived only through their emotions.'

'Oh!' She found that idea reassuring.

'It's the balance that's important, you see. If a race cannot achieve balance in this, it isn't fit to be let loose upon the galaxy. We have some very powerful technology. One person could destroy a whole planet with it. It's not safe to put such technology into the hands of people who haven't learned to acknowledge and control their emotions. We made that mistake several times in the early days of the Confederation and have learned the lesson well.'

'But you're only dealing with me here, not with the rest of Shavla!' she protested. 'What can that possibly tell you? How can upsetting one person help the negotiations?'

'Your reactions tell us a lot, though we had been observing your people for a while before we intervened. Channa, did it never occur to you to ask me why we had chosen you as Envoy, not one of the other

candidates?'

She drew in her breath in shock. 'Is there - some special reason? We thought - we just assumed that I was chosen - because of my - well, my intelligence. If Reinal had thought that I stood a chance of being chosen, he'd have had me killed before he'd have let me become a candidate.' She frowned. 'Why exactly was I chosen, Joran? Am I allowed to know?'

'Yes. It's about time. You were chosen partly because you're typical of your culture, and certainly your intelligence helped, but our tests also showed that, unlike the other candidates, you were not so rigidly set in your ways that you couldn't consider new ideas.' And finally, he thought to himself, you were chosen because you were a woman and could more easily form a bond of affection with me - but I shan't tell you that yet.

Her mind was back in gear again, her thoughts racing to digest this information and understand its significance. 'How could you know that?'

'The tests have been very carefully devised. I couldn't explain the details if I wanted to - it's not my speciality. And of course, we observed you with our - er - spying machines. Observed all the candidates.'

What he was saying terrified her. Observing people in every facet of their lives! Forcing them to succumb to their emotions! Saying that she was vulnerable to un-Shavlan ideas. Panic welled in her. What else did they intend to do to her? Suddenly she wanted to flee, to get as far away as she could from Joran Lovrel, Terran Mediator, but he was still holding her, and she was still Peace Envoy for Shavla.

'Look at me, Channa!' He lifted her chin and brushed away the remaining tears with gentle fingertips. He followed that up by kissing her cheeks, then her eyelids. When she opened her mouth to protest, he kissed that too, so firmly that she could scarcely breathe. One of his hands slipped down to unfasten her uniform jacket and when her hand flew up to stop him, he pinned it down, before lowering his lips to her nipple and caressing it slowly.

Her body was quickly aroused but she was horrorstruck at the thought of mating, in the open air, in daylight. Anyone could come along and see them! 'Not now!' she croaked. 'Not in daylight!'

He paused for a moment to grin down at her. 'Why not? I can see you better in daylight. You have a beautiful body.'

'Someone might come along and . . .'

He shook his head. 'No they won't. The robots signalled the com-centre to divert people from this area when we entered it for our walk. Standard procedure for your protection. No one will come by as long as we stay here. And besides, you've forgotten the privacy cube. I told you it had many uses.' His mouth returned to its leisurely caresses and she gasped as desire flooded hotly through her. She rolled her head frantically from side to side, staring around. There was just a green cocoon of foliage, a smell of crushed leaves and the grey barriers.

'Let yourself relax, Channa!' he murmured between kisses. 'We're quite safe here - and very private.' With a half sob, she raised her hand to caress his cheek. 'Joran, I don't understand you - this - anything.'

'No, and I don't understand you, Channa, not yet, not properly. That's why we're here - to learn about each other.'

But she couldn't think about that, because his hands were caressing her body again and, almost as if they had a life of their own, her hands were caressing him. The thoughts became jumbled in her head as, for the first time since she was eight, Channa Harknell abandoned cold reason and followed her own inclinations.

Afterwards, when she tried to pull herself together, Joran drew her back to lie naked beside him. 'Not yet, Channa. Let's lie here and enjoy the aftermath. Didn't they teach you about that in your - er - sex instruction?' He shook with laughter as he said the words.

She shook her head. It was normal to wash and dress oneself the minute mating was completed. One didn't linger over such things. Mating was a necessity, and an excellent relaxant, but one didn't indulge in it for too long. There were other things to do of more importance, other uses for people's energies.

‘There’s a period of intense satisfaction after making love,’ he murmured in her ear. ‘It gives the body deep relaxation and is in itself a great pleasure.’

She sighed and lay back against him. ‘You have an answer to everything, Joran Lovrel. It’s infuriating!’

‘Yes. We use the truth very consciously. It fights our battles for us.’

She shook her head, but did not try to pull away. She was too drained.

‘You know, Channa, I think I prefer most of all making love like this,’ he said, ‘out of doors, but safe within a privacy cube. And I love the aftermath, just lying together and relaxing. I’m very fond of a nap at such times. Why don’t you try it?’

She made a sound that was half laugh, half sob. ‘Why not?’ The whole world had turned upside down today. And she was very, very tired.

‘Did you sleep badly last night?’ he murmured in her ear.

‘What do you think? After yesterday’s fiasco.’ She added with heavy sarcasm, ‘Didn’t your observation machines tell you how I slept?’

‘I didn’t bother to check them. I was working late myself.’ He yawned and whispered in her ear, ‘Now, stop talking and go to sleep, Channa. Turn your mind off and let yourself sleep - or at least lie still and let me sleep.’

‘But . . .’

‘Shhh!’

She lay there, amazed, as his breathing deepened and his body relaxed against hers, his arms still imprisoning her. She did not dare move in case she woke him. Besides, yet again she needed time to think. Her mind was in turmoil. She must work through this experience, try to understand it - try to - to . . . She was not even aware that she was falling asleep, but her tiredness and the comforting warmth of his body betrayed her.

Joran lay beside her, feigning sleep perfectly as he had learnt to do long ago in his training. Poor Channa! She would be riddled with guilt when she awoke. Losing control like that. Un-Shavlan! His lips curved into a smile. This assignment was beginning to prove unexpectedly enjoyable. The Shavlan Envoy had a beautiful body and was easily aroused sexually. How unskilled her compatriots must be! Not that it would have made much difference to his behaviour if she’d been as ugly as a Sirian in the mating season. One did one’s job whatever it cost. That’s why mediators were so well paid.

He grimaced as he was reminded of other assignments that had been distinctly unpleasurable. One at least had taken a lot of fortitude and it had required a long debriefing by a psych-team to shake off the after-effects and recurrent nightmares, but he’d succeeded.

He would earn a large fee for this assignment, but the money was fairly irrelevant to him. He already had as much as he would ever need. But the satisfaction, ah, the satisfaction of doing a difficult job, one that was beyond the capabilities of most people! That satisfaction was extremely addictive.

Of course, it was early days yet, even if their progress did seem promising, but on the personal level things were going far better than he had expected. He would guess that no one had ever really roused Channa sexually before. She had been very ripe for the plucking there. And her guilt about Mirral had allowed him an early breakthrough. Poor Channa! How hard it had been for her to weep. He must allow her a day or two’s grace before he played on her emotions again, give her time to recover, to regain some of her sense of security. Should it be anger next time, or more tears, or just plain laughter? That would need careful thinking out and very careful orchestration. And whatever methods he chose, he had no doubt that Channa would spring a few surprises back at him before they were through. She was too intelligent not to.

Nor were her people going to play along meekly for much longer. Reinal would seize on any pretext to get rid of Channa. It was to be hoped that her father and his allies would make some effort to control their Supreme Commander. If not, there would have to be a little demonstration of Confederation technology. Or perhaps they should have a demonstration anyway? Yes, that might answer very well. Nudge the waverers towards co-operation. A mile or two of barriers along the border with Deora should make the point. Or a barrier around GHQ. Mmm, that might be even better! Lock in the Decision Group

and let them stew for a while. It should be easy enough to goad Reinal into providing an excuse for a demonstration. Joran grinned to himself at the thought. First, though, he'd have to let Channa report back to them about the privacy cube. She'd be more than eager to do that.

9

When she awoke Channa could not, for a moment, think where she was, then she saw greenery and gasped aloud.

'I'm glad you're awake. I'm getting very hungry.'

Joran's voice was warm and relaxed in her ear. She turned her head round to stare at him and the memory of their mating made her flush scarlet. 'I - I'm sorry I fell asleep, Mediator,' she said, striving for formality.

He allowed her to pull away and sit up. 'I'm not,' he said, stretching lazily. 'I'm very partial to a short nap after I've made love.'

She didn't attempt to stand up because she couldn't see her clothes. She felt ridiculously shy.

'If you're looking for your clothes, I tossed them into the bushes,' he said, standing up and reaching down to help her up.

She allowed this, but withdrew her hand from his immediately she found her balance.

He strolled forward looking for their clothes and she frowned at the sight of him. His body was muscular and well-exercised, the body of a fighting man, and he had a jagged scar on one buttock. It did not accord with the image he usually presented to her - but then, neither did the callous and arbitrary way he had of terminating the negotiations if she broke her agreement to answer all his questions - nor the summary way in which he had dealt with Reinal. She frowned. Which was the real Joran Lovrel?

'Now, where were we standing, Channa mine? Ah yes. Over here. So our clothes should be - yes, there they are!' He grinned at her triumphantly, like a boy hatching mischief, and waded through a froth of knee-deep ferns to retrieve the clothes.

She found herself smiling back before she could prevent it. 'Do you always throw things about like that?' At least if they discussed clothes, she could steer the talk away from the topic of mating. Fancy mentioning it openly like that!

'No, not always. But it seemed the right thing to do just then. Here are your pants. Now, where are mine?'

'Over here.' She went to retrieve them for him. The sooner they were both dressed, the better she would feel!

'And I've found your other things. They're a bit crumpled, but no one's going to see them but us.'

Calmly, he started to get dressed and she followed his lead because she did not know what else to do in such circumstances. She hoped that he would not continue to talk of the mating, but was disappointed.

'That was good, wasn't it? You're better at making love when you're relaxed.'

She blushed and looked away.

His chuckle brought her head round and anger lent a sparkle to her green eyes. 'I prefer not to talk about such things, if you don't mind.'

'I do mind. I love talking about them. How else can one improve one's technique?'

Her face reflected her shock. 'You must have better things to concentrate on!' she exclaimed.

'Not just now. Besides, it's important.'

She looked at him warily. Surely he wasn't going to pretend that mating was included in the negotiations?

'Making love is part of us, you know, Channa, part of our feelings,' he said gently.

Her heart sank. He was going to pursue the matter. She couldn't think what to say, where to look and she turned away indignantly.

He reached out to ruffle her hair. 'You can, of course, refuse to talk to me, Channa - but that'll mean another day's delay, won't it? Not to mention an even heavier burden of guilt.'

'That's not fair!' she exploded. 'You're abusing the agreement! It can't be relevant to indulge in such filthy talk!'

He swung her round, his fingers digging into her arm. 'We're on the verge of parting company again.' His face and voice were very stern. 'Your choice, Channa. You can talk to me, answer my questions - any and every question I ask, no matter what the subject - or you can return to your quarters now.'

She froze in the act of fastening her jacket. 'You mean that, don't you? You'd just walk away and leave me. Even after we've just - just - you know. You have no sense of camaraderie!'

'Of course I mean it. It's my job. I never tell you lies. You keep forgetting that small point, Channa. Or do you still not believe me?'

'I believe you, though I don't know why!' she said bitterly. She took a deep breath through gritted teeth. If filthy lubricious conversations were a necessity to him, she supposed she could comply. 'I'll talk about whatever you wish, Joran, for Shavla's sake, but may I ask why we have to pursue such - such disgusting topics?'

'Think about the conversation we had just before we fell asleep, Channa. It's the question of psychological balance again. If you, as Envoy, can achieve what we call a Genuine Emotional Balance, then there's hope for your people.'

She stared at him, as this sank in. 'You mean - you mean the mediation depends on - on whether I can adapt to your ways? Become emotional?'

How quick she was! Probably the most intelligent envoy he had ever dealt with. 'Yes. You're here as a sample of your people. That's why we choose envoys so carefully. They must be representative of their people, yet open to reason. To all intents and purposes, you are your people. If you don't adapt, then neither will they. And if they can't adapt to peaceful ways, then they're unfit for membership of the Galactic Confederation.'

She stared at him in horror. What he offered her was worse than pain and physical injury. Those of the Confederation were going to probe all her secret thoughts, expose her innermost self, deliberately infect her with their own decadence! If she did not conform to their ways, then Shavla would be the loser. And although she had been sent here to stall and pretend that the Shavlan Unity wanted peace, she realised suddenly that she had changed. She now saw peace as a genuine possibility. The universe rocked around her, for she was too intelligent not to realise the implications for her of what he said. She voiced the main one now.

'But - how will I ever readjust to Shavla?'

'You won't, of course.' His tone was calm, though he had just pronounced her death sentence. 'And the Shavlans will adjust more slowly than you do, so they'll be very suspicious of you.'

It was a moment before she could find her voice. 'Then what will become of me afterwards, Joran?'

They'll send me to a Correction Centre - no a Special Correction Centre - when I return. If you change me so much, they'll . . . ' her voice faded.

'We'll deliberately expose you to change, Channa. It's up to you whether you allow the changes to affect you.'

'But - if I don't change, what will become of Shavla? And if I do change, what will become of me?'

They'll deprive me of citizenship.' Her voice was choked with horror. 'They'll send me to the breeding pens! Why must you change me? Why?'

'That's your worst fear, isn't it?' Joran said thoughtfully. 'The breeding pens. Are they so terrible?'

Her shudder was an eloquent answer.

'And yet on Terra, we rejoice in the creation of life.'

She opened her mouth to reject that concept out of hand, but he laid his fingers lightly across her mouth.

'No, don't pursue the point now. You'll understand such things better as the negotiations proceed. But I promise you, Channa, I give you my solemn and official promise, that we'll not let them banish you to the breeding pens, whatever happens, or let them send you to a Correction Centre. Trust me on that, at

least.'

'How will you be able to stop them? Once I return to Shavla, they'll do what they like with me!'

'I can't tell you any more just now. And I won't tell you lies. But I'll keep that promise.' He held out a hand. 'Come along now, Channa! Breakfast calls.'

She ignored the hand. If the bout of crying had left her thoughts in turmoil, it was nothing to how she felt now. Those of

the Confederation might save her from the breeding pens, but she would never be able to resume her career, never! And what else would be left if that were denied her? She felt like sobbing all over again and hoped desperately that he would not pursue the point. She didn't think she could face another bout of weeping.

Joran touched his belt and the greyness of the privacy cube vanished as abruptly as it had formed.

Channa went forward to examine the earth where the greyness had lain. There were no signs of disturbance, no marks in the ground, no broken leaves, nothing. She shook her head. How could the Shavlan even begin to fight against such technology?

His voice in her ear made her jump. 'Come on, Channa! You've done your duty and examined everything. Now let's get back to the base. I'm looking forward to my breakfast.'

She walked forward into decadence, emotional torture and who knew what else. Suddenly, giving her all for Shavla had become too painful and too costly - far too costly. She had been afraid of the future before, but now she was terrified. It didn't matter, though, because whatever he said, she had no choice. She was not sure, though, how much emotional probing she could endure without going insane, but her one consolation was that it was being done to serve Shavla. Taking a deep, shuddering breath, she squared her shoulders.

Joran noticed more than she realised, but he said nothing. What his companion needed now was time to recover her personal balance, and that would not be easy, because he'd started a process which would alter that balance beyond all recognition. He empathised with her pain, but he was exultant about the rapid progress they were making. Lilla was pleased to have reached coital stage with the Deoran Envoy, but the Shavlan Envoy was developing at a speed previously unknown to him. He would have to check the records on that.

By the time they reached the base, Channa was in the frame of mind martyrs have experienced throughout the ages. Her body was rigid, her teeth were clenched and her expression radiated bleak determination.

Joran led her into a new area and left both the robots outside the door. She shook off her depression and looked around her. 'Where are we?'

'My quarters,' he said. 'Do you mind? It's as safe here as anywhere else, and I have a new experience for you.'

She stiffened immediately and he smiled. 'No, this one is a treat - well, I think it is. So if you don't mind, we'll continue our talk here.'

'Whatever you wish.' What does it matter if I do mind? she thought angrily. You'll simply invoke the negotiation agreement and force me to do as you require.

He gestured to a carved wooden bowl. 'Take a piece of fruit to stave off your hunger, and then we'll give our bodies some attention.'

She did as he told her, listlessly picking up the first piece of fruit that came to hand, but it proved to be one she did not recognise, yellow in colour, long and covered in soft leathery skin. She was uncertain how to tackle it.

'You peel it, like this.' He showed her how easily the inside of the fruit was accessed. 'It's called a banana. There are dozens of varieties. We thought this might make a very useful crop for the Shavlan hotlands. It grows only in warm climates. Your forebears must have lost their original stock.'

She roused a little from her lethargy, seeing something concrete to do for Shavla. Taking a bite, she chewed it slowly. It was quite delicious, soft and sweet. 'Easy to grow?' she asked.

'Very easy and extremely nutritious, raw or cooked. I thought we could offer Meran Thilsen some

accelerated samples to test. Her estates lie in the hotlands, don't they?'

She nodded, her mouth still full.

'People find it more difficult to remain hostile,' he explained, 'when they see tangible advantages to peaceful coexistence.'

That was going too far too fast. 'Tell that to the Deorin! They'll never agree to peaceful coexistence with Shavla, whatever lures you dangle before them.'

'That's their choice,' he said, smiling as he prepared to launch another shock at her. 'And you'll no doubt be glad to know that negotiations are not proceeding as quickly with Van Makass as they are with you.'

'Van Makass! He's the Deoran Envoy? Van Makass himself?' If she only had a weapon! Get rid of Van Makass and Shavla would have years of advantage.

'Yes. Do you know him so well?'

She controlled her excitement. 'I know of him. Everyone does. He's the Deoran War Leader. He's a brilliant strategist, but he has a reputation for callousness, even towards his own comrades, even among the Deorin. He's also the son of the Deoran Emperor, the son nominated as heir.'

'Yes. He and you have a lot in common there, haven't you?'

She looked at him warily. 'What do you mean by that?'

'Well, your father may not have the title of Emperor, or Supreme Commander, but he is the major power behind the throne, isn't he? And you are his favourite child, the one who's shown the most promise, the one he's grooming to succeed him as Faction Leader - aren't you? Your family rarely go for the figurehead positions, but they've held a major slice of the power in Shavla for generations and you're expected to follow suit.'

'We're one of the leading families among the high nobility, certainly, if that's what you mean,' she acknowledged.

He threw back his head and laughed. 'Your father would be very proud of you, Channa. That's a noncommittal answer, if ever I heard one. Now, come on. Enough serious talk. Let's get washed.'

She was only too glad to let the topic drop.

When they entered the ablutions area, she was stunned into silence. It was twice as big as the one in her quarters and it was equipped with what looked like a body immersion pool. The walls showed misty images of forests, with frondy branches waving and flowers blooming here and there. She resisted the urge to go over and touch them.

Joran gestured to the pool. 'It's called a spa,' he said. 'Get in and I'll show you how it works. I ordered it to be filled when I raised the privacy cube.'

She smothered a sigh of impatience at this further time-wasting on trivialities, took off her clothes and got into the pool. He joined her. The thing was clearly designed for two people. The water was warm and silky and in spite of her impatience and watchfulness, she let out her breath in a sigh of pleasure, and lay back against the side.

'Turn on the jets,' he said loudly and the water around them began to bubble furiously.

Channa jerked upright. 'What in Shavla's name . . .'

'The water jets massage your body. It's very relaxing. You needn't be afraid.'

'Afraid! I'm not afraid of a - a pool of water!'

'Then relax and enjoy yourself.'

'It's decadent!' she snapped without thinking, then looked anxiously to see if she had offended him.

Joran chuckled.

Why did he keep laughing?

He laid a wet hand on her arm.

And why did he have to keep touching her? Only with an effort did she refrain from moving her arm away.

'We'd better get this straight, Channa mine. You may be the Shavlan Envoy; you may be forced to answer any question put to you - and I will hold you to that agreement most strictly - but you have not

agreed and will not be asked to agree to become a meek, subservient creature who dare not voice her own feelings. In fact, we prefer you to express your feelings at this stage - as long as you keep answering my questions at the same time.' He had a challenging look on his face.

'I'll remember that,' she said dryly. 'I'm allowed to insult you, but not to keep silent. Is that what you mean?'

He grinned. 'That's exactly what I mean. So, tell me how you like my spa?'

'It's good - I think. If one wishes to live decadently.'

'It's more than self-indulgence. A spa like this is particularly good when one has a muscular injury or when one is feeling physically stressed. It is also, of course, just plain fun. Or decadent, if you prefer that word. I'll show you sometime how enjoyable it can be for two people about to make love.'

'I wish you'd stop talking about mating! It makes me feel very uncomfortable.'

'Your people may not talk about it, but they treat it as a simple act of physical relief, and call it by a disgusting name like mating. I find that distasteful in the extreme. It makes me feel just as uncomfortable!'

She frowned at him. 'Why? What more can it ever be than an act of physical relief or an effort to generate children?'

His smile was directed inwards at his memories, not at her, and his voice had become warm and tender.

'Oh, it can be much more, Channa. Making love can forge links far stronger than kin-alliances. It can physically reinforce a strong mental link between two people. That is, if one continues to make love to the same person - which Shavllans almost never do.'

'You're exaggerating. It can't be that important!'

'We think it is. Research suggests that our species is slowly, very very slowly, evolving towards telepathy, Channa. The Sirians have a form of it already, which is why they find contact with less advanced species so repugnant. For us humans, it seems that affection, especially when reinforced by regular love-making, helps to develop rudimentary telepathy between two people. We've seen signs of that in my own cohabitation group. And some of us believe, as our main philosophy of life, that love in all its manifestations is the most important attribute of our species.'

She scowled at him, suspecting further mockery.

Joran leaned forward to draw one warm wet fingertip down the side of her face, seizing another important opportunity. 'And for you, Channa Harknell, the development of an affective link with me is one of your major preliminary tasks as Envoy. If, that is, you're serious about wishing to win for your people the right to full membership of the Galactic Confederation.'

She froze. 'What?'

He leaned back and closed his eyes. 'Ah, this is lovely!'

She stared at his face, her mind reeling in shock. 'Joran!'

'Mmmm?'

'Joran, look at me!'

He opened one eye and squinted at her.

'Not like that! Joran, say it again!'

He shook his head.

'Does it mean what I think it means?'

He only grinned. 'Who can tell what another person is thinking?'

'Joran, answer me!' she demanded. She actually reached out to grab his arm, as if to shake an answer out of him and when he caught her hand in his, she did not pull away.

'I've said as much as I intend to at present on that topic, Channa. I wonder whether I've not been a bit premature in releasing that information to you at this point, but it's done now. I shall definitely not enlarge upon what I've said. After breakfast, we'll discuss the growing of bananas.'

'Joran . . . ' Her voice was pleading.

'No, Channa! You need to think about the idea of affection before we discuss it again. There are some good info-tapes you can view. It's been well researched. You'll feel more comfortable if you're aware of a few facts. Now, let me wash your back. Such a lovely back! How did you get that scar on your

shoulder?'

She shook him off. 'To hell with my back! Joran, you can't leave matters there, not after what you said!' He leaned away from her. 'Channa, if you persist, I shall simply close this session - and the robots will obey me, not you.'

She sagged back against the spa wall, which somehow managed to be soft where it needed to cushion her head and hard underneath her buttocks. She could have screamed with frustration and all he did was blow her a kiss, then close his eyes and sigh happily. But she dared not pursue the point. She stared at his face, hating him, manipulative devil that he was. Gentleness was not weakness with this man! After a while, the rhythmic pounding of the water made her tense muscles relax, in spite of her annoyance, so she closed her own eyes and gave herself up to her thoughts. Joran was right about one thing. This spa would be very good after a hard day's fighting. But - would she ever be allowed to fight for Shavla again? Would anyone?

When Joran announced that he could wait no longer for his food, she obediently climbed out of the water and allowed him to help her dry her body. When she reached for her clothes, however, he pulled a face. 'What's the matter?'

'I really can't face looking at that uniform thing - it's not flattering and it offends all my aesthetic senses,' he said in a petulant tone that in no way fooled her. She was beginning to realise that he ran through his poses as easily as any master actor.

'What do you wish me to wear?' She was trying very hard to be patient.

'Why not a robe like mine?'

'No!'

'You're afraid to.'

'I'm not! But to all intents and purposes, it's a breeding robe! I - I should feel stupid in one, Joran. And uncomfortable.'

'Do I look like someone who's breeding? I can assure you that Confederation technology has not pursued the avenue of male gestation, even though it's technically possible.'

She shuddered. What filthy idea would he toss at her next?

'Do it for me,' he begged, with another change of tone. 'Please, Channa, will you wear one of our robes? Just this once. Just to please me.'

'Do I have to?'

'Of course not. But at home, in my cohabitation group, that's what we wear all the time, so wherever I am, when I want to relax, I feel better in a robe.' He was watching her more carefully than she realised.

'Please!' he begged softly. 'Try it. Just this once. For me.'

She sighed, then shrugged. Wearing a robe was nothing compared to baring one's soul or being reduced to tears. 'Oh, very well! I can't see what difference it'll make, but if you wish it so strongly, then order one of those - those things for me.' It was only a garment. Ridiculous that she should feel so uneasy about wearing it. Ridiculous, too, that she should feel so embarrassed by their joint nudity. She had seen thousands of nude bodies in the barracks-house showers and thought nothing of them. Why did his body keep affecting her like this? Even if it was a beautiful body!

The dispenser whirred and two neatly folded garments appeared, both printed with the same soft floral design in slightly different colour blends. He handed her the smaller one with an elaborate bow and she took it reluctantly. For Shavla, she thought, holding it at arm's length as if it were poisonous. He put his robe on and, since she still had not moved, took hers from her hand, shook it out and slipped it over her head. 'There. It suits you.'

She swallowed and stared down at the flowing folds.

'Look at yourself.' He snapped his fingers.

One wall of the ablutions area changed miraculously into a mirror and she saw them both reflected in it. She knew it was her own image she was seeing, but it seemed like another person entirely. She realised that her hair was beginning to curl at the nape of her neck. She must get it cut or Reinal would notice. She swallowed hard again and moved her arms and legs about. 'Pah! I look like a pregnant sow! Joran . . .'

His fingertips touched her lips as lightly as feathers. 'Bear with me in this.'

'But . . .'

'Let's go and order our breakfast. Shall I choose for you?'

'Yes. Please.' She forced herself to walk over to the table. The robe whispered loosely against her legs when she moved and yet it was too tight under her buttocks when she sat down. She had to stand up again and jiggle about before she could get it comfortable. There was obviously an art to moving around in these things. She raised one hand to smooth her hair and was surprised to find it shaking, so she put it hastily into her lap, glad that he didn't seem to have noticed.

It was a relief when the food arrived. She allowed him to explain the various dishes to her and sampled the one he indicated they should start with. To her astonishment, she was suddenly ravenous. She forgot the robe as, one after another, the pair of them demolished the elegantly presented dishes. Conversation was abandoned, except for Joran's brief explanations about what they were eating and occasional murmurs of appreciation from Channa.

When all the dishes were empty, Joran leaned back and patted his belly. 'Ah! That was good! Do you want anything else?'

Channa shook her head, suddenly feeling guilty about how much she had eaten. Sheer greed, that's what it had been. Sheer, selfish greed.

'Don't tell me you're feeling guilty again!' he teased. 'Honestly, Channa, can't you just enjoy something?'

She scowled at him. 'I don't know what you mean.'

'Don't you?' He reached across to ruffle her hair again. 'And do you think I believe you when you tell me lies as blatant as that?'

'I don't know what to think.' Her smile faded and to her horror, she felt her eyes filling with tears.

His hand was warm over hers, but comradely. None of that sentimental stuff, thank goodness! 'Then don't think for a while. Let me tell you about bananas instead.'

She sniffed and was relieved when the urge to weep lessened. 'Go on, then. Give me a lesson on bananas!' Her voice shook slightly.

He ignored that and said calmly, 'I'll give you a lesson on tropical fruit which includes bananas, then you can return to your quarters and research this and the question of affection further.'

'Why are you terminating the negotiations? I haven't refused to answer . . .'

'No. You've been very helpful. And at no small cost to yourself, my dear. We've made enormous progress, Channa mine, much more than I'd expected at this stage. But both you and I need some time to think things over. Don't you agree?'

Reluctantly she nodded.

'And besides, I have to check with Lilla on how Van Makass is going. I'm the senior of the two mediators, you see, so my responsibilities extend a little further than just to you. And once I've outlined to you what we propose to do about introducing some new food plants, you'll need time to study the info-tapes and think about what you're going to tell your people. You'd better communicate with them again soon. Your father is rather worried about you. Nerlin's told him about the attempt on your life and the two of them are debating what steps to take next with Reinal and his faction.'

'Is he all right? Father, I mean. Reinal hasn't . . .?'

'Sandur is fine.'

'Thank you for telling me that.' She looked down at her hands, then back at him. 'We have done a lot today, haven't we? And it's not even noon yet.' The thought of some time on her own to mull things over was very appealing - un-Shavlan, but necessary in these very un-Shavlan circumstances. She sighed. Even her father would never truly understand the personal cost of what she was going through for Shavla. She just hoped that she would manage to retain her sanity through it all.

'We've made a great deal of progress today, Channa,' Joran said warmly, echoing her thoughts. 'You can be proud of yourself.' He gave her a quick hug and released her before she could protest. 'I realise how rough it's been on you. I'm sorry for that. There is no other way sometimes.'

She swallowed hard and managed only a nod. Those damned tears were threatening again. She wished he would not be so kind to her!

He walked with her to the door of his quarters. 'I'll see you later, then.'

Relieved, she left him and followed Fess towards her own suite.

10

'Sandur, my old friend, we'll have to postpone that game of chess.' Nerlin's expression on the flickering greenish vid-phone image was appropriately regretful.

Sandur shrugged and assumed a similarly regretful expression, though there had been no such arrangement. 'That's a pity, but Shavla's needs must always come before our own.'

'Serve Shavla!' agreed Nerlin. 'We'll have to arrange another game when I get back from GHQ.'

'Do you have any idea when that will be? I'm looking forward to getting my revenge on you.'

'Day after tomorrow, if all goes as expected. I'll try to contact you as soon as I get back. There's nothing like regular games of chess for sharpening one's strategic thinking. We can probably make the same arrangements as last time.'

Sandur nodded. Obviously another Decision Group meeting had been called and Nerlin would meet him in the cave afterwards.

How infuriating it was to receive news of Channa only at second hand! He found himself worrying about her more than he had expected to.

Nerlin broke the contact and looked out of his office window. Reinal was sending an official helisled for him. It should be here at any moment. He was still wondering what the Supreme Commander was up to. Rather unusual sending a helisled, but if one were already nearby, it made sense. Had Reinal been just a bit over-effusive, though? Nerlin decided to have the sled checked over before he got into it. As soon trust a rock-adder as trust Deslar Reinal.

When the helisled arrived the Harravay Estate team of mechanics, all very loyal members of his kin-lines, ran smartly out to the landing pad. Nerlin, observing everything carefully from the safety of his armoured office, watched his chief mechanic, Tarryl, arguing with the pilot. He grew very suspicious as the pilot shook his head and physically barred the way into the helisled. Was the man really refusing to let the mechanics on board? After a while, the pilot shrugged and backed into the cabin, closing the door in the Chief Mechanic's face. Nerlin pressed a button on the com-set. 'Anything wrong, Tarryl?'

'Yes, sir.' Her voice was expressionless. 'The pilot refuses to let my team service the helisled. How would you like me to deal with this?'

'Tell him I'll travel to Prime in my own sled, then request him to remove that thing from my helipad and park it at the bottom of the south meadow. After that, take cover as fast as you can - all of you.'

'Yes, sir.'

He pressed another button to summon his guard and continued to watch as Tarryl banged on the helisled door, the pilot re-emerged and the two figures had another argument. The pilot grew very heated and gesticulated wildly with his arms. From the way his mouth opened wide and the force of his gestures, he was obviously arguing hotly, trying hard to persuade Tarryl to change her mind.

'Sir?' A man's voice on the intercom this time.

'Have you been watching?'

'Yes, sir. I still am.'

'Looks like an emergency brewing, Shen, doesn't it? I suspect that the helisled is booby-trapped, since they won't allow our mechanics on board. Tarryl's telling the pilot to remove the sled to the bottom of the south meadow. If he moves in any direction other than that, destroy the sled at once. Broadcast a general alert and tell everyone to take cover.'

'Yes, sir.'

After a while, the pilot's mouth shut with a snap. He looked up at the sky for a moment, then boarded the sled again, closing the entry-port behind him. Tarryl and her crew turned and trotted back to the workshops at the double. Nerlin was glad to see that they reached cover before the helisled began to rise. Tarryl was not only the best mechanic he'd ever had, but she had a gift for teaching others her skills and somehow inculcating in them a more creative approach to machinery. She and her team had adapted and improved on a whole range of standard devices to enhance the estate's security. Pity about the injury that'd scarred her hands and face so badly. She'd been a very attractive woman before that botched-up raid.

These technical developments had not all been shared with the Shavlan forces. A faction had to retain some advantages, with a non-aligned faction in power. Even if the Supreme Commander suspected that anything was being concealed by Faction Harravay, he would not dare to invade another faction's headquarters to investigate - not a faction as large and well-connected as the Harravays, anyway. The helisled had still not taken off. That pilot was not in a hurry to move. Poor bastard probably didn't want to die. Well, who did? Nerlin's fingers drummed a ceremonial quick march beat on the desk. What was taking the pilot so bloody long?

He watched without a change of expression as the helisled finally lifted into the air. It moved towards the south meadow, then veered suddenly towards the residence. Shen's crew immediately fired on it. No chance of them missing at that short range. Little chance of Shen's crew missing anything, for that matter. They were hand-picked fighters and exceptionally well trained. All young Harravays tried to spend some time in the Residence Corps. Shen's personal weapons training was second to none.

The ensuing explosion was several times more powerful than it should have been, and even the reinforced office shook and vibrated in the shock waves. When the smoke cleared, it was obvious that there was considerable superficial damage to the buildings, but no penetration, thanks to Tarryl's new metal alloy shutters that had snapped across the windows. Shame about that colonnade, though. There had been some rather nice plasterwork in it designed by his grandfather, who had been a noted artist in the lulls they used to have between fighting in those days. Perhaps they could rebuild it one day. Perhaps this mediation business really would lead to peace.

The com-unit buzzed. 'Shen here, sir.'

'Casualties?' he demanded sharply. His highly-trained personal guards were far more important than the buildings.

'None. The reinforced walls withstood the blast even better than we'd expected and the new shutters are excellent. Nice to have Tarryl's improvements tested. She'll be pleased about the results. There were a few minor injuries from flying debris, of course, sir, but nothing serious.'

Nerlin relaxed and a wolfish grin appeared on his thin face. 'Excellent. Now, about this sad accident . . .

'Sad accident, sir,' Shen repeated, his face expressionless.

'Tragic, even. The Supreme Commander will, of course, want full details. That sled was one of his own wing. Get the scientific unit to help you sift through the debris, but don't start examining the remains of the sled until you get some independent witnesses. I'll call Faction Harknell. They're the closest. And independent enough for our needs!' He grinned and even Shen's well-trained lips twitched. 'And tell Tarryl to get my private helisled ready. Half an hour.'

'Yes, sir.'

Still thoughtful, Nerlin made contact again with Sandur. 'We've had a little accident here. Reinal was kind enough to send a helisled from his own wing to transport me to Prime - it just happened to be in the neighbourhood - but the pilot - er - acted irrationally and we were forced to destroy the sled before it rammed the residence. The resultant explosion was surprisingly large. I've got my scientific team ready to work on the wreckage, but I have to leave almost immediately for GHQ. I wonder if I could ask you to come over and supervise them? I'm sure Reinal will want a full report. Perhaps you could bring a couple of your senior scientific people along as well. It's always good to have independent witnesses, don't you think?'

Sandur nodded, straight-faced. 'We'll be over at once. Anything else I can do to help?'

'I don't think so. Not yet, anyway. Let's inspect the wreckage first and see what we find. As loyal Shavlans, we can't allow treachery in the Supreme Commander's own wing to go unpunished, can we? Why, his very life might be in jeopardy!'

'It might indeed. In far greater jeopardy than he realises.'

'When I think about it, I'm not sure it isn't your duty to cut short your home leave, Sandur, and bring the report on the accident to GHQ yourself - for Shavla's sake.'

For a moment, Sandur had trouble maintaining a regretful expression. Reinal certainly seemed to have played into their hands. However, this might be just a feint, designed to get them both to GHQ. If anyone were listening in, there was no need to tell them his plans. 'I need no urging to do everything I can for Shavla,' he said formally. 'Serve Shavla!'

'Serve Shavla!' echoed Nerlin and broke contact.

* * *

Flying in his personal helisled, Nerlin was within sight of Prime City in less than two hours. He had taken care to broadcast news of his imminent arrival to several of his closest allies as he went, and to fly mainly over their estates, not to mention sharing with them his 'worries' that the Supreme Commander might be in danger if there were treachery in his own wing. Several of them decided that it was their duty to follow Nerlin to the capital, and they would no doubt bring units of support staff and guards with them.

Nerlin sat beside the pilot and looked down at Prime City spread out beneath him like a coloured strategic map. He always enjoyed the sight of it from the air. There seemed to be an unusually large number of vehicles in the streets, and the parking pens at the heliport were almost full. Interesting, that. He detailed one of his aides to do a faction count on the vehicles the minute they landed.

He was met by a full unit of Harravay guards, ready to escort him to GHQ. When they arrived there, half of them remained outside the main entrance, their weapons fully armed; the rest fell into place behind him. 'One can't be too careful, sir, can one?' said the captain in charge. She grinned at him. 'Lot of uneasiness in Prime just now.'

He grinned back. He and Garran were old friends and had fought in several campaigns together. He always felt better with her around. 'In such times, one must be even more careful than usual. Is our honoured Supreme Commander safe?'

'I believe so, sir. But all members of his personal guard have been put on alert.'

'Excellent. And how many of our own corps are here in the capital, Garran?'

'Quite a few, sir. Kristan tipped us a warning several days ago that something was brewing and we started slipping our people in a few at a time.'

'That boy always has Shavla's interests at heart.' And his own, he added mentally, especially his own.

Kristan was obsessively selfish, as his father was very well aware. Still, this warning meant that Kristan had decided not to throw in his lot with the young Reinal faction, which had been one possible scenario. Nerlin had not considered it a high probability and was pleased that he had not misjudged his eldest son. For all the boy's rashness, he preferred Kristan to any of his other name-bearing children. 'Do you - er - happen to know where my son is?'

'Recovering in hospital, sir. He was attacked as he walked back from a meeting. He fought them off.

Brilliant at hand-to-hand, he is. One of the best. Minor injuries only, but we exaggerated their seriousness a little to keep him safe.'

'He agreed to that? Kristan!'

'Well, with a little persuasion.'

Nerlin nodded. Yes, there were signs lately that Kristan was becoming more mature. Except when it came to women. The young fool was still obsessed with Channa Harknell and had been pressing hard to have a breeding contract arranged with her. 'It seems that things are stirring at last, Garran. We need to be in a strong position. Bring in any more reinforcements you can. We must keep an eye on our Supreme Commander, must we not?'

'Reinal's increased his personal corps recently, sir. Even the relief guards came back into Prime

yesterday. He must be expecting trouble. We're making sure our own senior officers and allies are well protected. There have been one or two assaults on key allies, but nothing we weren't ready for, once Kristan had tipped us the word to be vigilant. He didn't know what they were planning, but he knew something was about to happen.'

'I always feel safer myself when you're at my back, Garran.'

'Thank you, sir.' She grinned at him and he grinned back. They had shared a good many recreation periods in their time. He had even fathered a child on her - though with no name rights. She'd been very sensible about the arrangements he had offered. Not a greedy woman, Garran. And the little girl was a healthy child, intelligent, too. He had seen that she was placed in the Faction Crèche and was making sure that she got a good education.

Garran was speaking again. 'We were helped by one or two suggestions from Faction Harknell, sir. Good allies. Why, I myself would have been dead but for them. It makes you feel very warm to have such allies at your side, doesn't it?'

'Very warm. They've always been good allies, the Harknells.'

'Yes, sir. And no doubt we'll continue working together - for Shavla?'

'Of course. Together. For Shavla.' His smile echoed hers.

Within GHQ, all was quiet and orderly, but there were more people moving around than usual. Nerlin passed, apparently at random, at least a dozen officers he recognised as close kin-allies. They were standing at important junctions in the corridors, chatting casually, but with hands near their weapons. Rather a lot of people around, he thought, considering the lateness of the hour and the recent exclusion from decision-making circles of many of these factions.

He wondered if Sandur was interested in taking the post of Supreme Commander after the coup. If not, he would ask for it himself. Sandur would have first right to it, of course, but the Harknells did not usually bother to take formal office.

Faction Reinal was increasingly well-represented as they drew closer to the com-centre. You could tell them at a glance, even if they were complete strangers and not wearing their faction colours. Strange how surly leaders bred surly soldiers. One of their captains stepped forward as they approached the door.

'No more guards are needed in GHQ, sir. Could you please ask your squad to wait outside the entrance.'

Nerlin smiled. 'No. I have news which absolutely requires reinforcements. Our leader may be in peril.'

'Orders are to . . .'

'Treachery has already been discovered in the Supreme Commander's own wing. If you impede me . . .'

Nerlin fingered his handgun. While the man was still hesitating, Garran pushed him aside and led the way forward, followed by Nerlin and his guards with their hands conspicuously on the shafts of their handguns. No one made any further attempt to stop them.

Reinal and the rest of the Decision Group were waiting for them in the special com-room set up by the Confederation.

Nerlin greeted them unsmilingly. 'My apologies for the delay, honoured colleagues. You received my message, Supreme Commander?'

'Yes. What exactly happened?' Reinal's expression gave nothing away, but that did not matter. The fool had already signed his own death warrant. It was merely a question of time - and Nerlin would allow himself to be guided by Sandur in that.

'Your helisled pilot ran amok, sir - tried to crash his vehicle into my residence. We shot him down.'

'Why would he do that?' exclaimed Sharifa, frowning.

Nerlin shrugged. 'Who can tell? Delayed battle-stress, perhaps.'

'Was there much damage?' asked Meran Thilsen, looking sideways at Reinal as she spoke. No fool, Meran.

'Superficial damage only. My science team is investigating the wreckage. A full report will follow shortly.'

The others all had grim expressions. Treachery in a personal guard was a serious matter and rarely

occurred. They all knew without being told that a more likely explanation was that Faction Reinal had tried to kill the Harravay Faction Leader. Their failure had now put Reinal at very great risk himself, in more ways than one. The Harravays would certainly take their revenge for that and who else would trust a Supreme Commander who openly attacked his own senior staff? Within the high command, unity was essential. All jousting for position usually took place well below that level. For members of a Decision Group, it had to be Shavla's survival which mattered most. Even Georn was frowning and eyeing Reinal covertly, and the two of them were kin-linked.

'My main worry,' Nerlin went on smoothly, 'was that a similar attempt might have been made on your own life, Supreme Commander. We can't afford to lose anyone as important as you, can we? For Shavla's sake. Or to let a minor incident escalate into a serious disturbance? For Shavla's sake. Not with a space transport hovering over the planet! Give the Confederation half an excuse and they'll intervene again.' His smile was a mere baring of the teeth, an expression which, in a rock wolf, might have been intended to warn off a possible adversary.

It had the same effect on the Supreme Commander, who stiffened visibly. 'Checks will be made on all my personnel, thanks to your warning. It was probably an isolated aberration.'

'One would hope so. We're making a few checks ourselves as well - for Shavla's sake,' agreed Nerlin. 'Shavla's safety is so much more important than our own, is it not?'

Meran judged it best to intervene before the two men said more than was wise. Their personal dislike of each other was legendary, but Reinal had not been able to avoid pressure to include Nerlin in the Decision Group. Nerlin had a very broad support base, plus the Harknell support, and might have won the nomination for Supreme Commander himself but for his traditional antipathy towards one or two significant urban factions, which were currently in the ascendant.

In the past, Meran's own faction had not been on the best of terms with Faction Harravay, but the tension had died down since she and Nerlin became leaders. Both had favoured broadening their support bases. And if both factions were now to call in their alliance-links against the Reinals, who were, after all, mere newcomers to the nobility, there could be a big spill of positions in the high command.

'Shavla's needs be ever served,' she said calmly, taking the lead. 'We're all in agreement about that. Now, had we not better begin, Deslar? We've already had to postpone contact till Nerlin arrived.' She herself had made very sure they did not start without him and would make Nerlin aware of what he owed her for that at a later date.

'A timely reminder, Meran,' said Reinal, reverting to his tone of cold authority. 'Decision Group be seated. Com-officer, make contact.'

Not even a 'please', thought Nerlin. He is rattled! Not like Reinal to be so curt with the lower ranks. Well, he'd be more rattled before the day was through. As soon as the contact with Channa was over, Nerlin intended to start undermining a few of Reinal's allegiances.

11

The Confederation communications equipment functioned perfectly, as usual. No flickering greenish pictures here, but a stable, full-size, three-dimensional image in natural colour that joined imperceptibly with the room; if the decor had been the same it would have looked like a continuation of the com-room. Each member of the Decision Group eyed the Confederation equipment enviously and wished that the secrets of that sealed box could be unlocked and used to replace Shavla's clumsy vid-phones.

As soon as contact was made, Channa jumped to her feet and saluted smartly, while Joran sighed audibly. 'Do you have to jump about like that, Envoy?' he asked irritably, his words quite audible to the Decision Group.

She ignored him and remained at attention until Reinal returned her salute. Joran sighed loudly again and muttered something in which the word "militarism" was clearly audible. Then he inclined his head. 'Good

evening, Reinal.' He almost lisped the words. 'Now, let me see if I can remember everyone's names without looking at my list. Good evening, Meran - Nerlin - Sharifa - Georn!' He beamed at them, apparently restored to good humour by this feat. 'There! I did remember!'

While Reinal ground his teeth audibly, Nerlin smiled. Too much difference between your manner now and last time, Mediator, he thought. Not really credible. It was a wonder Reinal hadn't noticed that, but then Reinal could be quite insensitive at times. He looked round at the others. Meran clearly realised that this pettishness was a ploy, for she appeared bored, but the other two were looking disgusted. They must be less intelligent than he had thought. Reinal always chose less capable allies than himself, instead of useful allies with skills to complement his own. The more fool he!

Joran yawned ostentatiously. 'Oh, do excuse me, everyone! I mean no disrespect, but what with the delays, I'm feeling distinctly sleepy. We aren't all as indefatigable as your Envoy here.'

Channa, still standing rigidly to attention, flashed him a glance of surprise as much as displeasure. What had got into him now? His behaviour was twice as effeminate as the last time they had spoken to the Decision Group and he had not been yawning or showing signs of fatigue before the com-link was made. There must be some ulterior motive behind this display, but what? Surely he wished to keep some credibility with the Shavlan Unity?

Reinal leaned forward and spoke with the heavy sarcasm for which he was famous. 'Then we shall not keep you from your rest for longer than necessary, Mediator. Perhaps the Zone Leader could make her report?'

'Well, of course! Why else do you think we're here?' Joran waved a hand at Channa. 'Go ahead, my dear!' Then he giggled and added, 'She absolutely hates being called "My dear" so of course I just can't resist doing it. You Shavlans are just too solemn for words!' He flapped a limp hand at Channa and subsided in his chair, eyes half closed and fingertips delicately supporting one temple.

'Your report, Zone Leader,' growled Reinal.

Nerlin rapped on the table. 'One moment, please - sir. Why aren't you using the title "Envoy"? Perhaps you would care to explain - sir?' He had not bothered to query this at other com-sessions, but it would make a useful starting point now.

'The Zone Leader is not my choice of envoy, as you well know,' snapped Reinal. 'Any more than it's my choice to negotiate peace terms in such a stupid manner. I prefer to use her military title. That, at least, is earned and she has my respect for her fighting capabilities.'

Meran leaned forward. 'Nonetheless, with respect, sir, Channa Harknell is the accredited Shavlan Envoy and we should all refer to her as such - if only out of respect for Shavla.'

Good, thought Nerlin, open declaration of support against our revered leader.

Reinal did not trouble to disguise his anger. 'Channa Harknell is the envoy chosen by the Confederation. I did not support her as a candidate. It's therefore more accurate for me to address her by her Shavlan military title.'

'With respect, sir, you were outvoted on that point at the time,' Nerlin said, glancing round the group.

'But just to make certain, we'll take another vote now. Those in favour of using the title "Envoy"?''

Meran and Sharifa's hands rose. His own joined them. Georn hesitated, then his hand rose too. 'I'm afraid you're outvoted, Deslar,' said Nerlin, delighted with this result. So Sharifa sensed the way the wind was blowing, did she? Well, well! It's a long time since we've been on good terms with Faction Bessle. Reinal must be playing his cards very badly behind the scenes. What a fool the man is. And what fools we were to allow him into office. We shall be more careful next time. When I become leader, I shall not alienate people on whims. At that level, it's Shavla that counts.

Reinal stared round at them in silence, breathing deeply, as if suppressing anger.

'It's a small point, surely?' pointed out Georn. 'Shavla's need comes before our own pride.'

'Very well!' snapped Reinal, 'I bow to Shavla's need.' From then on, he accented the title 'Envoy' so that it mocked its bearer. 'Deliver your report, Envoy! Surely even you must have made some progress in the negotiations by now, Envoy!'

Joran clapped his hands to gain their attention. 'Goodness me, you're as impatient as your Envoy, Reinal.'

These negotiations take time, you know, quite a lot of time. I consider that we've made excellent progress up to now. Why, we've moved far more quickly than I ever thought possible when we started, thanks to your Envoy's intelligence and quickness to comprehend. One has to be very careful in such negotiations, you know. Oh my, yes! A peace settlement is not easily developed - not one that is going to hold firm, let me tell you. And I've been on how many missions - seven, or is it eight, so far?' He paused to let that sink in, then added, 'If you will, my dear . . . ' waving one hand gracefully at Channa, as if to encourage her to continue.

She scowled at him and snapped her heels together, addressing the Supreme Commander. She was internally exultant at the way the meeting was progressing. Reinal was in trouble if he was being openly outvoted in a group stacked with his own allies and neutrals. Nothing of her thoughts showed in her face, however, and her tone was crisp and businesslike. 'We have continued to discuss the restoration of the ecological balance, sir, at the Mediator's insistence. Specifically, the replanting of the hotlands, which are still suffering from the Deorin's last winter campaign. I've been shown a variety of suitable crops and it remains to decide which estates will trial them.'

'Hotlands, eh?' murmured Meran. 'I offer my own estate for the trials. My people are always very eager to try new crops. It becomes more and more difficult to feed our forces, as you are well aware, Deslar.' The glance she threw at Reinal was distinctly unfriendly.

What's been happening in the hotlands? wondered Channa. Aloud she said calmly, 'I've amassed a great deal of information about such crops for our scientific corps.'

'Crops!' shouted Reinal, thumping his meaty fist on the table. 'Ecological balance! Is that all you've been doing, Envoy? What about a peace settlement, Envoy? You were sent there to negotiate a peace settlement, you incompetent idiot, not to discuss agriculture!'

'I've done all I've been allowed to do, sir,' she said quietly. What a pig he was! How did such a one as he ever get my father's endorsement? It just showed that anyone could make a mistake. 'As you know, there are rules to be followed, rules to which the Supreme Council gave its formal agreement, rules which are therefore binding upon me. However, I do have some extremely useful pieces of information for you, as well.' She paused until she had their fullest attention. 'Firstly, the Deoran Envoy is Van Makass himself, and secondly, he is making less progress than we are.'

She paused again while the members of the Decision Group looked at one another and mouthed the words 'Van Makass'. It was probably the most hated name in Shavla.

'Are you telling us that the Deorin have sent their War Leader himself to do the negotiating?' demanded Reinal.

'Yes, sir.'

'I don't believe you!'

'Oh, come now, Reinal,' said Joran. 'I must protest, I really must! If you're going to start accusing us of lying to you, I shall have to break contact. Mediators are not permitted to tell anything but the truth. It's an integral part of our code.'

'We're not accusing you of any such thing, Mediator,' said Sharifa smoothly. 'It was just - we were just surprised, that's all.'

'The Deorin wouldn't weaken themselves like that,' stated Reinal. 'I don't believe it!'

'See for yourself, then,' said Joran and made a gesture. He and Channa vanished abruptly, to be replaced for a few seconds by the image of a tall, heavily muscled man with dark hair and beard, exercising in a gymnasium. He was not aware of them, but the sight of him brought all the members of the Decision Group to their feet.

The image flickered briefly, then Channa and Joran reappeared. They had seen the same image replace the Decision Group.

'Your Envoy will vouch for the fact that the gymnasium you have just seen is on the base here.' He raised an eyebrow at Channa.

'Yes, sir. I exercise there myself.'

There was a sigh from the Decision Group.

‘Those bastards are vulnerable, then,’ said Reinal, ‘more vulnerable than they’ve been for a long time. Now would be the moment for an all-out attack! We could crush them once and for all!’

‘Dear me, no!’ said Joran. ‘I wouldn’t allow that, not for one moment!’

‘How could you stop us?’ demanded Reinal. ‘We’ve heard a lot of talk from you, but I’m not so sure that even the Confederation could stop a whole nation from mobilising!’

Joran smiled. ‘I hate to contradict you, Deslar, but I’d have no trouble stopping you. I’d simply do this.’ Grey box-like walls suddenly appeared around the Decision Group. The guards at the perimeters of the com-room exclaimed and tried to penetrate them. Channa flung Joran a glance of uncertainty and he smiled smugly. ‘You did wish to tell them about privacy cubes tonight, did you not?’ he asked cheerfully. ‘What better way than by a demonstration?’

She took a deep breath. He was the most infuriating . . . ‘It’s all right, guards,’ she called sharply. ‘The greyness will not harm anyone. I’ve been inside a similar cube myself. It’s there for demonstration purposes only. It might be advantageous, however, for you to try to penetrate the greyness, so that you can report upon its more obvious qualities to the Supreme Commander once it’s been removed.’

‘Lifted, my dear,’ corrected Joran. ‘We call it lifting the cube.’

She made no attempt to answer that provocation.

Within the privacy cube, three members of the group rushed towards the grey walls. Nerlin and Meran remained in their places, watching the others and noting carefully how the grey substance repelled them. Thinking over the past few minutes, Nerlin was struck suddenly by the lack of real discord between Joran and Channa. Her scowls had been turned on the Mediator at appropriate intervals, but the way she looked at him at other times was not hostile. She’s working on him, he thought. Good for her! Then he frowned. Or is he working on her?

Reinal tried desperately to punch and kick his way through the grey substance, smashed a chair against it, then threw himself back into his own chair. ‘What now?’ he growled.

‘We wait,’ said Meran. ‘And when this restraining material is removed, Supreme Commander, I think we should listen more carefully to what the Mediator says. We’re rather helpless against such technology, are we not? If he says he can stop us, I’m personally inclined to believe him.’

Georn quoted an old proverb. ‘Hitting one’s head against a wall is more likely to damage the head than the wall.’

Sharifa made a circuit of the edges of the cube. ‘Five paces each way, sir, exactly.’

‘Remove this thing!’ roared Reinal in the direction the image of Joran and Channa had been. He continued to shout loudly, but this had no effect on the grey walls. It did, however, cause his colleagues to exchange glances of surprise at his lack of self-control, even Sharifa and Georn.

Thank you, Mediator, thought Nerlin. Very useful display.

After a while, Joran grinned at Channa. ‘Shall I let them out now, do you think? Pity we couldn’t watch them, isn’t it? I bet Reinal went berserk. Ready?’

She nodded and straightened her spine to a stiff attention. The cube vanished as abruptly as it had appeared, and one of the guards, who had been stubbornly wielding a dagger against it, stumbled forward into the table.

‘Get out of the way, you fool!’ snarled Reinal and roared at Joran. ‘How dare you attack us like this, Mediator? A fine way to negotiate for peace! I wish to complain to your superiors.’

Joran smiled. ‘We don’t acknowledge that concept, Supreme Commander. No person is superior to another. And I myself am in complete charge of this mediation. But I will put your complaint on record, if you wish.’

Nerlin said nothing, but he padded across with Meran to examine the place where the grey walls had rested. They both exchanged glances of amazement. No trace of any sort had been left.

‘How can we beat that?’ mouthed Meran.

Nerlin simply shook his head.

Joran continued with unimpaired affability, ‘Besides, this is not an attack, my dear sir, merely a peaceful demonstration. You are in no way injured. Tell them about the privacy cube, Channa. After all, you spent

quite a while inside one earlier today.'

Channa swallowed her embarrassment at the memories this evoked and explained to the Decision Group how the privacy cube was used and the experiments she had made upon the one in the forest. 'When it was lifted, sir,' she concluded, 'there was no sign of disturbance, there were no marks on the ground, and there was no damage to plants - not even a leaf bent. The Mediator informs me that such barriers can be maintained over long distances, such as borders, at little cost.'

'It's hard to imagine such a thing extending along a whole frontier,' protested Sharifa.

'Oh, it's very easy to change its shape,' said Joran with the utmost cheerfulness. His fingers played across the control panel and the box reappeared, split into five segments, each of which neatly trapped one member of the Decision Group. Another movement of Joran's fingers and the greyness lifted, then reformed around the perimeter of the whole room, this time enclosing the guards as well.

Joran raised one eyebrow at Channa. 'How long do you think I should keep them there this time? Your Supreme Commander doesn't seem to like it inside a cube at all.'

'Do as you think best,' she replied curtly. 'Whatever you do, I shall be in trouble.'

The greyness vanished again, revealing a Supreme Commander purple with suppressed fury. But this time he did not roar insults, merely glared at them both.

'There!' said Joran chattily. 'Useful little gadget, isn't it? It's been around for - oh, let me see - about two thousand of your years. We don't need it on advanced planets nowadays, of course.'

Reinal breathed audibly but said nothing.

'We bow to your superior technology, Mediator.' Nerlin filled the silence. 'Do you have any specific plans for its use? I presume there was some purpose in this demonstration?'

'Only to prove my point that you will not be allowed to resume hostilities,' said Joran. 'This gives us a very simple way of controlling belligerents, since we can, quite easily, divide the whole of Shavla into manageable segments. Deora too, if necessary.'

'Is it really possible on such a large scale?' asked Meran. 'I mean no disrespect, Mediator, but such a thing seems - well, incredible to us.'

'It's possible,' said Joran. 'It's another Sirian peace device. The shielding takes very little energy to set up and even less to maintain. I'm sorry to have upset your Supreme Commander, but since none of you seemed to believe what I said, I thought a small demonstration of our technology might be apposite. We may appear to be rather casual to you, but we're very firm about the things that matter, like ending hostilities. We try not to emphasise it, but we have the power to compel you to do anything we want in the cause of peace, though we ourselves are restricted by Confederation law from using those powers for any other purpose.'

'Now, please try to accept that and stop trying to blame your poor Envoy for things that are outside her control. I had to put her in a privacy cube today too, to convince her of the same point. She's actually done very well for you, you know, much better than we had expected - and far better than Van Makass.'

'How much time are these negotiations likely to take, then?' demanded Reinal, taking charge again and ignoring the compliment to Channa.

'Oh, quite a while, quite a while.'

Reinal's hands clenched around his silver baton.

Meran leaned forward. 'Could you perhaps be a little more specific about the time involved, Mediator? It would help us to be more patient if we had a better idea of what to expect.'

'If you like. Now let me see, I should say that it'll take - hmm - several months at least, judging from past experience.'

'No!' Reinal crashed the baton he had been fiddling with down on the table and shouted, 'Channa Harknell, you are undoubtedly neglecting your duties if you've allowed him to think we'll put up with that!'

'Sir, I'm doing the best I can,' Channa protested, 'the best the terms will allow me to do. You've seen the barrier. What can one do against that? If you can think of anything else that I should do, tell me and

I'll do it! I'll serve Shavla in any way I can!'

Reinal grinned nastily. 'That's easy. I hereby give you a strict and formal order to kill yourself. You're an incompetent envoy and the Mediator tells us that only death can break that nexus. The solution is obvious.'

Nerlin's face was a study in fury, but in such circumstances even he dared not intervene.

Channa sucked in her breath in shock. No Shavlan would dare to disobey a strict and formal order from the Supreme Commander. Such orders were beyond anyone's questioning. She could hope for no help from Nerlin Harravay. Not even her father could have done anything. She swallowed hard and looked around her. 'Sir, I hear and obey, but I have no weapon.'

Reinal leaned forward, grinning. 'There's a vase on the table behind you. If you smash it, the edges should be sharp enough for you to cut your wrists. We shall bear witness that you died honourably, for Shavla.' His expression was gloating.

She saluted, then took a step towards the vase. One step only. Fess moved so quickly that he became a blur. Before she could even begin the next step, two metallic arms were restraining her and the shining body filled her vision. She sagged against the robot in relief for a second, then remembered to make a pretence of struggling.

It was Joran's turn to laugh. 'Oh dear me, Reinal, you're so naïve! Your Envoy is watched every second of the day by robots whose reactions are a thousand times more rapid than hers. How can you possibly expect her to kill herself? Or me to allow it?'

Reinal shrugged. 'I don't mind how she does it, though I'd prefer to witness it with my own eyes. If she's as loyal to Shavla as she claims, she'll find a way. Will you not, Envoy?'

'In view of the difficulties of executing such an order, I think you might perhaps reconsider, Supreme Commander,' said Nerlin sharply. He was furious with himself for having been taken by surprise. 'Unless you have incontrovertible proof that Envoy Harknell has been neglecting her duties, I would formally request that you rescind that order. She made every possible effort to obey, so her loyalty is not in question.'

'You're biased, Harravay. Close kin-alliances. Unfit to vote in this.'

Nerlin glanced at Meran, who nodded very slightly. 'I accept that. We are indeed close to Faction Harknell, so . . .'

There was a hidden threat there, thought Joran, but Reinal was too drunk on power to pay it any attention.

' . . . I'll be happy to let the others decide it,' Nerlin finished smoothly.

'With the greatest respect, I am in complete agreement with Nerlin,' said Meran. 'And I'm not biased. You always were impulsive, Deslar, even as a boy, not to mention wasteful of life when you were in active service. Shavla is not well served by those who kill her people needlessly. Envoy Harknell has demonstrated the utmost loyalty to Shavla throughout her life and deserves better of us.'

Georn coughed nervously. 'A little premature, the order, don't you think, sir? Your great devotion to Shavla is well known and perhaps makes you impatient. But we can't know all the facts, can we?'

Perhaps the Envoy really has done everything possible. Let's wait just a little while longer. The order can always be repeated, after all.'

Sharifa nodded. 'Yes. I would endorse the Supreme Commander's decision without hesitation if Envoy Harknell were indeed shown to have neglected her duty, but it's not possible to prove that. And she did attempt to obey your order. That must stand to her credit. What's more, that machine is the fastest thing I've ever seen and I doubt any of us could have done any better against it.'

Reinal scowled at them all. 'It's because you older factions had become weak that I was voted Supreme Commander and you should not forget that.' After a moment's pause, he added curtly, 'The order is suspended then, suspended only, not rescinded, pending further investigation. You should begin to work out a way to obey me, Envoy! For I will surely give that order again. I have no confidence whatsoever in you, Channa Harknell.'

'Sir, I will always try to serve Shavla's needs before my own,' said Channa, who was now standing back

at attention. 'As you do.' Her face and voice were expressionless, but her double meaning was clear and would have been considered a punishable impertinence in any other circumstances. Now, Reinal just looked at her and began tapping his baton on the table.

Well, Joran thought, much entertained, the children are in a quarrelsome mood tonight! Reinal will have to be punished, however. We can't have him killing the Envoy on a malicious whim. It's just the excuse I need for a little demonstration of our powers.

'Your efforts to obey me were as pitiful as your skill in negotiation,' Reinal spat at Channa. 'I bow to the wishes of the majority in this, but I have not changed my mind about you. Scribe, put that order on record as suspended, pending further investigation, and record also my continuing lack of faith in this Envoy.'

'I've heard more than enough!' Joran declared coldly, his voice cutting sharply through their bickering. 'Be quiet!'

The members of the Decision Group gaped at him, startled.

'You belligerent primitives are sometimes grossly overconfident about your own capacities! Who are you to sit in judgement on other people's lives, when you cannot even order your own without quarrelling?' His voice vibrated with power. 'Be it noted in the records of this negotiation that the Shavlan Decision Group has made an incompetent and malicious decision, which has violated the right to personal life of its own Envoy.'

'Er - if I may suggest a slight amendment, Mediator,' said Nerlin, 'that should read Shavlan Supreme Commander. The rest of the group voted against the order.'

'I stand corrected, Commander Harravay. Let the records be amended accordingly. However, our rules still require me to impose a penalty upon your Supreme Commander and allow me to include the whole group. There are lessons to be learnt during negotiations - and opportunities to be taken. You're about to learn more about both the Confederation's ethical standpoint and the capacities of our technology. Contact between the Confederation and the Shavlan Unity is hereby suspended for ten days, as is contact between the Unity and its Envoy - also between your GHQ and the rest of Shavla. We of the Peace Corps are very firm believers in allowing thinking time to people who are making faulty decisions.' 'You dare not!' shouted Reinal, standing up so quickly that his chair fell over.

Joran smiled and pressed a series of keys on his control unit. 'I dare anything in the cause of peace, Supreme Commander. I've devoted my whole life to it. You questioned our capacity to maintain privacy barriers over large areas. Your GHQ is about to be enclosed in a privacy cube. You might note that it did not require any special preparation on my part to arrange this, and you will learn that you can do nothing to penetrate or remove that barrier. As soon as I break contact, the cube will be set in place. Further barriers will be readied along the borders - that does require a few hours' preparation. I had not previously considered it necessary, Supreme Commander, but I do now.

'Remember - all of you,' he looked slowly from face to face, 'that conflict will not be allowed again on Evral under any circumstances. Remember also that you've already chosen your Envoy, whose life we of the Confederation are now bound to protect at all times. Upon her, not you, lies the main task of negotiating a peace. Your job will come later, when you ratify the conditions and negotiate their implementation with me.'

Meran leaned forward. 'What exactly do you intend to do to us, Mediator?'

'I intend to do nothing to you, Meran Thilsen, except to isolate you in order to give you time to consider your own actions. There's never any need for violence on our part. We leave that to you primitives.' His gaze switched back to Reinal, and it was not friendly. 'I repeat, Supreme Commander, that the barriers will be in place for ten days.'

'We won't submit to this!' yelled Reinal, pushing round to the front of the table, as if he intended to attack the image making the threats.

Joran's scorn was very evident. 'I'll see you in ten days, Supreme Commander. Info-tapes will be provided within GHQ to assist you with your understanding of our technological capacities. During this period, the Decision Group should perhaps debate the question of whether your nation is committed to

negotiating a peaceful settlement or whether you would prefer occupied nation status. Your choice, not ours. No, don't shout at me, Reinal! I have no more to say to you at this stage. Communication will be resumed in ten days.'

The Decision Group vanished from sight and Joran turned quickly to Channa. 'Come and sit down, my dear. That must have been a great strain.'

She nodded and moved woodenly to a chair. He followed and unexpectedly knelt in front of her, taking her hands, which were cold with shock, and kissing each one gently. 'Would you really have taken your own life at that foul creature's command, Channa?'

She was still too upset to protest at the way he was holding her hands. It took a huge effort to speak, but she didn't dare let the tender silence continue. 'I had no alternative. If I'd disobeyed a strict and formal order, all my faction would have been placed under interdict and would have been dispersed for Shavla's sake.' She took a deep breath, but could not stop her voice from wobbling slightly. 'It was a clever move of Reinal's, but I think he made a serious mistake in attacking my faction openly like that through me.' The warmth of his hands on hers was comforting and he was still kneeling in front of her. 'I rather suspect that they'll be fighting already inside that privacy cube of yours, Joran. Reinal's made it plain that he doesn't intend to negotiate peace under any circumstances. I doubt that my father and Nerlin will give him another chance to put Shavla at risk.'

'What a pity we can't see inside the cube! I should have made it five days' confinement, I think, but I was angry at his callousness towards you.'

She swallowed. 'I - Joran, I'm under obligation to you again for saving my life.'

'Not me - Confederation rules, not to mention Sirian robots.' He laid his hand on hers. 'Though I would not have allowed you to waste your life on that dullard's whim. I place a great personal value on your life, Channa.'

Her hands were still betraying her by their trembling and she was relieved when he stood up again. She did not know how to take what he had said. He had seemed genuinely concerned for her, in a way usually expected only of close kin.

Joran continued in a more normal tone, 'Although you're doing well as Envoy, Channa mine, Reinal is not doing well as head of your government. If changes aren't made in Shavla, he could negate all that you're doing.'

She still felt less than her usual self, but she was beginning to put herself together. Was she growing too soft in all this luxury? Perhaps there had been just a grain of truth in what Reinal said to her. 'Reinal's as ruthless as Van Makass,' she said, and this time her voice was steady. 'More so, perhaps. I think he's looking for an excuse to resume the war, even if it means heavy losses for Shavla. He's not even going to wait and see what could come out of the negotiations.'

'There's no doubt about that,' Joran agreed.

'I think there is a high probability that by the time your privacy cube is lifted, Reinal will no longer be Supreme Commander.'

'I think so too. I have a great regard for Nerlin's intelligence, from what I've seen of him, and for Meran's sanity, so I'll leave everything to those inside GHQ. By the way, Faction Reinal has moved a lot of troops into Prime recently.'

She looked anxious.

Joran grinned. 'But so have your kin-alliances.'

How could he joke about such a subject? 'Let's hope there'll be enough of them, then. But - you do realise, Joran, that most Shavlans are still committed to finishing the war. The idea of a permanent peace with the Deoran Empire is inconceivable, not only because the war has been going on for generations, but because of the nature of the Deorin.'

'The Deorin, as individuals, are not much different to the Shavlans.'

She shook her head. 'You'll never convince me of that. I've studied our history. You don't know what happened during the Second Phase Campaigns.'

'I know what your history books tell you - but history is written by the survivors, isn't it? We use

independent historians nowadays. Let's not argue about that just now. I have a great regard for people's sense of self-interest, not to mention their common sense. And that applies to Deorin, as well as Shavlans.'

She pulled a face at him.

'Let things develop naturally for a while, Channa. Faction Thilsen seems ready to consider other outcomes than war - I'm sure you noted how Meran supported Nerlin today? New and profitable hotland crops will be a very persuasive argument in our favour. I must arrange for further samples to be sent to Meran's Scientific Corps tomorrow. And Sharifa, too, is possibly reconsidering her faction's position. We must look more closely at Faction Bessle's needs. In fact, you'll have to tell me all you know about each faction. Self-interest is universal, Channa. And not to be despised, for it's the survival factor. Species who lack it do not survive for long.'

'I hope you're right.' She managed a half smile. 'My future chances of life depend partly upon your persuasive capacities. Now, what do you wish me to do while this ten-day ban is in operation?'

'Continue as before, communicating with me. There's a great deal for us both to learn about each other. You haven't proved incompetent as Envoy. On the contrary. And I think I've a little more experience in judging such matters than Deslar Reinal. We of the Confederation still acknowledge your authority. You - er - you won't waste our time trying to obey Reinal's order to plan how to kill yourself, will you?'

She shook her head. 'No. Once I would have obeyed any order from the Supreme Commander without question. But not now, not in this. Shavla would not be served in any way by my death. In fact, you're right. Shavla is being poorly served by this Supreme Commander.' Still upset, she spoke her thoughts without concealment. 'Oh, how I wish I could discuss this with my father! He ought to know how things stand if he's to make the best use of these ten days.'

He looked at her thoughtfully. 'Mmm. You have a point there. He's not inside GHQ, you know, so it's quite possible for you to speak to him. I think - yes, I think I'll allow you five minutes' conversation, Channa.'

Her face lit up. 'Do you really mean that?'

Joran looked pained.

She laughed spontaneously, not realising, though he did, that it was the first time she had done so with him. 'I'm sorry, Joran. I didn't mean to accuse you of lying. I was just - surprised. You gave me no hint that such things were possible. When can I speak to him?'

'Any time within the next hour.'

'As late as possible, please, then. I need to gather my thoughts together first. It's been an exhausting day.' And, she thought, I need to consider which information I dare share with him. It would be the first time in her life that she had not been totally frank with her father.

Joran moved towards her and kissed her lightly on the cheek. 'This has all been very hard on you, Channa mine. But you've done well.'

She stood still. How was she to take his expressions of affection? She did not really believe them, but could not reject them either, when so much depended on keeping him on side.

He lifted her chin. 'Poor Channa! I do plague you, don't I? Do your people never show their fondness for each other?'

'I - we of the nobility have little time for - for that type of relationship. I believe it does occur among the peasantry. Combatants are transferred, or they get killed. It would be - asking for trouble to grow too attached to one person. And there's always some sortie or raid to plan . . . Life in Shavla is just - not the same as your life.'

'No. Life is different everywhere. And I am as faithful to my mission as you are to yours, believe me. But in so far as it is possible, I am growing personally fond of you, Channa Harknell. The woman, that is, not the Envoy.'

She gulped. How, in the name of all Shavla's forebears, did one react to such a declaration? Surely, surely, he would not expect her to make a return avowal of similar sentiments? 'I - that's very - er - kind of you.'

He laughed and as he let her go, she sighed with relief. 'May I retire to my quarters, Mediator? I need time for reflection.'

'Of course. In fact, if you like, we'll set up the com-link from there.'

'Thank you. That would be very convenient.'

'I'll join you in fifty minutes.'

He watched her leave, then leaned back and stretched languorously. Poor Channa! But how strong she was. She had not flinched from obeying Reinal's order. He had grown to admire her in many ways, now that he knew her better. It had been time he emphasised the Confederation's power, and dear Reinal had given him a perfect excuse. What a boor the man was! The first team of observers had expected most Shavlanians to be like him, bull-headed warriors. But they were not. They were a subtle people, once you got to know them better, living in an incredible mesh of complex relationships. Increasingly he felt hopeful for them, though not, most definitely not, if they retained Deslar Reinal as Supreme Commander. It was up to them to make the next move. He wished he could see what was happening inside the privacy cube. Only the Sirians could do that, but they refused to share the secret.

12

'You will appreciate that I must be present at the meeting with your father,' Joran warned her, nearly an hour later.

'Of course.'

'And if I tell you not to pursue a topic, you must abandon it immediately. I expect instant obedience in that, or contact will be broken.'

'Yes.' You've trained me quite well in obeying your orders, she thought bitterly. As a child is conditioned to obedience in the Junior Corps. But she did not say that to him, not wishing to do anything to spoil this opportunity. 'I was not aware that such contact was permitted,' she ventured, seeing that he was in a fairly communicative mood. 'In fact,' she frowned, as she tried to remember the exact words used, 'wasn't it one of the preliminary terms to which we had to agree before negotiation commenced, that there could be no contact with me?'

He grinned. 'The term to which you're referring states that none of your people may try to contact the Shavlan Envoy without our permission. It says nothing about contact in the other direction, which may be made with our approval. It's deliberately written that way.'

'I see.' And what other surprises do you have up your sleeve, Mediator? she wondered. Sometimes, his arrogance set her teeth on edge, as did her own impotence.

'I have a wide range of discretionary powers, Channa. We don't advise disputants of their existence, but the powers are there, nonetheless.'

He did not volunteer any further information, and she knew better now than to persist with her questions. 'It might be better if you told me in advance which topics to avoid.' She did not wish to do anything which might jeopardise her time with her father.

'No, I think not. We learn a lot from what people choose to say, more than if we set conditions first.' And from this interview, he thought jubilantly, we expect to learn rather more than you realise, including making a start in breaking the hand signals code that your faction uses. It's very subtle, one of the best I've ever seen. I wonder, I really wonder, which of us two will benefit most from this concession?

'Ready, Channa?'

She nodded, her heart beating faster in anticipation.

'Establish contact.'

Channa leaned forward in her chair. The other side of the room flickered, then her father was there with her. The image was so realistic that she had an urge to run over and touch him. He was sitting in a plain chair against a background she did not recognise.

'Father!' She spoke involuntarily and he gave her one of those rare smiles where his eyes softened. She'd never seen him smile at her brothers like that.

'Channa! Are you all right?'

'They're looking after me well,' she said obliquely.

'Nerlin told me you'd been attacked. You do realise that none of us knew anything about those body plants. I've confirmed unofficially that they were Reinal's own idea and that the Reinal Science Corps executed the manoeuvre under strictest secrecy. Not even the Supreme Council knew about them. He's growing grossly arrogant, that man. And losing whatever sense of judgement and balance he ever had.'

'What? Oh, the body plants!' She had almost forgotten the earlier attack in the plethora of new experiences and complications. 'They're unimportant now, Father.'

'Not to me! You know that I'd not allow them to throw your life away. Reinal had no sanction, no sanction at all for such an action.'

'Yes, I know that, Father, but Reinal is still intent on getting rid of me. He took great pleasure only an hour ago in ordering me to kill myself, a strict and formal order . . .'

'What!' Sandur jerked forward in his chair, as if he would have rushed across to her, then recollected where he was and sank back.

'Fortunately I'm well guarded by robots here. I made a token effort, of course, but I was prevented from doing anything before I could even start. The robots' reactions are infinitely faster than our own. Thank goodness!'

'And you were able to make a token effort, knowing that?' He grinned.

'Yes, of course.'

'Couldn't be better, then. That'll give us added leverage against him.' His eyes narrowed. 'The Reinal faction will come to regret their choice of leader, believe me, Channa. And in the near future.'

When Sandur Harknell spoke in that dispassionate, icy tone, even his daughter shivered.

Joran watched in fascination. This is an exceptional man, he thought. If we can gain his confidence, we have a ready-made leader for the Probationary Period of this planet. The two Harknells seemed to have forgotten Joran's existence, which suited him very well.

'Reinal is a nothing,' Channa said contemptuously, 'but those robots are astounding, Father. I wish we had some in Shavla.'

'Metal abominations!' he said automatically.

She remembered with surprise that she had felt the same way not so long ago. 'No, not abominations,' she corrected. 'Just machinery. Very sophisticated and flexible machinery. I'm beginning to lose my dislike of robots and you will, too. You must! That's twice they've saved my life now. But, Father, we only have five minutes. We'd better not waste any more time discussing those incidents.'

'My main concern was your safety,' he said, which was as close as he could get to telling her that he had been worried about her.

'No need for concern. I'm very well looked after here, spoilt even. Conditions are incredibly luxurious. I wish you could see my quarters. I'm told they're standard design on these bases, but if that's the case, then Those of the Confederation are far richer than we had realised. So - tell me what the political situation is in Shavla. Surely some changes are imminent? Meran's siding with Nerlin now at the Decision Group contact sessions, and at the last one, even Georn and Sharifa overrode Reinal.'

Sandur looked at Joran. 'We are safe from spying machines here, I take it, Mediator?'

'Not even Nerlin's new spying machines could penetrate our privacy,' Joran assured him.

Sandur stared at him. Was the Mediator - could he possibly be aware of the range of undeclared devices currently in operation at both the Harravay and Harknell residences?

Joran grinned openly. 'With our technology, Sandur, we're able to - er - keep an eye on things everywhere in Shavla, even through rock.'

'Are you, now!' Sandur turned back to his daughter. No time to think that remark through now, though its implications were frightening. He must get as much information as he could from his daughter.

'Channa, we're about to take action against Reinal. He made an attempt on Nerlin's life today before the

meeting. Very stupid thing to do and badly executed. That's why I'm here in Prime. Our alliance made a bad mistake, supporting Reinal. Compromises rarely satisfy anyone. Worst mistake I've ever made, personally. I may have to take the Supreme Commander's post myself for a while, though I'd prefer not to. We'll see how things go. Nerlin would be a better person to use as a figurehead. He enjoys the fuss and ceremonial more than I do. Now, do you know anything about that grey stuff around GHQ? My people tell me they can make no impact on it.'

'It's called a privacy cube. It's quite impenetrable, even to Those of the Confederation. The Sirians make the equipment which generates it. They specialise in peace-keeping and defensive equipment. You can get more information about them from the Confederation Bureau in Prime. Get Fellass to research matters there. The Sirians make the robots, too. Brilliant design.'

'And GHQ?' he prompted.

'It'll be blocked off behind the barrier for ten days from today, a punishment set by Joran because Reinal ordered me to kill myself.'

'Not a punishment, Channa,' protested Joran, 'a lesson. There's a great difference between the two. Giving people time to think over their errors can be very effective, don't you agree, Channa?'

Channa flushed so hotly that Sandur stared at her. Had she been subjected to the same treatment?

She felt obliged to explain. 'It seems to be standard Confederation procedure for dealing with belligerents, Father. There are certain rules which one may not violate - as I have learnt to my cost, and as Reinal is now learning. In my case, if I refuse to answer a question, negotiations come to a halt for the rest of the day.'

'Mmm.' Sandur had never seen his daughter acting quite like this, blushing and looking flustered. What had Those of the Confederation been doing to her? He made no comment on it, however. 'Are you sure that the barrier will be in place for ten days?'

'Very sure. That's why I asked for this meeting. Joran doesn't lie to us. That's another inviolable rule, part of the Mediators' Code of Ethics, I believe.' Her fingers twitched slightly.

Sandur nodded, not attempting to hide his pleasure at that news. Enormously useful information. She'd done well getting it to him. Ten days would give him plenty of time to arrange matters. And she'd made the hand signal that confirmed it to be true to the best of her knowledge. 'Ten days, eh?' he repeated.

'Couldn't be better. That'll give us the opportunity to arrange a pleasant little reception for Reinal when he's let out - if he's still alive by then. Nerlin's in there with him and we've got quite a few of our own people inside GHQ, so he may not survive.'

He bowed a thank you to Joran, who inclined his head in response. Sandur's eyes lingered for a moment on the Mediator and his brow wrinkled as if something was puzzling him.

'I doubt Reinal will survive,' said Channa. 'Nerlin looked particularly smug when Joran stated their punishment. I'm sure the Harravays have something up their sleeves. Where's Kristan?'

A smile flickered for a moment on Sandur's face. 'He's inside GHQ too, in the hospital.'

'Is he badly injured?' She wished he were dead.

'I gather not - just lying low. He's been associating with Faction Reinal's younger set for a while. It was at his father's request, but I'm surprised he managed to convince them that he was genuinely ready to betray his alliance.'

'The only one Kristan's interested in is himself. They would have realised that pretty quickly. He was probably ready to jump either way, but decided that his father was more likely to win. I don't trust him one fingerspan.'

'I think you can trust him enough. He's a Harravay, after all. Our faction links go back a long way. And if Nerlin gets rid of Reinal while they're inside that cube thing, then he's welcome to the position of Supreme Commander. Otherwise I'll have to take it on myself for a while, though you know that I've never sought formal power.'

'Yes.' Channa hesitated, then burst out, 'Father, I must know - have you had to cede breeding rights with me to the Harravays?'

'Mmm? Oh yes. Well, more or less. Can't be avoided, my dear. You know that as well as I do. We've

discussed it before.'

'I won't agree if it means going into Kristan's breeding pens.' She flicked her fingers in the sign for personal danger.

'No, I realise that. Special terms have already been discussed and found acceptable. You'll both live at the Harknell residence and you can stay in our own breeding pens until just before the birth. You'll have to go to the Harravay birthing centre then, of course, so that verification of the child can be beyond question. But we'll send a guard corps with you, and once you've recovered from the birth, Kristan's rights over you can be terminated, if you so choose. No need for you to feed it yourself.'

'My mother did.'

'The Nestars have some strange ideas. And anyway, your mother and I got on well - on the whole. It was no hardship to prolong our relationship.'

'And if Kristan won't agree to those conditions?'

'In that case, Nerlin has offered to take his place and breed with you himself.'

'I'd prefer that,' she said frankly. 'I loathe Kristan. I know for certain that he beats his women during mating. A junior officer of mine made the mistake of going off on a rec period with him once. He broke her arm - deliberately - then mated with her afterwards.'

'That's something you'll just have to cope with, Channa. We'll make sure the worst excesses are prevented. You'll suffer no more than a few bruises, or else the breeding rights will be terminated. There are men who can't mate without some perverted stimulus. Kristan's one of them, I suspect. He's lucky that his family are powerful enough to protect him.' He hesitated. 'You're not getting soft, are you, girl? This mission is not - er - changing you in any way? We need to maintain those particular kin-links and you're the only female Harknell of the right age and standing. Kristan's maternal lines are good. They usually breed powerful physiques. An excellent trait, that. About time we reinforced it in our lines. We're growing rather slight in build.'

She sighed and fiddled with the hem of her tunic. 'I don't think I'm getting soft, Father. It's just that I hate Kristan Harravay, kin-link or not, and I always have done. He's insane. And as he's bigger than I am, there's a limit to how much I can defend myself. My uncle had to step in a few times when we were young.'

'Faction need, Channa.'

'I know.' She sighed again, then realised she was wasting time and must get more information through.

'But in one sense you're right - I am changing, Father.'

'What do you mean by that?' His voice was sharp.

Her fingers had flickered again in the general danger sign.

Joran leaned forward. 'That subject is forbidden, I'm afraid, Sandur. Channa, if you try to continue with it, contact will be broken.'

Neither wasted a second arguing with him. He had to admire their quick reactions.

'I have other useful information,' Channa said crisply. 'Van Makass is the Deoran Envoy.'

'Van Makass! Are you sure?'

'Very sure.'

'I'm amazed that he's risked himself.'

'Who else could a man like him trust? He's definitely here at the base.' Her fingers flickered confirmation. 'And I gather that he's not making as much progress as we are in the negotiations.'

'How the hell long are these negotiations going to go on? Tell me the truth, if you can, Channa. Are you making the maximum progress possible? We're all a little surprised at the time it's taking. You don't have some hidden agenda of your own, do you?'

'No, Father. I wouldn't let Shavla down. No personal interest could justify that. I'm making the maximum progress that Joran will allow.' Her fingers signalled danger as she pronounced Joran's name and her father frowned slightly. Like most Shavlans, he found it difficult to see beyond Joran's effeminate mannerisms and flowing robes, but he knew Channa would not lie to him, not knowingly, anyway, and he also knew how intelligent she was.

Joran smiled benignly at the pair of them. 'There are well-established procedures to follow, as I've explained to your daughter, Sandur. We've intervened in conflicts like this quite a few times over the years.'

With one eye on the time, Channa rushed on. 'I must tell you, Father, that in my opinion we shall not be able to avoid negotiating a true peace. You should work on that premise from now on and prepare for it. I estimate the probability to be as high as eighty per cent.' Her fingers confirmed this most emphatically. Sandur raised his eyebrows. 'Are you so certain of that already? Are the members of the Decision Group in agreement?'

'I didn't discuss it with them. Would Reinal have believed me? Or even have accepted it as a working possibility? He's irrevocably set on war.'

'Mmm. I suppose not. His hatred for the Deorin goes beyond reason. You're absolutely certain of what you say?'

'Well, not one hundred percent. There are so many differences between ourselves and Those of the Confederation, not to mention the Deorin, that it takes time to learn what the truth is - but I'm fairly certain. Technological superiority weighs heavily in their favour. How heavily you wouldn't realise unless you'd seen the base here. Their technology is - it's unbelievable at times.'

She hesitated, then added, 'We must always bear in mind that they have many centuries of experience of this type of negotiation, as Joran just said. Not to mention much longer lives in which to apply and refine that experience. Think how much we've changed in Shavla in the last two centuries, Father, and then remember that even their individual life spans are well over two centuries.' Her fingers continued to flick confirmation.

Sandur was betrayed into a whistle of surprise. 'They live that long?' He stared openly at Joran.

'Joran is well over a hundred years old,' Channa said.

'He doesn't look it. His body looks younger than mine!'

'Look at his eyes. That's where it shows. Young body, old eyes.'

Joran grinned and gestured gracefully with one hand.

Sandur took a deep breath. 'You'll pardon me for staring, Mediator. I was - I still am - amazed.'

'No offence taken, Sandur. Do continue, Channa. Your time is nearly over. You were discussing my eyes.' He looked at her soulfully and nearly laughed again as her lips tightened in annoyance. But she didn't waste her precious time on him. Already Joran had allowed them more than five minutes. Who knew when he'd cut off the interview?

'You should also understand, Father, that the Galactic Confederation has a great many genuine benefits to offer us. Ecological balance, unlimited food supplies - that's only the beginning. The longer life span is a considerable temptation in itself. And - a true peace is not to be rejected lightly. We are not Deorin, who cannot see anything beyond violence.'

Sandur frowned. Had they been brainwashing her?

Joran leaned forward. 'She's not been drugged, Sandur, if that's what you're thinking. It's against our code. Your daughter is intelligent enough to believe the evidence of her own eyes. You're right to consider her your heir. She's an exceptional woman.' Pity you'll have to find another heir.

'I think, Channa, it would be better if I didn't share all that information with certain other people yet.'

'Perhaps not. But I thought that you should be prepared, Father.'

'Indeed, yes.' The implications!

'I now consider it my main task to make certain that any peace conditions negotiated guarantee that the Deorin are very strictly controlled. Such as they are never to be trusted.'

'We all know that. To Shavla's cost. The Second Phase Wars were not of our making. We would have held to the treaty and kept to our borders but for their provocation.'

Joran cleared his throat and smiled at them both. 'It's more than time to cut contact, I'm afraid. I've been a little over-generous with you, but I'm sure you won't complain about that.'

Sandur said urgently, 'Look after yourself, daughter. Faction Harknell's future depends on you.'

'I will, Father. And Father - keep an eye on Kristan. I don't trust him!'

Sandur winked out of existence before he could even nod in reply.

Channa sat there, staring at her clasped hands. She felt unable to face Joran immediately. She had wanted to cry out to her father to stay with her, to help her, to come and take her place here. He would do all this so much better than she could. She almost ached to feel his arms around her in one of the rare hugs he offered when she had particularly pleased him. At least he had called her 'daughter', another rare sign of his affection.

The weight of her responsibility was crushing her, and yet - and yet the thought of going back to Shavla was worse. She knew that she would no longer be able to pass the Correction Centre tests, even after so short a time away from the Shavlan way of life, knew also that her career as an officer was ended, even before peace made such a role superfluous. She could feel tears welling in her eyes again! Damn Joran for making her so susceptible to her emotions! How could this be better than being in control of oneself? She took a deep, ragged breath. She was only too well aware that the isolation was biting deep. Seeing her father had made her feel worse, not better.

Joran's arm slid around her shoulders. She was vulnerable at this point and he could not afford to let slip the opportunity for strengthening the bond between them. 'You love your father,' he said gently. 'And one can see that he loves you - in spite of your Shavlan terseness with each other.'

'He's been a good and caring father,' she said simply. 'I owe him everything. Few people take so much trouble with a daughter. Or give a child so much companionship.'

'What about your brothers and sisters? You have several, do you not? Were none of them rivals for his affections?'

She leaned against him. 'No. They're loyal Shavlans, but,' she shrugged, 'they have no - no inner fire. And also I'm much more capable politically than they are.' She spoke matter-of-factly, taking no pride in what was merely a fact of existence. 'My father values that highly. It wasn't expected of the breeding. My mother's line can produce - individualists.' She said it as if it were something to be deeply ashamed of. 'That was a risk my father took in mating with them twice. I sometimes think that he was - is - quite fond of my mother. He still visits her, you know. Quite often.'

'Why did he give them breeding rights in the first place?'

'That line is renowned for excellent physical health and - well, good looks - if you like red hair. I have a full-blood brother, you know, which is quite rare among the nobility. Fellass.'

'And your other siblings?'

'I have quite a few, but only two half-brothers with name rights. All four of us were brought up on different estates, for security, and as they're older than me, I never saw much of them. They were all in the Junior Corps before I left the care of my nursemaid. They've done quite well, the three of them, though not nearly as well as I have. My half-brothers are solid, dependable officers, and my full-blood brother - he was injured, you see and walks with a bad limp now - he teaches strategy at the Senior Military Academy. And undertakes research on his own account. Such as they are the very backbone of Shavla. And of course, my father has seen that they've set up good breeding links. Fellass has two children already and Paal has a woman awaiting birth in his breeding pens. Negotiations are still under way for Dassar. They'll do well by our faction.'

She sighed. What was she doing, talking about her family? 'I must be boring you.' She realised that his arm was still round her shoulders and tried to pull away, but his grasp tightened.

'You really will have to learn to touch and be touched, Channa. It's an integral part of our society.'

'As I'm never likely to visit your world . . .'

'How do you know that?'

She stared at him, hope warring with disbelief in her eyes. 'But surely - surely I will have to return to Shavla after the negotiations end?'

He shrugged. 'Some people return afterwards; some don't. Participating in a mediation is a painful process for an envoy, but one of the rewards offered by the Confederation to all participants is the opportunity to travel to other planets - once peace has been negotiated, of course.' He planted a fleeting kiss on her cheek. He was developing a habit of doing that and she never knew quite how to react to it.

The prospect of interstellar travel so stunned her that she ignored the kiss. 'Oh, I'd love that!' she said, from the heart. 'I've always wanted to see other worlds. Always!'

Her reaction delighted him. He had not realised that she had such a strong desire to travel. That would make things easier for her afterwards. And be a pleasure for him. One of the most memorable experiences he'd ever had was when he took an envoy from one of his successful mediations for her first visit to another planet. With M'Simmal, he had recaptured the wonder of his own youth and early travels; with her to love and laugh with, he had lost the slight boredom and sense of déjà vu which sometimes afflicted him. 'We'll go together one day, if you like. I'll volunteer my services as guide.'

Channa sighed. 'Don't tempt me! The negotiations are only just beginning.' And afterwards, the spectre of Kristan loomed. She tried to wriggle away from Joran. It made her feel uncomfortable to sit so close to him.

Joran chuckled and maintained his grasp. 'I wasn't bored by your talk of your family, Channa. In fact, it can be more useful for me when you do volunteer information. We're trying to understand family feelings in your society, but your kinship links are so complex that it's not easy. Would you say that there's a special bond between you and your siblings? A bond that wouldn't be as strong with other kin-allies?' She frowned. 'Well, in a way. Siblings are the closest of the kin-links, and one therefore owes them a particular loyalty. In theory. But among the higher nobility, siblings are usually brought up on separate estates - for security, as we were. Bombing raids could wipe out whole families, otherwise. I don't know my brothers all that well, though Father keeps us informed of who's doing what and he arranges occasional family gatherings when it's safe. My brothers are not much different to any other kin-ally, really. One could form as close a personal bond with - with any kinsperson.' Mirral's image rose in her mind and she took a deep breath, not daring to meet Joran's eyes. 'How is it with siblings on your world?' she asked, desperate to avoid a return to that painful topic.

'Different. And yet similar. A strong bond exists between parents and children, and a strong bond is encouraged between siblings. If possible, they're raised together, but of course, there can be a hundred years' difference between them in age. Group siblings, as we call them, are usually much more closely bonded than blood siblings.'

'How many children did you say you had?' She remembered perfectly well, but wanted to get him talking for a change. She had to admit to a curiosity about his personal life. You never knew what information might come in useful. He was not the only one on the alert for what he could glean.

'I have five children. That's more than most people. My oldest daughter is - mm - nearly eighty now. She's only just joined a permanent cohabitation group. It took her a long time to settle down, find herself a path in life. She has no children.'

'Is that allowed?'

'Many people choose not to have children. There's no compulsion. Some choose to have a great many. But children are an expensive hobby on Terra itself, so that provides a natural limitation. The State will meet the expenses of raising one or two children for poorer parents, but no more. Such people are simply prevented from conceiving again. I'm lucky. I earn a handsome amount and can indulge myself. Also, I enjoy raising children.'

'Enjoy it!' He must be lying to her!

'Yes, truly. It's a very creative and satisfying occupation. Did your father not enjoy raising you?'

She betrayed her surprise at the very idea. 'I - suppose so. He certainly took an interest. But we all do. Children of the nobility are strong bargaining points for our factions. Are all your children from the same mother?'

'No. Two were from my first partner, who was killed in a mining accident. I miss her still. We were very close.' He sighed. 'In spite of our advanced technology, we can't prevent accidents from happening. Two children were from my second partner, who still lives with the cohab group, but she and I have drifted apart and no longer share our lives closely, though we remain good friends. My third partner was - temporary. From her I had my youngest son. He shares her turbulent nature. Neither would have settled happily in our cohab group. The two of them have gone to help colonise one of the new planets.'

We still keep in touch, though, and I hope to go and visit them one day. I had thought of spending the bonus from this assignment on a small spacecraft of my own and setting out to explore this part of the galaxy a little.'

She shook her head, not in disbelief, but in wonder at the strangeness of it all. 'To live so long! To know so much!' she murmured and twisted her head to look at him. 'I must seem like a child to you, Joran.' The arm relaxed its hold, but he stroked her cheek briefly before he took it away completely. She was beginning to find the gesture comforting, in a strange sort of way. Like a fighting comrade's hug, she told herself.

He answered her comment only obliquely. 'Poor Channa! Being an envoy is a heavy burden to place on anyone. And a lonely one.'

Damn! He was doing it again, bringing tears to her eyes, for all her efforts to turn the conversation to safe topics. She dug her fingernails into her palms, hoping the pain would stop her degenerating into a maudlin state. 'I'm happy to serve Shavla in any way I can,' she said stiffly.

'So I've noticed. Even to the extent of killing yourself. You could not have been completely sure that Fess would save you!'

'The consequences of not obeying that order would have been horrific for my whole faction. If necessary, I would have killed myself!' She stood up and began to pace the room, desperate not to allow the conversation to linger on emotional topics.

This time Joran judged it best to let the matter drop. Besides, he had another shock in store for her. How would she react to this one?

13

The next day, after an earnest morning's discussion, Joran yawned and stretched. 'I'm afraid I'll have to leave you for a while now. One or two things need my attention.'

Channa nodded. She could never understand why he didn't just do things without telling her. He had the upper hand here, after all. 'Is it possible for me to get some vigorous exercise? I'll become flabby if I go on sitting around like this.'

Joran nodded. She was playing right into his hands. 'Certainly. Com-system! What exercise facilities are free?'

The metallic voice answered immediately. 'The woods are not available, but the gymnasium is free, Joran. The swimming pool is occupied at the moment by the Deoran Envoy.'

Joran raised his eyebrows at Channa. 'Will the gymnasium suit you? Oh, and by the way, it's next to the pool. If you'd like to take a swim afterwards, I'm sure the water will be free by then.'

'Yes. All right. Thank you.' She turned and left the room immediately, afraid that Joran would guess what she was thinking.

He watched her go with sad compassion, for there was no skill in predicting how a loyal Shavlan would behave, given that piece of information. Unfortunately, certain actions were essential in a mediation and this was one of them. At every painful new experience, every step along the path, the Envoy would have to prove that his growing faith in her was justified. Nothing could ever be taken for granted when a whole planet's future and millions of lives depended on the outcomes.

As she followed Fess along the corridor, Channa's flesh crawled at the thought of Van Makass separated from her only by a wall. She wished desperately that Joran had not told her about that, for she now had an inescapable duty to try to kill the heir to the Deoran Empire. If the Correction Officers, if anyone at all, even her father, ever found out that she hadn't tried to do so when the opportunity presented itself, they would unhesitatingly condemn her to death on her return to Shavla, peace negotiations or not.

Before coming here, she herself would have felt the same about anyone who did not make the effort,

given the same circumstances! But suddenly she did not wish to attempt this task. Why? Was this the result of the changes which Joran had so skilfully introduced into her thinking over the past few days? Was she genuinely convinced that a successful conclusion to the wars did not depend - could never again depend - upon battles won, or upon the deaths of so many people? Could it even depend upon the death of someone like Van Makass?

Once, not long ago, Van Makass's death would have been the single biggest advantage that Shavla could have hoped to gain,

both tactically, for he was a skilled strategist, and for propaganda purposes. Like his now-ageing father before him, he was a key figure, binding the Deorin together in implacable purpose by the sheer force of his personality. She had lost count of the number of Shavlan suicide squads sent to assassinate him. None of them had achieved even a serious injury.

People said that he was lucky, and indeed his luck was legendary, but she did not believe in that sort of luck. Nor, she guessed, would Van Makass. He was always carefully protected by guards whose own lives depended on their leader's survival. It was even rumoured that he killed the families of any of his personal guards who let him down. Legend said that he was brutal, ruthless, savage, even more so than the average Deoran. But what good would his death do now that Those of the Confederation had taken charge?

She stopped dead in the middle of the corridor. Why had Joran given her that information anyway? He must have known that she would be forced to take advantage of it. His knowledge of Shavla was extensive and was growing daily.

Oh no! she thought bitterly, as realisation swept over her, you're expecting me to try to kill Van Makass! And with those robots around, I don't have the slightest chance of success. And the worst of it is, I don't dare ignore the opportunity. Damn you, Joran Lovrel! I'm sick of your meddling. Answer this! Do that! Let your emotions go! Weep all over me! Damned mediators! Deoran spawn, all of you!

If she had been in the habit of giving way to her emotions, which she was not and never would be, willingly, she could have sat down and wept there and then. Instead, she sucked in her stomach, stiffened her shoulders and started marching briskly.

'Not that way, Channa.' Fess's voice broke into her deliberations. She growled in her throat, stopped and tried to regain her bearings. She could never tell where she was in this damned place!

Her posture impeccably military, she turned to follow the robot, but her thoughts were beating helplessly around and around in her skull. Could she elude Fess's control? Was that even possible? She could not think how, but she still had to try. She felt like someone attempting a suicide mission wearing a blindfold. Her heels drummed furiously as she marched. Only her hands spoiled her military bearing: they were clenched into tight fists.

When they reached the gymnasium, exercise garments were extruded from the dispenser. Channa put them on without even noticing that they were bright green in colour and far too brief for modesty. Her thoughts were still on the problem of Van Makass. She asked for an exercise programme, since she could not be bothered to devise her own. A quiet mechanical voice made a few suggestions and she began to move around in the patterns it prescribed. She examined the gymnasium walls as if she was seeing them for the first time. Never had she paid so little attention to her body's needs.

After a few minutes, she decided to see what she could find out from the robot. The first thing she needed to know was behind which wall that Deoran filth was swimming. She waited until her circuit brought her near it and paused for a minute. 'I can't hear any noise from the pool.' She gestured casually to the wall nearest to her.

'You would not, Channa. There is comprehensive sound insulation in all walls to minimise interruptions. But in any case, only storerooms lie beyond that wall. The pool is on the other side of the gymnasium.'

'Oh.' She continued her exercises, switching back to circuits of the room. This apparatus was wonderful. If only she had time to do it justice! She must pass on the designs to her people. One could do so much with it in a small space. It would be excellent for the smaller guard posts. So many details to learn and share. So many things to enrich one's life. And yet she must concentrate on death! Strange how that had

never worried her before. Strange that it worried her now. Oh Shavla! What am I becoming? She noticed some hand weights lying in a corner and slowed down to eye them. On the next circuit, she stopped to pick them up. What were they made of? They seemed to be neither metal nor plastic, as far as she could tell, but they were heavy. How far would Joran let her get in this? Did he actually want her to attack Van Makass? Why couldn't they just get on with the negotiations? Her mouth set in lines of grim determination, she put the weights down and resumed her circuits of the gymnasium.

Careful scrutiny of the walls revealed some faint cracks which might indicate a doorway into the swimming area.

She passed them twice without trying anything. The more she considered this, the more sure she became that Joran had set her on this track deliberately and that any action she took was doomed before it started. Why, Joran, why? She sighed aloud.

'Are you all right, Channa?' called Fess, ever alert to her welfare.

'Yes, of course I am! Can't you see that I'm all right?'

'I can see your body, Channa, inside and out, and there are no malfunctions. But I am aware that one must always consider the emotions of humans. The sound you just made sometimes indicates emotional distress.'

'Well, it didn't indicate emotional distress this time! I'm fine. Just leave me in peace to get on with my exercises.' How stupid to take out one's frustration on a machine. And even more stupid to feel ashamed of one's rudeness. She had almost apologised to a collection of metal just then! What would they say to that in a Correction Centre?

She sighed again. What did it matter now why Joran had put her in this position? All her reasoning still came back to the point that if she did not make an attempt to kill Van Makass, it would be found out by Correction Officers in the debriefing and she would be condemned to death out of hand.

Anger eventually fuelled her to action, anger against everyone, Joran included. She snatched up a weight, moved a few steps with it, exercising assiduously, then, as she came to the spot she had noted, she smashed it against the possible doorway. To her astonishment, the door burst open, but Fess was at her side before she could take more than two steps into the swimming pool area.

Van Makass was standing only a few metres away. She recognised him from the propaganda photos. She tried to throw the weight at him, knowing that she had already failed, and was not surprised when Fess plucked it from the air as soon as it left her hand. She did not try to struggle then. As well try to fight a winter storm as struggle against a Sirian peace robot. But since Fess made no effort to move her away, she remained where she was, rigidly erect and watchful. What would happen next? Would she be able to gain any advantage from it?

The Deoran reacted immediately to her attempted attack, by roaring with fury and charging towards her. Another robot blurred into place in front of him, but not until he had almost reached her. Interesting! That robot could have stopped the Deoran before he had taken a second step. This must mean that they wanted a confrontation.

'So! You must be the Shavlan Envoy.' Van Makass's eyes raked her body and she became painfully aware of the scantiness of her costume. She gritted her teeth and ignored it.

He gave a bark of mocking laughter. 'Well, let me tell you that your strategy is as poor as your aim, Envoy.' He stood behind the barrier of his robot's arm, making no attempt to touch her. He too must have learned how swift and strong the robots were. But the looks he cast at her body were in themselves an assault.

'You surely did not expect to succeed, Shavlan?' he asked, after waiting in vain for her to say something.

'Why even bother to try? These tin men are the fastest things I've ever seen, as you must have found out. Or are you Shavlans as stupid as the jokes say?'

'Of course I didn't expect to succeed. But it was worth the effort just to see you in person, Van Makass. Not many Shavlans do that and live. Besides, I cannot now be accused of neglecting my duty to Shavla. I tried to kill you, did I not?' Her voice was as calm and smooth as his was rough and angry.

'Duty to Shavla!' He almost spat the words at her. 'Shavla's worth nothing! You softbellies were on the

verge of defeat when they came and you know it! If these decadents from the Confederation hadn't intervened, we'd have razed Prime to the ground by now and wiped out most of you weaklings with it.' 'But they did intervene,' she said, her quiet tones running in cool counterpoint to his loud harsh voice. 'And you've been compelled to negotiate with them, just the same as we have. There can be no more talk of victories now or of razing each other's cities.'

'Compelled to negotiate, yes, but not to capitulate. I still have that choice, or so I'm told. I may well choose to go down fighting. I may decide not to accept peace and re-education!'

She did not try to reply to that, just continued to stare at him steadily. Was a man with such a reputation as a strategist really such a coarse brute? Or was he taunting her deliberately?

'Why you?' he asked abruptly.

'I don't understand your question.'

'Why did they choose you as Envoy? Why did your people not send Deslar Reinal? Isn't he supposed to be your leader? Or was he too cowardly to take the risk? And how did you Harknells manage to get a candidate accepted by Faction Reinal, anyway? I was amazed when Lilla told me who the Shavlan Envoy was. Reinal was an arrant fool to allow your faction even to present a candidate, let alone giving Those of the Confederation a choice of envoys! We manage our affairs a little more carefully than that. The only Deoran candidate was me. I told Those of the Confederation that they could like that or lump it. And here I am!'

Well, you're certainly a typical enough Deoran, she thought, but I can't see you accepting change. Aloud she said quietly, 'Reinal had no choice. We don't allow absolute rulers in Shavla. And we Harknells still have enough power to achieve our ends.'

'The more fools you, then, not to pay better attention to who you choose as leader! He's the reason why you nearly lost the last campaign. He's incompetent. If I'd had his luck, I'd have finished things off by now.' He looked over his shoulder. 'Hey, Mediator! You should have offered me this one to play with. That'd have kept me nice and quiet for a long time. She's more attractive meat than you, with your soft ways and sneaking tricks! Besides, I've never fucked a noble Shavlan officer before. They usually kill themselves when their assassination attempts fail. Now wouldn't that be something to enjoy, the heir to Faction Harknell in my personal suite! I'd relish the task of taming her!'

'I haven't been named heir to anything,' said Channa, ignoring his crude taunting. 'You have your facts wrong.'

'I have my facts right. We have good intelligence units right in the heart of your precious Shavla. You're the heir, no doubt about that, whether your father's named you formally or not. And you're a lush piece of womanhood, too. What a waste, putting you in the military!'

Channa divorced herself from his crudities. Was he behaving like that to irritate his mediator or was it to try to provoke her? Or was it just standard Deoran behaviour? She did not know. She had never talked to Deorin, just fought them. Maybe that's what Joran wanted to see, how she would talk to the enemy face-to-face. She was sure that he was watching them, and the thought that he was seeing her forced to be the butt of obscenities galled her far more than what the Deoran was saying.

Van Makass claimed her full attention again. 'I'm very virile, you know,' he boasted, patting himself suggestively. 'Not like your softbellied Shavlan men. You could do a lot worse than breed with me, Harknell. We kill off poor breeding lines in Deora, or send the mistakes to the mines. Those that are left are prime stock.'

'Breed with you!' She snapped her mouth shut. She must not allow him to goad her.

He stood there and continued to appraise her body with open appreciation. Channa forced herself to remain aloof and motionless. Don't leave, she kept telling herself. Stay calm! There will be information to be won here. She would come out of this encounter intact, she thought exultantly, and no one would now be able to accuse her of neglecting her duty.

'You know, you're not bad-looking,' he said. 'In fact, you seem remarkably fit and strong for a Shavlan whore. Good self-control, too. But then, more of your women fight than ours, don't they? We don't send our breeding stock off to be cut to pieces. I've never had it away with a woman warrior before. I usually

like women's bodies to be soft. Yours might be one of the few exceptions. Tell me, are you a good screw, Channa Harknell?'

'None of your business, Deoran!' she said evenly.

He chuckled. 'You look like a good screw. A . . . very . . . good . . . screw. Had any children yet?'

She could not repress a slight shudder. 'That's none of your business, either.'

'Let me think . . . I could do with my aides here to check the facts for me. As far as I can remember, your family haven't given anyone breeding rights over you yet. Am I correct? Yes, I see that I am. So no one's pumped you up, eh? You've still got that pleasure to come.'

Disgust crawled briefly across her face.

'Well, look at that! The statue's showing signs of life! You don't fancy breeding, do you, Channa Harknell? Your face turned sour as mouldy mash the minute I mentioned it! My, my! You'd soon be in trouble in Deora for such crooked thinking. A woman's main purpose in life is to breed, preferably male children, and we make sure that they're taught that from childhood. Damn it, they're proud to breed for Deora and we honour them for it! But I find your attitude very piquant. I'd enjoy breeding from you, watching you squirm and pant for mercy as I worked you, and then watching your belly swell with my baby.'

She shrugged, but it was an effort to do so. The mere thought of being in this man's power, of breeding with him, nauseated her.

'We don't set a quota for our women's breeding, either,' he continued.

Heavens, did he never stop talking? But was he making her a gift of some information? Or was he using his words to get some from her?

'You Shavlans do set a quota, don't you? What is it, two or three babies each of you has to produce? That's a stupid waste of potential! And it's also why Deora will win in the end. We breed more prolifically than you do. There's always a new generation of strong young fighters raring to go and more being raised.'

His voice softened. 'Hey, Channa, how would you like me to inject some decent blood into your precious Harknell breeding lines, eh?' He made a suggestive gesture and roared with laughter as she flinched visibly. 'That's got you where it hurts. Don't fancy it at all, do you? Better watch out, Channa. You're getting me really interested in you. Maybe I'll name having you as one of our peace conditions.' She could not let that go. 'Hardly! Those of the Confederation do have a certain code of behaviour, you know.' Or do they? Maybe their code is as flexible as the extra rules they don't tell us about!

He chuckled again. 'Do they, indeed! We could have a practice together now. I'm sure our dear Mediators would allow us the chance to have a fuck or two, if we asked them nicely - in the name of peace. After all, they do it all the time, don't they? In the name of peace.'

She breathed deeply and slowly. Show no anger, show no disgust! She chanted the words like a litany inside her mind.

Van Makass gestured towards the side, where his mediator was obviously standing. 'They seem to like fucking. They even fuck with primitives like us.' He paused and eyed her up and down again. 'Mmm, but I prefer my meat more spicy. Meat that fights back a little. Like you.' He took a step towards her and roared with laughter as she took an involuntary step backwards.

'Warrior woman you may be, but you're still soft inside, Shavlan!' he taunted her. 'Too soft to turn a situation like this to your advantage. Look how you cringe back now - and I'm only throwing words at you! I definitely fancy you, though. A bitch like you would tempt any man. Funny, that. I don't usually like red hair. Look, I'll make you a promise. If you're still alive when we win the war, whichever way we have to win it, I'll take you into my recreation suite for a year or two and try breeding from you. Harknell intelligence and looks, with the Van Makass virility. Should give me some interesting children, eh? I'd bring up our sons to be real warriors and our daughters to enjoy doing their duty by their menfolk.'

She did not attempt to answer. Deoran crudeness was not worth angering oneself over. Besides, he was just goading her. A Deoran would never fancy mating with a Shavlan - or vice versa. Pity he'd found her

weak spot, but she was pleased with the way she'd kept in control of herself generally. She let him run on. This must be what Joran wanted. To study their reactions to each other. Well, she intended to react as little as possible. She was here only to protect herself and to glean information.

Van Makass made a lewd gesture with his mouth, but she continued to gaze steadily at him. 'You've got good self-control, for a woman,' he said admiringly.

Did he really think women were so different to men?

'Except when I talk about breeding,' he continued thoughtfully. 'But you'll get used to that idea in time. You, Channa Harknell, are marked for me from now on.'

'Such an honour!'

His robot intervened. 'You must return to your quarters now, Van Makass. The time allocated for exercise has ended.'

'I'd rather stay here and play with the little Shavlan whore!' He made another very explicit gesture with one hand, but Channa did not allow her expression to change.

A woman stepped into their line of vision. This must be Lilla, the other Mediator. She was the one who had been with Joran that day in the pool. She was beautiful - coffee-skinned and dark-haired, with the body of a young woman shown to advantage by a brief close-fitting garment. But her eyes were like Joran's, old and knowing - and full of the quiet understanding that Channa found hardest of all to accept.

Van Makass turned to sneer at Lilla. 'This is my Mediator, Shavlan. Look at her. Pretty, isn't she?'

Though I prefer redheads, now I've seen you! Mind, Lilla's a good screw, not at all fussy about what she'll do for a man. Most accommodating! Did they give you a man as Mediator? Yes, I can see that they did. Is he good at fucking as well? No, you Shavlans call it mating, don't you? Stupid word! But clever of these Confederation devils to use fucking as a weapon, don't you think? Much more fun than using brute force. They must have a queue of perverts wanting to do a job like theirs! I bet your keeper's really sucked you in by now with his smarming ways, hasn't he? Pah!'

She jerked backwards involuntarily as he spat in her direction, and he roared again with laughter. 'Look at her cringe! Oh, Channa, Channa, how I'm going to enjoy you! You Shavlans are a spent force. You won't last long now, whatever these Confederation pimps say or do. You're rotten eggs ready for the cracking. Negotiations! Pah!' He spat again in her direction, then swung round on his heel, still trailing taunts behind him. 'Don't forget, Channa Harknell, one day I'm going to show you how a real man screws! Come on, Lilla. Seeing that bitch has made me feel horny. No more info-tapes! I need your body.'

Lilla winked at Channa and turned to follow him.

Channa stood there, horrified. Mediators, they called themselves! If Van Makass was correct, they were just glorified recreation whores and Joran was as bad as Lilla, except that he did not have to face such crudity. Or did he find her primitiveness appealing in itself? She shuddered. How could that woman do it? How could anyone who called herself civilised let Van Makass touch her? Channa felt physically sick after her encounter with him, and she had never considered herself squeamish. If the Deoran had set out to disgust her, he had most definitely succeeded. The thought of him touching her was almost as bad as the thought of Kristan Harravay.

'I wish to go back to my quarters, Fess!' she said through gritted teeth. 'Now! I've changed my mind about the swim. I'll have a shower instead.' And for once, she thought, I'll welcome the perfume. I feel as if I've been covered in filth, had it ground into my pores. She could even feel the imprint of Van Makass's hands on her body, though he had never actually touched her. She shuddered again.

'Certainly, Channa. Please follow me. Are you cold? You were shivering then.'

'I'm fine. Just take me to my quarters.' Bloody robots! Always there on watch. Oh, for a cool, dark cave. Why, she asked herself as she marched along behind Fess, trailed by Rolly, why, why, why had Joran allowed - no, set up - this meeting? Another of his discretionary powers? A trick? A lesson? What could he possibly have learned from Van Makass that he did not know already? The man was totally crude and obvious.

Nothing, she thought, as understanding dawned slowly. Van Makass had behaved very predictably,

making no attempt to hide his hostility, enjoying making his crude taunts. So the only other thing of interest to Joran was, must be, herself. She could not stop shuddering. I'll never let Joran touch me again, she vowed. Playing with me like that. I hate him!

But she knew that she did not hate him. They were both bound by different loyalties, that was all. He acknowledged that openly, had never tried to pretend otherwise. All he had done was to stay true to his own people. She could understand that. But could she let him touch her again? Her body throbbed, as it always did when she thought of mating with Joran. Damn him! Damn them all! Did I behave as predictably as Van Makass? Did you enjoy watching us, Joran? What did you learn from me? And what else have you got in store for me?

14

Sandur sagged back in his seat as the image of Channa vanished and he was left alone in his temporary command room in Prime. For one irrational moment he had an urge to call out to her to come back - he even lifted his hand as if to make a gesture of appeal - then he took control of himself. He had things to do and she had never really been there.

'Guard!'

'Yes, sir!' The guard answered promptly, but remained outside the door. They were too well trained to enter Sandur's office unbidden.

'Summon my Corps Leaders. At once. And my son, Fellass.'

Within seconds Kerrall had arrived. The leader of Sandur's Personal Guard, he was always close at hand. He was a cousin of sorts, greying now, but still immensely strong, and an expert at individual combat. All Sandur's Personal Guard were kin-linked to him. Who else but kin could be trusted to guard your back?

Sheera came in next, the leader of Faction Harknell's Scientific Corps. She was ageing now, her body stooped and her hands gnarled, but her brilliant intellect was undiminished, still razor-sharp and highly creative. She had led the Scientific Corps during the last decade of his father's life, and Sandur hoped she would lead it for him until her death - let that day be long in coming! For all his appreciation of her talents, he was a little in awe of Sheera, who could still make even him feel like an untried boy.

Marrin Nestar, leader of the Transport Corps, followed Sheera into the room. He was half-brother to Channa's mother, Riahn. She had a lot of half-brothers, too many for safety, but that was typical of the Nestars - breed for pleasure, not for gain. A fine woman, Riahn, Sandur thought, smiling as always at the memory of her. She came from a sound faction, too. The Nestars were of the old nobility, but little interested in central politics and power-mongering, preferring to focus on their regional affairs. He had bred with Riahn first to please his father, but the second time to please himself. Their unions had been fiery, with the breeding pens echoing to their quarrels. They had spent more time in passionate reconciliations than sound bargaining and getting to know each other's factions and capabilities. Ah, but Riahn had been, was still, such fun! He wished he could have spent more of his life with her.

And out of that second breeding had come his Channa, a precocious brat with a vivid personality almost from the day she was born. He still visited Riahn occasionally, for she rarely left her own estate now, but strangely enough Channa and she did not get on very well. Perhaps they were too alike. He could see the similarities between them, even if they could not.

Sandur was content to leave it like that. He had not wanted to share his daughter's upbringing with anyone else; she was his to mould, his to enjoy. And now she had grown from a tiny flame-haired child, creating mischief at every turn, and had become a beautiful woman, one with brains and an instinctive grasp for politics. A credit to the Harknells - a credit to Shavla. He shook himself. Now was no time to grow sentimental, when Faction Harknell's survival depended upon him!

Marrin Nestar had originally been sent to the Harknell residence under the terms of the breeding contract

to keep an eye on Channa's upbringing. The Nestars had a tendency to do strange things like that. They had wanted to keep the child themselves, but Sandur would never agree to that for any of his offspring who were to bear name-rights. Harknell offspring were too valuable to leave to the casual upbringing of the Nestars. Still, it had been good for Channa to have Marrin around. He was devoted to her and she to him, but he got in the way at times, in Sandur's opinion, and had had a tendency to fill her head with strange ideas. Still, it never did any harm to keep the kin-links close, and Marrin had more than earned his keep by managing their faction's Transport Corps with consummate efficiency.

Tillith Harknell rushed in next, leader of the Estate Guard Corps. Young, hence the tendency to rush around, but promising. Dark thin face, like all true Harknells. And very eager for advancement. It was a pleasure to watch these young ones come up the ranks and to foster their development. In them lay Shavla's future. Or did it, now? What sort of people would be needed in times of peace? Sandur sat for a moment chewing on that thought. It had chilling implications for a man like him, a man who had devoted his life and his faction to the war effort.

Last of all came Fellass - as usual. Rarely could Fellass be made to hurry, even in an emergency. He was a sound if somewhat unconventional officer, teaching strategy in the Officers' Academy since the injury which had left him with awkward body movements that might prove a handicap in combat. Fellass had a memory for detail that had proved to be of far more use in the Academy than on the battlefield. A strange son for a Harknell to sire. Bred of the Nestars and sometimes, Sandur thought, it showed. Fellass was squarely built, like his uncle Marrin, with nondescript brown hair and greyish eyes. He was pleasant natured and extremely intelligent, but there was no sign of leadership qualities in him, no political instinct for an ambitious father to turn to the faction's advantage.

'Top secret,' Sandur said aloud when they were all assembled. Glances were exchanged and eyes brightened. Most of them were itching for something to do. The inactivity of this enforced peace was very wearing on people whose whole *raison d'être* had always been war. There was no one alive now who could remember the uneasy decade of peace between the First and Second Phase Wars - the Interim Peace.

No, Sandur's eyes lingered on his son. Only Fellass still seemed happy, Confederation restrictions or not, pursuing what he called 'random research', which usually had to be relegated to his spare time. Sandur had once scolded him for wasting his energy on such rubbish. Who cared about history and old records when there was a war to win? But later he had had to admit he was wrong, for his quiet unassuming son had turned up quite a few useful ideas for improving people's everyday lives. And that, too, contributed to the war effort. Nowadays, Fellass's random research was actually encouraged by the authorities, at least whenever there was nothing more urgent to be done.

Sandur waited a moment for the scrambler grid to be activated around the room - Nerlin was not the only one to have some undisclosed gadgets in use. Sheera checked everything herself on a hand monitor, then nodded to him to continue.

He still hesitated. Hard to know where to start in this. How did you tell people that their whole life might be about to change permanently? How did you start turning warriors into farmers and merchants?

'A brief conversation with our Envoy has been permitted me by Those of the Confederation - unknown to the Supreme Council or the Decision Group.' He did not need to tell them to keep quiet about that.

'You will be glad to know that Channa is well and is, of course, still working actively for Shavla. As we had surmised, Faction Reinal's claim that she had been corrupted by the Confederation was false.'

Marrin nodded his head. 'I said so at the time. No one could corrupt that girl.'

The others made no comment, but their expressions showed eagerness for action, and at the mention of Faction Reinal's duplicity more than one hand caressed the regulation handgun everyone carried as a matter of course.

'Channa managed to give me several important pieces of information during the conversation, which was strictly limited in time, and she confirmed them with hand signals. First, the greyness around GHQ is a barrier placed there by the Mediator as a punishment for the Decision Group, or more specifically, for Deslar Reinal.' He paused for a moment to master the anger which surged up in him again.

‘Why?’ asked Sheera. ‘What has that fool done now?’ She had never approved of their support for Reinal as Supreme Commander.

‘He apparently gave Channa a strict and formal order to kill herself.’ He ignored the growls of anger from Fellass and Marrin, and the hisses of surprise from the others. ‘She made the attempt to kill herself, of course, for the sake of the faction, but she’s well protected at all times by those damned peace robots of theirs, so she was not allowed to act upon the order - and will not be allowed to do so in the future.’ He sat back and grinned at them, a wolfish baring of the gums. ‘So dear Deslar played into our hands there. It couldn’t have turned out better. The barrier will be in place for ten days, to reinforce the point. It seems that Those of the Confederation have very strict rules about the sanctity of life, and Deslar’s action upset them.’

The smile faded to a frown. ‘Channa stated quite openly that this was the way Those of the Confederation deal with any infringements of their regulations, by forcing people to take time to reflect on their misdemeanours. A similar punishment was applied to her when she refused to answer a question. Negotiations were terminated for the day. You will all no doubt remember how puzzling we found it that responding to any and every question was one of their central conditions for these negotiations?’

They nodded gravely, then Marrin caught his eye and Sandur nodded to him to speak. ‘No sign of - er - damage to Channa?’

‘None. Physically, she looked very well. As well as I’ve ever seen her look, come to think of it.’ He frowned, trying to decide why.

Fellass nodded. ‘That’s good. We need people like Channa. She’s got a brilliant mind, if only she’d learn to use it more constructively.’

Sandur grinned again. ‘At the moment what we need even more is a breathing space to make some - er - readjustments to the support base of the central ruling group. That grey barrier is going to be very convenient, eh? Such a pity that Nerlin’s trapped inside, and Kristan too, not to mention their personal guards. The remainder of Faction Harravay will be a bit lost for leadership till they’re released. It shouldn’t be difficult for us to gain their help for a coup in Prime, should it? After all, we’re on the same side.’

Everyone was grinning now. No one was ever completely on the side of another faction, though the Harravays and Harknells were closer than most.

‘So,’ Sandur went on, ‘we have been given adequate time to complete and effect a coup. I do not scruple to use that word or to work quite openly for a re-formed alliance. Deslar Reinal has been disastrous as Supreme Commander.’

‘About time you got rid of him,’ grumbled Sheera, whose age and achievements gave her certain privileges that others would not have dared take with Sandur Harknell. ‘Reinals are trash. Urban based - no sense of property or tradition. Trash. Always have been. Should never have allied with them, even loosely. Told you so at the time.’

‘We’re all entitled to an occasional mistake,’ Sandur said mildly.

‘Hmmm! Well, you’ve had your entitlement now! Shavla can’t afford another mistake like that.’

‘Did Channa manage to tell you anything else?’ asked Fellass, his expression wistful. ‘I’d sell my soul for her chance to study the Confederation way of life and their technology.’

‘Yes. She told me something rather significant, something we need to consider very very carefully, the reason I called you here for a Top Secret conference.’ He paused, watching their faces, then dropped his bombshell quietly. ‘She’s just about convinced that only a genuine peace is going to be possible.’

The group exploded into talk, protocol forgotten.

‘What?’

‘I don’t believe it!’

‘Never, while one Deoran lives!’

Sandur held up a hand and the babble of exclamations was cut off. ‘If Channa truly believes that, I’m inclined to follow her guidance. She’s there; we’re not. We all know her capacities. I’ll accept her judgement enough to make contingency plans, anyway.’

‘Did she give any reasons?’ Again, it was Fellass taking the lead in the questioning. Rare, that. He usually sat and listened to what others said.

‘She told me that it was not only because of their technological superiority - which she suggested was far greater than we could begin to imagine - but also because the benefits for Shavla are genuine. She hasn’t faltered in her desire to serve Shavla.’

‘Yes, but to accept an imposed peace - with the Deorin not subdued,’ protested Tillith. ‘Is that safe?’

‘The best decision, I would remind you all, is not always the most popular decision or the easiest to take.’

Fellass spoke thoughtfully. ‘Acceptance of an imposed peace would be a very unpopular outcome for the negotiations. Could she survive it politically?’

‘I don’t know,’ admitted Sandur. ‘It’s one of the things which worries me.’

There was dead silence in the command room. Peace! It was alien to their way of life, and the concept was more frightening than any of them would have admitted. It was Tillith who dared to voice their thoughts. ‘I can’t imagine peace, somehow,’ he said hesitantly. ‘I - I don’t think I’d know how to cope with it. I mean - what does one do with oneself in peacetime?’

‘I find the prospect difficult to envisage myself,’ agreed Sandur and one or two of them looked relieved, ‘but we must make the effort. Channa confirmed the truth of her statement with highest emphasis signals.’

Fellass was looking positively joyful, Sandur noticed. I must speak to him afterwards, find out what he’s thinking. I never have understood him. You could call him stolid - he certainly looks stolid - except that he has a brilliant intellect. He’s produced artifacts that are of real significance to our people. To our people’s everyday lives, not to war. He stared at his son’s face as if he were seeing it for the first time. And students trained by him are exceptionally well trained, not to mention being better than average at coming up with new ideas. Yes, I must speak to him. I have, perhaps, neglected a prime asset.

Sheera was looking cynical, as only Sheera could. ‘Well, we can deal with peace if and when it comes,’ she said gruffly. ‘In the meantime, we have a coup to prepare for. Did Channa give you any other useful information, Sandur? Something which might help people resign themselves to peace.’

‘Well, she did mention that one of the benefits of peace for us could be a doubled life span. That won’t help our coup initially, but it could be useful afterwards.’

‘I would not be uninterested in the prospect, myself.’ Sheera looked down at her twisted fingers and grimaced.

‘Are you sure of that?’ demanded Marrin. ‘I can’t believe it’s possible.’

‘Channa’s sure. She said Joran was well over a hundred years old. He looked younger than me.’

‘Those of the Confederation could be fooling her.’

‘She thinks not. She said something about them always telling the truth. She also said they had old eyes in young bodies. And when I looked at Joran, it was true. Hard to explain it without you seeing him, really seeing him. He’s a strange devil. Dresses in bright flowing robes like breeding gowns. Can’t stand these effeminate types, myself! Couldn’t imagine him in a fight. But maybe he’s not as soft as he seems. Channa obviously respects him. Several times, she signalled that he was dangerous. That surprised me.’ I wonder if she is mating with the fellow, he thought. It might be good policy to bond him to us, but I wouldn’t fancy grandchildren from that stock. No advantage for our faction there. But he did not share those thoughts with his Corps Leaders.

‘So what are Channa’s plans now?’ demanded Sheera.

‘She considers that her main task as Envoy is to ensure that the Deorin are totally controlled by any peace conditions. It seems that the grey stuff around GHQ can be used along borders as well as to enclose things, so perhaps there would be some chance of enforcing a genuine peace.’

Tillith pursed his lips. ‘I still can’t envisage peace with the Deorin, sir.’

‘Nor I. But we’d better start trying. Now, to work! First the coup, then I want some projections for managing a peace - one year plans, five years plans, permanent institutions needed and so on. Can you do that, Sheera?’

‘I suppose so. It’ll seem strange, though. Unnatural.’

‘I’ll help,’ volunteered Fellass with an eagerness Sandur had rarely seen him show before. ‘I’ve read quite a bit about the Interim Peace. It’s given me a few ideas about where to start. I’ve already done some thinking about how one copes with peace.’ He saw that the others were staring at him in amazement. ‘When we were doing so well in the Piovran Campaign,’ he added, and noted with relief that their suspicious expressions faded. Shavla be thanked that they did not know how he really felt about the obscenity of war!

‘On second thoughts,’ said Sandur, ‘perhaps Fellass should take charge of that project, Sheera, if you don’t mind - once he’s helped us to evaluate the best strategies for a coup. Keep an eye on things and act as adviser, though. If he’s already thinking on those lines, he’ll be the best one to run the project. Just let me know what resources you’ll need, Fellass, and give me a daily report on progress.’

‘It’ll be a pleasure.’ Never had Fellass looked so vibrantly alive. For a moment, Sandur saw a marked resemblance to Channa, or at least to Channa when she was lit up with enthusiasm about something. Had he, he wondered, ever really known this son?

They were all silent for a moment, Sandur included. Peace. A dream. An ideal. A word. The thought of facing it in reality was bewildering, even terrifying.

Sandur allowed them a few minutes’ contemplation, then spoke briskly, ‘Right, then, about the coup . . .’

15

As soon as the Mediator had winked out of sight, Deslar Reinal’s thick fingers stretched out towards the button on the table which would signal the rest of the guards to enter.

Meran Thilsen, who was sitting next to him, moved so fast that the four guards inside the room did not have time to stop her. Before Reinal could reach the button, something sharp jabbed the back of his neck.

‘Needle gun,’ she said loudly.

The guards froze where they were. Needle guns were rare and prohibited, but usually lethal.

‘It’s loaded with frenthene,’ she added.

Reinal went rigid. Frenthene paralysis was permanent and there was no known antidote. If the victims were lucky, someone killed them; if they were unlucky, they simply lay where they fell and starved to death.

Nerlin nodded his head in approval of her quick action. He was happy for anyone else to take the lead at this stage, but also amazed that Meran should act so decisively without even conferring with her faction.

‘Disarm them, would you, Nerlin.’ She gestured towards the guards, who twitched unhappily, afraid to endanger their leader’s life, but equally reluctant to give in so easily.

‘Do as she says!’ Reinal’s voice was hoarse with anxiety.

Nerlin took out his own handgun, a very special item, though it appeared to be a regulation model.

Meran smiled. ‘Excellent. Hurry up! My arm might get tired and who knows what I’d do then.’

‘Do as she says, you fools!’ repeated Reinal, his brow beaded with sweat.

The guards allowed Nerlin to remove their weapons and fasten their hands behind their backs with their own restrainer cuffs. When they were helpless, he calmly shot them all in the neck.

Georn made a strangled noise in his throat, but Meran jabbed her weapon in Reinal’s neck and he shouted, ‘Don’t move, Georn!’

‘There was no need to kill them, Nerlin,’ Meran said coldly. ‘I don’t believe in excessive violence.’

‘I haven’t. That’ll just knock them out for a few hours. Stun-gun, we call it.’

‘New product?’

‘Brand new. Just trying it out before handing it over to the nation.’

‘Naturally,’ she said drily, then stared at Georn and Sharifa. ‘Where do you two stand in all this?’

Georn cleared his throat. ‘Well, I’m not in favour of the destruction of a perfectly good envoy like Channa Harknell. Wasting life like that doesn’t help Shavla. But Reinal is the Supreme Commander . . .’

‘Was,’ said Nerlin quietly. ‘It’ll be someone else, from now on.’

‘You want the job?’ asked Meran, who had not raised her voice once since she had so calmly initiated the coup.

‘Unless you object. I’ve never thought you had designs on a Central Command position.’

‘Shavla, no!’ she agreed. ‘All the fuss would drive me mad. But we’ll need to discuss our agreement first. My faction will favour giving serious consideration to this question of peace . . .’

Reinal made a strangled noise and she said sharply, ‘Shut up, you!’ then continued quietly, ‘Though only on the right terms. Shavla would be best served by such a peace, I think.’

‘I don’t think you’ll find my faction unreasonable about that - or ungrateful for your support. An alliance with Faction Thilsen would be welcomed by us.’ He stared at Georn and Sharifa. ‘Anyone with even a modicum of sense can see that we can’t fight the Confederation. We’re children to them, technology-wise. Babes, even.’

Meran nodded. ‘Couldn’t agree more. Please take over, Supreme Commander Harravay.’

He looked at Sharifa. ‘What about you? Your faction has links with Faction Reinal.’

‘Well, I must hold to that alliance for the moment, but I’m not seeking to commit suicide and I think Faction Bessle would consider a peace settlement.’ She held out her empty hands. ‘Cuff me. I’ll wait on events and consult my faction as soon as I can.’

Nerlin moved forward to secure her.

‘Channa Harknell is a damned good officer,’ she said quietly, for his ears alone. ‘Saved my life once. She didn’t merit that order. Good luck!’

As soon as the cuffs were in place, Nerlin raised his handgun. ‘It really is harmless,’ he said, as he shot her, then turned back to shoot Georn, who was radiating hostility. ‘Better safe than sorry,’ he said to Meran, grinning. ‘I’ll apologise to him later.’

Reinal glared at them both, but did not move a muscle.

There was the sound of a scuffle outside and Nerlin moved quickly to stand next to the door. He listened carefully, then smiled. ‘Mine, I think. But keep that needle gun in place until we’re sure, will you, Meran?’

Her smile echoed his. ‘My pleasure. I’m just sorry he hasn’t given me an excuse to use it. Not my favourite person, our ex-Supreme Commander here. I’m old enough to have had friends killed in the Westrim Coup. Careless, that. They were good friends and loyal Shavlans. I still miss them.’

Reinal’s face turned a greasy white. The Westrim Coup had been staged by his father and had led to Faction Reinal’s sudden rise in power. Although Yanson Reinal had claimed to be breaking up a subversive group, the bloodiness of his actions had not been well regarded and there had been some doubt about whether any subversion had existed. If the war need had not been so great just then, there might have been time to investigate and things might have turned out differently in Shavla.

There was a pattern of taps on the door.

‘Come in, Kristan!’ called Nerlin.

When Kristan entered the room, Meran relaxed her hand. ‘Better take charge of this one,’ she said, gesturing to Reinal. ‘No need to treat him gently, either.’

Reinal sighed with relief to be out of the way of her needle gun, but as he turned, he saw what she was holding in her hand was not a needle gun, but a small brooch, of the sort favoured by Faction Thilsen.

‘You Deorin spawn!’ he yelled, lunging for her.

Kristan calmly shot him and laughed aloud as the body hit the ground and a stream of blood trickled across the floor.

‘Can’t beat a head shot,’ he said, still smiling.

‘Was that really necessary?’ asked Nerlin.

‘Very. He’d only have re-formed his faction group, once we let him go.’ Kristan straightened up. ‘We can’t afford to be soft. Who’s taking over as Supreme Commander?’

‘I am,’ Nerlin said.

‘With the help of a few new friends,’ added Meran.

‘What about these two?’ Kristan kicked Georn’s unconscious body.

‘Half-committed to us already. Reinal upset them a little today. He was a fool. Don’t!’

Kristan lowered his handgun regretfully. ‘You’d better be right, Father. We can’t afford to leave anyone alive who might stab us in the back.’

Meran frowned at Nerlin. ‘Your son had better keep his liking for violence under control from now on. I’m not in favour of superfluous killing. Not now. Not ever. I serve Shavla, not the whims of violent men - whatever faction they belong to.’

Nerlin looked at her thoughtfully. So Kristan’s reputation had spread, had it? What had he been doing to upset the Thilsens? If he could not learn to control his sadistic streak, then he would not be of much use as a faction leader. ‘You should know, Kristan,’ he said, to distract his son, ‘that Reinal gave Channa Harknell a strict and formal order to kill herself, for so-called negligence of duty.’

Kristan’s face became a snarl of hate. ‘And you let him? You let him kill her?’

Nerlin shrugged. ‘He took us by surprise.’

Kristan’s hands were clenched into two fists. ‘I should have kept him alive to play with. That spawn did not deserve a clean death. How did she . . .’ His voice faltered.

‘She didn’t die,’ said Meran.

‘She disobeyed the order!’

‘No. But she’s guarded by a Sirian robot and it prevented her from doing anything. Those robots are the fastest things I’ve ever seen. They move so quickly, it’s a blur.’

Kristan let out his breath in a whoosh. ‘So she’s still alive!’ There was a gloating expression on his face.

‘And promised to us for first breeding rights,’ said Nerlin, ‘but only under special conditions.’

‘I’ll get around those. She’s mine, whatever anyone says. I’ve waited long enough for her. How soon is she likely to be finished with those Confederation pimps?’

‘Unfortunately, the negotiations will take rather longer than we had expected,’ his father admitted. ‘So you’ll have to wait for a while to claim her.’

‘How long?’

‘Several months, it seems. The Mediator wouldn’t be more specific. But she’s apparently doing well by their standards.’

‘It seems that peace is a distinct possibility,’ put in Meran, interested to see Kristan’s reaction to this.

‘Not while one Deoran lives!’ he said thickly. ‘That’s probably the only thing I agreed with Reinal about.’

Nerlin veiled his eyes from Meran’s sympathetic gaze. Kristan had just removed himself from the succession. The boy had not been such a fool when he was younger. What had got into him lately? A cold fear began to creep into his heart that Kristan was becoming unstable. That was a bitter thought, but it would need to be dealt with. Kristan had been his own preferred candidate for next leader of Faction Harravay. His other sons lacked their older brother’s power and charisma. Such a bright little fellow he’d been, Kristan, right from birth.

He watched his son covertly. One had to face reality. There was a nephew who would be the best alternative candidate if Kristan did not change his behaviour. One did not back a loser. The faction came first. He hid his concern beneath a smile and went across to Kristan. ‘Aren’t you going to congratulate me on my accession to the Leadership, son?’

‘Congratulations, Father. Now, let’s go and clean up GHQ.’ Kristan’s expression was filled with gloating pleasure at the prospect.

Meran shook her head as she watched them leave. Poor Nerlin! A great disappointment for him. But Nerlin was sound enough and she did not doubt that he would consider Shavla’s needs before his own. Kristan Harravay was - she searched for a word - twisted? No, tainted was better. Like the carrion

eaters in the wetlands near her estates. Their flesh was completely inedible, however hungry you were.

16

Channa wandered listlessly around her living quarters, very conscious of Fess's presence. When the com-unit buzzed, her 'Yes?' was instant, for she had not been able to settle down.

'Joran here. Would you like to go for a walk with me? The grounds are just about complete now.'

'Why not?' As well do that as anything else.

He did not seem to notice her lack of enthusiasm. 'Meet me on the terrace, then.'

She trailed Fess down the maze of corridors, not even noticing whether Rolly was following them and not bothering this time to try to memorise the route. She felt in very low spirits - a helpless pawn, not a powerful envoy. When she had been selected, she had been afire to win every advantage possible for Shavla. How different was the reality!

As she went towards Joran, she felt another surge of embarrassment to think of him witnessing Van Makass behaving in such a lewd manner towards her. Why had she just stood there and let the Deoran vomit his filth? She should have turned and walked away from it. She wished for a moment that she had not agreed to come for a walk.

Joran enfolded her in the inevitable hug of greeting and she stood passively within his arms, willing herself not to respond, though all she wanted to do was to put her head on his shoulder and weep.

'Angry with me?' he murmured in her ear.

'What right do I have to be angry?'

'The same rights as everyone else.'

'Huh! Puppets have no rights and that's how you treat me, pulling my strings, making me dance to your tunes, forcing things upon me!' She caught her breath and shut her lips firmly. She was not going to lose her temper.

He ran a finger down her cheek. 'My poor Channa!'

'Don't do that!' She wrenched herself away. 'Are we going to walk - or did you call me because you need to mate? Perhaps Van Makass's crudities have aroused you?' She saw a flicker of anger in his eyes, quickly banished but real nonetheless, and her own rage eased a little. Rarely did she manage to penetrate Joran's urbane facade.

'Let's walk,' he said curtly.

'It's what I came for. I'm getting out of condition.'

They walked in silence for several minutes. Channa was still so angry that she was not willing to initiate any conversation. When they came to a stream, Joran stopped and automatically stretched out a hand to help her - help she in no way needed. Were the women of his world incapable of doing anything without a man's help? She submitted because she would have had to push him aside to jump across on her own.

'What's making you so furious?' he asked at last.

'What do you think?'

'Believe me, Channa, I had no idea that Van Makass would behave in that crude manner. It's not his usual behaviour, well, not to that extent, anyway.'

'It wouldn't have made any difference if you had known. You'd have set me up to confront him anyway. You probably found it all very entertaining!'

'Of course I didn't find it entertaining. But we both have our own loyalties. You know that. And you'd not hesitate to send me into an awkward situation if it were necessary for Shavla.'

She glared at him.

'But Channa, I am sorry it turned out like that.'

His voice was soft and pleading. She was not going to be taken in by his cajoling ways. 'I'm amazed you can pretend it was a surprise to you!' she said angrily. 'He's a typical Deoran. You're supposed to be

studying us all closely. Surely you've realised by now how crude they are?'

'They don't behave like that in their own homes.'

'Do you think we've been fighting them for so long just out of spite, then? They're vicious and totally untrustworthy, and always have been. Let me tell you about the Shensall Massacre sometime, or the Beruchin Pogroms, or the Fabriss Bay Assassinations . . . We have a lot of such tales to choose from. The Deorin are noted for their gratuitous killing! Callous, sadistic . . . There aren't words strong enough to describe them. If we'd allowed them to, they would have taken over the whole planet and plunged it into savagery three centuries ago.'

'What about the Westrim Coup? That was your own people. Or the Northwell Purges, or the Fithivill Noyades?'

'That was - it was just - people got carried away! And the Noyades were the work of a lunatic, who paid the price with his own life when his crimes were revealed.'

'You don't think you're just a trifle biased?'

'No, I don't!'

'What's the main thing that upsets you about the Deorin?'

'Main thing? Everything!'

'Such as? Give me some concrete examples from everyday life.'

'Well, they don't look after their veterans. People who have served Deora all their lives are killed as soon as they've outlived their usefulness. And their women are given no chance to participate in the life of the nation. They're just used to breed more filthy Deoran spawn. And look how Van Makass spoke to me! I tell you, Joran, you'll never get the Deoran Emperor to accept a genuine peace.'

'And will we get the Shavlans to accept one?'

Trust him to slip in such an important question so casually. She knew from the way he was looking at her that the answer was important to him, and she took time to think through her response.

'Well? Stuck for an answer? Or thinking out a nice juicy lie?'

'I don't need to tell lies. I'm just - well, surprised that you could ask me such an important question so casually.'

'Is it important?'

'Of course it is!' She decided on truth. 'And yes, I do think there's a chance - a very real chance - of a genuine peace. But it will depend on the coup against Deslar Reinal succeeding. And it depends - oh, on the Shavlans growing used to the idea of peace. I think they will do, if they're given time. Unlike the Deorin, we Shavlans don't live for violence. Those incidents you mentioned were - aberrations. We've been fighting to save ourselves, not to try to conquer others.' She ran a hand through her hair, then stared at him with unconcealed hostility. 'It'll all take time, anyway.'

'How long do you think it will take, Envoy Harknell?'

'Several years, I should think. Who can tell exactly?' Her heart sank at the thought of several years of exile here at the base with Joran, but she answered him honestly. Not her needs, but Shavla's be served! He turned to the accompanying robot. 'Official record,' he said, in a formal tone of voice. 'As Peace Mediator to the Shavlan Unity, I hereby declare that Stage One has been successfully terminated. Stage Two commences herewith. Let that be noted in the records and communicated to Central.'

'It is so noted.'

Surprise held Channa motionless for a moment, then she asked, as calmly as she could, 'What is Stage One, Mediator?'

'Stage One is the designated first step in the first part of any peace negotiations, Envoy.'

'You're behaving in a very formal manner. Not like you usually do.'

'It's a solemn and formal occasion. By declaring a successful conclusion to Stage One, I'm acknowledging formally that there is a genuine chance of a successful outcome to this mediation. I believe Stage One to be the most significant step in any series of negotiations. When things have settled down in Prime, we'll let your people know how well you've been working on their behalf and we'll make them aware of the terms of Stage Two.'

'If my father and Nerlin gain control.' Although she had great faith in them, she had been trained never to take victory for granted. Things could go wrong - people could die - you just never knew. You should always have at least one contingency plan ready.

'Oh, come now, Channa! I thought we were past the stage of trying to fool one another.'

One of her rare smiles flickered over her lips. 'Oh, come now, Joran,' she mimicked, 'who's trying to fool whom? I'll be totally honest and open with you when you're totally honest with me. That's a promise!'

He threw back his head and laughed, breaking the tension that had built up between them. 'Touché!'

Then he had to explain about the old art of fencing and its attendant rituals.

By the time he had finished, she had relaxed enough for him to seize her hand and pull her on. 'Come on! We can talk as we go, now that the formal part of today is over. I've got something I want to show you, Channa.'

'Why don't we run, if you're so impatient? I'd love to stretch my legs properly. I'll be as flabby as a nursing mother if I go on at this rate.'

Ten minutes' steady jogging brought them to the edge of the new lake - and it was Joran who showed signs of slight distress in his breathing, not her, Channa noted triumphantly.

'I hadn't realised how very fit you were,' he said, putting his arm round her shoulders again in a comradely way that she didn't like to shake off, 'even after we've had you caged up for days.'

'Well, I am getting a little out of condition.'

'I don't think I've ever been in such peak condition as you. We Terrans don't push ourselves quite so hard.'

'You don't have to. You're not fighting for your very survival. This is all a game to you.'

'Not a game.'

'What, then?'

Again she had caught him off guard. He frowned, his eyes unfocused, as he considered her remark. 'I don't know how to describe it,' he said at last. 'The Confederation takes the question of Galactic Peace very seriously indeed. It's almost a holy quest for some of us. As for myself - well, I don't need to work as a mediator any more - I have enough credits to live on - but I do this peace mediation thing well, so I enjoy tackling a project every now and then. But I don't regard either you or your planet lightly, believe me, Channa. Or the need for peace.'

She studied him, head slightly on one side. 'No, perhaps you don't. But I wonder if you've ever had to fight for your life?'

'No. Not in deadly earnest.' He linked his arm with hers. 'I think you're going to be good for me, Channa Harknell.'

That surprised her and she did not know what to answer. It seemed to her that he had always been the one to teach her things. She turned the subject. 'Would I be able to go for a few real runs, Joran?'

Cross-country, with varied terrain? I'd like to get back into better shape.'

'Well, perhaps not cross-country, but within the grounds of the base, certainly. We have the perimeter defences completed now. May I join you in those runs?'

'I want to do some real runs,' she warned.

'I wouldn't mind improving my own fitness. We can't have you starting to despise me again, can we?'

She blinked. Until that moment she had not fully realised that she had despised him before and had now stopped despising him, but he was right. 'I don't - despise you,' she said awkwardly.

'I know. Now you don't. But you did at first.'

'Well - that was before I knew you.'

'And do you know the Deorin?'

She drew in a sharp breath. 'What do you mean by that?'

'I mean that it's more difficult to despise someone whom you know well.'

'I don't want to know the Deorin!'

He just gave her one of his enigmatic smiles and shrugged. Her heart plummeted. Oh, no! He couldn't

mean to - he wouldn't! She could not face regular interactions with that foul-mouthed Deoran devil.

'But if we go for long runs, you must promise not to wear me out completely,' he said, returning to their original topic. 'I want to be able to run more easily, not to be run into the ground!'

'I'll treat you like a new recruit,' she promised.

'Oh, no, you won't! I've seen what your corps leaders do to them. Just help me to improve my tone gradually.' He turned her around, his arm remaining lightly on her shoulders. 'Now, I brought you here to show you the final lakeside landscaping. What do you think of it?'

She looked around, frowning. 'In what way? It would, of course, provide strategic protection against foot soldiers and prevent easy access to the base by vehicles, but . . .'

He groaned aloud. 'Oh, Channa, Channa, you surely can't be oblivious to its beauty!'

She stared at him, then back at the rippling expanse of water, which reflected the hills around the base. It was like a scene in a child's mirror toy. 'Do you mean - this lake wasn't created for strategic reasons?'

'Certainly not!'

'Then why?'

'Because it's beautiful. We like our surroundings to be beautiful, if possible. We'll probably be here for quite a while, as you've just acknowledged.'

'You put it there just to look at?'

'Yes, just to look at.'

'Shades of Shavla!' She shook her head and walked off along the shore. After a moment's hesitation he followed, saying nothing, waiting for her to speak.

It was long minutes before she stopped and turned to face him. 'I doubt if you'll ever understand how rich that makes you seem to us.'

'Rich?' It was the last word he had expected.

'Yes, rich. Rich in time. Oh, rich in technology and resources too, of course, but it's the time that I envy you! You have time to - to stop - to play - to revel in yourselves as individuals. And you have so many years of life as well. How much we Shavlans have had to give up just to survive!'

'I hope you don't hate us for that. I didn't mean to brandish our wealth in your face.'

'Not hate - but most of my people will certainly envy you when they realise what your lives are like. How could we not? But envy is not hatred. That emotion we reserve for the Deorin.'

She strode off again and he followed, fascinated by her. He had never worked on a mediation where the envoy was so intelligent, so quick to learn, so thirsty for knowledge - or so physically attractive. Beware! said a trained voice inside his head. You're forming altogether too strong an affective link. She won't be able to match that. But he knew that he could do nothing to change matters. It was his weakness as well as his strength, this ability - no this need - to form affective links. He continued to follow her when he knew that tactically he should have been leading.

In the end, she stopped striding away from him and sighed. 'Let's sit down, Joran, and just be quiet for a while. I must learn to waste time now, mustn't I, while I wait for my people to follow in my footsteps. How many years do you think that will take?' She sighed again.

He sat down close to her and for the first time it was she who, very hesitantly, linked her arm in his. After a while, she leaned her head on his shoulder. 'Deal generously with us,' she said, her voice low and husky. 'We've been deprived of so much.'

This time their love-making was very gentle and sweet and had little to do with the gratification of their bodies' hungers.

'You need a holiday, you know,' he said as they walked back.

'A holiday. Now?'

'Yes, now. Days of rest for your body and mind to renew themselves.'

'Days! Like a rec leave, do you mean?'

'What else did you think I meant?'

'Well, to us, a holiday is a day when work is suspended and especially nice food is provided.'

'Just for a single day?'

‘That’s all we can usually afford. Sometimes it’s only for half a day.’

‘Poor Shavlans! But this holiday wouldn’t be to prepare you for more fighting, Channa, rather to give you a chance to reorient yourself.’

‘And what do people do on one of these long holidays of yours?’ she asked lightly, not thinking him serious.

‘People usually go away to explore and relax in new surroundings.’

‘The only other surroundings on Evral, apart from Extremity Island, are potential war zones. This planet is not rich in land masses - hence the wars.’

‘I realise that. So we’ll have to go somewhere else. How would you like a trip up to the space transport? We could go for a walk in space. Maybe you’d like to visit one of your planet’s moons?’

She froze. ‘You can’t mean that!’

‘Why can’t I?’

‘You’d allow me - an enemy - access to your GHQ?’

‘I don’t consider you to be an enemy, Channa, more like one of your cadet officers, and the space transport is not the same as a GHQ. Besides, I’m not offering you unlimited access to our facilities. You’d either be with me or confined to your quarters all the time we were up there. Those are firm conditions.’

She just stood and stared at him, like one turned to stone.

‘Well - surely it’s not an unpleasant suggestion?’ He snapped his fingers in front of her eyes. ‘Channa! Are you still there? You haven’t given me the slightest indication of whether you’d like it or not.’

She played for time, fiddling with her hair in a way she had when she was thinking hard. ‘Is this a treat or a test?’ she said eventually.

It was his turn to freeze. ‘You’re growing remarkably perceptive, my dear.’

‘I’m still a Shavlan and I’m still Envoy for my people. That’s a burden I can’t put down for years - even if I am allowed so-called holidays. And now it’s you who’s avoiding answering, Joran.’

‘Not really. I was just surprised for a moment. You know, Channa, you have one of the sharpest minds I’ve ever met. Ever. I wonder what the Shavlans will be like once they have time to develop their intellects.’

‘Don’t forget my original question. Is this a treat or a test?’

‘I’ll freely admit that it’s both. As you said, you can’t stop being Envoy any more than I can stop being Mediator, and you’ll inevitably be under observation whatever you do. But we always try to arrange for a few more relaxing interludes - call them rec leaves, or holidays, whatever you like - during a Mediation. There’s no trickery about that. One needs such breaks for optimal performance of one’s tasks.’

‘Well, over the years I expect I’ll need several more of these holidays,’ she said somewhat bitterly.

He did not try to contradict her. ‘Long years, they’ll seem, too, at times. But don’t you realise that I’m similarly constrained? I’m tied here for as long as you are, and I can never forget that I’m the Senior Peace Mediator in this Intervention.’ His eyes caressed her face so warmly as he spoke that she could not mistake his meaning when he added softly, ‘though I might like to sometimes. I might like just to be a normal man making love to a normal woman.’

She stiffened. ‘We both have our duty.’ Surely he was not going to pretend to an old-fashioned long-term affection for her! The very idea was . . . Well, it was not suitable! It was one thing to take pleasure in each other’s bodies, one thing to become comrades, but quite another to . . . She pushed that thought aside. She was and would remain Shavla’s Envoy. She would not allow herself to grow deeply attached to this subtle man, who might yet turn out to be the greatest enemy Shavla had ever faced.

‘So?’

‘So what?’

‘So would you like a trip into space?’ He had expected her to jump at the offer; instead she was hesitating. ‘Surely you don’t think we intend to subvert you up there?’ he mocked. ‘Perhaps you think we have secret off-world laboratories where we turn enemies into . . .’

He broke off as she flushed scarlet.

‘You do think that!’ He started to laugh again. The laughter continued until tears ran down his cheeks.

‘Oh, Channa! Oh, my dear dear Channa-girl, do you really think so badly of us?’

She grew defensive. ‘Who can tell what your superior technology is capable of?’

He put both hands on her shoulders and looked her straight in the eyes. ‘Channa, our technology would enable us to take over this planet and alter the mind of every single inhabitant without anyone realising it. But that’s prevented by what I told you about before. Balance. Racial sanity. Our laws and our ethics would not allow such things.’

She stared back at him. ‘You can tell me anything you like, Joran, and I won’t know whether you’re lying or not, but how are you going to convince me that you’re guided by such noble philosophies?’

‘I can’t, of course. You’ll just have to judge the Confederation by what you learn about me. Did you think you were the only person brought here to provide an example of your people? I have that role, too.’

Her mouth parted slightly in shock. That aspect of the matter had definitely not occurred to her before.

‘And there’s another thing which protects you.’

‘What?’

He gestured to the two robots. ‘Your guardians. You have two peace robots always within call. If we were going to subvert you, it’d be too late now to do anything, but if we - and they - are what I say, then they’re here for your protection from us, if necessary, just as much as from the Deorin or from Deslar Reinal’s inept attacks. I have no way of overriding the robots’ built-in programming, you know - even if to do so were not against the Mediation Code.’

‘Yes, I can see that.’ Her eyes brightened and she grabbed his arm. At that moment, she looked stunningly beautiful. ‘Oh, Joran, do you mean it? Will you really take me into space?’

‘I mean it. Which moon would you like to walk on first?’

But she could not answer, for she was undergoing yet another new experience. She was weeping for joy.

17

Van Makass kicked a piece of equipment and scowled around the gymnasium. ‘I’m tired of this artificial stuff, Lilla. In fact, I’m extremely tired of this so-called negotiation. How long is it really going to take? You’ve never answered that question properly and you seem in no hurry to find a solution.’

She sighed and swung herself up to sit on a crossbar. ‘I’m in no hurry because we’re trying to achieve a true mediation, but you’re right in one sense. I too am beginning to wonder whether we’ll ever get anywhere,’ she said, following a new tactic she had spent some time discussing with Joran the previous evening.

‘What exactly do you mean by that, you two-faced bitch?’ he roared and moved to stand in front of her, his great fists clenched and a vein throbbing in his temple. One of the peace robots blurred into position beside him. Restraining Van Makass was not an unusual occurrence, for he was prone to violent rages, which he made no attempt whatsoever to control.

‘If you’re going to attack me again,’ she said coldly, ‘we can quite easily postpone the rest of this discussion until another day.’

He glared at the robot, then turned round and smashed his fist at a nearby pole to vent his frustration. His hand was caught in mid-air by the robot and not released until he drew it back. Last time that had happened he had gone totally berserk and it had taken both robots to get him back to his quarters. Lilla watched carefully, but to her relief he regained control of himself this time.

‘Well, are you going to answer me or not?’ he demanded after a moment or two.

‘I’ll answer, but I’d prefer to sit across a table from you and make this a formal session, Envoy.’

‘Whatever you wish, Mediator. Just as long as you give me a few answers for a change.’

‘You may not like the answers.’

‘What difference will that make? I don’t like this whole bloody Intervention of yours. Our wars are none of the Confederation’s business. And this negotiation is just a farce!’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘Because in a true negotiation, there would be groups of people representing both sides, as well as a neutral mediator, and they would talk openly, all of them, until they worked something out.’

‘Do you think so?’

‘Yes, damn you! This - this is kindergarten stuff! Why, you even treat me like a child and send me to my room if I displease you! That’s no way to treat an envoy.’

‘It’s standard procedure for the Peace Corps, I’m afraid.’

He had been like an enraged bull the first time she terminated the negotiations. When the robot left him in his quarters, he had tried to wreck the place. Because of that, they had assigned a robot to stay with him at all times, even before the body plants incident, and it was that which had saved his life. However, the robot’s presence had not sweetened Van Makass’s temper.

Lilla led the way to one of the formal conference rooms. Not one with the trick chairs this time, but a smaller room with an oval table and an upright chair in the middle of each long side. She sat down opposite him and the robot stationed itself next to Van Makass, who studied it through narrowed eyes. Like Channa, his attitude towards robots had undergone a radical revision after one had saved his life, but he still bitterly resented the fact that they were there at every turn and that they could control him where the mediators could not.

‘Make this a Formal Record, please,’ Lilla said crisply. ‘Present are Van Makass, Deoran Envoy, and Lilla Reydahl, Peace Mediator. Lilla speaking. First Warning will now be issued.’

Van Makass grew very still. ‘What exactly do you mean by that, Peace Mediator? First Warning about what?’

She looked at him coolly. He was still pronouncing her title with exaggerated emphasis, but at least he was according it to her. ‘I mean, Envoy, that I am about to issue a formal warning to you, as official representative of the Deoran Empire. The warning is given because we are making little, if any, progress in these negotiations. The warning is not meant as a threat, nor is it issued for the purpose of coercing you into behaviour unacceptable to your people. It is simply a formal statement of fact for the official records and you will later be given a tape of this meeting.’

‘If you’re not doing this to try to push me into behaving in some particular way or other, why bother to issue a warning at all?’

‘Because you have a right to know your position at all times and I have an obligation to keep you aware of it. Whether you make any changes in your dealings with me is, as always, your own choice.’

Van Makass sighed loudly. ‘So what is the bloody warning supposed to tell me about the Deoran position, then?’ He leaned forward, his eyes fixed on her in a way which usually intimidated anyone opposing him, but Lilla did not flinch. If anything, there was an expression of bored resignation on her face, as if this was how she had expected him to react. It was her lack of response to his aggression which irritated him most about her and sometimes drove him to excesses of crude behaviour, but his efforts to provoke her were all to no avail. It had been the same, to his surprise, with the Shavlan Envoy. He would have expected her to react, at least. A tasty piece, Channa Harknell. If he could ever have her, he would.

An image rose of his own wife, a plump dark woman, older than him and chosen for him by his father. Marrying Julan had nipped at least three plots in the bud and had been a very logical thing to do. It was a pity, though, that he found her so unattractive, a pity she was more concerned with her dignity than with being an entertaining companion. People said he was lucky because she was not ugly, but luck, to him, would be for fate to have given him a wife like Channa Harknell, someone with fire in her belly and brains in her head.

In the meantime, there was Lilla waiting patiently to speak. If he pushed her too far, she would simply

cancel the day's meetings and the robots would escort him back to his chambers. And yet, she was quite prepared for him to screw her, encouraged it, in fact. And seemed to enjoy it, too. He had not quite figured that one out. Was this standard tactics or was she just highly sexed?

'If no progress is made within the designated negotiation period,' Lilla told him calmly, seeing that his eyes were once more focused on her, 'then no Peace Settlement can be reached. If you remember, a time limit of three hundred days was placed on the First Stage of these negotiations. You were informed of all this before you were chosen.'

'Chosen!' he scoffed. 'We gave you one candidate. It's us who did the choosing.'

'On the contrary. If that one candidate hadn't been suitable, these negotiations wouldn't have started. And for your information, Van Makass, however many candidates had been offered with you, you would still have been the one chosen. You have all the qualities we require in an envoy, in that you are, we consider, truly representative of your people and you are very intelligent. If you cannot negotiate a peace, then your people cannot accept one.'

He was not aware that he was drumming his fingers on the table top, a habit he had when thinking furiously. His father, the Emperor, had immediately dismissed such a long time limitation clause as irrelevant and most of the War Council had agreed, though Baron Menda Peroth had expressed some reservations. Van Makass made a mental note to listen more carefully to Menda in future. An Emperor should always choose clever counsellors. But who had ever heard of negotiations that went on for even one hundred days, let alone three times that number? 'And what happens if the designated period ends without satisfactory peace terms being negotiated?' he growled as Lilla made no effort to continue.

'Would it be too much to hope that you'll fly away and leave us to mind our own business?'

'You should not indulge in false hopes, Van Makass. I've told you that before. They're a weakness. Whatever the outcome of these negotiations, Shavla and Deora will not be allowed to continue the war. Make up your mind to that.'

He snorted.

'Look up in the sky whenever you doubt our ability to enforce a peace.'

He breathed deeply, but said nothing.

'If First Stage is not reached, or at least within sight, by the end of three hundred days,' she continued, reverting to her formal tone, 'then the two Mediators assigned to this Intervention will first ask for a Senior Review Committee to be sent out to Evral to check that everything possible has been done to facilitate a settlement. Once that has been verified, the Peace Corps will file for a Cessation of Negotiations Order and a Tribunal will be set up by Galactic Central to consider the question of how occupied nation status is to be imposed. Peace Corps officers will continue to maintain the status quo throughout the interim period, which has been known to last for several generations.'

'End of the soft treatment, eh?' he jeered. 'What comes next? Drugs, brainwashing, rough little soldier boys threatening our people?'

She did not attempt to hide her disgust. 'Don't judge us by your own standards, Envoy! Such methods are not only primitive, but illegal and - to us - totally disgusting. They would go against the very ethos of the Confederation.'

'So you say!'

'So it is in fact! What's more, you are personally protected from trespass upon your rights as an individual by the peace robots. In case you had forgotten, they're willing to be destroyed themselves in order to save your life. They would protect you just as conscientiously against the Mediation Team, if it were necessary, as they have against the body plants. The quarters in which you live contain equipment which continually scans your body and brain, and which would detect any tampering with either. Believe me or believe me not, Envoy, your safety and welfare are very stringently protected!'

'Fine words!'

She stared at him unblinkingly, wondering what he might have been like had he been brought up in a nation at peace. She had had occasional glimpses of the person behind the noisy facade and that person was a much more likeable character than the braggart Heir to the Deoran Empire. She suspected that he

would have become a leader, whatever his circumstances, for he was that type of person, vital and charismatic.

When she did not respond, but just sat looking at him steadily, he sighed and spoke very quietly to her, bravado for once laid aside. 'Perhaps you had better explain exactly what you mean by "First Stage", then, Peace Mediator. I really don't understand my position. The Confederation has obviously set concealed goals for this negotiation and I would like to enter a formal protest, on behalf of my father, the Emperor, that these goals were not explained to us properly before we began.'

'Formal Protest registered,' said the robot, making him jump. 'You are advised now, however, Envoy, that such goals cannot be revealed at the beginning of the negotiation, as they would almost certainly affect the outcome negatively. Official permission had to be sought by this Peace Negotiator before she could explain First Stage to you. Such a step is only taken when it is considered that an impasse or a positive outcome has been reached. The requisite permission was granted by Joran Lovrel, Senior Peace Negotiator of this Intervention, and was recorded by myself, as official observer.' It bowed to Lilla. 'The explanation should now be furnished to the Envoy, Peace Mediator.'

She leaned forward, brown eyes very steady and serious. 'First Stage means that an envoy has accepted the possibility of a True Settlement - not the pretence of acceptance that you're still according me, Van Makass - and that the envoy has displayed a genuine understanding of what will be involved in finalising a peace settlement. It's no guarantee of a successful outcome, but it is a positive indicator that success is possible, even probable.'

Van Makass snorted and muttered something under his breath.

Lilla ignored him and continued in a calm voice, 'In addition, reaching First Stage brings with it certain privileges, as the Shavlan Envoy is presently finding out.'

He drew his breath in sharply, but did not erupt into rage as she had expected. Any of his aides could have told her that Van Makass in a quiet attentive mood was Van Makass at his most dangerous. Lilla considered him dangerous at all times, as dangerous as any wild beast would be when penned in a cage against its will. She was finding that this Intervention was stretching her skills to the limit and she was glad to have been paired for it with someone as experienced as Joran.

She looked at him steadily, clearly waiting for a response, and after a moment he said bitterly, 'So that Shavlan bitch has sucked up to her Mediator good and proper, eh? She's got style, that one has, I'll grant her that, but she's a disloyal whore. I wonder what her people will think of her acceptance of the concept of a negotiated peace. From all I've heard of him, their Supreme Commander will burst his guts at the mere idea! Pity my father missed that one when he wiped out the Reinal nest years ago! This Deslar Reinal's put a bit of life into the Shavlan war effort.'

'Envoy Harknell has gone beyond pretence and subterfuge in the negotiations, but she is still completely loyal to Shavlan interests, Van Makass. Make no mistake about that.'

'Accepting the inevitable with open legs, eh? Trust a woman! We'd not even begin to consider letting a woman represent us.'

'That will change, one way or another. Your children will accept the irrelevance of gender, even if you never do.'

'I'll see them dead first!'

'You'll not have that power, Envoy.'

There was silence for a moment as he digested this, then he shook his head before returning to her previous statement. 'What privileges has passing First Stage won for the Shavlan bitch, then?'

'A relaxation of the restrictions on movement. She is currently preparing for a visit to our space transport, where she'll meet some of the senior officers. I believe a trip to one of the moons is also being planned.'

He remained perfectly still, no expression on his face, which was in itself a sign of deep emotion in a massive man who emanated power as an almost visible aura. Bitter envy was churning in him at the thought of Channa Harknell going into space. Like her, he had longed to explore a wider universe than one planet. Like her, he had shelved his dreams for the sake of his country. And now, to be told so casually that she was about to go off-planet made bile rise to his mouth.

After a few moments, he was sufficiently in control of himself to say very calmly and quietly, 'Unless there is any more that I should know about the terms of Stage One, I would like to return to my quarters now, Lilla. I need to think about this very seriously, do I not?'

She looking at him searchingly, but his normally expressive face was calm and devoid of emotion, and although he met her gaze steadily, his eyes seemed blacker and more opaque than usual, his thoughts veiled from her. 'Yes,' she said at last, 'I rather think you do, Envoy. There's nothing more to tell you at this time, but if you wish to speak to me or to ask any questions, however minor, you've only to use the com-unit. I'm very much at your service.' She raised her voice. 'Let it be noted that the First Warning has been delivered, understood and accepted. Do you wish to make any further statements, Envoy?' 'No.'

'Then the Formal Record ends here.'

Van Makass stood up and strode out of the negotiation chamber without taking leave of her. One robot moved rapidly to precede him, the other followed closely behind. He ignored them and they adjusted their pace to his.

Lilla sagged in her chair and let out her breath in a whoosh. 'Well, Van Makass, that's made you think a little, eh?' she said aloud. 'And about time, too!'

But she was conscious of a sense of unease. She had expected him to rant and rave - not to withdraw into himself. Also, she was conscious that her own sexual desire for him had only been enhanced by this display of self-control. Van Makass, for all his crudity, was an attractive man and a fascinating human being, whose interests ranged over many fields from agriculture to industry, from military strategy to, of all things, the early education of children. And behind it all, he had a sense of service to his people as Heir to Deora, which had surprised her as she gradually got to know him better, and which would, she thought, astonish the Shavlan Envoy.

I wonder, she mused, am I getting too involved emotionally with this man? The empathy line is a delicate path to tread. I must discuss it with Joran. But it was Van Makass's vivid face and gleaming eyes which lingered in her mind's eye, not Joran's wry smile and soft voice.

18

Channa walked briskly across the take-off field to the space shuttle, excitement bubbling within her. She thought she had managed to control it, but Joran knew her well enough to sense the difference in mood. 'Your eyes are beautiful when they're lit up like that,' he told her, 'but why did you insist on walking across to the shuttle? We usually go there by airsled.'

'To savour the contrast. Your base doesn't feel like Shavla at all; this does.' She realised guiltily that she had indulged in a whim for no valid reason, but she could not stay feeling guilty when the space shuttle was towering over her and she was on the verge of realising a dream.

Joran found her excitement infectious and smiled at her. He tried to take hold of her hand, but she pulled it away.

'Can't you keep your personal feelings to yourself just for once!' she demanded, outraged that he would behave like that in full view of the base.

'It's our way of enhancing pleasure shared with someone we're fond of,' he said mildly.

'Well, it's not ours!' She hesitated, then begged, 'Please, Joran, don't spoil it for me! I want to - to feel every moment of this. Myself!'

'Why?'

She looked at him warily. Always questions. And she did not dare refuse to answer, just in case he stopped this rec leave - no, she must get used to calling it a holiday. 'Because it's always been my dream to travel to our other planets. Always. I've told you that already.'

‘Not very Shavlan, to waste energy on dreams!’ His grin belied his words, but she could only take them seriously.

‘I saved my dreams for rest periods! I never indulged in them when on duty. I even discussed such things with my Sanity Supervisor and he said having dreams like that was perfectly acceptable - they were a vision of what Shavla might one day achieve.’

‘Sanity Supervisor! That’s a new one to me!’ There were always so many details to learn about other cultures. ‘Tell me about Sanity Supervisors.’

She smothered a sigh. ‘They’re special officers who’ve been trained to deal with other people’s inner worries in a supportive manner. Such worries can impede optimal performance.’

‘It’s not an unusual concept. Many cultures have such people. We on Terra call them Counsellors. The Sirians call them Life Witnesses. It’s a very sensible provision to make in any society, especially one continually at war. I hadn’t realised that you Shavlans allowed yourselves such a luxury. I don’t like the name, though. Sanity Supervisors! Ugh!’

She shrugged, hoping that her brief answer would satisfy him, but of course, it didn’t.

‘Do you use Sanity Supervisors for anything else?’

‘Yes.’

‘For example?’

‘Helping people adjust to incapacitating injuries. That can be hard for a previously active person. Or - ’ her voice faltered.

‘Or, Channa?’

‘Or assisting women combatants to come to terms with the need for bearing children.’

‘I’m surprised you’ve never discussed your own feelings with a Sanity Supervisor, then. You haven’t come to terms with the need to bear children.’

She might have known that he would pursue that point, she thought bitterly. ‘It wasn’t necessary. There’s been no serious question yet of my bearing a child.’

‘Well, with Kristan looming on the horizon, you’ll certainly need to speak to a Sanity Supervisor when you get back, won’t you?’

She decided to ignore that jibe.

‘Do you use Sanity Supervisors in the Correction Centres as well?’

She shuddered. ‘No. Interrogators are used there. They’re very different to Sanity Supervisors - and highly skilled at their job. They train on Deoran prisoners. And the Deorin can be very stubborn.’ She fell silent for a moment, then added pleadingly, ‘Do we - I’m not refusing - but do we have to talk about Correction Centres now?’

‘No. We won’t spoil your pleasure in this moment.’ But we will continue to discuss them after we return.

‘Thank you.’ It’s bad enough, she thought, that I’ll have to face a Special Correction Centre after this negotiation is finished. I neither need nor wish to dwell upon that in advance. But she did not volunteer that information. It was her own problem to face up to the sacrifices this mission would later demand of her. For Shavla’s sake.

He saw the light fade in her eyes and guessed something of what she was thinking, so he introduced another subject. He could not yet let her know what did lie in store for her. And even though it might be preferable to a Correction Centre, it was still a form of sacrifice. ‘You won’t be able to march like that on the space transport,’ he remarked. Thank goodness for small mercies, he added to himself. He had grown to recognise all the marching rhythms she used unconsciously and he disliked them intensely.

‘Why not? I thought you said that artificial gravity was generated on the transport.’

‘Because, my dear Channa, you’ll be wearing soft spongy-soled footwear and because every surface is padded. The pseudo-gravity requires one to walk with a sort of gliding movement.’ He chuckled. ‘And you’ll be delighted to know that we don’t wear robes on the transport, either. Sudden changes in pseudo-gravity happen from time to time, and one does not have adequate control of one’s movements in a robe when freefall hits.’

She grinned at him. ‘Good! I hate those robes. What do people wear up there?’

‘Standard jumpsuits, colour coded according to their role - just in case of accidents. The spacecraft are reliable in themselves, but accidents inevitably occur. Space debris, for instance, can be extremely dangerous if encountered when coming out of a hyper-jump. And there are waves of energy washing around the universe that we’re only just beginning to understand. They unbalance the pseudo-gravity when they surge across a space transport’s path.’

‘What colour must visitors to the ship wear?’

‘A vivid green. It’ll look good with your hair.’

‘My hair’s a mess. It needs cutting.’

‘No.’

‘What do you mean, "No"?’

‘No, it doesn’t need cutting.’

‘If one of my superior officers saw me with such unkempt hair, I’d be in trouble. I have to get it cut! Surely you have robots which can do that for me?’

‘We have, but I shan’t allow it. Your officers will have too many other things to worry about as the negotiations proceed to care whether your hair is short or long, I promise you. And if they do comment, I’ll tell them that you’re growing it as a favour to me.’ He put on his affected lisp. ‘Such short hair makes me feel so dreadfully uncomfortable! I really can’t think with a near-bald head wobbling at me!’

‘I’m not bald!’

‘Near enough, when it’s all shorn off.’

‘Well I’d rather not let it grow any longer, thank you. I feel more comfortable with it short.’

‘I know you’d rather not.’

Her heart sank. He’d have her appearing before the Unity Council in a robe at this rate. ‘I’ll cut it myself,’ she threatened.

‘Please, dear Channa, grow your hair for me.’

‘No!’

‘As an Envoy, you must be able to demonstrate personal flexibility, you know.’

‘You’re just twisting things to suit yourself. I’m sure that’s not in the rules.’

‘No, it isn’t.’ He chuckled in delight at the outrage on her face. ‘I’m definitely twisting things to suit myself. You see, I have this thing about red hair. It looks magnificent worn long - especially when it curls as delightfully as yours does. It helps put me in the mood for making love.’

‘That’s not ethical!’ She was blushing at his crudeness.

The grin became even broader. ‘No, it isn’t, is it? But I do have some privileges as Senior Mediator. And by the way, I’ve already instructed the robots to prevent you if you try to cut your hair.’

She glared at him, but closed her lips firmly. She would not argue now, whatever he said or did. Why was he brandishing his decadence and self-indulgence at her like that? Today of all days! Well, she was not risking anything stopping this trip, so she would not quibble at his crudeness. Fortunately, they were almost at the shuttle. Surely the presence of others would make him restrain himself?

They entered the take-off module through a bathing area, where they were asked to remove all their clothes before passing through a decontamination tunnel. Channa patiently followed instructions and emerged, freshly washed and fully tested. She was certified free of dangerous organisms and clad in a visitor’s bright green jumpsuit. Joran was wearing a similar garment in soft blue, with a darker blue diagonal stripe from one shoulder to the waist.

‘What does your suit denote?’ she asked, ever alert for information.

‘The blue denotes the Peace Mediation Corps. The darker stripe shows that I bear senior rank on this assignment.’

‘How senior are you, generally speaking, Joran? Am I allowed to ask?’

‘You’re allowed to ask anything you like. I may not always choose to answer. This time I will, though. I’m very senior among mediators, Channa.’

‘If you’re not prepared to answer the question properly, just say so. I detest prevarication.’

He shrugged his shoulders. ‘I didn’t know you cared so much about me. Actually, Channa, I’m the most

senior mediator in the whole Terran Peace Corps. Next rank above me is Adviser, permanently based at one or other of the Sector Centrals, except for occasional Planetary Tribunal work, reviews, or other troubleshooting.'

'You must be due for promotion soon.'

'I've refused elevation several times already. I prefer my freedom.'

She stared at him, with her mouth open. 'You mean - you mean you're allowed to refuse a promotion. Just on a - a personal whim?'

'Why not? It's my life, after all.'

'Yes, but don't you have a - a duty to the Confederation - or at least to your own planet?'

'No. I have no particular duty to do anything I don't want to do, as long as things are running smoothly in the Confederation, which they have done, on the whole, for the last millennium. There are plenty of other people keen to do the jobs that I've refused. It would be different if it were an emergency, of course.'

She shook her head, finding this idea absolutely alien, but there was no time to pursue the point as a voice asked them to board the shuttle.

They were guided to their seats by a glowing arrow, pure light suspended in mid-air, and light that moved freely. How was it generated? This trivial piece of technology impressed her more than she would have admitted. The seats were more like open pods than chairs. Joran showed her how to lie in hers, then lay down in his own pod next to her, stretching out in the lazy way he had which had once irritated her, but which she was now growing used to. He smiled across at her. 'We may still be on duty, Channa, but I think we'll both find the next few days more relaxing.'

'Take-off in five minutes,' announced a quiet voice in the hood of Channa's seat. 'Are you quite comfortable, Channa?'

'Extremely comfortable, thank you.'

'Please don't hesitate to ask for anything you need. At two minutes before take-off, a tone will sound and your seat will settle back into a full reclining position. The flight itself will last approximately one hour. When we arrive, please remain in your seat until instructed to leave it.'

She had expected take-off to be painful. How else could the shuttle achieve the necessary velocity?

Instead, there was a slight feeling of pressure on her body, the quiet voice continued to murmur information about unbelievable speeds into her ears, then the pod swung upright again.

Joran looked across at her. 'That's it, Channa Harknell! You're in space. Want to come and view your planet from above? Otherwise, you won't feel much difference.'

'Is it allowed?'

'It is if I say so.' He held out an imperative hand.

She drew back. 'Joran, what will people think if they see us holding hands? Please - let's keep things on a purely professional level during this visit.'

'Sorry. I must insist that you follow our behaviour patterns during this holiday.'

The hand was still stretched out, waiting for hers, and he was blocking her way. 'Please don't make me do this, Joran!' she blurted out, aghast at the thought of publicly parading their relationship.

'Sorry. It's part of your reorientation.' He reached out to take her shaking hand and drew her into the narrow aisle between a series of unoccupied pods. She found herself blushing as they moved into the crew area. She had never in her whole life displayed signs of intimacy in public.

'Regard it as another new experience,' he teased, as if he were reading her thoughts.

'Damn you, I'm embarrassed!' she blurted out.

He pulled her towards him, catching her off guard for a moment, and kissed her firmly on the nose, handling the lighter, yet almost sticky pull of the pseudo-gravity with ease. 'Another new experience, that's all,' he repeated. 'Remember, you have to learn to face up to your emotions. And you'll see others behaving in a similar fashion, so you'll soon grow used to it.'

A cough behind Joran sent further colour flooding into Channa's already burning face. A crewman stood there, his eyes firmly fixed on the air to the side of Joran's head. 'Captain's compliments, sir, and we're ready for the Envoy to view the planet. If you'd like to come this way, sir, madam.'

Joran handed her past him, his steel-like grip in direct contrast to the loving expression on his face. 'Come along, Channa, darling! You're about to achieve one of your dreams.'

As she passed him, she gave way to an impulse to kick him hard on the shins and had the satisfaction of seeing him wince, but she was still unable to pull her hand out of his. His strength sometimes surprised her.

To her further horror, as they entered the flight control area Joran put his arm round her shoulders. She wished the floor would swallow her up, but no one even seemed to notice.

'Barran, allow me to introduce the Shavlan Envoy. Channa, darling, Barran is our pilot on this trip.'

She shook hands with the pilot, a young woman of her own age, and then gasped at the sight of the viewscreens on one wall. She forgot her embarrassment as well as her manners in her delight at the first view of her own planet from space. Joran let go of her and the flight officers sat quietly, letting her experience it to the full. They all enjoyed watching people's reactions to a first trip into space.

Shavla lay spread out on the screens, just like a living version of the maps she had once used daily. One side of the continent was still in darkness, the other in daylight. Drifts of cloud moved across the landscape. She recognised the position of her mother's family territory, but it was shrouded in cloud and probably rain. Faction Harknell Headquarters was suddenly there, right below her, easily distinguishable because of the river nearby. The world turned slowly beneath them as they moved up towards the space transport and she soon found Deora replacing Shavla.

'The two countries look much the same from up here, don't they?' Joran murmured in her ear.

'Another lesson?' she hissed at him.

'We hope so.'

In spite of her feelings about her country's perpetual enemy, she had to admit to herself as she watched Deora unroll beneath them that both halves of the butterfly-shaped land mass did look much the same from above. But that thought, planted by Joran, made her feel uncomfortable, as did the sight of Deora, defenceless beneath her. Darkness covered the most populous part of the enemy territory and few lights showed. It was just a piece of land, untainted in itself, if you did not know what sort of people inhabited it. Then the capital city, Firstfall, came into sight, surrounded by its famous ring of mountains. It was blazing with lights, in spite of the lateness of the hour. Her hands clenched into fists. What wouldn't she give to be over it like this in a fully-loaded bomber!

'Time to go back to our seats, my dear,' Joran said in her ear, putting his arm firmly round her shoulders again. 'We'll soon be manoeuvring to dock with the space transport.'

She came back to reality with a bump and had to swallow her annoyance in order to thank the captain. Joran conducted her to her seat again, still holding her hand and she did not dare pull away. He knew she did not dare! Why did he have to behave like this? Spoiling everything!

In spite of her annoyance, the excitement continued to well up within her and to glow on her face as she watched space roll around them on the miniature screen attached to her pod.

Ah, thought Joran, watching her, if only we could all retain that youthful enthusiasm! If only life were still full of surprises and new experiences for me!

19

It was not until the next day that Van Makass ended his voluntary seclusion and called Lilla on the com-unit.

'Can we go for a walk, Lilla? I feel better when I'm not shut up in this rabbit warren.' Like Channa, he had eventually come to the conclusion that the physical surroundings at the base were changed regularly to confuse him.

'Certainly. I'll meet you down on the terrace.'

Once outside, he breathed deeply. 'That's better. I hate being penned up indoors.'

'I know. But you must see the necessity.'

'From your point of view, yes.'

She glanced covertly at him. He was in a strange mood today, very quiet and contained.

'How do you control whole nations if you decide on Occupied World status?' he asked, out of the blue.

'With a privacy cube.'

'What's that?'

'I'll show you. This is a personal privacy cube.' Her fingers flickered over her belt and greyness suddenly surrounded them.

He was, if anything, more alert than usual, but he did not panic or throw a tantrum at being penned in by the greyness. 'It's like the barriers that came down when the body plant attacked me, isn't it? May I examine it?'

'Go ahead. It's not in the least dangerous.'

He behaved very much as Channa had done, touching, pushing, throwing himself at it. 'You call it a cube,' he said at last. 'Does it extend below us as well? Or could one dig one's way out?'

'No, one couldn't. It really is a cube in this projection.'

'Then how do you contain a whole nation? You surely can't use one of these.'

'We can change its shape and dimensions, or use it as walls. We could also put a cube around a whole city - Firstfall, for instance - and it's quite easy to sub-divide a nation into segments, for better control of violence. It takes only a few hours to set up the barriers, if we see the need.'

'What about guns? Do they affect it?'

'Nothing can make any impression on it. It seems to be the ultimate in inert matter. In fact, we of the Confederation have no idea how to produce it or penetrate it. It's another Sirian peacekeeping device, and they don't share all their technical secrets with us. They're well in advance of the rest of the Confederation in many ways.' She touched her belt again and the greyness disappeared.

He studied the ground. 'Not even a leaf has been bent by it! With one of those to keep the borders, you could keep those Shavlan softbellies out permanently.'

'Yes. And it's just an everyday device, to us, Van.'

He did not comment on that pointed remark. 'How about a brisk walk now, Lilla?'

'Whatever you wish.'

An hour later they were sitting by the lake. 'It's beautiful,' he said, surprising her yet again.

'I thought you Deorin had no time for beauty.'

'Very little. But the court of the Emperor is set up in some style and we do try to preserve some of our heritage. What little those Shavlan laxbrains have left us.'

'You're very scornful of Shavlans.'

'Because they're rotten at the core. They don't deserve to win. If we were to follow their ways, our people would soon degenerate too. Like decaying plants. That's why I cannot and will not negotiate an unprotected peace for Deora. Better to perish fighting than to live like that, knowing your children will be weaker than you, and their children weaker still.'

'There won't be any winners or losers now, Van. And you will not be allowed to perish fighting.'

'Damn you for that!'

'Are you agreeing with me?'

He took her arm and pulled her round to face him. 'Reluctantly, very reluctantly, Lilla! We may be primitive, and we may be steeped in belligerence, but we're not stupid! And we're not about to throw away all we've fought for. We Deorin are strong, both individually and as a nation. If we decide to fight, you'll have to subdue us one by one. Even our women are trained in hand-to-hand combat, so that they can protect themselves and our children. Think about that.'

'I have been. Ever since I met you.'

He sighed and let her go, changing the subject and gesturing to the lake. 'Why did you bother to make a lake here? It's a waste of effort, surely?'

'Because we like our surroundings to be as beautiful as possible.'

His voice betrayed a bitterness he rarely revealed. 'You're rich beyond our wildest dreams, do you know that, Lilla?'

She did not pretend to misunderstand him. 'Because we can afford beauty?'

'Exactly.' His brooding eyes studied her face. 'Though you've paid the price for it. You Terrans are even softer than the Shavlans!'

She shrugged. 'We'll have to disagree on that point. I don't think we're soft in any detrimental way. I think we were fortunate that the Sirians enforced peace on our planet a long time ago. Just as we're enforcing it here.'

'They what?'

'They enforced peace on Terra. We were the subject of an Intervention, just like Evral.'

He stared at her as if she had struck him.

'We struggled against them for quite a while. Just as you're doing now. But in the end . . .' she smiled and let her voice tail away.

'They chose envoys - like here?'

'No. That system had not been developed then. We Terrans were instrumental in setting it up, actually. We felt the cost we had paid for peace was rather high. There were no privacy cubes in those days, you see.'

He shook his head, as if he could not credit what he was hearing. 'But - it changed your people, didn't it?'

'Yes. For the better, we think. It's given us the opportunity to develop our potential as individuals. The national identity inevitably becomes less important when there's peace for any length of time. We have a minimal world identity, and that's all.'

'Is it enough?'

'Oh, yes. Van - I think your people have great potential for growth. More than most. And many things to share with Those of the Confederation. You need not fear that integration with us will submerge your identity.'

He set both hands on her shoulders. 'Look at me, Lilla. I have an important question to ask. I'm asking this formally, as Deoran Envoy, not as Van Makass, and the answer is vitally important to me. So I'd like to see your eyes as you answer.'

She looked up at him. 'As you wish, Envoy.'

'Why does the Confederation bother to enforce peace like this? I mean, even if we were to destroy our planet, it wouldn't really affect the other planetary systems. So why interfere? Why bother?' His hands were gripping her shoulders tightly, and his eyes did not leave her face for even a second.

She continued to return his look steadily. 'That's quite easy to answer, because we know exactly why we do it. We "bother" to enforce peace, as you put it, out of a sense of self-preservation. The one thing we can't seem to control is the tendency of the various species within the Confederation to increase their numbers. At the opposite extreme, any species which manages to control its numbers risks becoming static and stopping developing. Ask Joran sometime to tell you about Fethran III. He was on that Intervention. It's a classic case. It failed.'

'So you don't always win!'

'Of course not. Not even Sirian technology can guarantee that.'

'Why did that Intervention fail, then?'

'Because the Fethrans have completely lost the ability to change and adapt to new circumstances. Their species is humanoid, but it's in decline. The first time the phenomenon was encountered, we of the Confederation didn't understand it for quite a while. Since then we've been studying it carefully. We have no wish to go down that track.'

'What do you mean by "in decline"?''

'Their numbers are declining. The typical regression pattern is well documented now. You can get info-tapes on it from the library. They explain what happens when a culture loses the ability to grow and change. It's not a secret, Van. Once regression gets to a certain stage, we can do nothing to arrest the

decline. We didn't realise that at first because it's not common. With the Fethrans, it was irreversible - and believe me, we tried everything we knew to help them. Not even the Sirians could make any impression on them. Now we can only protect them from other species and wait for the end. The pace of their decline is accelerating more rapidly than we'd expected, so we've recently revised our estimates of the time schedule. Once the Fethrans are extinct, we shall re-colonise their planet.'

'Surely that will take a long time?'

'Yes, of course. Many thousands of years. But the Confederation plans in those terms, Van Makass. We Terrans didn't set up the Confederation, you know. It's been in existence for a very long time. We merely joined it, thanks to the Sirians.'

'Why aren't they in a decline, then, after all their years of peace. It seems to me that peace is another form of stagnation.'

'We don't find that. Not as long as a species continues to learn and change.'

He did not look convinced. 'And what about us Deorin? We're not about to go into decline!'

'Don't be too sure of that. Your nation, and Shavla too, are in a static phase, and have been for several generations. You've been locked into belligerence for so long that it's become a way of life. We think you can be saved. We know the planet can be saved. Hence this Intervention.'

He stared at her.

She did not dare touch him, for he was radiating shock and distress. She could only say softly, 'You'll be given every opportunity during this Intervention to negotiate an acceptable peace, Van. If you don't choose to do that, you'll be given occupied nation or occupied planet status and we'll try to lead you into the necessary changes. If that fails, as it did on Fethran III, you would be protected for as long as your species endured. It's a very remote possibility, Van, but it is a possibility.'

'I don't - I can't believe you!'

She shook her head, sadness welling up in her. 'Well, leave that for now, Van. Just try to understand that whatever happens, you will not be allowed to damage your planet by this senseless warfare, or to continue making war on the Shavlans if they choose the path of peace.'

'And you call that self-preservation for the Confederation?'

'Indeed, yes. One day we may need the planets neighbouring Evral. You're damaging your own quite wantonly. We can't let you go on to damage the others. That's long-term self-preservation.'

He was silent and she waited with infinite patience. Eventually he said harshly, 'And if we do change, what benefit does the Confederation get from us then?'

'The input your life-form will make into galactic culture.'

'And that's so valuable? The input from primitive belligerents?'

'We cannot, we dare not, allow even the Confederation to become static.'

He sat there, looking anxious, but there was no sign of his usual violence. 'Dare I believe you?' He was asking himself as much as her.

'You should. It's the truth. This Intervention is basically self-preservation, Envoy. It's not benevolence or selflessness. It's a form of very serious long-term, galactic planning.'

His breath whistled out and he shook his head. 'That's one response I had not expected. I wonder - '

'Wonder what?'

'Wonder if it's the truth!'

'It's not the full truth, because you couldn't understand the full truth, but it's a fair simplification.'

'I just - hadn't expected that answer.'

'Does it matter?'

'Very much.' He was still standing close to her, still searching her eyes, as if to force every detail from her. 'You see, you've just given me a response I can perhaps accept. Pure selfless devotion to the cause of saving lives, with no benefit accruing to yourselves, would be a load of crap, and I wouldn't have believed that, whatever you'd said.' He drew her into his arms, twisting his fingers in the soft coils of her hair, but staring into her face as if he would reach into her thoughts. 'I'm afraid, my dear, my very dear Peace Mediator, that we've reached an impasse.' He shook her, but not sharply. 'A bloody impasse!'

he repeated in a tight voice.

She tried to pull back from him, but he was holding her too tightly, preventing her moving. Behind him the robot stirred, but made no effort to intervene. 'In what way an impasse, Van Makass?' she asked quietly, aware that this was a very crucial moment.

He stood there in silence for several minutes and she made no move to disturb him, then he sighed and said quietly, 'It's an impasse because I don't bloody well know what to believe or what to do next!'

'We have plenty of time to consider our next steps.'

'We do? Are you suddenly on my side, Terran?'

'Not in the sense you mean, no. I'm on the side of peace and progress. But helping you helps the Confederation, so I'm very willing to help in any way I can.'

'Van Makass needing a woman's help!' He threw her away from him and she would have fallen had the robot not caught her. The other robot was now hovering beside the Envoy, as if it sensed the tension building in him.

His fists clenched and unclenched. 'Self preservation!' he spat at her. 'You bitch! You scheming devious bitch! That's the only sort of answer that would ever make sense to me! Did you choose it on purpose?'

'No. It's simply the truth.'

'Give me a man to negotiate with,' he begged suddenly. 'I could believe a man more easily, relate to a man more easily, damn you!'

She shook her head. 'That's against the rules, I'm afraid.'

His eyes were suddenly alert again. 'I was right, then. The sexual connection is not just a chance happening.'

'No, not just chance.'

'And yet you know how we think about women, how we treat them.'

'Yes.'

'You let me treat you in the same way.'

'To a certain extent. It's part of the job, to learn how your people behave and feel. I wouldn't like to spend the rest of my life in such limiting circumstances, though. I'd get bored and frustrated.'

He growled in his throat. 'Do you enjoy your work, Mediator? Do you enjoy screwing primitives?'

She refused to be provoked. 'Very much. It's an avocation, not a job.'

'You've lost me there. What's a sodding avocation?'

'A calling, one of the highest there is, one of the most skilful. One cannot just decide to become a mediator, Van; one must have the innate capability before one can be accepted. The tests are arduous and the training is very long. Over a decade, as you count time.'

He stared at her. 'Over a decade? For training?'

'Yes. Did you think that military training was the ultimate? Our training was much more rigorous.'

'You must have short working lives!'

'Not really. We live much longer than you do, you know. About two hundred and fifty of your years, usually.'

He had known instinctively she was older than he was, but that made his breath whistle out. 'I don't believe you! No one could live that long!'

'How many times must I tell you that I don't lie to you?'

'How old are you, then, Lilla? You've never answered that before.'

'Just under a hundred.'

'I don't believe you! You can't be! You don't look - well - older than thirty.'

She shrugged. 'Your women age very rapidly. Too much child-bearing. Too little to live for after menopause.'

'The child-bearing's necessary. And our men don't often get even that chance to age.' He came towards her again and put his hand under her chin, turning her face up and studying her skin. 'You can't be nearly a hundred!'

'I am.'

‘How much under a hundred?’

‘I’m ninety-eight years old.’

‘And Joran?’

‘He’s rather older than me. He’s a hundred and forty-three. He’s the most senior negotiator in the Peace Corps. I’m very fortunate to be working with him. I’ve learnt a lot from him. We all hope to share an Intervention with Joran Lovrel.’

He ignored most of what she said. ‘Does the Harknell bitch know that? About your life expectancy, I mean?’

‘Yes. She has done for a while.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘You didn’t ask. You were too concerned with your efforts to shock me and disrupt the negotiations. Not concerned enough to learn from me.’

‘In the name of all Deora’s martyrs, how can you stand it?’

‘Stand what?’

‘Stand a negotiation where you have to - to fuck someone who treats you like I do. Even my wife would not accept that! And she’s a good Deoran woman!’ Docile to the point of non-existence.

Her smile was almost maternal. ‘It’s a privilege to conduct a peace negotiation, Van Makass, a privilege I fought hard for and which I appreciate more than you could possibly understand. I come from a world where many people suffer from chronic ennui, but I have a satisfying and meaningful life. You cannot, as yet, appreciate the richness of learning about and trying to understand another culture. You can’t appreciate the joy of helping to start the process that brings a whole planet to peace.’ Mischief lightened her features. ‘Besides, as a lover, Van Makass, you can be very satisfying - when you’re not insulting me, that is.’

He let go of her and took a step backwards. ‘Shades of my ancestors, what do I do now? What do I believe?’ he whispered and took off suddenly, running away from her along the lake’s edge as if all the demons in his nation’s mythology had suddenly taken on life and were pursuing him.

The robots followed him, but Lilla stayed where she was. ‘Perhaps now we’ll make some progress,’ she said aloud. ‘I hope so, Van. I really hope so.’ For she did find him attractive. Vibrant with life and energy in a way men of her own planet rarely were, he had only to touch her for sexual desire to flare. Yes, she thought wistfully, you’re far too attractive for my peace of mind, Van Makass.

20

Joran and Channa were sitting quietly on the terrace, where she was rediscovering the joys of fresh air and green foliage. ‘Sorry to be back on planet?’ he asked.

‘In a way. But you were right. The holiday was relaxing. I - I’d like to thank you for that.’ And, she thought, for the chance to meet a few people. Strange how normal the space transport’s officers had seemed, almost like Shavlan officers, though softer inside, since they had never faced real combat.

‘You needn’t. It’s standard procedure to give envoys a rest from time to time. You’d earned it.’

‘And is it standard procedure to - to devote so much attention to an envoy?’ she asked, for he had been assiduously attentive to her throughout the visit, sharing a cabin openly, behaving as if he were in love with her. And even though she would have preferred him not to demonstrate affection towards her all the time, she had to admit that other couples had behaved similarly, which had helped her to cope with it.

‘I’m afraid so, Channa.’

He did not touch her as he spoke and she missed it, then grew annoyed with herself for falling into Terran ways. Gratuitous touching was both decadent and self-indulgent, she told herself, but there was a sadness in the thought, sadness that her people had not been able to develop their affections more openly. Silence stretched between them for a while as she worried that she had not wanted him to give that answer, that

she had wanted him to - to - To what? she asked herself sternly. To show he was genuinely in love with her? How un-Shavlan! She straightened her shoulders and took a deep breath.

'I think you're ready to understand some more things about a mediator's role, Channa.'

'Am I?'

'Yes.' And now his hand did cover hers and she did not pull away. 'We're chosen, very carefully chosen, for our ability to empathise with other humanoids. To be accepted into the Peace Corps is one of the Confederation's highest achievements, and to become a Peace Mediator requires over a decade of training and apprenticeship. If I were not able to relate to you, I couldn't begin to understand your people. I learn to understand them, Channa, through you, through our relationship. I treasure that relationship most highly, believe me. I don't feign affection, I'm able to develop it - genuine affection, too, make no mistake about that.'

She was trying to control the tight knot of distress that had gathered inside her. 'Oh?'

'Channa, Channa, you will one day understand, believe me you will!' He caught himself in time and changed tack. I'm getting too fond of this one, he thought, then shrugged mentally. He had grown too fond of most of the envoys with whom he had dealt - according to the theorists, anyway. They always told him that in the debriefings. But what did they know? Most of them were text-book tacticians and had only been involved in a couple of senior mediations. The affection he inevitably developed had not had a detrimental effect on the outcomes of any of his negotiations so far. Indeed, he had been much more successful than other mediators and was quite a noted figure nowadays, a thing which amused him greatly. There was considerable pressure on him to become Senior Mentor in the training establishment, or to take a high-level position at Central.

'How many times have you had to develop affection for a primitive? Does it get easier?'

'This is my tenth senior intervention, not counting those in which I participated during my apprenticeship or as a junior mediator. That's the most interventions anyone in the Peace Corps has ever undertaken, I think.'

He was looking at her, but his eyes were out of focus and his expression was sad. 'It wasn't always possible to develop an affection for the envoys, Channa. On two of the missions the species were quite humanoid physically, but mentally very alien and - well, very difficult to help. With our present level of skills, anyway. Our Research Wing is working hard to extend our skills and understanding.'

Now he had caught her interest. 'So what did you do with the two failures? Give them occupied world status?'

'One of them. The other was - beyond help. Even the Sirians acknowledged that.'

'What do you mean, beyond help?' This information could be important for Shavla.

'I mean that the species was in decline and that all we could do was to prevent further violence or damage to the planet. That species has now been placed under Confederation protection until it becomes extinct, which it inevitably will. I suffered from that intervention and required several months' help from our psych squad to regain my confidence and come to terms with my distress. It isn't easy to know that your failure has consigned a whole species to extinction.'

She could believe that, but why was he telling her about it, exposing his weakness?

As if he had read her mind, he said quietly, 'Like you, I must answer any question you ask that does not harm progress in our negotiations. Did that never occur to you?'

'No.' And did she believe him? Why on earth would the Peace Corps give away their advantages like that?

'Life isn't always easy for a mediator, whatever it seems like to you. We more than earn our money on some mediations.'

It made her uncomfortable, the way he often seemed to know what she was thinking, but she did not like to see him distressed, so she laid her hand on his arm. 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you, Joran.' So would she have consoled a comrade in arms.

'Nor I you. I think the memory of Fethran III will always upset me. But Channa, sometimes it's unavoidable that we hurt each other, you and I. We both have a first responsibility to those we

represent.'

She stiffened. He was leading up to something. She was growing to recognise some of the patterns of his behaviour.

'In the next stage of the negotiations, I think it'll be your own people who'll hurt you, Channa mine. I know that I'll have to distress you as well. And we can neither of us change the rules of the game or the course of events, much as we might like to. Some things must be done, for the higher good. You would call them service to Shavla. I might call them imperatives or duties.'

Her hand was still on his arm and he covered it with his own. 'Channa, you're doing so well! Few negotiations proceed as rapidly as this one. I checked in our archives. It was unusual that I let you go off-world on your first holiday, but I thought you both needed and deserved it. And you coped with it even better than I'd expected.' His expression softened as he added. 'In spite of my overt displays of affection.'

She stared at him in shock. Was it all pretence, then?

Again he answered her unspoken question. 'Genuine affection, I promise you, but deliberately displayed.'

'Oh.'

'But because we're moving so rapidly, you have less time to recover from each change than usual, less time to grow accustomed to each stage of personal development. And that can be hard for you.

Wearing. Yet I can't slow down your natural rate of progress.'

She had had enough of this introspection. 'What comes next, then? I'd rather you told me straight out than kept preparing me for it, Joran. I'll face what I have to, for Shavla.'

'Very well. Next comes interaction with Van Makass. And it's for me to choose the timing of that.'

She drew in her breath in a hiss. 'What do you mean by interaction?'

'Who can tell?'

She was very still, rigid with shock and disgust, her jaws clenched so tightly she could barely form the words. 'I hate him. Joran, he's my enemy, my people's enemy.'

'You hate the idea of Van Makass. It's ingrained in you to hate all Deorin, whether that hatred is justified or not. You don't know Van Makass as a person, so you can't really hate him as an individual.'

'I can! I've met him!'

'Then you must learn not to hate him.'

'I won't!' She caught her breath as he moved his chair backwards. 'Oh, no!' She grabbed his arm before he could stand up and leave. 'Please don't banish me to my quarters, Joran! I'm sorry!'

'I must give you thinking time if you won't take the next step.'

'But he - I . . .'

'How can a true peace be established until your people learn to make friends with their former enemies?'

She drew in a deep sobbing breath. 'Is he - is Van Makass ready to meet me? He was very abusive last time.'

'He's less ready than you are, but we judge him able to benefit from a meeting. You've moved ahead of him in this negotiation. We hope to use you to draw him onwards. We even feel that we can be open with you about this. That's some measure of the respect Lilla and I have developed for you.'

'Flattering me, now?' She threw the words at him, then snapped her mouth shut to prevent more anger escaping.

'Telling you the truth, Channa mine. While you and I were on holiday, Lilla managed to shock Van Makass to his core. Hopefully, she made him think a little differently about the idea of war - and peace. We would now like the four of us to spend some time together. In fact, we judge that to be essential.'

'Then you'll stay with me? It won't be just - just him and me?'

'At first I'll stay. We'll take one step at a time after that. Will you do it? Can you face spending time with him?'

She could not answer immediately. The idea still sickened her. 'Why do you say I'm ahead of him?'

‘Because you’re in Stage Two. He’s not yet passed Stage One.’

She was silent for a moment, trying to understand the implications of that. ‘I don’t know what my people will say to such a meeting.’

‘They’ll be very upset - and possibly very brutal towards you - even your father.’ He ached to take her in his arms, but knew he must not.

‘I - don’t know whether I can interact with that man. Especially if he,’ she blushed, ‘continues to insult me as he did last time.’

He traced a line down her cheek with one gentle fingertip. ‘I love that streak of Puritanism in you. I love it when you blush. In my own way, I love you, Channa. Perhaps more than I should.’

Time stood still for a moment as she stared at him, astonishment rippling over her face, then consternation quickly following it. ‘And I - have developed some - some affection - for you,’ she said jerkily, surprised by the words which seemed to say themselves. She stared at him again, then blurted out, ‘How did it happen, Joran? Shavla save me! What am I becoming?’

‘You’re becoming the most successful envoy ever recorded, and you’re making more rapid progress than any of our projections ever forecast,’ he said quietly, then raised his voice to speak formally. ‘Stage Two successfully completed. Let that be noted in the official records, Fess.’

Channa gazed at him, open-mouthed, and he answered the question before she could ask it. ‘Stage Two is the ability to form affective links with people outside your nation and to acknowledge that fact openly. Channa Harknell, I’ve never been involved in an intervention quite like this one. Such progress! Such phenomenal progress!’

‘Joran Lovrel, I’m not sure that I’d call this progress! And I know my people wouldn’t.’

‘They never do, Channa mine. They never do.’

21

‘Ready?’ Joran’s hand was hovering over the controls.

‘Yes.’ Channa was tense. What would they find once the restraints were lifted from GHQ? Five minutes ago, Joran had lifted the cube for a second and broadcast inside GHQ a request for the Decision Group to assemble in the com-room so that the permanent removal of the privacy cube could be discussed.

The other half of the room flickered once and then lit up to reveal Nerlin Harravay and his son. Kristan’s mouth framed the word, ‘Channa!’ but he did not speak it aloud. His eyes were hot upon her. His fingers splayed out, then clenched convulsively as if he would seize hold of her.

Channa felt a shudder run through her guts. There was something about Kristan today that upset her more than usual. Her eyes narrowed as she stared at him, unable to pin down the difference. Whatever it was, the change was for the worse. He seemed unwholesome, as if he were diseased in some way. She drew in a careful breath. She must not forget that she too had changed - more, perhaps, than she had realised. After her time at the base, after Joran’s delicate and yet passionate lovemaking, she found the mere sight of Kristan so repulsive that the thought of him touching her intimately made her want to vomit. She studied him, trying to understand why she felt this way. His thick neck with its bulging muscles, his pale skin with the scattering of sun-blemishes, even his coarse sandy hair - it all made bile churn within her. She would not, could not endure that heavy body invading hers. She would not allow herself to be given into his power. Only with an effort did she control her shuddering revulsion but Joran could feel the tension radiating from her.

There was a moment’s silence, then Joran said, in his mildest voice, ‘Would you please tell us what’s happened in GHQ during the past few days, Nerlin?’

Nerlin spoke quietly, but his underlying satisfaction was quite evident. ‘We’ve staged a little coup, Mediator. I’m afraid Deslar Reinal is dead.’ He glanced at Kristan as he spoke Reinal’s name, and it was not an approving glance. ‘The other members of the previous Decision Group are safely under guard until their factions can be contacted and asked to decide whether they will join the new Peace Alliance or

not.'

'Who killed Reinal?' Joran asked.

'I did. Our ruling group has grown a little squeamish, Mediator,' Kristan spoke in his usual abrasive tones. 'I ensured that there would be no counter-coup designed to reinstate Deslar Reinal, that's all. An essential precaution, which has undoubtedly saved us a great deal of future annoyance and mass bloodshed. We've also managed to dispose of a fair number of Faction Reinal's troublemakers in the fighting. But my father doesn't mind that as much. That's honest killing.' His mockery was as heavy as his body.

'Faction Harknell's guards were very helpful,' Nerlin said, frowning at his son and changing the subject. 'Our kin-alliance still holds strongly, Channa, you will be pleased to know. Er - I presume, Mediator, that we'll now be able to contact the outside again.'

'If I deem it safe.' Joran spoke as gently as usual, and Kristan did not attempt to conceal his scorn for this effeminate. 'My colleagues are currently surveying GHQ and making an assessment of the state of affairs.'

'You can do that? So quickly?' It was Kristan who spoke, his voice now registering envy.

Joran bowed his head in assent, but continued to address the father. 'You are, I presume, Nerlin, ready to continue the negotiations?'

'Indeed, we are! Eager, even.'

'I'd expected to find a Decision Group waiting.'

'Unfortunately, we can't form one until we see where the other factions stand.' Nerlin shrugged. 'These things take time, you understand. But we have been on very amicable terms with Faction Thilsen since the coup - indeed, Meran's quick thinking allowed it to take place with a minimum of destruction - and we're on neutral terms with members of the other factions which were in the previous Decision Group. That is, in itself, a sign that we are likely to gain their support.'

'We'll gain the support of everyone, except for Faction Reinal and its closest kin-links, I should think,' said Kristan. 'Members of those groups have been a little stubborn about our changes here - to their detriment.'

'So you wiped out the resistance?' Joran allowed his distaste for gratuitous violence to show.

'I'm afraid so.' Kristan grinned at them. 'Such a pity!'

Nerlin frowned at his son again. 'We discovered during our interrogations that Deslar Reinal had been making preparations to impose a dictatorship on Shavla. His faction was always unwilling to enter into peace negotiations with you and had intended, after the coup they were planning, to refuse to continue. To call your bluff, as they described it.'

'They don't really have the choice of refusing,' said Joran mildly.

'I appreciate that.' Nerlin spoke sharply. 'What you should realise is that dictatorships are un-Shavlan - very un-Shavlan indeed. We do not permit them under any circumstances.' His eyes flickered briefly to his son, then away again. 'Whether you were here or not, we would have prevented Reinal from progressing down that track.'

Joran pursed his lips. 'I see.' Trust Nerlin Harravay to put everything in the best light. The man was a consummate diplomat.

'They're good fighters, the Reinals.' Kristan spoke with relish.

'I'm glad you enjoyed your little games. That was probably your last chance to indulge your taste for gratuitous violence, Kristan.' Joran spoke politely, but implacably. 'We must now move towards a true peace.'

'Oh, I don't think there's any certainty that it'll be my last chance to enjoy a good fight,' said Kristan.

'No certainty at all. There's bound to be resistance to our changes.'

'Kristan!' warned his father. 'Let that go for now!'

'No! Over half the Shavlan troops in Prime follow me, father. I'm going to take an active part in this Decision Group, whether you like it or not! I intend to have a very real say in what happens. I'm not selling Shavla down the line, just for the sake of peace, whatever our dear Mediator says. If we accept

peace, it'll be on our own terms.'

'Oh?' Nerlin's voice was calm, but his eyes had gone hard.

'And if you and your friends don't give me the opportunity to represent my friends, Father, I'll take it!' Kristan added.

Nerlin's anger flickered for a moment in his eyes, then vanished. 'Dear me,' he said mildly. 'And you never used to enjoy your strategic studies!'

'It's several years since we've worked closely together, Father. I've changed while I've been away from you. You should have allowed for that. I've learnt rather a lot about life and politics, some of it from Faction Reinal. The members of that faction have their good points, especially the younger ones outside Reinal's inner group. I've not given up hope of coming to some accommodation with a few of my ex-friends among them, when this damned barrier is lifted. They'll be more amenable to reason once they see that I'm part of the Decision Group. You're not going to object to my participation in the decision making, are you, Father?'

Nerlin looked at him steadily for a moment, then smiled, though Channa thought it was an effort for him. 'Not at all. Why should I? You're my eldest son, after all. Who better to be involved? But you must allow me to be a little surprised at first.'

Kristan relaxed. 'You always were - sensible, Father.' He raised his head and stared across what seemed just like a normal room, addressing Channa alone. 'I shall start the negotiations with your father immediately for our breeding contract, Channa. I've waited long enough. But I shall not accede to all your terms. We don't need them. I'll not damage your body when it's needed to carry my heir, and you're a fool to think I would. I shan't treat you like other women. You are different.'

'If my terms are not met, I might not agree to breed with you.' It was an effort to keep her voice even. She was, she thought bitterly, losing her self-control as she learned to express her emotions. Joran called it progress. Shavlans would not agree.

'I don't think you'll have much choice,' Kristan said pensively. 'I'm in a rather more powerful position than I was before, far more powerful than you, nowadays. You made a mistake, letting them send you away from the action, Channa. In the present circumstances, I'm sure your father will be just as sensible as mine.'

'We'll see.'

'We will, indeed. It'll be my breeding pens. My ownership of your body during breeding. And my custody of the offspring afterwards. You're too soft, Channa, for all your intelligence. I'm not having my son ruined by a lax upbringing. You need my genes in your offspring as much as I need yours in mine. You can keep the second child, as long as the first is a son.'

'You'll have to discuss all that with my father.' She did not know how she managed to maintain her calmness. 'I have complete trust in him. I doubt he'll allow you such an open breeding contract, though, let alone two children.'

'I doubt he'll object too strongly to my terms, as long as I promise not to hurt his precious daughter. And don't forget that he may need to keep me happy - you may both need that. What my father doesn't know yet, and of course your father too, is how many people I have outside waiting to make a slight revision of this coup. If necessary. I'll have to see how things go before I decide whether to use force, won't I, Father?'

Nerlin breathed deeply. 'There'll be no need for that, Kristan.'

'Oh, I think there might be. Reinal was right about one thing. The old faction leaders were getting soft. I'm not soft and I intend to start remedying the softness in Faction Harravay. And, Channa Harknell, I intend to dictate the terms of our breeding contract. You can reconcile yourself to that.'

'As I've said, I'll leave the negotiations to my father.' She spoke off-handedly, as if it did not matter greatly. 'Do you intend to become Supreme Commander, then, Kristan?'

'Not yet. My father,' he sketched a mockery of a bow, 'will be the figurehead. I never did enjoy the ceremonial. He does.'

Nerlin spoke calmly, seeming happy enough with the state of affairs. 'In that case, I'm happy to accept

your terms, Kristan. It makes all the difference to my feelings about your part in this if I become Supreme Commander. I've always served Shavla. To me, there is no higher reward for that service than the position of Supreme Commander, and no better way in which to continue serving Shavla. I'll freely admit that the position is important to me.'

'Well, don't let it go to your head! You'll be answerable to an active Council this time, not a bunch of toothless dotards.'

Nerlin inclined his head again. 'It's the Shavlan way,' he agreed. 'We were wrong to let Reinal change things.'

Kristan's a fool to think that Nerlin will accept his own son's control, Channa thought, watching the subtle by-plays. Nerlin is like my father, loyal to Shavla first, to his faction second and to his family third. Kristan would be as disastrous a leader as Reinal was. Mmm, there may be some hope for me if there's internal dissention among the Harravays. And I'd back Nerlin to win. He's worth ten of his son.

Joran leaned forward. 'Well, we'll leave you to sort out the local politics among yourselves. As long as the violence comes to an end. Would you like us to give you a progress report on the negotiations now or do you wish to wait until you have a full Decision Group assembled?'

Again, it was Kristan who spoke. 'I'd very much like a report now. In fact, I'd have demanded one if you hadn't offered it of your own free will, Mediator. It's about time we saw some progress. These negotiations are taking far too long. We Shavlans have other things to do.' His eyes were on Channa's body as he spoke.

Her cheekbones were slightly flushed, but otherwise she gave no sign that she was upset by anything Kristan had said or done.

Joran smiled sideways at her. 'May I start the reporting tonight, Envoy? After all, it'd be hard for you to sing your own praises. You Shavlans are far too modest.' He turned back to the Harravays. 'You'll be glad to learn that we have successfully completed Stages One and Two of these negotiations. This has been achieved much more rapidly than expected, so Shavla is far ahead both of the expected schedule and ahead of the Deoran Envoy, as well.'

'What in the name of all our ancestors does that crap mean?' demanded Kristan. 'The agreement Reinal made with you was too bloody vague by far! I wouldn't have accepted it. And I'm seriously considering renegotiating it.'

Joran looked him straight in the eyes and his voice became chill. 'You will not be allowed to change the terms, Kristan Harravay. They're fixed.'

'Like hell they are! It's still Shavla's future we're talking about. And we don't take kindly to dictatorship from anyone, especially someone like yourself. Why couldn't they send us a real man as Mediator?'

Channa blinked and Nerlin closed his eyes for a moment, as if in pain. Joran merely smiled, a slow, pitying smile.

'If you continue to behave in such a crude manner, Kristan, I shall switch on the privacy cube for a further day - or for as many days as it takes for you to rediscover your manners. This is a negotiation. Not a bullying session. Not a slanging match. Your petty lusts and your personal dislikes belong elsewhere. Kindly keep them there in future!' He had completely lost his languid air. His tone was that of an adult scolding a child, and a stupid child, at that. Channa relished the outraged expression on Kristan's face.

Nerlin's hand was tight on his son's arm. 'No benefit to Shavla from angering him, Kristan. We can make no further progress while we're locked inside GHQ.'

Kristan swallowed his anger with a visible effort. 'Is one allowed to ask what these stages of yours mean?'

'Of course. Tell him, Channa.'

Channa could have wished that he had done that, but she took a deep breath and tried to speak calmly.

'Stage One means that I have accepted the idea that peace is a genuine possibility and have fully grasped what will be entailed in the negotiations.' She paused, unwilling to explain Stage Two.

'And what exactly is involved, Channa?' Nerlin asked quickly, before Kristan could speak.

‘It will entail a - a long period of learning for me, on behalf of our people. I am the - the experiment, if you like. What I can do, our people can do.’

‘You still haven’t said how long it will take.’ Kristan thumped the table as he spoke.

She looked at Joran. ‘I’m not sure at this stage. Mediator?’ Her eyes were pleading, but he shook his head slightly, refusing to help her out.

‘How - bloody - long?’ roared Kristan, thumping the table even harder. ‘Answer me at once, Envoy, damn you!’

‘Several months at least, or so I’ve been led to believe.’

‘What!’ His face turned dark with fury. ‘You know damn well we won’t accept that! Either you’re not trying, for your own reasons, or they’ve got at you. No genuine negotiations need to take so long! Reinal was right about that.’

Nerlin touched his arm again, but his hand was flung aside. Kristan sat glaring across the room, fists clenched. Channa maintained a carefully neutral expression. This situation could be personally threatening. She wished her father had been there when she made the announcement to Kristan. She would have welcomed some support.

‘Are you sure of the time schedule, Channa?’ asked Nerlin, seeing that Kristan was still too angry to speak. ‘And have you really agreed to it without even consulting us?’

‘Unfortunately, yes.’

‘Why unfortunately?’ demanded Kristan, finding his voice. ‘If some condition is unfortunate for us, then we’re not accepting it.’

‘Unfortunate for me, not for Shavla.’

‘Tell us why, you stupid bitch! Stop talking in riddles!’

His voice grated on her eardrums like a rasping saw. She had never really appreciated before how ugly his voice was. ‘Because I regret my isolation from my family and colleagues,’ she said unemotionally.

‘Because it is lonely being an Envoy.’

‘You deserve an official reprimand for that self-indulgent little whimper,’ Kristan spat at her. ‘Wholly un-Shavlan, you disloyal whore! You’ll need reorienting in a Special by the time you get back at this rate! And I’ll make sure you get that reorientation before we breed, believe me! In fact, I’ll deal with it personally. I’m fully accredited as a Senior Interrogator now, you know. We’ll have to clear all that Terran crap out of your skull before you’re fit to mother my offspring.’

‘I’m not and never have been disloyal!’ She refused to be intimidated. ‘And what will "un-Shavlan" mean in peacetime, Kristan? Will there even be Correction Centres then? Until our concepts of proper peacetime behaviour have been defined, no one has the right to call me, with my record as a fighter, un-Shavlan.’ Since her record in the field was better than his, this was returning his taunt with a vengeance. She had always been better with words than him.

His hands were great balled fists, quivering to smash in someone’s face. ‘As your future breeding partner, I have a vested interest in making sure where your allegiances lie.’

‘As a totally loyal Shavlan, I have no intention of concerning myself with such personal details as breeding contracts while I have a vital job to do for my country. I could put in a counter-accusation of bias and self-indulgence, Kristan, and would enjoy doing so.’

His smile was the cruellest thing about him, always had been. He did not know how to smile for pleasure, only for the causing of pain. ‘You’ll regret that threat, believe me!’

‘Will I?’

Nerlin intervened. ‘Stop that, for Shavla’s need!’

‘I agree.’ Joran was no longer smiling. ‘I think this discussion should be postponed and not resumed until you’ve got your full Decision Group together, Nerlin. And I agree with your Envoy in this. Personal desires have no place in these negotiations.’

Nerlin took this way out thankfully. ‘Yes. Shavla’s needs, not our own.’

Only Kristan seemed unaware of what the implications of his father’s remarks. He was still too busy glaring at Channa.

‘I shall expect Sandur Harknell and Meran Thilsen to be members of any Decision Group,’ Joran went on, ‘and I shall not make contact again, or allow your Envoy to make contact, until a suitable and truly representative group has been assembled. If it’s not formed within a few days, then we may have to rethink Shavla’s future.’

‘You’ll get the group we decide on!’ Kristan flung at them. ‘When we Shavlans decide it!’

‘Indeed? The next few days should be very interesting, then, though it would be unfortunate if you negated the considerable progress that your Envoy had achieved relative to the Deorin, would it not? You haven’t forgotten that the Deorin are also negotiating, have you? However, as always, what you do is your own choice.’

‘And the privacy cube?’ Nerlin asked.

‘I’ll lift it. For the moment. While you’re assembling your Decision Group, I have more ecological information to share with your science teams, some new accelerated plants for them to try and some details of further technical assistance we can provide, if you wish. I’ll arrange for the data to be passed on by one of my scientific officers.’

Kristan leaned forward. ‘I don’t intend to wait much longer, Channa, whatever our dear Peace Mediator says. So you just start hurrying things up.’

‘I shall continue to work for our people, Kristan. However long it takes. Whatever it may entail. Shavla’s needs be served, not my own!’

Kristan snorted. He did not seem to have noticed that Channa had not explained the meaning of Stage Two. She was hoping that the interview would end before he did so.

‘Serve Shavla!’ As Nerlin echoed her last phrase, his face twisted for a moment with a shadow of sadness.

When the image vanished, Channa buried her face in her hands. ‘I can’t!’ she grated out, hardly able to speak for the loathing that soured her mouth. ‘I can’t mate with Kristan Harravay. Not even for Shavla!’ Joran’s arms were around her. ‘You won’t need to.’

She resisted the temptation to lean against him and shook her head. ‘Don’t underestimate him, Joran. People always underestimate him because he’s such an insensitive brute - but he’s cunning, too. Especially where his own welfare and desires are concerned. And his desire to mate with me seems to have become an obsession.’

‘Don’t worry. I’ll be very careful when dealing with him, I promise you.’

‘Can’t you help them? The other factions, I mean. Can’t you help them set up a decent Shavlan government? One without Kristan as a power broker?’

‘No. They must sort out their differences and produce an acceptable Decision Group themselves. Or not produce it.’

‘Can I speak to my father again, then?’

‘I think not.’

‘But I need to warn him! About Kristan.’

‘He’ll find out soon enough. I have every confidence in his capacity to deal with the matter.’

She pushed away from him and jerked to her feet. ‘Kristan was right about one thing, though! I am turning into a self-indulgent weakling. You’re doing that to me, Joran!’ Her voice had an edge of hysteria in it. ‘I want to be alone now. I need to think.’

He uncoiled himself with lazy grace. ‘Certainly. I’ll give you until one o’clock.’

‘Why until one o’clock? That’s not long enough!’

‘We have a luncheon engagement at one with your fellow envoy. Or had you forgotten? I’m sure you wouldn’t like to break the appointment.’

She had forgotten it. ‘No!’ she said instinctively. ‘Oh, no! Not today, Joran!’

‘Are you refusing to join us?’

She fell silent. More than anything, she needed to be alone, needed time to think. ‘What if I did refuse?’ she asked, her voice shaking.

‘Then you would obviously need more time to think about things alone, wouldn’t you? You can have as

much time as you wish, Channa. I shan't hurry you in any way. But in the end, we'll keep that appointment with Van Makass before we meet your people again. If you need the time so desperately, however, take it. We'll simply postpone the next meeting with your people.'

'Is that your answer to everything? Sending me to my quarters?'

'It has proved to be one of our most effective strategies, simple though it seems. It surprises everyone how effective it is. And it's so delightfully non-violent that even the Sirians approve of it.' She glared at him for a moment, then yelled, 'Damn you, Joran, I'll be there!' before stamping out of the com-room. Once in her quarters, Channa flung herself on her bed and buried her head in her arms to shut out the sight of the robot standing patiently in a corner. Anger roiled within her, anger at everyone: Joran for being so implacable, Nerlin for being so weak as to allow Kristan to take over, and most of all Kristan, simply for existing. I can't do it, she admitted to herself. Not even for Shavla! Not with Kristan! She would have to make that clear at the next meeting. And if her father did not back her up, she would just have to disappoint him.

She rolled over and stared bleakly up at the ceiling. I'm failing them all. Kristan's right in a way. I am growing too self-indulgent! But I can do nothing about it. If I don't manage to change, to adapt to Confederation ways, Shavla will be given occupied nation status; if I do change, the Supreme Council will accuse me of being disloyal - and worse.

The spectre of Kristan interrogating her in a Special Correction Centre was the stuff of her worst nightmares. She would kill herself first. Even the thought of returning to Shavla was - She gasped and sat bolt upright in horror. She didn't want to go back! Didn't want to return to Shavla! What had she become? Was this base a place for genuine negotiations or was it the Terran equivalent of a Correction Centre? One where they turned you into something else by soft tactics - and by love?

22

At ten minutes to one, the com-unit chimed. Joran's voice sounded so cheerful and normal that the nightmares she had been building around him receded a little. 'Are you coming to lunch now, Channa?'

'Yes.'

'Still angry at me?'

'Yes.'

'Never mind. We won't let that hinder us. Wear a robe today.'

'What?'

'Wear a robe.'

'No!' Appear before the enemy dressed like a Terran degenerate? Never!

'Yes, Channa. No robe, no lunch. And you know how set I am on you meeting Van Makass before we do anything else.'

There was silence as this sank in, then, 'Why, damn you? You know what Van Makass will think if I wear a robe!'

'Please wear a robe for me, Channa.' His voice was soft, but she knew him better now. His softness hid a will that was harder than plasteel.

The dispenser chimed and produced a soft clinging robe in pale green silky-textured material which rippled through her fingers as if it had a life of its own. When she put it on, she stared at her reflexion in dismay. Her hair was curling over her ears and she stank of perfume. Prettied up like that, she looked just like a recreation whore! She nearly did not go down to join them, but desperation got the better of her. She could not face more confinement to quarters. Not now, with her thoughts in turmoil. And besides, if she did not go now, she would have to go another time. Joran always meant what he said,

always carried out what he threatened. At one o'clock exactly she ordered Fess to take her to Joran.
'Certainly, Channa.'

They were waiting for her on the terrace, of course. Where else? The Terrans seemed to love the place. She paused by the door and Joran moved towards her. In the distance, the mountains brooded over the glinting lake. Van Makass was standing next to the balustrade with Lilla, but he swung around when Joran greeted her.

'You look lovely, my dear Channa.'

'Your choice of clothes, not mine, Mediator. You know what I think about these robes.' She did not, could not move. What would the Deoran think of her?

Van Makass watched them with interest. From the way she was hanging back and the angry expression on her face, it looked as if they'd had to coerce the Shavlan Envoy into having lunch with him. He stared at her thoughtfully. If she was angry with them, it opened up the possibility of a temporary alliance between the two envoys against their captors. Piquant idea, that!

He moved forward to join them. 'I believe we're obliged to interact with one another from now on, Envoy Harknell. A temporary non-specific truce would be quite acceptable to me.'

She was amazed to find herself grateful to the Deoran for putting things on a more military footing and answered with a return of her old crispness, 'I accept your offer.' She did not see Joran take a step backwards and raise one eyebrow questioningly at Lilla. Did not see Lilla shrug her shoulders and mime surprise.

'Good.' Van Makass smiled at her, but it was a real smile, not a taunt. 'How did they coerce you into coming here in a robe today?'

Channa was puzzled. She had expected nothing but coarseness from him after their last meeting, and had mentally prepared to endure it. Instead, the Deoran was behaving with the perfect civility of one senior officer to another, and had not even allowed his eyes to linger on the revealing curves revealed by the clinging material. 'How do they always coerce us?'

'Confinement to quarters?'

'Yes.'

'Infuriating, isn't it? I have to confess that I didn't need coercing this time. I wanted to meet you properly and see how you're feeling about this negotiation. I'm told that we'll be allowed to talk fairly freely.'

'With the reservation that I will not discuss anything which may give you a tactical advantage, Van Makass, I'm quite prepared to talk to you.'

'What do you wish me to call you, then?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Van Makass is my formal name. Informally, I shorten it to Van. We're required to be informal here, aren't we?'

She could only match that offer. He had been very generous already. 'Channa will be suitable - while our truce remains in force.'

Joran moved forward again. 'Shall we sit down, then, now that a truce between the two of you has been established? I'm getting rather hungry.' He drawled the words and Van Makass threw him the same glance of disgust that any decent Shavlan would. Surely the Deoran was not still fooled by Joran's acting?

She realised suddenly that she was ravenous. She could not even remember what she had eaten that morning - or if she had eaten. 'Yes, so am I.' She turned her back on Joran and stalked round to the other side of the table.

Van Makass, a master of covert observation, noticed that her eyes kept flickering over Joran's face during the meal with a trace of - was it resentment or bewilderment? Or both? He sat back and allowed Lilla and Joran to guide the conversation, so that he could study the Shavlan Envoy. His first impression of Channa Harknell was quickly reinforced. A very desirable and intelligent woman. But she looked - he hesitated for a moment over the choice of a word - unhappy. Yes, that was it. She looked unhappy. Channa let the Mediators talk. She was beginning to realise just how exhausted she was. First the

confrontation with Kristan, then this. What next? She realised that Joran was asking her something and jerked upright. 'I'm sorry, Mediator. I'm afraid my mind was wandering. I'm a little tired today.'

Joran pulled a wry face at her. 'Are we back to formal titles? Surely not, Channa?' To her absolute horror, he added softly, 'I thought we'd grown closer than that, much closer.'

Channa blushed furiously and waited for Van Makass to take advantage of that information.

To her surprise, he didn't. Instead, he said just as softly as Joran, 'I'm well aware that creating sexual bonds is part of their tactics, Channa. It annoys me, too, sometimes.'

She threw him a grateful half-smile. 'It can be very - very disconcerting at times.'

'Yes.' The resentful look he gave Lilla echoed Channa's glare at Joran and made her feel better. He's trying to soften you up, she told herself, but could not bring herself to care or to think out her own response tactics.

The food, excellent though it was, sat like lead in Channa's stomach and her appetite vanished after a few mouthfuls. She would not have eaten anything, except that that would have betrayed how upset she was. She was finding it hard to believe that all this was happening. Was she really sitting down to eat and chat with her arch-enemy?

Van Makass ate with relish, commenting on each dish and querying its ingredients. At one stage, he grinned across at Channa and said provocatively, 'It's a lot better than your sustabars!'

'And your nutra-strips,' she countered swiftly.

'I didn't know you'd tried them. Awful, aren't they?'

'As bad as sustabars.'

After that, the conversation was gently guided into ecology and landscaping, and the tension began to subside a little. When the meal was over, Joran stood up. 'I think you two could be trusted on your own for a while, don't you?'

Channa opened her mouth to protest, then slumped back in her chair, too tired to argue, too tired to indulge in futile gestures of defiance. If he wanted her to spend time alone with the Deoran, she would eventually, so why not get it over? 'Whatever you say, Mediator!' Her tone and expression betrayed her real feelings.

Lilla grinned at her and put her arm round Joran's shoulders. She was tall for a woman, much taller than Channa, who had often regretted her own lack of inches. Harknells were not noted for their height.

'Enjoy your chat, then, you two!' Lilla called over her shoulder as they moved away.

Van Makass said nothing, but he missed nothing, either. The Shavlan Envoy was as tense as a junior recruit before her first battle. Was this the result of making progress? What had Those of the Confederation been doing to her?

When the door panel had closed behind the two mediators, he suggested a walk. 'I get pissed off with this place, don't you? And with them.'

'Fed up to the eyeballs! But whether we stay or go, they'll still be monitoring us.'

'So what? I like being in the woods and they can't take that feeling of pleasure away from me. Anyway, I've given up bothering about whether those sods are watching me or not.' He jerked his head towards their four robots. 'You'll be quite safe with me. Even if we had not agreed to a truce, our dear guards never leave our heels. No one could get past those tin men. Besides, I've no intention of attacking you. I want to talk.'

She studied him openly. In physique he was surprisingly like Kristan - tall, heavily built and muscular - but there the similarity ended. Apart from his sandy hair, Kristan lacked colour, even to the chill grey of his eyes. Van Makass was vibrant with colour and life, tanned from an outdoor life, oozing energy at every pore. Even his dark curly hair seemed to be full of bounce. He was probably a master in deviousness, she reminded herself, as she realised to her disgust that she found him physically attractive. But whatever the Deoran was, he could not be as twisted and loathsome as Kristan!

'Like what you see?' Van Makass asked and she realised that he might have misconstrued the way she had been studying him.

'Don't get any ideas like that! We're military officers in truce and that's all there is between us. You

reminded me a little of someone, that's all. Just at first.'

'Someone you like?'

She shuddered.

'I see. Not a compliment, then. Am I allowed to ask who he is?'

'No, you may not. I prefer your company, though. I loathe him!' She stared at him in amazement. 'I can't believe I said that!' How could one prefer a Deoran to an Shavlan? Any Deoran. Any Shavlan.

'Well, that's certainly an unexpected compliment. Thank you. And look, I'm sorry about the other day, Channa. I'm not usually so crude. I'll admit that I was trying to goad you. And Lilla. But you kept your temper well. And that damned woman stays calm whatever I say or do. It drives me mad sometimes. Though I meant what I said about wanting to mate with you, make no mistake about that. If I ever get the chance, I will.' For the briefest of moments, his gaze rested on her breasts.

She stared back at him, her expression frosty. 'Well, I'll just have to make sure that you don't get the chance, won't I?'

'Yet you mate with your Mediator.'

'So do you!'

He grinned, irrepressible. 'Well, it helps to pass the time. Besides, she's a damn good screw. I'd rather have you in my bed, though. Sometimes I feel like I'm fucking my grandmother.'

She had no intention of prolonging such a personal conversation. It was too dangerous. 'Can we please change the subject? The thought of mating sickens me today.'

He looked at her thoughtfully. Something had really upset her. He took a guess. He was good at guessing. 'Your people pushing you to mate with this person, then, the one you don't like?' The man must be of the nobility, and from a faction close to the Harknells. They'd never waste her on anyone unimportant.

She wished she had not mentioned Kristan. 'That's none of your business!' She started walking along the tree-lined path and he followed, still thoughtful.

For a time, neither of them spoke, then Van Makass judged it prudent to change the subject. 'Why have you capitulated?'

'Capitulated?'

'Given in to Those of the Confederation.'

'I haven't capitulated!'

'They keep telling me how much progress you're making. You're into Stage Two now, whatever that means. They've kindly explained about Stage One, but not Two. They like to keep their little secrets, don't they?'

'You're still in Stage One, I'm told.'

'Yes. And it appears that I'm not making enough progress to suit them.' His teeth showed briefly in a snarl.

She was still nettled by his remark. 'I don't think that what I've agreed to amounts to capitulation.'

'Then you do consider peace to be a genuine possibility?' He was frowning now.

'Yes, of course. Don't you?'

He shrugged. 'Not necessarily. If we have the freedom of choice they keep harping on, then we can choose to go down fighting. And we Deorin may just decide to do that.'

'They'll simply prevent you from fighting and impose occupied nation status on you. What freedom is there in that? I don't care to sacrifice my fellow Shavlan for nothing. That's bad leadership.'

He scowled at her last remark, which carried too much truth to ignore. 'That's the difference between you and me. I consider resistance to be a very distinct and viable possibility. They can't control every single Deoran for every minute of the day - as they'd soon find out if they tried. We'd find gaps in their surveillance lines. Deoran integrity is not to be given away lightly.'

She couldn't raise the energy to argue today and besides, she was not now sure now whether she would prefer the Deorin to negotiate a peace or to refuse one, so she didn't want to push either way. That point would require a lot of thought. 'We'll have to agree to disagree, then,' she said lightly. 'I don't think we

really have the choice of resuming the war - or of setting up any kind of worthwhile resistance - given their technological advantage.'

'Well, I'm still not convinced we'd gain anything but glorified slavery from putting our heads into the Confederation yoke. Better dead than a slave!'

'Your choice, Van. I think the advantages offered by the Confederation are genuine and far outweigh the disadvantages so far, and I think their offer of peace is genuine.' She broke off a branch and swished it at the bushes as she walked. 'And in any case, I don't think they see us as potential slaves. I don't think they could see anyone that way, morally, and why should they need human slaves? They have the robots. What are they but glorified slaves?'

They both stopped to stare at the four robots which were deployed around them.

Van Makass folded his arms and leaned against a tree. 'He's really convinced you, then?'

'Yes, he has.' It wasn't until she spoke that she realised how very strongly she was convinced. She thought of Joran. Angry as she was with him at the moment, she did not believe that he would lie to her or cheat in these negotiations. He had his own code of honour.

'And admitting that you're convinced means that you've passed Stage One?'

'Unfortunately, yes.'

'Why unfortunately?'

She looked at him with a new awareness. 'You're as clever as rumour says, Van. Work that out for yourself. I don't intend to discuss that point.'

'I think we should discuss the idea of peace, if we're both to come to workable decisions. Why did you say "unfortunately"?''

'I shouldn't need to tell you why. You must realise how hard the change to peace will be, how long it'll take. What do you think we envoys will be doing during that time?'

He stared at her and gave a soft whistle.

'In any case,' she added, 'I've moved on from Stage Two. I moved into Stage Three this morning.'

His expression turned angry. 'Did you now! And how does one do that?'

'Wait and find out for yourself!' But her expression was no happier than his. The memory of Joran's coercion today came back to gnaw at her conscience and her own reluctance to return to Shavla or to mate with Kristan festered within her like a pustule of guilt.

Van Makass studied her thoughtfully. 'Whatever Stage Two is, it's made you angry.'

She ignored that gibe. 'This is called "learning to express one's emotions", Van. Your turn is yet to come.'

'Well, you're certainly not as self-controlled as I would have expected of a member of the Shavlan nobility.'

'I used to be.' She sighed. 'I'm still not used to what this negotiation involves for us envoys. Are you?'

She looked down at the robe and flicked it angrily. 'Have they ever made you wear a robe, Van?'

'On my dead body, perhaps! I couldn't prevent that.'

'I wouldn't be too sure, if I were you. I thought that once. In fact, you shouldn't be too sure of anything any more, your own reactions included. Especially as the negotiations progress.'

It angered him that she had moved ahead of him, even though the experience did not seem to be pleasant. He looked at her, trying to understand what was happening to her. She was staring along the path, and her whole body betrayed weariness and anger.

'What's really griping at your guts, Channa?' he asked suddenly, not expecting an answer.

'I needed some time to think about what's happened to me today.'

'And what has happened?'

'None of your business.'

'Why didn't you take it, then?'

'It wasn't allowed. Joran knew how I felt, but he chose not to give me any time. Oh, I was quite prepared to meet you, Van, don't think I wasn't, but I'd - I'd just rather it hadn't been today.' It was then that the realisation hit her. Joran had chosen this time specially, had played on her weakness, so that

she would be less on her guard with Van Makass! And she had let him. 'Damn him!' she said softly and fervently.

'Walk off back to your rooms, then.' Van Makass looked at her without any bluster. 'I'm enjoying your company, after all this time alone with them, but I'll understand. They get me angry, too, sometimes.' He remembered - would he ever forget it? - the shock it had given him to realise he had in no way fooled Lilla about his readiness to negotiate a peace. Her reasons for Confederation involvement had unsettled him greatly, backed up as they were by technological superiority. And her being a woman did not help, either.

'No, thank you. I'm not risking confinement to quarters. Even if staying here does mean continuing to consort with the enemy.' She tried to smile at him, to show she was joking, but the smile soon faded. Shavla, but she was weary! 'Let's sit down!'

'All right. Over there suit you?'

'Mmm.' She waited until he had sat down, then moved a short distance away from him to sink down on a very artistic fallen log. She rested her head in her hands, closed her eyes and sighed.

'Tell me about this Stage Two,' he prompted softly, his eyes very watchful.

'No.' She did not even bother to open her eyes.

'Very well. Tell me instead why you see such advantages in peace.'

She felt that this ground might be safer. 'Because there's so much to learn from them, so much to see.'

She opened her eyes to watch his reactions. 'There's more to the universe than Evral. I've always known that. Haven't you? Once we get peace, there'll be so much out there waiting for us!'

He could not resist asking, 'How was space? Lilla told me about your holiday.'

A smile replaced her wariness. 'Wonderful! Everything I'd dreamed of and more! We walked on both moons, you know. Just put on airsuits and walked on the moons.'

'I envy you that. I really do envy you that!' He tore a branch off a small bush and began to shred its leaves.

'I don't mean to sound like them, Van, but it is your own choice.' She broke off and grimaced. 'Though I get sick of hearing that phrase, don't you?'

'Bloody sick. Because it's not true. They're pulling our strings at the moment, whatever they pretend. And I'm sick to death of being shut up at this base. God knows what's happening in Deora! I should be back there now!' He bit off that exclamation. He was not going to let the Shavlan know that his own father had urged him to give serious consideration to the possibility of peace and was at odds with his Council about that. And Emperor or not, Van Kledin could not go against his people's wishes to that extent. Van changed the subject. 'What was space like? Tell me about it.'

Channa had not missed his exclamation. So there was disagreement in Deora, was there? She did not pursue the matter, but searched for words that would do her experiences justice. 'Space was - awe-inspiring. The stars - so many more of them are visible when you're up above the clouds. And our system is only one small part of the universe. It puts the futility of wars into perspective, seeing the stars.' She did not see the admiration warming Van Makass's eyes as he watched her speak, did not realise how lovely she looked when she grew animated. Silence fell for a few moments. She allowed her thoughts to drift. Who was this present interaction designed to help most, her or Van Makass? Who needed help most at this moment?

He looked no happier than she felt when at last he said bitterly, 'Perhaps they should take me up and show me, then! You hear that, Lilla? I'd like a holiday, too.'

'Perhaps they will take you one day.' Channa's voice was soft and it was obvious to Van Makass that she was speaking from the heart. 'Once a peace is concluded, we'll be allowed to travel off-planet, you know. Unsupervised. It's one of the rewards: the envoys get a chance to travel.'

He stared at her. 'Who the hell's side are you on?' he demanded, his voice choked with anger. He jumped to his feet and began pacing up and down. 'You're another devious bitch!'

She realised that her words had penetrated his shell and she got to her own feet, looking him straight in the eyes as she added, 'Strangely enough, I was not trying to be devious or to subvert you, Van. I was

speaking from the heart. But I daresay you'll not believe that.'

He continued to pace up and down nearby. 'I don't call this a negotiation. It's a charade, Channa. And a form of brainwashing. They're getting at you!'

'Kristan said that. I think he was right, though not in the way he meant. We couldn't adapt to peace if we didn't change, could we?' If I can change, so can most other Shavlans. If Van Makass can change, so can the Deorin . . . But can he?

Van snapped his fingers, following one of his hunches. 'Kristan! Kristan Harravay. That's the one who's upset you, isn't it?'

She could not prevent her lips curling in disgust at the thought of Kristan. 'Yes. You know of him?'

'All Deorin know of him. He's one of our prime targets. One day, one beautiful day, that man will die in agony for what he's done.'

'What do you mean? He's done no more than any other officer would.'

'Don't you know that he's been one of their - I mean one of your - most skilled Interrogators for the past four years? He has an aptitude for torture and a sick appetite for it, too.'

'I didn't know until today that he was an Interrogator at all. Then he said something this morning - boasted about it - ' She broke off. She was not proud of Shavla for using a creature like Kristan, for profiting from his sadism to gain information from enemy soldiers who had committed no crime but to fight honourably for their country. She had never been comfortable about the concept of torturing prisoners, even though it did gain valuable information for Shavla.

'So he's the one who's upset you.' Van Makass nodded to himself and hazarded a further guess. 'Do they want you to breed with him? I gather the Harknells and Harravays are very close - almost inbred, in fact.'

She drew her breath in with a hiss. 'That's none of your bloody business!' She started walking away and when he followed, she refused to meet his eyes. Why did everyone harp on breeding with her or mating with her? Why couldn't they just treat her as what she was - a military officer?

He grabbed her by the arm, forcing her to face him. One of the robots was hovering within reach, but neither of them noticed it.

'Don't do it, Channa Harknell! He's pure poison, Kristan Harravay. You wouldn't want to bear a child with his traits.'

'You don't need to convince me of that.'

'We'd have castrated a creature like him long ago and sent him to the mines. He's sick in the head. We don't torture our military prisoners, you know.'

She stared at him. 'They say you do.'

'Well, they're lying. We don't.'

To her horror, she believed him. 'I realised today that I couldn't breed with Kristan,' she confessed, her voice low. She was speaking as much to herself as to him.

'Not even for Shavla's sake?'

'No. I'd rather breed with - with you, even!' She broke off to stare at him in astonishment. Now what had she said?

'That's an excellent idea! I'm at your service any time, Channa.' He flourished her an exaggerated salute.

'Don't hold your breath, Van. I was only using you as an example of the lengths to which I'd go to avoid breeding with Kristan.'

'Oh, now I'm bitterly disappointed,' he mocked, but gently, not as he had spoken to her in the gymnasium.

As the implications of what she had said sank in, she stayed motionless where she was and then said feelingly, 'Oh, damn you, Joran Lovrel! You've done it again!'

'He's done what?' Van Makass leaned against a tree and stared at her. She was a woman in turmoil, if he was any judge of people. But by all the Shavlan demons, she was beautiful!

'He's - this - making me interact with you - has made me realise how very much I'm changing. Haven't

you seen what the score is here? Haven't you realised that - '

A blurred sound in her ears made her stop and shake her head. She could see that Van Makass was similarly affected. Joran's voice whispered softly from somewhere near her ear. 'It's better not to go too deeply into some things with Van Makass, Channa - not until he has made more progress, anyway. Will you continue the conversation along other lines?'

'Yes.'

The blurred feeling vanished and she shook her head to clear her ears. She saw that Van Makass was rubbing the side of his head. 'I was being censored. I should have known better than to pursue that point. Look, let's walk briskly! If I hitch this stupid robe up, we can stride out. I'm sick to death of inaction!' If she did not manage to exhaust herself, she would not sleep a wink. And it was about time she stopped allowing Van Makass to take the initiative.

To her surprise, he did not probe any further and they were able to speak of neutral subjects, such as the restoration of the ecological balance. He was an intelligent companion with a quick grasp of new concepts and a surprising knowledge of agriculture and soon they were deep in discussion.

When they arrived back at the terrace, they found the two Mediators were waiting for them.

'Was your time together so painful?' Joran teased, coming to put his arm round Channa. She leaned against him, deliberately flaunting their relationship at the Deoran, half ashamed that she had allowed herself to relax her guard with an enemy.

'It was pure pleasure,' said Van Makass. 'I thank you for your company, Channa Harknell. I prefer it to Lilla's. At least with you, feelings are honestly expressed and I know where I stand. If we ever do get to mate, I think we'll both enjoy it.'

'That would be taking a truce too far!' she said crisply, standing up straight again.

'Not for me.' Admiration was plain in Van's eyes. 'You're a lucky fellow, Mediator.'

Channa felt colour creeping into her cheeks and turned slightly towards Joran to hide her embarrassment and her confusion about her own feelings. He did not hesitate to tighten his embrace.

Lilla stepped forward and touched the Deoran's arm. 'Do you wish to continue our morning's discussion now, Van?'

'No. Actually, I wish to be left alone. She does, too, and she needs it even more than I do. You're pushing her too hard and it sounds to me as if she's got enough trouble brewing at home.'

Joran looked at Channa when the other two had left. 'Do you still need to be left alone? You can return to your quarters now, if you wish.'

'Yes. No. Oh, damn you, I don't know what I want!' If she were left alone, she'd think too much. She wasn't sure she could face any more deep thoughts.

'Come and have a spa with me, then. That'll relax you.'

She looked at him, tempted.

'I promise not to load anything else on to you today.' His arm was warm and comforting around her shoulders. She could not resist the temptation to lean against him.

'All right. A spa would be very pleasant.' She tried to speak lightly, but the expression on her face remained troubled and even the spa did not completely wipe the worry lines from her forehead.

Damn it all, she had enjoyed Van Makass's company. Worse still, she liked the man!

23

Two days later, Channa faced the com-screen and sighed with relief as it flickered into life to reveal a full Decision Group which included her father. Then she looked at the other members and grew wary.

Kristan Harravay was there, but not his father. She kept her face expressionless and her eyes away from Kristan, but she immediately started running through possible reasons in her mind for Nerlin's absence.

Joran smiled lazily. 'Well now, that's a little better, isn't it? A more representative group, at any rate. I

really couldn't deal with just one faction! Good morning, Sandur, Meran, Sharifa and Georn. Oh, and of course, Kristan. How could I have forgotten you? Um - is one allowed to ask where Nerlin is? I had expected him to be here today in his new role as Supreme Commander.'

'My father had an accident,' said Kristan. 'Regrettably, he did not survive it. An attack by a remnant of Faction Reinal, I'm afraid. We thought we'd cleared them all out of GHQ. That particular group will do no more harm, though. We were at least able to make sure of that.'

Sandur's fingers twitched slightly to indicate that Channa should keep silent. She signalled acquiescence. Joran watched them with interest while he pretended to smooth a wrinkle from his robe, for he now understood some of their hand signals. Crisis coming up, he thought. Fairly decisive stage, this.

'My condolences, Kristan,' he said aloud. 'It's sad to lose a father.'

Kristan nodded acknowledgement, but his eyes were devouring Channa and he showed no signs of grief. Indeed, he was exuding self-satisfaction.

Joran waved one hand. 'Er - I hardly dare ask, but well, life must go on, must it not? Who will now become Supreme Commander?'

'That hasn't yet been decided.' It was Meran who answered. 'I've taken on the role in the interim, with the agreement of everyone here. But I'm not interested in becoming Supreme Commander on a permanent basis.' She spoke curtly.

Joran could not fail to notice that Georn was avoiding everyone's eyes and that Sharifa was looking positively resentful. Only Kristan and Sandur seemed at ease.

'Oh dear!' Joran pouted and sighed, much amused by the expression of revulsion this brought to Kristan's face. 'It's very hard to negotiate with an interim government. One's never quite sure whether one's terms will be respected - or whether such a government is truly representative of the people. Still, we must do something, must we not? We can't stand still. Too much is at stake.'

As Kristan leaned forward to speak, Channa signalled highest danger to her father and a sign that meant Avoid/deny this speaker at all costs. Joran did not understand these signals but he did understand that her father had refused her request. There was a sudden rigidity about the figure beside him.

Kristan put his hands together, thick fingers making a steeple, and stared across it at Channa. 'You're looking rather strained today, Envoy. This all seems to be too much for you. Are you sure, Mediator, that there's not some way to replace our Envoy? Her father and I are very eager to have her back. We're in complete agreement on that.'

Stony-faced, Channa said nothing, though as she brushed a strand of hair from her face, she signalled to her father to confirm that. When he did, her sharp intake of breath was quite audible to Joran.

'One grows so tired of repeating it,' Joran addressed the air above his head. 'And they all ask it - every negotiation's the same. As soon as an envoy starts showing some progress, they want to replace the poor creature!' He refocussed on Kristan. 'And it's not, repeat not, allowed. Only I, as Peace Mediator, may replace a living envoy. And I've never done so yet, not on any of my other negotiations. Please accept once and for all that Channa Harknell is your Envoy and will remain so throughout this intervention.'

'Perhaps we have more concern than you do for our Envoy's welfare,' put in Sandur.

'Or perhaps you don't really want to negotiate a peace,' said Joran, giving them all a dazzling smile to emphasise his point. 'It's quite common at this stage, actually. Would you like some more time to think about things? I can allow you as much as you need. Better a slow negotiation than a - '

'No!' exploded Kristan. 'Meran, call his bluff! Put a stop to this pussyfooting around! We're acting as timidly as a brood mother. We should just refuse to negotiate with him until we have a new envoy, one who'll get things moving.'

It might have been Deslar Reinal speaking, Channa thought with a shudder.

Meran ignored Kristan and turned to Sandur. 'Your protégé is acting a little rashly, don't you think? Can you not control him? Personally, I think he's too young to form part of a Decision Group.' Kristan glared at her, but something seemed to hold him back from challenging her comments. Joran made a mental note to study Meran Thilsen's background.

When Sandur shrugged, Meran leaned forward and addressed Kristan directly, 'I'm satisfied with our Envoy's performance, Kristan Harravay, perfectly satisfied. Which is more than I can say for yours.' She turned her attention to the erect, uniformed figure standing at attention at what appeared to be the foot of the same table. 'How do you feel about being replaced, Channa? Do you think it's necessary? Are you too stressed to continue?'

'No. I'd prefer to continue, Honoured Leader.' The title made Kristan's scowl deepen. Had he really expected to take charge of Shavla himself? He must be more of a fool than she had thought. She continued smoothly, 'I think I'm making as much progress as anyone else would be able to, perhaps more. But of course, Shavla's needs are the deciding factor - and what the Mediator will allow.' She looked at Joran, expecting support from him.

She was not disappointed, but wished he would not act with such levity.

'I, too, am very satisfied with this Envoy.' His lisping delivery grew more pronounced. 'You Shavlan are too impatient! No wonder Channa's so tense, with her own people snapping at her heels and going on at her about breeding contracts. Nag, nag, nag! Oh my, what a way to decide things! Come home, Envoy, and have a baby, instead of helping us to establish peace on the planet!'

Kristan growled something in his throat, but Meran's lips were twitching. Joran ended his provocative speech before he laughed aloud. He was beginning to respect Meran Thilsen. She was not at all taken in by his posturings. He liked her staff, too. Her Science Corps was a pleasure to deal with and the officers of Faction Thilsen worked together in a harmony which probably reflected good leadership and morale.

'Things will be all right if you just let Channa get on with things, you know,' he ended softly.

'You must forgive us,' Meran frowned at Kristan, 'but procrastination wins no wars, so we've grown out of the habit.'

Joran looked at her sharply. Was she beginning to understand how mediations worked? Or was her phrase just fortuitous?

'We had no idea that the negotiations would take so long,' Meran added, with a hint of a twinkle in her eyes. 'Why did you not tell us before we started, Mediator?'

'We never do. Regulations.'

'May we ask now exactly how long you expect it to last?' put in Sandur smoothly. 'Our Envoy said some months, but that's rather vague.'

'Well, you can ask, of course, yes, you can certainly ask, but I couldn't give you a definite answer, even if I wanted to. Some negotiations last for years and - '

'What!' roared Kristan, standing up, as if to rush across the non-existent room. 'Well, you can just - '

'Be quiet, Kristan!' Meran's icy command cut across his bull roar. 'Or leave this group immediately!'

Her eyes met his and locked with them for a moment, but she was old enough to be his grandmother and he knew that he needed her faction's support for a time if he were to attain his ambitions, so he bit back his hot words.

When she was sure that Kristan would obey her, Meran turned back to Joran and Channa. 'My apologies, Mediator. The young can sometimes be over-enthusiastic. You were saying?'

'I was about to observe that this is one of the fastest-progressing mediations on record so far - and we've been conducting negotiations for nearly two thousand of your years. Shavla should be very proud of its Channa Harknell!' Joran saluted her with a graceful flourish of the hand and she clicked her heels together and bowed her head slightly in acknowledgement. He had to admire the ease with which she slipped back into her military role, though he hated to see anyone behave like an automaton, especially her.

'If this is fast, then I dread to see how the Confederation conducts its business.' Kristan muttered, staring at the Mediator.

Joran merely smiled. 'Oh, we manage,' he sighed softly. 'We just muddle on through.'

Meran changed the subject. 'Channa, they're talking of a breeding contract between you and Kristan. I think we should clear the air of that, since Kristan seems unable to think beyond it. Your father assured me that you'd be agreeable to such a contract and that you've left the negotiations to him.'

Channa took a deep breath. Rarely had she disagreed with her father, and certainly never in public.

‘That’s not quite true, Meran. I had said that I would consider breeding with Kristan, if certain special terms were agreed to. Have they been agreed to, Father?’

‘Enough of them have. Our faction’s needs are sometimes more important than our own, Channa.’

‘Which ones have not been agreed to?’

‘Location. Custody of first offspring.’

‘First!’ She snapped her lips together with a visible effort.

Joran was watching them carefully, but could see no secret signals. Indeed, there were delays between their responses, as if neither quite knew how to proceed.

After a short silence, Channa shook her head. ‘Not good enough, Father. If you’ll not support me as you promised, then I’ll have to refuse. And there will be no second offspring with Kristan. Not under any circumstances.’ Her fingers pleaded for his support. His were still.

Further seconds ticked by, then Sandur leaned forward. ‘Don’t let me down in this, Channa. Don’t let Faction Harknell down!’

For an eloquent man, thought Joran, this was a minimal attempt at persuasion. He could still see no hand signals from Sandur. Unexpected, that. What was he up to now?

Channa shook her head. ‘I’m sorry, but I must refuse.’ Her fingers again signalled the utmost danger and this time, added a request that Kristan be killed.

Kristan snorted. ‘I told you she’d be like this! And you can just stop wagging your fingers around, Channa. I know most of the Harknell codes as well as you do.’ He turned to his colleagues. ‘Perhaps you’ll believe me now! They’ve brainwashed her. She’ll need remediation time in a Special Correction Centre when we get her back. Can you honestly see a main-branch Harknell going against faction needs otherwise? Next she’ll be refusing to serve Shavla. You’ll have to agree now that she’s unfit to represent us. And he will just have to accept that.’ He jerked his head towards Joran.

Sandur shook his head, his eyes hooded. ‘Channa, think what you’re doing!’

It was a relief to have her decision out in the open, the dread spectre of mating with Kristan banished. ‘I have been thinking, thinking very seriously. Father, I couldn’t fulfil a breeding contract with him now, even if my original terms were met. Kristan is not acceptable to me, not under any circumstances.’

‘Do you deny our faction’s needs?’ His voice was stern, his fingers motionless.

She looked at him for a very long minute before she spoke, then she shook her head. ‘Father, I will not gift his insanity to our line. I cannot breed with that man, not now, not ever.’

‘You whore!’ said Kristan softly. ‘You will definitely regret this one day. The only insanity is your behaviour today.’

‘No. I’ll regret nothing.’ She looked at him, allowing her distaste to show. ‘Whatever happens.’

Sandur silenced Kristan with a sharp gesture. ‘If you wish to remain a member of Faction Harknell, Channa, you must serve as your leaders see fit. You know that. I insist that you reconsider your decision. That breeding contract is important to us. We insist upon it.’

Silence. None of the others interrupted. Then Channa raised her head. Her eyes were bright with unshed tears, but her voice remained steady as she spoke, ‘Meran Thilsen, I ask that you bear witness to my claim for independence from Faction Harknell and beg that you will contact my mother’s faction on my behalf to ask if they will accept me into Faction Nestar.’

A shock wave rippled around the Decision Group, then there was a hush. No one moved. Everyone seemed to be waiting for something.

Sandur sat with bowed head for a moment, then raised it to speak coldly. ‘No need for your involvement, Meran. I shall have to send Channa’s uncle back to the Nestar estate. He can plead her case.’ He did not look at Channa directly.

Kristan glared across the room at her. ‘You’ve sold out to them, you traitorous bitch!’ He ignored Meran, who was looking compassionately at Channa, and spoke to Joran. ‘After that, we cannot possibly recognise her as envoy! Even you must see that, Terran!’

Meran looked at him contemptuously, but Joran did not give her time to speak. Slowly and emphatically,

he stated, 'You may not change your envoy, not under any circumstances. And I must say that I'm extremely surprised that you have allowed such personal trifles as breeding contracts to come before Shavla's needs, Sandur Harknell.'

Sandur's expression was inscrutable as he shrugged. 'Some of the breeding contracts are more important than you might realise, Mediator, important to Shavla's stability. Personal feelings must not count when faction needs and kin-alliances are in question.' His eyes lingered for a moment on Channa, then he stared away into the distance, betraying no sign of emotion.

'I, too, am surprised at you, Sandur,' agreed Meran, 'and I do understand the importance of breeding contracts. I still have no fault to find with this Envoy. Moreover, as a woman, I can understand how she feels about Kristan. I would not allow my daughters to breed with him. I would not gift his inheritance of violence to my line.'

The look Kristan cast at her boded no good for their future relations. Meran ignored it. 'Sharifa? Georn? How shall you vote in this matter of our Envoy?'

'No fault,' agreed Sharifa promptly. Shooting a triumphant look at Kristan, she added deliberately, 'I, too, can understand how Channa feels.'

Kristan's face turned puce and Sandur had to dig his fingers hard into the younger man's shoulder to keep him quiet.

Georn hesitated, glancing sideways at Kristan, then back at Meran.

Meran met his pleading glance with an icy stare. 'If I am not supported in this matter, Georn Jansiv, then I shall resign this unwelcome charge. I have never desired the position of Supreme Commander, not even temporarily.'

Georn took a deep breath. 'No fault, then. Channa should remain as Envoy.'

'Majority decision,' declared Meran. 'Channa, this Decision Group will continue to recognise you as Shavla's accredited Envoy.'

Kristan's expression had become thunderous. 'We shall discuss this further, Georn,' he said curtly. 'In private.'

Georn sat up straight. 'If I'm harmed in any way, Sandur Harknell, our whole alliance is cancelled. And you'll have to keep that young lunatic under control if you wish to maintain unity, Meran! I've seen his tactics before.'

'Father,' Channa leaned forward.

'You've just repudiated that relationship!' Sandur's voice was even and cold.

Her fingers curled for a moment into fists. 'I apologise for that slip.' She paused and had to swallow hard before she could continue. 'Sandur Harknell, I ask that you investigate more thoroughly how Nerlin Harravay was killed. I cannot believe -'

Sandur interrupted her brutally. 'What I do is my own business, Channa No-name. We're quite satisfied that we know the facts about Nerlin's death. An unfortunate incident. They occur.'

Kristan sneered openly. 'You'll make a good recreation whore when this is all over, Channa No-name! I'll look forward to breaking you in to your new duties myself after we've realigned your thinking. The offer to breed is formally withdrawn, Sandur.' His eyes burned on her as he added, 'But I'll have you in my recreation suite yet, Channa No-name, believe me. And who will protect you then?'

Joran, who had been watching Channa's white face, and the white-knuckled hands clasped behind her back, held up his hand. 'Dear me, you people can be so brusque! However, I think we'll have to postpone further discussion until Channa's mother has given her decision on recognition of her daughter into Faction Nestar. And if they accept Channa, then we must, in all fairness, include their chosen representative in this Decision Group before we can continue. We cannot take any decisions that could be repudiated later, can we? So I hereby declare this meeting ended.'

The faces of the Decision Group reflected their amazement at this abrupt end to the proceedings, all except Sandur's. Was that a gleam of triumph in his eyes? Joran wondered. What was the old devil plotting now?

When the other half of the com-room had darkened, Channa sat on, her eyes unseeing, her head echoing

with her father's words: Channa No-name. That had hurt. It was a heinous insult to a member of a nobility whose pride in their lines and their faction's honour had carried them through many decades of gruelling warfare.

Joran allowed her a few minutes to recover then cleared his throat. 'Let's go and talk about this in comfort, Channa.'

She shook her head. 'No. Thank you, but I - I wish to be alone.'

His hand was warm on hers. 'Perhaps it might be better if you asked your mother's help yourself?'

'What?' She raised her head, her eyes lighting up. 'I thought you wouldn't allow me to contact anyone else!'

'I can change my mind, can't I? We effeminates often do that.'

'Effeminates!' She gave the ghost of a laugh. 'Why do you do it, Joran?'

'To goad idiots like Kristan.'

'You're not fooling Meran. Or my father.'

'They're not idiots. Interesting, isn't it? Georn despises me too. How can such as he become a faction leader?'

She shrugged. 'He's in the direct line. Very well connected. Though you're right. Faction Jansiv will have to look to breeding better intelligence into their line if he's typical of them. I don't know them very well. Their allegiances are mainly in the south.'

Joran would have liked to take her in his arms, but he knew she would resent that at this moment. 'Shall I make contact with your mother or not?'

'Yes, of course. I'd be very grateful for the opportunity. Do you have com-units everywhere on Shavla?'

'No, of course not, but we now have communication interchanges on the moons. That makes it fairly easy to patch in to anywhere on the planet, if we want to. Though you won't get such a smooth visual linkage on a temporary patch.'

'Can I have some time to think about the meeting?'

'No. Now or never.'

'All right. Whenever you're ready.' He could see the effort it took her to answer briskly, and he ached for her pain, but he felt it better to arrange a meeting now. Vulnerable as she was, she might reveal something useful.

24

'Com-system, patch us through to Faction Nestar's headquarters and ask if Riahn Nestar is willing to speak to her daughter.'

Five minutes later Channa was facing her mother, who was dressed in a soft rose-coloured tunic, darker hose and soft suede ankle boots - typical uplands leisure wear. She felt rather shy, not to mention embarrassed, for she had never developed a close relationship with her mother, and was coming to her now as a suppliant.

'So,' said Riahn, 'they're allowing you to make contact. We were told that we weren't allowed to communicate with you.'

'You're not, but Joran can approve or suggest contacts. I'm sorry - I'm forgetting my manners. Mother, may I present Joran Lovrel, Senior Peace Mediator to this Intervention. Joran, this is my mother, Riahn, Faction Leader of the Nestar Alliance.'

'I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, Joran Lovrel.' Riahn eyed him with open curiosity.

Joran bowed his head, his face expressionless. 'You'll excuse me if I hurry matters along, but I would expect your brother, Marrin, to be calling you shortly, Riahn, and I would prefer it if our meeting were kept secret from certain people in Prime.'

Riahn blinked. 'As you wish.' She studied her daughter. 'What's wrong, Channa?'

'You always could tell when I was upset.' Channa took a deep breath and said abruptly, 'Today I refused to do my faction's bidding and was compelled to declare myself independent of my faction. By parental descent, I have the right to request admittance to Faction Nestar.' She swallowed hard and her eyes were bright with tears again. 'I ask for admittance and I beg your support in that, Mother.'

'What did you refuse to do, Channa?'

'I was being pressed to enter into a breeding contract with Kristan Harravay. I - I could not accept him.'

'Well, he's a young lout, I agree, but you always knew that your father wanted to maintain close kin-alliances with the Harravays. You never protested about the prospect of breeding with him before. Why this sudden change of mind?'

'Because Kristan Harravay is - I'm convinced he's gone mad. He was never an easy choice for me, but at first I thought I could circumvent any personal danger by asking for special terms in the contract. But they were not agreed to. And since that time, he's, well, he's grown worse. Loathsome.' She shuddered. 'Did you know he'd become a Senior Interrogator?'

'What! A Harravay an Interrogator! I'd never have believed it.'

'It's disgusting. The whole idea of torturing prisoners of war sickens me. Their only crime was to fight for their country, after all. Even if they are Deorin.'

'I couldn't agree more,' Riahn said warmly, but the glance she threw at her daughter was puzzled. 'In fact, I've never believed in torturing anyone. It's demeaning to the perpetrator. How did you find out about Kristan? People don't usually publicise it when they become Interrogators.'

'He boasted of it. And threatened me with a Special Correction Centre when I declared my independence from Faction Harknell.'

'I see.'

'I also suspect that he's just killed his own father.' Rapidly, she described her earlier conversation with Nerlin and Kristan. 'I've no proof, but I'd set a ninety per cent probability on that.'

Riahn was frowning. 'And your father - he did nothing? Nerlin was his closest friend. They were closer than most brothers.'

Channa looked at Joran. 'We're absolutely safe from spying devices, aren't we?'

'You know we are.'

'And - will you promise not even to hint to the Decision Group about what I'm about to say?'

'I'll say nothing to any of your people, but I make no promises about my own,' Joran replied.

Channa nodded and took a deep breath. 'There are two possibilities, Mother, and I'm not sure which is the more likely. First, things might be as they seem and I might indeed be Channa No-name.'

'And second?' Riahn's voice was crisp, and with no hint of sympathy, which helped her daughter to continue, though Joran could see that Channa's body was taut with suppressed tension.

'Second, Father might have done this deliberately to hold Kristan at bay until he can deal with him. Otherwise, why would he send my Uncle Marrin to you to pass on my request that you accept me into Faction Nestar?'

'Why indeed?' Riahn chewed at her index finger. 'Hmm. Sandur's always been extremely fond of you. You've definitely been his favourite child. I find it hard to believe that he would actually disown you.'

'Yes, but he's also totally loyal to Shavla.'

'I know. And he would always put the faction's interests before his own. But - he was very attached to Nerlin. Very. If Kristan really did kill his own father - well, I don't fancy his chances of staying alive for much longer. Sandur and Nerlin had a very special sort of link. He tried to forge the same sort of link between you and Kristan when you were young, but the two of you fought from the minute you first met, Marrin said.'

Channa smiled briefly. 'Uncle Marrin was usually the one to separate us, or to rescue me. Kristan was a bully. I've always hated him. Father knows that. And,' Channa shuddered, 'I could not mate with Kristan now, whatever the terms. I thought I could, for the sake of the faction, but I can't!'

Riahn's expression was thoughtful as she studied her daughter. 'You've changed, Channa. There was a time when you would not have admitted to, or even allowed yourself, such a weakness. I used to find you very hard. As if you were covered in a shell.'

Channa sniffed away a tear. 'Yes, I'll admit that I've changed. It's been necessary for me to change. Peace will require all of us to change, I think.'

Riahn's eyes widened in surprise. Did Channa accept peace as an inevitability, then? She made no comment, for fear of giving the Mediator an advantage or a reason to end the communication. I hope it's true, she thought fervently. Oh, how I hope it's true! At the same time, she was considering the fact that Channa was revealing all this to her in front of the Mediator. That implied a considerable degree of trust in him. She began to study him more carefully.

Joran nodded to her. 'Your daughter is doing a brilliant job as Envoy, Riahn.'

The warmth in his eyes as he smiled at Channa made Riahn blink for a moment. Even more astonishing to her was the rueful smile Channa gave him as she said, 'One must learn to serve Shavla in new ways.'

Riahn asked sharply, 'But you do serve Shavla still? I have to be very sure of that, Channa.'

'I was bred from a Harknell and a Nestar. Do you think I could turn traitor?' Channa looked Riahn straight in the eyes. 'Yes, Mother, I do serve Shavla, however painful that may be, but it's a different kind of service to fighting - very different - and harder to endure.' Her voice wavered on the last words. 'I like you better, daughter, when you're less sure of yourself, when you're less Harknell-arrogant. Don't don that carapace again!'

'Are we so arrogant?'

'Oh, yes. Though Fellass has perhaps managed to tread a more moderate path. I've seen him quite often since he was injured, you know. He's undervalued by the Unity, I think. I find him impressive.'

Channa looked startled.

Joran cleared his throat and Riahn looked at him with a wry smile. 'You wish us to settle matters more rapidly, Mediator?'

'Yes, I'm afraid so. I can't allow Channa too long on these contacts. Her main task is here at our base, and distractions only slow down progress. An envoy's path is much harder than most people realise. The weight of a whole nation is on Channa's shoulders.'

Riahn's fingers were drumming on the low table beside her chair. 'Very well, then, I'll take steps to have you accepted provisionally into Faction Nestar, Channa. But,' she stared straight at her daughter, 'it must be a true change of allegiance. I ask your word that you won't change back afterwards.'

Channa swallowed hard. She had guessed this might be asked of her and it had added to her anguish. 'I give you my word, Mother.'

Riahn glanced at Joran. 'It would be usual for her to spend some time with us during the probationary period, learning our ways, letting us get to know her, since she is bred of our prime line. We are rather different to Faction Harknell - less autocratic - less self-sacrificing - though no less devoted to Shavla. We do not tread the iron way quite as willingly, I think.'

'The iron way?'

'The way of unremitting warfare, Mediator. We dare to hope for, even plan for, something better. Many of the smaller back-country factions feel the same.'

'I must discuss that aspect of your faction's ethics with you one day. It was not immediately obvious to us, even with careful observation. Perhaps I may contact you myself later? And you can be sure that as soon as her duties here allow, Channa will be permitted to come and visit you.'

'But not yet?' Riahn had been studying him as he spoke. With her, he had made no pretence of effeminacy, Channa noticed.

'No, not yet. There are one or two other stages to be gone through first. Your faction may, however, be pleased to know that Channa is exceeding all our expectations in the progress she's making as Envoy. She's reached Stage Three, whereas Van Makass, the Deoran Envoy, has not yet left Stage One.'

'Van Makass!' Riahn bit off further comment and gave a long thoughtful look at Joran before changing the subject. 'Am I allowed to know what these stages mean, or how many of them there are?'

‘Stage One is a recognition that a genuine peace is a real possibility and it’s also an acceptance of what negotiating that peace will entail.’

Riahn stared at her daughter. ‘A Harknell accepted that!’

‘Harknells have never been noted for their stupidity, mother.’

‘No. And Sandur’s line less than most. Stage Two, Mediator?’

Joran smiled. ‘Ability to develop some affection for a person not of Shavla.’

‘By that, I suppose you mean yourself?’

‘I have that honour. The feeling of affection between us is mutual. Though we are both aware that our duties to our own people come first. Unfortunately.’

‘And the other stages?’

‘Not even Channa is told about the stages yet to come.’

Riahn looked horrified. ‘You mean she has to pass these - these tests - without knowing what they are?’

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘Daughter, I do not envy you!’

Channa’s smile was weary. ‘Who would, Mother?’

‘And Van Makass is representing the Deoran Empire,’ mused Riahn. ‘That must place you in a dilemma, daughter.’

‘It did at first.’

‘And yet,’ Joran said gently, ‘once I had persuaded her to stop trying to kill him - so wasteful! - and once I had induced her to meet him, she found that he was a human being, much like herself. Though he’s just as militaristic as you Shavlans. The two of them could not talk comfortably until they’d declared a formal temporary truce.’ He chuckled, as if it were a fine joke.

‘I find that quite understandable, Mediator. We’ve been at war with Deora for a long time. Hmm.’ She shook her head. ‘Associating with the Deoran War Leader would not be liked. I shan’t mention that to my own Faction Council yet, though personally I think it’s a good idea to take a new direction - and someone will at least get to know the Deoran War Leader. It never hurts to know one’s enemy.’ Again, her eyes flickered towards Joran, as if trying to fathom him, then back to her daughter. ‘Van Makass has been the subject of many rumours. What’s he really like, Channa?’

‘Very alive. Vibrant. Full of energy. Foul mouthed at times. Understanding at others - of the difficulties of being an envoy, at least. That forms a sort of bond between us. I wish you could meet him.’

‘I’d like to. We must break the hostility cycle if we’re ever to achieve real peace. But you have all my sympathy, daughter, for it will be no easy task to lead the way towards peace.’ She turned to Joran. ‘I will need to speak to her again if I’m to receive her into our faction, truly I will, Mediator. My kinfolk won’t accept her, otherwise. And it would be better if she could come here within the near future so that members of the Faction Council can speak to her themselves.’

‘I’ll send a technical unit to the Nestar Estate, if you’ll permit that, to set up full communications facilities, and the same to your faction compound in Prime. That’s the best I can do for the moment. But I’ll have to regulate the contacts, according to the current stage of the negotiations. There are times when interruptions could prevent progress. The negotiations must come first, slow as they may seem at times.’ He and Channa exchanged a half smile that was as intimate as a caress. ‘One more thing - you yourself will need to join the Decision Group now, Riahn.’

She pulled a face. ‘I was afraid of that. I have no love for Prime. In fact, I dislike leaving the Nestar estates. We of this faction have a strong bonding with our land that city dwellers find incomprehensible.’ He smiled wryly and shrugged his shoulders.

Riahn sighed. ‘Very well. I know my duty. I don’t think I’ll wait to hear from your uncle before I start responding to your request for admittance, Channa. We of Faction Nestar are not so tied to protocol as the Harknells - and we can keep our own counsel, Mediator.’

Joran nodded. ‘Your decision.’

When he and Channa had flickered out of existence, Riahn started chuckling. Sandur Harknell, she thought, you are as cunning as a serpent! A foot in both camps, but with an eye to your own power base,

as always. Well, in this I hope you win! If anyone can, it's you. And I shan't envy you the management of the adjustment to peace. Then she frowned. But what will this do to our daughter? Your precious little Channa is changing. I never liked her so much, never before felt her to be my daughter as well as yours. How will you cope with that? How will you cope with losing her? And how will she cope with life in Shavla afterwards?

She thought of Joran. Presumably, Channa was mating with him. A pleasant-mannered man, the Mediator, but pure plasteel underneath the smooth surface, if Riahn was any judge of people. What were his feelings towards Channa? He had looked at her with what, in any other man, she would have considered to be genuine affection. Was it? Or was he feigning that?

She sighed. What did he really want from Shavla in these negotiations? Even if peace was negotiated, she doubted that would get the Confederation off their collective backs. Anyone who thought so was a fool. And what would Shavla become? She did not like to think of it degenerating into a placid world of farmers and merchants. Much as she disliked this continual war, she took a pride in the vitality of Shavla and the honour of those who fought for her.

She shook herself out of her speculations and rang the bell to summon the Faction Council and acquaint them with this startling new development. To think of Faction Nestar playing a central role on the national scene! It would almost be worth having to spend time in Prime if she could inject a note of sanity into the proceedings. A young thug like Kristan Harravay had no right to be a member of a national Decision Group. How had Sandur allowed that?

Sandur Harknell. As always, her eyes softened when she thought of him. A small man, compared to the Nestars, who usually bred tall, but a man of distinction, nonetheless. There was something neat and satisfying in him, both physically and mentally. They had got on very well together - when they were not quarrelling! He would have kept her with him permanently at the Harknell estate had she agreed to it, adopted her into Faction Harknell. But she had not agreed. She could not bear the thought of leaving her beloved hill country permanently and most of all, she had not wished to become embroiled in centralist political games. She had left the Nestar homelands to fight for Shavla and to breed, but in between the battles and the babies, she had needed to come home. Now she led the mountain defence group and was based at home, and that suited her very well.

When both of her full brothers had been killed, one after the other, she had been the only one left of the main bloodline to lead her faction, because Marrin was a half-brother from an unimportant alliance. Not a central alliance group, the Nestars, but old and well respected in the northern uplands.

She chuckled aloud again. No, she had never wished to become embroiled in politics, but it seemed as if she now had no choice. Politics had come looking for her, firstly in the form of the faction leadership and secondly in the form of a very distressed Channa. Her expression softened. She hoped that Joran was offering her daughter the comfort she needed. She hoped he realised how demoralised Channa would be feeling at this moment after a public rejection by her father. And she hoped Channa realised that there was no turning back from a change of faction - not if she wished to keep her honour intact.

25

The next day the com-system informed Channa that the weather had left the woods very wet and that Joran considered it better for her to exercise inside the base.

'Where?' She was determined to maintain her fitness level.

'Joran suggested that you join him and the others in the swimming pool.'

'What others?' As if she could not guess!

'Lilla and Van Makass. They've just arrived there.'

Her heart sank. She knew without asking that Joran would insist on her joining them if she tried to refuse.

All she wanted was a day's peace. Why could she not be allowed some time to recover from one shock before another hit her? But she had been bred a Harknell and there was a need to deal with the enemy, so she did not protest. Make no mistake about it, she told herself firmly, Van Makass is the enemy, however charming he may seem. 'I'll need swimwear, then,' she told the com-unit.

The screen immediately began to show pictures of swimwear, which ranged from the provocative to the protective. 'That blue one,' she said, impatient with the delay. There was a ping and a swimsuit appeared, its lines a classic for millenia, being mainly designed to cover the trunk and erogenous zones. The material was delightful, silky but firm. It was accompanied by a sort of short robe, patterned around the hem with flowers. The Supreme Council would have had a fit if they had seen her in it, she thought, staring in the mirror. And it was a wonder they had not already commented on her hair. She had never worn it so long before and it felt strange to have it tickling her ears.

When she arrived at the pool, the others were already swimming and Joran called to her to join them. She slipped off the robe and dived into the water, surfacing next to him. 'Good morning. I hope you slept well, Mediator.'

He grinned. 'Well enough. And my name's Joran, remember! I hope you slept well, too, Channa, and are ready to face another day's irritations.'

She grimaced, treading water beside him. 'I'll do what I must, as you well know. Shavla's needs, not my own.'

His smile was warm. 'Yes. You have an admirable tenacity of purpose.' A wet fingertip traced a line down her cheek, then his smile faded. 'I, too, do what I must, Channa. Never forget that!'

'I try not to.' She looked at him in puzzlement, for his words seemed unnecessarily emphatic. What was he planning now?

After some frolicking in the pool, Channa and Van Makass found themselves participating in a long-distance swim, from which the other two soon dropped out. Swimming training was optional on Terra, it seemed. Joran swam regularly in the ocean, because he lived near it, but Lilla rarely went swimming, preferring to climb mountains instead. That seemed a strange activity to Channa. What benefit could one gain from climbing mountains?

'How's it going?' Van asked, easily keeping pace with her practised strokes. 'You still look strained.'

'I still feel strained.'

'You need a rest.'

'I've just had one. My holiday in space, remember?'

'And he's pitched you back into the thick of things. What happened yesterday to put that frown on your brow? Did you talk to dear Kristan?'

'Among others.'

'And?'

'None of your business, Van Makass!'

He seized hold of her in the water, his superior body strength making it relatively easy to hold her steady in front of him. 'Actually, Channa Harknell, I was asking out of personal concern for you.' He shook her slightly. 'I was not trying to gain a tactical advantage.'

'Get your hands off me!'

A smile crept over his face. 'Give me one kiss and I'll let you go.'

'No!' She squirmed suddenly, pushing her knee against his chest. She almost broke his grasp and they scrabbled wildly for a few seconds before Van's superior strength gained him the advantage.

He held her under the water for a moment, then allowed her to surface for breath. 'Neat trick, but I've seen it used before. And you haven't the body weight to fight me off.'

She was sure Joran and Lilla would be watching and became embarrassed as well as angry. She leaned forward, as if to kiss him, but instead she bit his lip hard. He roared and pulled them both under the water. This time, she managed to wriggle out of his grasp, but before she could get away, he had grabbed her ankle and pulled her back. 'You surely don't call that a kiss?' he demanded, laughing at her anger. Suddenly he rolled her under the water.

‘You surely don’t think I’d willingly kiss you!’ she sputtered, when he allowed her up again. Why were the robots not helping her?

When she tried to call for help, he rolled them both under again and held her there for longer this time.

When she surfaced, gasping for breath, he pulled her close and started to kiss her thoroughly, pulling her back under the water as he kissed her, so that she had to concentrate on holding her breath and not on fighting him off. By this time, she was too disoriented and breathless to try anything else. When he had finished kissing her, he released her abruptly and backpaddled, clearly expecting a reprisal.

She just trod water and glared at him. Don’t waste energy on winning a skirmish that doesn’t matter, she told herself. ‘Deoran or not, you’re only a man!’ she spat at him. ‘What do you expect me to do, fall into your arms after one kiss?’

‘Not at all. I simply wanted to kiss you. As if we were just a man and a woman, not sworn enemies. I find you very attractive.’

‘Well, that admiration is not reciprocated!’ She slapped the water with one hand, unable to conceal her frustration. ‘Why do all you men hound me like this? Why can’t you just leave me alone - or treat me like any other comrade?’

‘Because you’re not any other comrade. You’re a very desirable woman, Channa.’ He swept the water-sodden curls from his eyes. ‘Actually, I’m damned if I know why I find you so attractive, because half the time you behave like a vixen, and the rest like an officer who’s swallowed the book of regulations. You certainly have no idea of a woman’s role!’

‘A Deoran woman’s role would bore me silly! I’m amazed your women put up with it.’

‘I’ve had no complaints.’

‘Who would dare to complain to you?’ She turned and swam for the edge, pulling herself out of the water in one swift graceful movement and standing beneath the air-dryer that still seemed to her to do the impossible in one minute flat. After she was dry, she stalked across to find her robe. Joran remained sitting by the table, but Lilla stood up and went over to the water’s edge, where she sat down and splashed her feet in the pool.

Channa watched Van Makass pull himself out of the water and sit down by Lilla’s side. If he had not been a Deoran, most women would probably welcome him as a mating partner, she admitted to herself. But he was a Deoran! She pushed away the memory of his kiss. She just hoped that no one back in Shavla would ever find out that she had allowed a Deoran to kiss her. The memory of it made her blush. ‘Enjoy your swim?’ Joran’s voice in her ear caused her to jump in shock. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you.’

‘I’m - a bit jumpy today.’

He put his arm round her. ‘So I can see. What’s upset you?’

‘Don’t pretend you didn’t see what he was doing.’

‘By "he" I presume you mean Van Makass?’

‘Of course I mean Van Makass. He’s the only other man around here, isn’t he? Except for your colleagues from the Peace Corps and them you keep well and truly hidden.’

‘What was Van doing?’

She ground her teeth in fury. ‘You know very well!’

‘From here, you looked like any other man and woman frolicking in the water.’

‘Well, we’re not just any man and woman, we’re two peace envoys from nations which are hereditary enemies, and he had no right, no right at all, to kiss me like that!’

‘Why not? You’re a very attractive woman. I often kiss you myself.’

‘That’s different. My country is not at war with yours.’

‘It’s not exactly at peace, either.’

She froze. ‘No. No, it isn’t. I keep forgetting. How can I forget that?’

‘I’d like to forget it totally myself,’ he admitted ruefully. ‘Maybe one day we’ll be able to. Are you upset because he kissed you?’

‘None of your business.’

He raised one eyebrow. 'I thought you'd learned to answer my questions, Channa.'

'But that's personal. What has it got to do with the negotiations?'

'Since when have we let personal matters stand as an excuse for refusing to answer a question? Maybe you should think about it some more.' He took his arm from around her shoulders and she grabbed it.

'No! I'll answer if it's so damned important.' She took a deep breath. 'Yes, I am upset. He's not just any man, he's a Deoran - worse, he's the Deoran War Leader. And I let myself get into a situation where he had the advantage and could force his attentions on me.' She let go of his arm and sighed. 'I'm as angry at myself as anything, if you must know, Joran. I should have known better than to stay in the water with him. It's just that I was enjoying the swim. He's good enough to make me extend myself.'

'He didn't seem to have to do a lot of forcing. I can't see any blood.'

'He's a lot stronger than I am! There are limits to what a person of smaller body weight can do in some circumstances. Especially if the larger person keeps holding her under the water. Yes, and I'd also like to know why my peace robots didn't come to help me.'

'I told them you were just playing.'

'I thought so! You were encouraging him!'

'Well, what's so special about one kiss? You've kissed and mated with all sorts of men before.'

'Not that many men! And this kiss wasn't special!'

Joran smiled. 'He really is just a man, while he's here at the base. And you're just a woman.'

A new worry struck her. 'Are you trying to push me into mating with him?' she demanded indignantly. 'I won't do it, not under any circumstances!'

He pulled her into his arms and started to trail kisses along the nearest side of her neck. 'No. I draw the line at that. I much prefer to keep you for myself. And I wish you'd learn to call it making love, not mating. But you do have to learn to stop making a monster out of Van Makass, Channa. He is just a man.'

She sighed and nestled against him for a moment. 'Joran, I'm too weary for all this. Could we not just - just have a peaceful day?'

'We can have a very peaceful day - as long as we spend it with Van Makass.'

'I might have known there'd be a catch in it.' She shivered and pulled away from him. 'I'm cold. And I'm hungry. How about breakfast?'

He raised his voice. 'Serve breakfast, please.' The food materialised almost immediately from a wall dispenser at the side of the room. Joran raised his head. 'Come on, you two! Breakfast is served.'

Channa was very quiet during the meal, but the others did not seem to notice. As usual Van Makass ate heartily and was loudly appreciative of the food. Channa picked at the things on her plate.

After breakfast, Lilla took the lead. 'We thought you might like to view the new banana plantations at the Thielsen Estate, Channa. Perhaps you'd like to see them too, Van?' She explained about the new species of plants they were giving the Shavlans, ignoring the look of anger on the Deoran's face. Channa noticed how quickly he suppressed it, but also how closely he questioned Lilla about the technicalities of accelerated crops and the conditions under which these gifts were being made.

When the viewing was over, Van Makass no longer tried to conceal his anger. 'What you two Peace Mediators are doing is giving the Shavlans some distinct advantages over Deora! I thought you didn't favour either side.'

'We don't,' Lilla said quietly. 'There's no longer a war going on, Van, nor will there ever be war here again. As soon as you like, we can supply your people with similar plants. As soon as you admit that these peace negotiations are serious and permanent.'

Channa looked down at the table, embarrassed for him, but a sudden change in the atmosphere made her look up again, to see Van Makass striding towards the door. 'I've had enough of all this!' He yelled over his shoulder. 'Stuff the lot of you! And stuff your bloody peace negotiations!'

When the door refused to open, he banged it with his fist, sagged for a moment against it, then strode back to their table. 'Why?' he demanded, fury making his voice even deeper. 'Why in front of her?'

'She understands how you feel better than anyone else could,' Lilla's voice was soft and gentle. 'She's

had enough frustrations to bear herself since she came here.'

Van Makass looked at Channa and she found that she did indeed feel sorry for him. 'Come and sit down, Van. You know these Terrans are as immovable as the Extremity Mountains once they've decided on something.' Only perhaps, for Terrans, mountains were movable!

For a moment all hung in the balance as they waited to see whether Van would erupt into one of his mindless rages or even try to attack the two Mediators. Finally he growled something under his breath and threw himself into a chair. 'What pleasant activity do you have in mind for your captive animals now?' he demanded, folding his arms across his chest.

It was Joran who answered. 'We thought we'd all go for a flight across the two continents. Deora and Shavla look rather different from the space shuttle.'

Van Makass's inhalation of breath was so sharp that it seemed to echo around the swimming area. 'Do you mean that?'

Lilla laid her hand on his arm. 'We always mean what we say, Van. You should know that by now.' 'What's the catch, then?'

'No catch. Just a little outing. Very educational.'

Channa watched him with sympathy, then, on a sudden impulse, reached across to grasp her enemy's shoulder. 'Whatever the purpose of this, Van, it'll be worth it.' She could feel his muscles tightly knotted under her hand, then, very gradually, they relaxed and he shook his head as if it was all too much for him. But he reached up and touched her hand for a moment before she removed it from his shoulder.

'When?' he asked.

'Why not now?' Joran looked at Channa. 'Do you think he'd prefer to walk across the field, as you did?'

Van looked at her, giving her just the tiniest nod of thanks for her understanding, then turned back to Joran. 'What does that mean?'

Channa coloured. 'When I went up into space before, I insisted on walking across to the shuttle, instead of using their moving walkways.' She felt a little embarrassed about that now. 'It seemed to make the contrast greater, more - more telling, somehow. I never feel as if I'm on Evral when I'm inside the base.' 'I can understand that. Yes, let's all walk across to the shuttle.' It would also give him a useful view of the base's terrain.

Joran and Lilla stood up.

'Wait - don't we need to change our clothes?' Like Joran, Van was only wearing a brief garment which covered his lower body.

'No. We'll change as we go through decontamination. You should wear your robe, though, Van, to walk across the field.' Lilla held out a short robe, similar to the one Channa was wearing, but which Van had refused to put on before.

For a moment he hesitated, then he gritted his teeth and took it from her. No one from Deora was going to see him, after all. He shot a rueful look at Channa as he pulled it down and she shrugged her shoulders and smiled at him.

Once they were outside, Channa found herself walking beside Van Makass. She could sense his excitement, even though he was trying to keep it under firm control. His eyes were alight with anticipation and he kept looking across at the space shuttle as if he were afraid it would vanish.

They passed quickly through the decontamination chambers and, clad now in ship suits, followed the glowing arrows that led them on to the shuttle.

Van Makass examined his seating pod with interest and allowed it to fold around him for the take-off.

When they were up and it released him, he turned to Lilla. 'I'd expected to feel more - more push.'

'We've had a low-recoil design for the past millennium.'

'Is there anything Those of the Confederation can't do?' he asked flippantly, but he was frowning as he looked about him at the shuttle.

'There are many things we can't do. We're always meeting new challenges. We can't yet visit other galaxies, for instance.'

Channa laughed. 'Well, it's nice to know that even you have some limitations.' She was delighted to be going into space again, whatever the reason.

After a minute, Van Makass asked, 'Can we - is it allowed - to see outside?'

Joran nodded. 'Of course. We could view the outside from here, but I think it's more exciting from the control room, where the images wrap around the walls. Don't you agree, Channa? First, we'll overfly the two continents, then we'll dock at the space transport for lunch. We won't walk on the moons today, but perhaps another time.'

The intensity with which Van Makass lived through the experience gripped them all. He stood against the rear wall of the control room, staring out at the stars on the viewscreens as if he wanted to seize them with both hands. The look he cast at Channa after a while was thoughtful. 'Is this what convinced you?' 'No. I was convinced of the inevitability of peace before we ever left the planet. And I had to do much more to earn my trip into space. This is favouritism,' she added, teasingly.

'Hmm.'

He turned his back on her and gazed hungrily at the views of Evral which were showing on one wall. From the way his shoulders were hunched, Channa guessed that he had a desperate desire to be on his own, but she knew that Joran and Lilla, for reasons of their own, would not grant either of them any privacy that day. Subtle pressures were building up within their group, every bit as taxing as those generated by a hard campaign: pressures to push Van Makass towards peace, pressures to push her she knew not where. She looked at Joran and he gave her an enigmatic smile, accompanied by a slight shrug of the shoulders. She risked another glance at Van, still hunched away from them and had to admit to herself that she felt truly sorry for him today.

Lilla moved over to stand beside Van. 'We're just above Prime. See! There.'

'Yes. There seems to be a lot of activity.'

'They're indulging in some political manoeuvring. We're still awaiting a conclusive outcome.'

Channa forgot her sympathy for Van as she scowled at Lilla. How dared she betray what was happening in Shavla to a Deoran!

Gradually the landscape changed and Firstfall came into sight. Van's knuckles were white on the handrail. 'There's a lot of activity here, too.'

Lilla nodded. 'Yes. Your father isn't having an easy time keeping control of his commanders. They're very belligerent about these negotiations.'

'Do you blame them?'

'Not blame. But they'll have to learn a little patience. You all will. Peace is not achieved in a few days, Van. It takes years.'

'You never miss an opportunity to preach at me, do you?' But he spoke tiredly, not aggressively. He continued to scrutinise Firstfall until it had passed from sight. 'My father's an old man. He needs me with him,' he said abruptly. 'And he's your only chance of Deora accepting a peace settlement. If you let the others take over, they'll fight you to the death without considering any other options.' He seemed to have forgotten Channa's presence.

'As soon as you've faced facts, we'll let you speak to him,' Lilla offered.

'What? But you said . . .' He broke off in mid-sentence and glanced at Channa. 'Have you spoken to your people?'

'Yes. But only when Joran permits. I can't choose when or with whom.'

'But the terms said -'

'The terms said that our people couldn't contact us. They said nothing about the mediators allowing us to contact our people.'

'Goads and carrots, eh? Is that how they got at you?'

'It's not how they persuaded me. I already believed in the possibility of peace. For me, their technology is one of the most telling arguments for working towards it.'

Van Makass pressed his lips firmly together and concentrated on the landscape again. After a couple of circuits of the planet, the shuttle docked in the space transport and this time they were allowed to watch

the docking process.

'Damn you all!' said Van Makass softly when they had viewed the shuttle floating easily into place in the vast docking bay. 'Damn your superior bloody technology and damn your sanctimonious interventions!' He was very quiet during their tour of the space transport, even quieter when invited to take a short walk in space, though he did not reject the offer. During the flight down he hunched his shoulders against all of them and made no effort to discuss his experiences.

Channa would have been glad to have left him in peace then, but Joran smilingly insisted that they all dine together on the terrace. Van Makass walked with them wrapped in a cloud of silent resistance that was almost visible. He was like an animal caged and tamed only for the moment, Channa thought, stealing a glance at him. Given half a chance, he would explode out of his prison. She could not help sympathising with his suffering, Deoran or not.

During the meal, Van Makass stirred his food around on the plate and ate very little. 'How do you maintain a peace?' he demanded suddenly. 'There would be - inevitably - outbreaks of violence and resistance in Deora, probably in Shavla, too. Some people will never accept the idea of peace.'

'We use the privacy cube,' Lilla told him.

'Over an area as big as Deora?'

She nodded. 'Or bigger. There seem to be no limitations to its size.'

'More of your marvellous technology?'

'It's Sirian peacekeeping technology,' said Lilla, 'not Terran. Simple, but very effective.'

'Damn - you - all!' Van Makass threw the words at them like bullets, his head poised stiffly on his shoulders like a snake about to strike. 'Damn you all to the lowest Shavlan hell! How much longer must I sit here and suffer publicly, Lilla? Are we all going to be forced to share a bed next, or do you intend to keep us awake throughout the night learning new tricks?'

'It depends on you, Van. How much longer will it take for you to admit the reality of our intervention?'

He let out his breath in an agonised whoosh. 'I don't know. Like Channa yesterday, I need time to think. Need it desperately, damn you! You can't expect me to do that sort of thinking with you all staring at me like an indigene on Extremity Island. I won't make a decision without some thinking time. I won't!

Whatever you do to me.'

Channa stood up. 'I'm tired, Joran. Please - give him some peace and take me back to my room. He needs it.'

'Stage Three passed,' Joran said quietly but distinctly.

Van Makass's head jerked up. 'What?'

Channa stared. 'But - what have I done?'

The blurred noise sounded around her, as Joran spoke for her ears alone. 'You've cared about your enemy's pain, not just once, but all day. As he cared about yours yesterday. Only, he cannot pass Stage Three until after Stage One.' The blurriness vanished and Joran raised his voice. 'Fess, let it be formally recorded that Channa Harknell, Shavlan Envoy, has now passed Stage Three.'

Van Makass leaned forward. 'Congratulations, Channa! Whatever you did.' He made an effort to smile at her.

'I didn't do anything! One never knows what the next stage entails. I'm not so crass as to deliberately flaunt my progress in front of you!' She leaned forward and grasped his hand in hers. Suddenly it seemed very important that he should not think that she wished to torment him. 'Truly, Van, I didn't know it would lead to another stage.'

'Stage Four passed,' said Joran. 'Please note that in the formal records, Fess.'

Channa jumped as if she had been stung. 'How can it be? I didn't do anything! Damn you, stop it, Joran!'

Van still smiled, if rather crookedly, a gigantic achievement of self-control. 'You are - quite incredible - Channa Harknell.' He stood up. 'May I leave now, Lilla? I really can't take any more.'

It was Joran who nodded.

'Van - ' Channa hesitated.

He turned back to answer her. 'It's all right. I know you did nothing on purpose to upset me. For a Shavlan, you're all right.'

Lilla followed the Deoran Envoy out, her face expressionless.

Channa turned to Joran. 'Sometimes you sicken me! Why did you have to do all that to him in public?'

'We judged it to be the only way to get through to him. Wouldn't you rather face peace than war? Peace on both sides. He's a very stubborn man. I thought we'd never break through to him. And aren't you curious about Stage Four?'

'I'm beyond being curious about anything today.'

'I'll tell you anyway. Stage Four is that you voluntarily touched your enemy to express your sympathy with him, and again, it had to happen more than once.'

'Oh.'

'Are you even sure whether that man is an enemy now?'

'All Deorin are my enemy.' But there was no passion in her voice.

'Not here, Channa. Here, there are no enemies. We're just a group of human beings living together and getting to know one another.' He leaned back and sighed. 'And contrary to what you're thinking, I do not enjoy seeing people suffer.'

'I don't care what you do or do not enjoy! I, too, need to be alone now. Surely, you can . . .'

'I would have allowed it, believe me, but we've just had an urgent request from Riahn that you speak to her Faction Council as soon as possible.'

26

Channa stared at Joran, aghast. 'What?'

'You heard me. Riahn wants you to speak to her Faction Council. Urgently.'

'Oh, no! Joran, please - put them off till tomorrow! Joran, I beg you!' She could hear the hysteria hovering behind her anguished words, but could not completely control it.

'How can I, my dear? You must belong to one faction or another if these negotiations are to continue. This is the worst possible time for you to deny them an interview.'

She grabbed his arm. 'Joran, I'm still wearing a robe! I need to change my clothes first.'

'You look very nice to me! Those soft greens and blues suit you.'

'I need to wear something more formal. You know I do.'

'Why? The Nestars are more informal than the Harknells. They won't mind you wearing a robe.'

'Well, I'll mind.'

He raised one hand. 'Make contact!'

She growled through her teeth, then adjusted her expression to a calmness she in no way felt.

Riahn appeared before them, surrounded by what must be the Nestar Faction Council with Marrin at one end. Seven pairs of eyes fixed themselves on Channa, who automatically straightened her shoulders into a more military bearing. 'I apologise for my informal attire,' she said curtly. 'The Mediator gave me no time to change.'

Riahn waved her hand dismissively. 'What does that matter? Anyway, it's nice to see you out of uniform for once, Channa. Makes you seem less of a Harknell.' She herself was dressed informally, as were half her colleagues.

Joran let out a ghost of a chuckle. Channa pressed her lips together and breathed slowly through her nose.

As her mother introduced the Council members, Channa studied their faces. She had met only two of them, apart from her uncle, and the others were strangers. There had been a particularly costly campaign a few years previously, which had taken a heavy toll of prime line Nestars. The Council members did not

look as if they were delighted to see her; indeed, they looked every bit as suspicious as Joran had predicted, especially a thin woman with greying hair and a sharp-featured face who was a stranger to Channa. Her uncle smiled and gave her a wink, but said nothing.

‘Marrin arrived here yesterday,’ Riahn informed her daughter, ‘to plead your case. The Faction Council insisted on meeting you before they ratified my decision to grant you provisional membership of our faction. Presumably you will be allowed to answer their questions?’ She looked at Joran for confirmation.

He waved one hand, ‘Only if they are not too threatening. You will understand, Council members, that these negotiations are very delicate. Channa passed Stages Three and Four today and that’s very wearing on an envoy.’

‘It would be usual for her to come and spend some time with us before acceptance,’ the sharp-featured woman said. ‘I don’t like taking people we don’t know into the faction, whatever their blood relationships.’

‘I, too, would prefer time to get to know Faction Nestar’s central group,’ agreed Channa, ‘but it isn’t allowed.’

‘What is allowed, then?’ demanded the woman, who seemed to be the spokesperson for dissent.

Channa hesitated, but neither Joran nor Riahn made any effort to help her out. ‘What is allowed,’ she said, after a moment’s thought, ‘is for me to negotiate a genuine peace, one which will endure. I think that’s more important than anything else we may feel or wish on an individual level, don’t you?’

The woman stared, then surprised Channa by nodding. ‘If that’s true, it’s crucially important. I’m amazed to hear those words coming from a Harknell, though. They’re the last faction I’d have expected to lead us into peace.’

Channa swallowed. ‘I’m not a Harknell now.’ It still hurt to remember that. She had not denied her name when Van was there, but she could no longer call herself Harknell when she was among Shavlans.

‘You’re Harknell bred and raised. Same thing,’ said another Council member.

‘Not purely Harknell raised,’ Marrin interjected. ‘I helped bring her up as well. Part of the breeding agreement. Don’t forget that.’

Channa stared at him suspiciously.

‘I put a few touches in every now and then as you were growing up, lass,’ he said gently. ‘You might not have noticed it much at the time, but I think I was able to take the edge off the Harknell callousness.’ He raised his voice. ‘Put it in the Council Records that I’ll vouch for her with my own life blood. And you do know me.’

The woman turned to stare at him. ‘You have that much faith in her, Marrin Nestar?’

‘Yes. That much. She’s quite an exceptional person, as you’ll find out, Fenneth.’

The woman shrugged. ‘Objections withdrawn, then. But provisional status only. It’ll be Channa Pro-Nestar.’ She looked back at Joran. ‘Can we manage to negotiate a true peace, Terran?’

‘I think so.’

‘What about the Deorin? They’ll never agree to a peace. And even if they do sign an agreement, we won’t be able to trust them. We’ve been caught out by their treachery before.’

‘We of the Confederation have ways of enforcing a peace.’

‘I’d need to see them to be convinced. And they’d have to be good. Channa Pro-Nestar may be our Envoy, but you’ll have to convince all of the country factions like us Nestars, if you want the peace to stick.’

Riahn rolled her eyes up to the ceiling. Her cousin Fenneth was notoriously cantankerous and mistrustful, but she was outdoing herself this time. And she would only grow more suspicious if stopped before she had asked all her questions.

Joran smiled at Channa. ‘Should we demonstrate the privacy cube to them at this stage?’

‘Yes, but let me explain it first.’ She directed her explanation at Fenneth, who would obviously be the hardest to convince. ‘The privacy cube is a device which completely cuts off one area from another. It cannot be penetrated or disrupted by anything we know. It’s another Sirian peacekeeping device. I’m

told that it's easy to generate on a large scale and could be set up along the borders between the two nations, if necessary. We'll give you a demonstration of it now by enclosing all of you in a cube. It won't hurt you in any way. Please try to penetrate it by any means you wish, including firing your handguns at it.'

Joran pressed his com-unit controls and a greyness filled the screen. He looked at her. 'Think that'll do the trick?'

'It may help.'

After a few minutes he lifted the cube. Fenneth, who was on her feet with a handgun at the ready, immediately walked across to examine the place where the 'walls' had been. She looked across at Joran and put the gun away. 'Not bad. How does it work?'

'We don't know. The Sirians never explain their inventions. They just sell them to us, to be used in the quest for peace.'

'Hmm.' Fenneth sat down and looked towards Riahn, nodding.

Riahn leaned forward. 'Welcome to Faction Nestar, Channa.'

Marrin grinned at her. 'You'll find us a little easier to deal with than Faction Harknell, lass. We're more relaxed about things, though no less patriotic.'

'I know that, Uncle Marrin.' It was not often that she acknowledged the relationship in that way, since they had not been name-linked before, but she needed every bit of help she could to get the Faction Council on her side. 'How was F . . . Sandur when you left Prime?'

'Enigmatic. He's got a lot on his plate controlling Kristan at the moment. Until they know the extent of that young devil's support base, they're a bit restricted in what they can do to counteract him. You were right to refuse a breeding contract with him. I'd not want his seed mingled with our line.'

Channa smiled at him and Joran noticed how warm and unshadowed that smile was. With her father, there was always some tension, as if she was afraid of displeasing him, fond as they were of each other.

'I'll be leaving for Prime as soon as this meeting is over.' Riahn looked wryly at her daughter. 'It's not my favourite place, as you well know.'

'You're needed there, Mother. Meran Thilsen is trying to work for peace and Sandur Harknell is playing his own game, as usual. I think - I suspect - that even he may need your support before the coup is finally settled.'

'Yes. We suspect that, too. But it'll be on our own terms.' She glanced at her fellow Council members.

'Well, any other questions?'

'Just one.'

'Please go ahead, Fenneth,' said Joran.

'Channa, what made you decide that a true peace was possible? We all want peace, or at least, all sane people do, but we all know what the Deorin are like. How can you ask us to trust them?'

Channa paused for a moment to gather her thoughts. 'My decision had little to do with the Deorin. I think it's based partly on the superior technology of Those of the Confederation, which has to be seen to be believed, and partly,' she hesitated then said firmly, 'on my personal trust in the Peace Mediator.'

Fenneth raised her eyebrows and even Riahn looked surprised.

'It's very difficult to explain, but we live very closely together at the base. His people's technology has saved my life. Joran and I see each other every day, spend most of the day together. You get to know people quickly under such circumstances. You'll know that yourself, from what happens during a campaign - and this is a type of campaign, or at least, I think of it as such.'

Most members of the Council nodded at this. They would all have done their share of fighting. Indeed, one member was lacking an arm and another had heavy scarring on her face.

Channa shrugged. 'I think it's a deliberate part of the strategy that we get to know one another well. It's probably very effective, but as I'm the only envoy, the whole peace negotiation is based on my judgement and I admit that it may be flawed. I can only do my best. I can give you no absolute guarantees about what will happen if we agree to peace, no one can, except perhaps Those of the Confederation, who have undertaken many of these interventions.'

Another pause, during which the members of the council looked thoughtful, then Channa added quietly, 'There's also the fact that their civilisation is much older than ours and their lives so much longer. Joran says he's a hundred and forty-three years old and may live to be over two hundred. I'm inclined to believe him. His eyes betray his age.'

Joran continued to watch her, but could feel the council members staring at him now. She had convinced them to give the negotiations a chance and more than that you could not ask at this stage. He was unaware of how warmly his eyes were resting on Channa, but several members of the Council noticed and drew their own conclusions.

'Think how much one learns in only one decade,' Channa went on. 'How much more must Joran understand about life and people's feelings than we do?' She paused and then said quite definitely. 'Now that I know him, I would trust him to guard my back.'

'Stage Five passed,' said Joran. 'I'm honoured by your trust, Channa, and will not let you down. Let that be noted in the formal record.'

She turned to look at him, forgetting the Council for a moment. 'No. I'm sure you won't, Joran Lovrel. Though you're not a comfortable person to live with.'

'A peace negotiation is never a comfortable situation.'

Riahn watched them in fascination. Unless she very much mistook matters, her daughter had developed an affection for this man, an affection which went beyond the simple act of mating or the comradeship of war and into the realms of what she herself might have shared with Sandur, given easier times. 'What's Stage Five?' she asked.

'Expression of trust in the Mediator to a significant group of the Envoy's people.'

Channa said nothing. She felt stunned by her own progress today, and numbed by the continuing shocks. Fenneth grunted. 'Well, you're plausible enough, Terran, but I'd like to get to know you better, myself, before I trust you with my country's fate or even to guard my own back. It's a pity you can't come and stay here, too.'

'That might be a good idea!' Joran sounded surprised. 'Perhaps at a later stage in the negotiations. Would you receive me at your estate?' These Nestars were as full of surprises as Channa. Very different from the Harknells, or the other factions he had studied closely. He must direct the observers on the space transport to pay more attention to the smaller country factions, those who mainly kept out of Prime and did not form part of the central power group.

Fenneth nodded. 'Surely. We'd prefer it. We say you should know your allies as well as you know your own children. It's a good maxim, whether in peace or war.'

'I'll give you the chance to know me better later. And - would you receive another visitor besides Channa and myself?'

'That depends on who it is.' Few outsiders were allowed into a faction's headquarters.

'Not an ally. The Deoran Envoy, in fact.'

Shock showed on every face.

'I suspect that even he is growing to accept the inevitability of peace,' Joran went on. 'We've certainly been making progress with him today. And if he recognises this as a true negotiation, then your people must learn to interact with Deorin.'

There was a babble of voices, then Marrin cut through them. 'We might receive him here, Mediator, given a few guarantees about his behaviour - but only if Channa thinks it right. Most factions wouldn't consider it, but we're Nestars and we pride ourselves on our willingness to listen to and learn from anyone, especially if it will benefit Shavla.'

Channa had never been quite so proud of her mother's line. 'It might become right to receive him in the future, Uncle. It isn't right at the moment. As Joran says, Van Makass hasn't yet accepted the inevitability of peace, though he seems to be moving towards it. If I do feel I can trust him - well, someone will have to take the first steps towards acceptance, and I would be proud for it to be us. But I won't approve a visit until I myself feel more sure of him. He's very confused about things at the moment.'

‘You’ve met him already?’ Marrin stared at her.

‘Several times. It is required of me by the Mediator. How can one negotiate a true peace unless one learns to live with one’s former enemy?’

‘What’s he like?’ It was Fenneth who asked, of course.

‘He’s a man like any other. More talented than most. Very vigorous. I think rumour has lied about his nature. He doesn’t seem particularly callous or brutal, though I think he would do what he had to for his people. You learn to forget that he’s a Deoran. Sometimes. But you can never forget that he’s a man of considerable power and charisma. Therefore I will not approve a visit until I know him better.’

There was a babble of discussion.

‘Well, I’m afraid we must leave you now,’ said Joran. ‘Unless you wish this overtired Envoy of yours to fall asleep where she’s sitting.’ When he had broken contact, he added, ‘Let it be noted that Stage Six has just been passed,’ for her ears only.

Channa sat there, tears in her eyes. ‘I have a lot to be grateful to my Uncle Marrin for. But if, as I suspect, it’s his part in my upbringing that brought me here as envoy, then I’m not sure that I can quite forgive him for what he’s done to me, either. Sorry! What were you saying, Joran?’

‘Only that you’ve just passed Stage Six. That’s all.’

She could only stare at him. It’s too much, she thought. I can’t take it all in.

He would have liked to gather her in his arms, but this was too formal a moment. ‘Stage Six is when you tell significant people from your own nation that the other Envoy is a human being like themselves.’

‘That justifies a stage of its own?’

‘Oh, yes. The shift in attitude required is considerable. If you like, I’ll play you back some of the recordings from when you first arrived. I think you’ll hardly recognise yourself.’

‘But you already knew that I had - grown accustomed to Van Makass.’

‘I knew, yes. That’s not quite the same as you making such a declaration to a significant group of Shavlan leaders. I might add that they received it well. Reinal would have had an apoplexy, then repeated his strict and formal order for you to kill yourself.’

‘Kristan will be no different.’

‘I doubt Kristan will be with us for long. Your father has something up his sleeve.’

‘Stage Six.’ She shook her head. She was too weary to consider its implications, too weary to think straight.

‘It’s a very important stage, actually, Channa.’

She stiffened and forced her tired brain to concentrate.

‘When anyone passes Stage Six, the Mediator has to make a report to the Central Galactic Council on progress made in the Intervention. A very high importance is placed by our Council upon peace mediations, you see. We don’t just pay lip service to peace; we seek it as an integral part of our government and culture. I shall be reporting directly to the Galactic Council, not to Sector Command, from now on.’

‘Oh.’ She stood up and moved towards the door. ‘I’m sorry, but I can’t seem to take it in. I’m too tired. I really do need some time alone now, Joran.’

‘I know, my dear. Take as long as you wish.’ When he had watched her leave, he spoke aloud. ‘Let it be placed on record and brought to the notice of the Central Galactic Council immediately, as an urgent priority, that this civilisation is one of the most vigorous we have ever met. Experts should study the records and decide if any further steps will need to be taken before Shavla and Deora begin to move towards joining the Confederation.’ He thought for a moment, then added, ‘I’m not sure that we’re ready for them! I forecast that they’ll make a significant contribution to Galactic culture.’

Two hours later Joran was woken by the com-system chiming in his darkened bedchamber. ‘Mmm. Yes?’

‘Joran?’

‘Channa? Are you all right?’

‘Yes. I - I’m sorry to wake you in the middle of the night.’

'I'm at your service at any time, Channa.'

'Joran - will you - will you come and hold me? I - I need you.'

'Of course, Channa.' He donned a robe and paused before he left his quarters. 'Stage Seven,' he said aloud. 'Please note that in the official records.' Then he shook his head in amazement and added softly, 'But I won't tell her that yet. She's had enough shocks recently.'

He had some idea of the sensation that Channa's passing Stage Seven would cause back at Central, especially as it had come so soon after his report on Stage Six. It seemed to him that the progress of this mediation was escalating and he suspected that the Evral Intervention was going to set new records and provide training material for embryonic peace mediators for many centuries to come.

Channa Harknell/Nestar was, as her uncle had said, a very exceptional person. From now onwards, Joran was sure that they would be studying the recordings of her at the Peace Academy and analysing every blink of her eyes.

He only hoped that the way he had conducted this intervention would also stand up to the historians' scrutiny. He rather thought it might; he rather thought it was the best Intervention he had ever managed.

27

Joran was not the only one to be awakened during the night. Lilla's com-system chimed a little while later.

'Lilla! Wake up, damn you!'

'Van? What's wrong?'

'Nothing's wrong. I want to talk to you, that's all.'

'In the middle of the night?'

'What does the time matter? This is important!'

Lilla swung out of bed. 'I'll be round in a minute or two.'

'Not here. In the conference room. I'll be hanged if I'll say this in a bedroom!'

She was very alert now. 'In the conference room, then. Ask your robots to take you there.' She put on plain trousers and a well-cut tunic with the Peace Corps insignia on one shoulder and, after contemplating her image, twisted her long dark hair into a knot at the nape of her neck. If this was what she thought it was, formality was in order.

When she arrived, Van was already waiting, pacing up and down as if he could not bear to sit still. The two peace robots were standing watchfully in corners. Van was wearing full Deoran military uniform, which was considerably more elaborate than the Shavlan uniform, but which suited his flamboyant nature.

As she came in he saluted. 'Peace Mediator.'

She nodded. 'Envoy. Shall we sit down?'

'Yes.'

He looked grim. Had she mistaken the reason for this call? She waited for his lead.

'I wish to declare formally,' he said, in a tight voice, as if uttering the words was painful, 'that I am ready to acknowledge the true nature of this Intervention.'

'Which is?'

'Which is a peace mediation.'

'You were already aware of that, surely, Envoy?'

He glared at her. She was not making this easy for him. 'I was aware that we were to attempt to negotiate a peace,' he grated out. 'I did not believe that we really could negotiate a peace.'

'I see. And are you also aware of what this negotiation will involve, Envoy?'

'I am. Unfortunately.'

'Could you please elaborate? Why do you say 'unfortunately'? Take your time.'

He sighed, but this was no time to give in to his anger. 'I say "unfortunately" because it will take a long time, and I would rather be back in Deora at the moment, with my own people.' He held up a hand as if to stop her interrupting, though she had not intended to do so. 'I realise now that it will probably take months, even longer, to conclude terms, and that I myself must learn to change my feelings and attitudes if peace is to be achieved. I also say "unfortunately" because I don't look forward to the change process, having seen what the Shavlan Envoy is experiencing.' He looked at her defiantly.

Her smile was warm, though her words were formal. 'Let it be placed on official record that Stage One has been achieved by the Deoran Envoy.'

The peace robot stepped forward. 'It is so noted.'

Van stared at her, his face expressionless. 'So, Lilla, now you've got what you wanted from me.'

'No, Van. This is only the first step. It means that peace is now a real possibility - but it's not yet a certainty.'

'Is that what Channa was told?'

'Of course. You follow parallel paths, as you must realise.'

'How many stages are there to go through?'

'I can't tell you that.'

'Just as you can't tell me what the stages are?'

'Exactly.'

'For all I know, you're just making them up as you go along.'

'No, Van. I give you my solemn word that I'm not. Peace Mediations follow a set of prescribed guidelines. Not only do I have no latitude with regard to changing what the stages are, but I am the Junior Mediator in this Intervention. I'm also subject to the guidance of the Senior Mediator.'

'Joran.'

'Yes.'

'And does he do much guiding? I mean, is that fellow pulling all our strings?'

'We consult on tactics, but he hasn't had to override any of my decisions, if that's what you mean. I'm junior to Joran, but quite senior in the echelons of the Peace Corps.'

'How senior is he?'

'He's the most senior of all the peace mediators.'

'I suppose Evral should be honoured, then. How come Channa got him? Were the Shavlanians expected to be such a problem?'

'Do you have to ask that?' She smiled.

'What if you'd chosen a male envoy from Shavla? Or would you not have been allowed to choose a male?'

'We don't do the choosing, actually. There's an elaborate selection process, supervised by Sirian peace robots. Some processes you were aware of; some were undertaken covertly.'

'What if both envoys had been female?'

'There were two other peace mediators ready to take over, one male, one female. We always come prepared. They returned to Central after you were chosen.'

'So you always choose a mediator of the opposite sex to the envoy?'

'If that fits in with the sexual mores of the culture. There are cultures where what we call love is only sought with someone of the same gender, whatever the imperatives of procreation.'

His lips curled in revulsion and he opened his mouth, as if to speak, but shut it again, contenting himself with a grimace of disgust.

'Each culture, each person, has freedom of choice in that, Van. The Confederation does not prescribe how its members shall live. The only restrictions are that warfare must not imperil the viability of planetary systems and that for Confederation members there must be freedom of life choices for the individual citizen. There are always other planets for dissidents to move to, if they dislike the local mores. It seems to work quite well as a system, for all its simplicity.'

He sighed. 'Well, just as long as you don't try to introduce any of those filthy perversions into Deora.'

Then his face brightened and he leaned forward. 'Now, about these accelerated plants and trees - how soon can we get some?'

'As soon as you like. We shall need to speak to your scientific officers, arrange trial plantings. And - would you like to speak to your father privately, before you meet the Deoran War Council? That may help him to support your decision.'

He stared at her for a minute. 'You really will allow that?'

'Yes. But remember, it's at my discretion and I may terminate the meeting at any time if I don't approve of what you're saying.'

'What new surprises have you got waiting for me - at your discretion?'

She made no attempt to touch him, but continued to behave in an uncharacteristically formal manner. 'A few, probably. But about your father - do you wish to speak to him?'

'You didn't need to ask me that, surely? Of course I wish to speak to him! There's nothing I'd like more.'

'I can allow you only five minutes.'

He raised his eyebrows.

'The same as the Shavlan Envoy was allowed the first time.' Her expression softened. 'Though we don't calculate it to the second, Van, contact is never for too long, as it disturbs the ambience we need to generate for a true mediation.'

Van closed his eyes for a moment and when he opened them he looked a little less stressed. 'Thank you for that offer, Lilla. It means more to me than you could ever understand. It should be morning in Firstfall. Can I speak to him now?'

'Yes. But remember, it's for five minutes only. Would you like some time to think about what you wish to say before we make contact?'

'Is that allowed, too?' He sounded surprised.

'It's a standard offer the first time. You don't have to accept it, though.'

Well, he thought, as he made his way back to his quarters, I'll bet there's something else behind all this. I'll bet you'll learn a lot about us from what I say to my father. That can't be helped, though. You hold all the guns! The memory of the space transport caused him to add mentally: not to mention having some very superior technology that goes far beyond guns.

An hour later, the other half of the com-room flickered into existence to reveal the Deoran Emperor, Van Kledin the Third, in his private quarters. He was old for a Deoran, being nearly seventy, and he had never been a fighting emperor due to the seriousness of the injuries received in his second campaign while his father was still alive. As he had been disabled while saving his men, this had won him the common people's lasting respect and he was probably the most popular emperor there had ever been.

Van Makass studied his father while the com-system was being aligned properly. It said something for the old man's political skill that he had managed to retain the throne for so long. The Deoran nobility would not tolerate incompetence in their Emperor, not with a war to win, and emperors who could not lead their troops in person were not usually popular with them. But Van Kledin had been lucky. First his brother, then his son, had acted as War Leader in his place, and they had both proved themselves to be first-class commanders. Van Makass acknowledged that fact about himself without conceit. His father was a truly brilliant ruler, and that was more important in his eyes.

During his long reign, Van Kledin had managed the nation's affairs with consummate skill and a breadth of vision that few emperors had ever equalled. His brother, who was too old for active duty, was sitting beside the Emperor now, bolt upright, military to the core, even in an informal situation.

The flickering vanished, Lilla whispered, 'Ready,' and Van Makass snapped to attention.

'We're not on parade now, Van,' his father told him, in the dry wispy voice that had threaded Van's days for as long as he could remember.

Van nodded a greeting to his uncle and relaxed slightly. 'We have only five minutes, sir.'

'I thought private contact was not allowed. Is there some problem, Van?'

'No, sir. You aren't allowed to make contact, but our Mediator can grant us an interview if she feels it

appropriate. Those terms we were given have a few hidden twists to them.’ He threw a brooding look at Lilla, sitting relaxed by his side and she gave him a cheerful smile in return.

‘And what has caused this indulgence, if there is no problem?’

‘Sir, you should know that I’ve just conceded that this negotiation can genuinely lead to peace. The Confederation calls that passing the First Stage and they regard it as a very important step.’

‘You did that without ratification from His Majesty?’ barked his uncle.

‘Hush, Pedrix!’ The Emperor’s attention was fully on his son. ‘You both know that peace is what I want, provided the terms and safeguards are there so that those damned Shavlans don’t overrun us. Go on, Van.’

‘I’ll be allowed to announce this formally to the War Council tomorrow and ask for their ratification. This call is to warn you, to give you time to consider the implications.’

Van Kledin nodded. ‘Good. I appreciate that.’

‘Sir - Father - First Stage also means that I’ve understood and accepted exactly what this negotiation will entail for me. You need to know what that is.’

‘Yes?’ The Emperor spoke calmly, but there was a warmth in his eyes as he studied this wild, first-born son of his.

‘It will take time - months, probably. And it will involve me - changing.’

‘What do you mean by that?’ Pedrix was not to be quieted when the safety of his country was at stake.

‘I mean, I shall have to - to change my attitude towards the Shavlans, in the person of their Envoy. If I prove that I can change, can live and work with a Shavlan, so can most Deorin. In other words, I am the trial subject.’ He could see that his father had picked up the implications of all this by some subtle changes in the way he held his body.

His uncle muttered to himself, breathed deeply and continued to look suspiciously at Lilla.

‘It must be fairly obvious that peace will involve major attitudinal changes, Pedrix,’ the Emperor said thoughtfully, laying a hand on his brother’s arm, ‘though I doubt that most Deorin will find it easy to accept even the idea of a genuine peace.’ He looked wryly at Lilla. ‘We’re a war-ridden bunch, Mediator. If there are no campaigns going on, we squabble among ourselves. Peace will require very artful management if it is to hold firm with certain groups.’

Van cocked his eye knowingly. ‘The Agnates been giving you trouble again?’

‘Nothing we couldn’t handle, but a nuisance nonetheless.’

‘Threw a few of them into Special Incarceration,’ said his uncle with great satisfaction. ‘I did the arresting personally. They knew better than to try to subvert or counter-accuse me! Charged ‘em with lack of respect for their true and lawful Emperor. They should’ve been given the death penalty, really, but your father decided at the last minute to be lenient. Didn’t want to create any more martyrs.’ His grin was very like Van’s own. ‘We kept ‘em sweating for a while before we told ‘em that, though. After all, your father is still well liked by the common people and has more than done his duty by Deora.’

‘How’s your health, Father?’ Van Makass ventured.

His father shrugged. ‘I get no younger.’

Pedrix added, ‘His Majesty’s health is not good. We need you back here as quickly as possible, Van. If anything happens to him, we don’t want a coup by the Agnates.’

Lilla took a sudden decision and leaned forward. ‘If you like, Van Kledin, we could send a medic down to check your health. Our technology is capable of more skilful medical interventions than yours.’

Van Makass turned a look of deep gratitude on her. ‘Thank you, Lilla.’ He turned back to urge, ‘Please say yes, Father!’

‘Do you trust them so much, son?’

‘In some things, yes.’

Pedrix snorted but Van Kledin nodded. ‘Very well, then, Mediator. Send your medic, but only if it can be done secretly.’

Lilla nodded. ‘It’ll be set in motion immediately this meeting ends. We’ll say the medic’s there to augment the communications equipment and you can arrange some excuse to see him privately.’

Pedrix was still shaking his head, but Van Kledin nodded without hesitation. He laid a hand on his brother's arm. 'I trust Van's judgement on this, Ped.' Then he looked at Lilla again. 'It may be my senile imagination, but it's been considerably more than five minutes already, surely?'

She put a finger to her lips. 'Shh! I didn't hear that.'

Van Kledin's grin was boyish, for all his grey hair. 'You're a woman of great understanding, Mediator.' 'Thank you. Now, you'd better tell them about the immediate benefits, Van,' she said. 'I can't let this contact go on for too long.'

Van explained rapidly about the accelerated growth of plants. 'Their technology is brilliant. We wouldn't last long if we did try to fight them. It'd be a suicide campaign - except that they probably wouldn't even let us get killed.' He paused and looked at Lilla again. 'Am I allowed to tell him about my little treat.' 'Mmm.'

He shed years as he described his trip to his father. 'I went up to the space transport! It's incredible! Oh, I wasn't allowed to see much of its interior once I was there, but the trip - to fly through space, to see the stars without the blurring of the atmosphere, to walk in space. I can't describe it! It was the most memorable experience of my whole life. Channa said the same.' He broke off.

'Channa?' asked Van Kledin.

Van bowed his head. 'I hadn't meant to tell you about her yet.'

'You'll have to now. Who is this Channa, that you cite her words to me?'

'Channa Harknell, the Shavlan Envoy.'

Pedrix spluttered indignantly. 'You've met the Shavlan Envoy? And you didn't think it worth telling us! Or you thought perhaps you might do that later? Are you, or are you not, a loyal servant of His Majesty? They've done something to you at that base. The only meetings with Shavlans should be to kill them!'

Van Kledin leaned forward and murmured 'Shh.'

Pedrix fell silent, but his expression remained grim.

'The only peace my brother can envisage is a peace where we keep ourselves totally separate from the Shavlans. I think you must have something more than that in mind, Mediator.'

Lilla nodded. 'It's as we've always said: we're here to negotiate a true and lasting peace. Your son has recognised that fact formally, but unless you can acknowledge it as well, your country will be given occupied nation status and your affairs will be managed for you by the Confederation for several generations to come.'

Van Kledin said nothing for a few moments, nor did his expression change when he finally spoke. 'If my son can show me that the Shavlans are also prepared to face a true peace, and that you can guarantee it, then I will endeavour to lead my people towards the same goal - for as long as I'm spared.'

'We hope to do all of that, Van Kledin. And I'll send a medic down immediately. I think your life is important to us.'

Pedrix was staring at her and shaking his head.

'Is something wrong?' she asked, speaking to him directly.

'I just can't get used to dealing with a woman,' he grumbled. 'That's not liked here, you know. It's the thing that upsets the Agnates the most.' Van Kledin coughed gently and Pedrix hastened to add, 'No offence meant to you personally, ma'am.'

'I'm an experienced mediator, Pedrix, which is all that counts.' Lilla spoke mildly. 'Your people will have to get used to dealing with women in new ways. You'll not wish them to spend their lives breeding so prolifically in peacetime, or you'll soon overpopulate Deora.'

He ignored the last part of her speech, but Van Kledin looked at her sharply, as if that idea had struck home.

'You say you're an experienced mediator,' said Pedrix, 'but how would we know any different? In fact, how do we really know that you come from the Galactic Confederation, or even that there is a Confederation?'

'You could ask your nephew's opinion. We've spent a fair amount of time together lately, he and I.' Van Makass watched her as she spoke. Lilla, he had learned, became very calm and quiet under

pressure. Not once had he managed to shake her self-control and he had indulged in some outrageous behaviour while attempting to do so. For the first time, he admitted to himself that he admired many things about her. She would make a good friend, but - he closed his eyes as he acknowledged something else to himself - it was Channa who obsessed his thoughts, Channa whom he wanted in his bed - no, more than that, wanted in his life. How had that happened? Beside the fact that Channa had grown very attached to Joran, Van himself already had a wife. He realised that his uncle had just asked him something and snapped back at attention. 'I beg your pardon, Uncle?'

'I was saying that I'm worried about how you've changed, Van. You've grown - quieter, somehow, subdued, even. Are you really all right? They're not - er - ' He broke off with a scowl at Lilla.

Van snorted. 'They're not drugging or torturing me, if that's what's on your mind. They,' again his eyes lingered on Lilla, 'have very firm principles and standards about how they deal with envoys. But this experience is changing me, as I said earlier. How can we arrive at a peace settlement if we don't change?'

'I've been trying to change Deoran bellicosity for nearly fifty years,' said Van Kledin. 'Thought I'd failed when even you, my own heir, grew up war-crazy.'

Van Makass and Pedrix both gaped at him. This was the last thing either of them would have expected the Emperor to admit.

Van Kledin's smile was for his son alone. The others might not have been there. 'I think you're ready to understand a few of my plans now, Van.' He leaned forward, as if he wished to get closer. 'Go for peace, son! Whatever it takes. It'll be worth it. But protect Deora. Our people will be your responsibility one day.'

Van nodded, still bemused. He knew that his father had been an unconventional Emperor, not always approved of by the nobility, but he was revered by the common soldiers and respected even by the peasants and the Merchants' Guilds, for whom he had improved life considerably. A supporter of art and culture, Van Kledin. A lover of beautiful things. Art had been at the very periphery of Deoran life before and was now respected, even if it could only be indulged in by those too old or too disabled to fight.

Van knew that his own upbringing had been totally unconventional, but since no one had ever been able to best him in the military arts, the differences had not been challenged. Indeed, a few families had copied them. His father's choice of wife for him had been a surprise, as well. Julian came from an undistinguished family with large country holdings, and was not very intelligent. Pretty enough to arouse a man physically, but - a picture of Channa and her bright intelligent eyes was dismissed with a quick sigh.

Lilla leaned forward. 'We'll arrange a meeting for tomorrow with your Advisory Council, Van Kledin.

Today's meeting has been an informal contact and we need not mention it, if you would prefer that.'

He nodded. 'That would be helpful.' Their eyes met for a moment and he said softly, 'Look after my unruly son, Lilla. He's Deora's only hope of a genuine peace.'

While Van was once more staring in amazement at his father, who was very sparing with compliments and never made sweeping statements like that, Lilla said quietly, 'We will, of course, look after your son to the best of our ability, but I'm only now beginning to realise how much of a catalyst you've been in the making of him and therefore in the salvation of Deora. Van Kledin, this meeting has been very valuable to us.'

When the image had faded, Van Makass sat staring at the blank walls and Lilla did not urge him to speak. 'The sly old devil!' he said at last. 'That's the first time he's ever admitted anything like that.'

'You should be proud of him. He's a man of quite exceptional vision.'

'He'd have made a better envoy than me.'

'No, Van. He's too different from the other Deoran nobility. An envoy must be representative.'

Van laughed softly, his thoughts still on his father. 'Unruly son, indeed!'

'Well, you Deorin can be rather - boisterous.'

'And that's not really a compliment, is it? Like children who have yet to grow up.' His words were harsh, his great fists clenched on his lap, till he noticed and deliberately unclenched them.

'I meant it neither as a compliment nor as an insult. It was just a statement of fact.' She laid her hand on

his.

He shook it off and stood up. 'I hate all this, you know.'

'I know.'

'But you enjoy your job, you bitch!'

'If you'll sit down for a while, Van, I'll tell you something about my job and training. It's time you had some understanding of how very much it means to me, and why.'

He hesitated.

'It would be useful for you to know. Channa found it significant when Joran told her.'

He sat down at once and Lilla tried to explain what an achievement it was to be chosen for mediator training and how long that training took, ending by saying, still quietly, 'All our assignments are very carefully planned, you know, Van. We don't just breeze around the Galaxy, taming the savages. An Intervention is a major decision and must be endorsed by the Central Advisory Council. Unanimously. Then it's planned for meticulously, with the best Advisors in the Peace Academy.'

She broke off as she noticed him stifling a yawn. 'I'd forgotten that it was the middle of the night. I'm so sorry, my dear, but I have another shock for you before I can allow you to go to sleep.'

He sat up straighter, ready to face what he must.

'You've passed Second Stage as well tonight, Van. I didn't interrupt at the time, as our conversation with your father turned out to be crucial to this intervention.'

'Second Stage?'

'You've expressed absolute trust in me to a significant group of your leaders.'

'But Channa's Second Stage was something different?'

'The Stages are all set, Van, but not the order in which you must achieve them - except for First Stage, of course.' She raised her voice. 'Let it be noted formally that the Deoran Envoy, Van Makass, has passed Second Stage in this Mediation.'

One of the space robots stepped forward. 'It is so noted.'

Van was silent as they walked back to his quarters. At the door, he paused, staring at Lilla as if he had never seen her before. 'Coming in?'

'If you like.'

'No, damn you! If you like!' He grasped her shoulders and swung her round to face him. 'I don't want a woman in my bed because it's her duty. Especially not tonight.'

She leaned backwards against his arms and one hand came up to caress his cheek. 'I do like you - perhaps too well for my own good, Van. But nothing and no one will ever divert me from my duty.'

He sighed and pulled her closer. 'I know. I have my own imperatives, too. Come in anyway, Lilla.' A ghost of a laugh shook him. 'After all, my father wants you to look after me.'

She smiled and traced the outline of his lips with her fingertip. 'I'd do that, anyway. But it would truly please me to join you now.' She sighed and nestled against him as the door opened in front of them. 'We all find the pace of a mediation wearing at times, you know, Van. Mediators and envoys alike. That's what forms and strengthens the bond between us.' But she dared not elaborate on that.

As the door closed behind them, he put one fingertip on her lips. 'No more talk of the negotiations, mmm? For tonight, Lilla Reydahl, we're just a man and a woman who wish to spend time together.' He looked over her shoulder and grinned. 'And two robots, of course.' Then he swung her into his arms and carried her into his sleeping chamber.

In Prime, trouble was brewing, though more slowly than either Channa or Joran had expected, and Kristan Harravay was proving to be nearly as much of an impediment to the peace negotiations as Deslar Reinal had been. When communication sessions were permitted, he was barely civil to Joran, and was

openly contemptuous of Channa and any statements she made. Sandur made no attempt to intervene and maintained a bland expression on his face throughout, but Riahn protested at regular intervals. In her protests she was always supported by Meran, usually by Sharifa and sometimes by Georn. Another attempt to assassinate Kristan failed, thanks to his superb skills in hand-to-hand combat. He fought back so fiercely that the would-be assassin was killed, and it was not therefore possible to link the attempt to any individual or faction.

Overall, Kristan's urban support groups were more than counterbalanced by Faction Nestar's widely based country alliances, so neither side was in a position to make an open move against the other. Unfortunately, as Channa pointed out to Joran, the Nestar alliances were with minor factions too widely scattered to mobilise quickly or with any degree of secrecy. If Sandur Harknell ever decided to change sides, there would be bloody conflict in the capital, but it was unthinkable for a Harknell to abandon the Harravay kin-alliance. Kristan seemed to be counting heavily on that and so far had not been disappointed.

The days rolled by with nothing conclusive happening in Prime, and the only progress made was at the base. Channa decided that her father was playing a waiting game with Kristan, but she was not fully convinced, for Sandur kept his own council, as always, and his bland half-smile did not falter at the reporting sessions, whatever the accusation Kristan made about Sandur's daughter. The Confederation observers noticed an occasional secret rendezvous between Fellass and members of Nerlin's old personal guard, now relegated to standard duties, but Joran did not yet share that knowledge with Channa.

When Riahn first arrived in Prime, she arranged a formal meeting with Sandur to try to discuss their daughter, who was, she knew, very hurt by being so forcibly disowned as to be addressed as Channa No-Name. 'Are we adequately screened here?' she asked.

'Very adequately.'

'Then I'd like to discuss Channa. Am I correct in presuming that you deliberately drove her to declare herself independent in order to keep Kristan's nasty little paws off her?' She perched on the edge of the table, swinging one leg to and fro.

Sandur's expression froze. 'I don't wish to discuss Channa No-Name, even with you. She's been a bitter disappointment to me.'

Is he warning me off that subject? wondered Riahn. He never did like to share parentage rights. 'She's not Channa No-Name any longer, but Channa Pro-Nestar,' she corrected, but without heat. It seemed to her that a shadow of sorrow crossed Sandur's face as she said the word Pro-Nestar, but even with her understanding of the man, she could not be sure.

'Yes. So I gather.'

'She's made a good impression on my Faction Council. Even Fenneth agreed to grant her provisional acceptance, and you know what Fenneth's like about purity of the faction.'

He grimaced. 'Far be it from me to malign your kinswoman, but Fenneth has a sharp tongue and a suspicious mind. Let's hope she doesn't oppose full acceptance, for your daughter's sake. One does not wish the young woman ill.'

What did that mean? 'Channa's passed Stage Seven in the negotiations now, I'm told.'

He stared at her. 'How did you find that out? You haven't attended a meeting of the Decision Group yet.'

'I've been granted an interview with her by the Peace Mediator. He, too, is impressed by her progress. Did you know that Channa is creating new records for speed of negotiation? Galactic records.'

Sandur's mouth twitched slightly, but the proud smile was still-born and his expression quickly hardened again. 'She's been well trained and has a keen intelligence. It's just a pity that she's not more heedful of faction needs and refuses to do her duty. A flaw like that argues a dangerous degree of selfishness. You'll have to watch that side of her.'

'I would never have asked her to do something so unreasonable as to agree to a breeding contract with Kristan Harravay. She's always hated him and well you know it. I'd refuse to breed with him myself,

faction needs or not. He's . . . '

'I do not consider the idea to have been unreasonable,' he interrupted, signalling to her to beware with a secret hand sign that only the two of them shared.

She hoped that she had not betrayed her shock at this.

'One should never place personal feelings before faction needs,' he continued smoothly. 'I have never done so in my entire life.' He reached out to touch her cheek and changed the subject firmly. 'You're looking well, my dear. I always knew you'd age gracefully. You have beautiful skin.'

'Thank you. You're carrying your years lightly, too, Sandur.' They stood staring at one another, lost for a few brief moments in shared dreams of what might have been.

'Well,' he said eventually, 'I never thought to see you as Faction Leader, Riahn. How are you enjoying that role?'

'As little as you might expect, knowing me. I've never sought political power. If things were not at so crucial a stage, I might have resigned the leadership in favour of someone younger and more enthusiastic by now.'

'But things are at a crucial stage, a very crucial stage. And the young lack experience. I think you're right to join us here in Prime. Perhaps your influence will keep Channa loyal, to Shavla at least, if not to her former faction.'

Was that reference to the young a message about Kristan? 'It's Shavla's future that matters, after all,' she said. 'We've always agreed on that.'

'Indeed, yes. For Shavla, I will give my all.'

Even your daughter, she thought. I don't think I could do that. People would say that I'm not a good Shavlan. I'd say that it's not good for Shavla to demand unreasonable sacrifices of its citizens.

Thinking things over after their meeting, Riahn came to the conclusion that Sandur must have allowed Kristan to plant spying devices in his quarters, and must have known that he would listen to their conversation. What was Sandur plotting now? Was he indeed going to maintain his alliance with that young bully? If he was, she and Sandur would inevitably become estranged, because she would not ally herself with Kristan Harravay long-term, or allow her faction to do so. Not after some of the reports Marrin had delivered during the years he had watched over Channa. That branch of Faction Harravay must be lopped or the whole of the main blood-line would degenerate. If it had not done so already. Kristan was not the first Harravay of the direct line to display a sadistic streak. The taint was being passed on.

Riahn and Sandur spent no more time alone together, and even Kristan could find no real reason for distrusting his ally and occasional mentor, or for doubting the continuing soundness of the Harknell-Harravay alliance, though he still had a watch kept on every member of the Decision Group. He trusted no one, not even his father's old guards, though they had been nothing but co-operative since his father's death and had shown no signs that they doubted Nerlin's assassin to have been a Reinal.

It was several days before Joran permitted another meeting between the Shavlan Decision Group and their Envoy. He was astounded by the rapidity of Channa's adjustment to Confederation mores, not to mention her intuitive understanding of the subtleties of life as an individual. Her progress was unparalleled in the history of mediation, but at a cost. He could see the strain eating away the flesh on her bones and the blue shadows lying under her eyes like the ghosts of old bruises, but he was helpless to do anything about that. The need for peace was an inflexible driving force.

Meran continued to act as Supreme Commander, and apart from the addition of Riahn, the composition of the Decision Group remained unchanged. Kristan attempted to add one of his own nominees to the group, supported by some very brutal political manoeuvring that dragged most of the waverers over to one side or the other, but he accepted the failure of his move with outward equanimity. It seemed to Those of the Confederation, playing back the recordings time after time to try to understand all the nuances of the Decision Group's individual and reciprocal body language, that there was some movement towards cohesion among the Decision Group, cohesion based on the women's unexpressed but obvious dislike of Kristan, with Georn the only waverer and Sandur remaining aloof, but presumably continuing to

support Faction Harravay.

After some consideration, Joran asked Channa to review the recordings and she shared with him her views on the probable meaning of the group's interactions, showing remarkable frankness.

'There's a hint of - of wildness, even elation, behind Kristan's eyes that I've never seen before.'

'Wildness? Behind his eyes?' Joran looked pained. 'Is that something on which to base an opinion?'

'No, but it's something on which to allow for a possibility; it's something that needs taking into account in our calculations. You need not believe me, but I've known Kristan for as long as I can remember and I do see a distinct change.'

'I'm surprised that a militaristic culture would encourage such thinking.'

'I'd be surprised if your training did not lead you to allow for the same possibility. Instinct is less often right than reason, but should always be taken into account. However, you'll draw your own conclusions, whatever I say.'

Within ten days of Van passing Stage Two, the four people at the base had grown fairly comfortable as a group, the only jarring note being Van's attraction to Channa. In spite of this, as the weeks passed, the group's cohesion only strengthened.

Joran found Channa sitting alone by the lake one day, with a brooding look on her face. 'Something wrong?'

'I wish Van wouldn't stare at me like that.'

'He's very attracted to you. And I think you find him attractive, too.'

'In other circumstances, I might find him attractive,' she allowed, 'but at the moment, he is basically my enemy, even if he is working towards peace.'

'And what am I?'

She looked down and shook her head, refusing to answer. For once he did not press the point.

Another day, Joran asked her idly, 'Could you see yourself mating with Van?'

'Certainly not! He's a Deoran!' Her cheeks were flushed, but was it with indignation or guilt at her own feelings?'

'You're at perfect liberty to mate with him if you wish, or if you think it will help the negotiations. As you did with me the first time,' he added softly. She would never know what it cost him to make that suggestion.

She swung round to confront him, moving as jerkily as a peasant child's straw puppet. 'Joran, surely you don't want me to do that. Not after all the efforts you've been making lately to introduce me to the idea of long-term pair-bonding?'

'I will do whatever is needed to achieve a true mediation. You know that.' He spoke steadily, no hint of his personal feelings showing.

'Well, I will not! Whatever you say! Everyone has their limits. I surely have some rights as an individual, even if I am an Envoy.' Then she gasped and fell silent. What had she just said? It was rank disloyalty to take that attitude. She was growing more un-Shavlan by the day.

Joran looked at her thoughtfully. 'What's upset you now?' He had a fair idea, of course.

'Putting my own feelings before my concern for Shavla.'

'I wouldn't say before Shavla, just alongside. That seems quite a reasonable thing to me.'

She shook her head. 'It isn't, not for a Shavlan. A Peace Mediator would not do it, either. Would not set personal feelings before the chance for peace.' She stopped abruptly and stared at him. 'And you haven't, have you?' Perversely, she admired him more for his firmness of purpose and herself less. He was watchful, but said nothing.

'I've never felt like that before, you know. Never ever put my own feelings so blatantly before the needs of Shavla.'

'So you think you ought to be ready to make love to Van Makass if that would help the negotiations along?'

'I - suppose I - no!' Joran was still looking at her as if he had withdrawn himself from personal involvement. Surely he wasn't going to try to insist on that close an involvement with the enemy? 'I won't

do it, you know,' she said very quietly. 'Not even if you confine me to my quarters indefinitely.' For a moment, the depths of her weariness showed quite clearly in the stark lines of her face. 'I'm sick to my soul of being treated like a - a commodity, Joran.' Even when it helps Shavla towards peace, she thought forlornly.

'I don't regard you as a commodity, Channa.'

'No. But I'm not really sure how you do regard me, deep down in that Mediator's soul of yours.'

'How do you want me to regard you?'

She blushed.

'Tell me, Channa mine.'

'I want you to - to want me, like people do in your entertainment sagas. I want you to say you'd hate me to mate with Van.' He stared at her as if he had never seen her before, as if he were light-years away mentally and she could not help adding, 'Joran, surely you're not going to - to encourage me to mate with him? Surely I have some rights as an individual under your Confederation laws?'

In answer, he put his arms on her shoulders and said very clearly, 'Stage Twenty passed. Final Stage in this part of the mediation. Let it be noted that Channa Pro-Nestar, formerly known as Harknell, Envoy of the Shavlan Unity, has clearly demonstrated that her people can accept the idea of peace and are capable of adapting to the changes it involves.' He paused to stare down at her amazed expression, then added, deliberately allowing her to hear, 'Let it also be noted that this Envoy, Channa Pro-Nestar, has progressed more rapidly through these first-part Stages than any envoy ever before known in the history of mediation. Let Central be informed of that as a matter of urgency and inform your Sirian makers immediately thereafter. Advice and suggestions would be welcomed on the next steps, from whatever source.'

'It is so noted,' said Fess's cool voice. 'I shall prepare an analysis for my makers. Estimated time of notification three standard hours. The significance of this mediation is already recognised by my makers and considerable interest is being shown in this planet as a consequence.'

Joran turned and looked at Channa. His hands were still on her shoulders, gripping them, but keeping her at a distance. 'Congratulations, Envoy.'

'What does Stage Twenty mean?' she asked, moving closer to him and taking the initiative by linking her hands behind his neck.

Joran gave in to temptation and rested his face against the top of her head. 'Stage Twenty involves a declaration of individualism, from the stance of a citizen of the Confederation. Not an insignificant statement for a loyal Shavlan to make.'

She was still feeling the after-effects of shock at her own abandonment of all that had been inculcated in her. 'How can I feel like this, Joran? How can I betray Shavla for my own needs?'

'How can you not feel your own needs? In most of the galaxy, it's the norm. What you've been trained to do is against human nature. It's a question of balance once again.'

She sighed and slumped against him. 'Joran, how long will this go on?'

'A while yet, I'm afraid.'

'Well, if that's the end of the first part of the mediation, is it possible - would I be allowed to take another holiday?' Oh for some quiet days in the woods! Or the clean silence of the stars.

'We'll try to arrange something as soon as Van catches up with you. A holiday together. It won't be long. He's as quick a learner as you are.'

There was silence for a few moments, then Channa said in a tight, pain-filled voice, 'How could you have suggested that I mate with him?'

Joran held her at arm's length and looked straight into her eyes. 'I can do anything I must in the cause of peace, because I've seen the price paid for interplanetary war. And a mediator's training is very, very thorough. A decade, remember?'

She swallowed hard. She knew that he was not pretending to have developed an affection for her, but did it go no deeper than a requirement of the job?

He began to stroke her hair. 'Oh, Channa mine! This negotiation won't go on for ever. Once peace is

established, you and I can start behaving like any other man and woman who feel affection for one another. But not until then. And what's more, I know you wouldn't suggest it if you were not so very tired. The fact that you acknowledge your own needs doesn't mean that you're denying Shavla's needs.' He kissed her forehead very gently. 'Now, I can't allow you a real holiday, but you could go and spend tomorrow by the lake. I'd promise only to disturb you in an emergency.'

She stiffened her spine. 'You're right, of course. I don't know what came over me. I am tired, but that's no excuse for not doing my duty. My father would be even more disgusted with me than he already is if he had heard me say those things. I don't think even my mother would understand. I don't think I understand myself any more.' She looked at Joran and her own pride helped her to ask, 'What comes next, then? What does the next part of the mediation involve?'

'That's for us to decide together. We need to plan how to implement peace in both Shavla and Deora. There are several paths we could take to do that. I have no fixed views. I'm depending on you and Van. It also depends on who wins the power struggle in Shavla, of course.'

'I thought you had all the procedures laid out for you.'

'Not exactly. The First Part is set, but after that, we have considerable latitude. What you perhaps don't realise, Channa, is that you've led us into unknown territory. We've never had to deal with an envoy who could adapt so rapidly. I've never been so undecided about possible courses of action, for all my years of experience. I usually have a couple of standard years to work things out. This has been - what? - four standard months?'

What is it about the Evral Intervention that's so different? he wondered. Is my love for Channa impinging too much on this Mediation? Have I passed my peak as a mediator? Do I need to call in an advisory group to help chart the way through this maze? But no, that would come between the four of us. And I suspect that an advisory group would be just as perplexed as I am. There is, after all, no one in the Peace Corps more experienced in field work than I am. And no one who knows Evral as I do.

They were interrupted by an urgent message for Joran. Channa had learned to recognise the sudden flatness of sounds around her when he was receiving a secret communication. Within seconds, he had turned into a blur of hazy colour that was barely recognisable as the figure of a man.

She remained where she was, her eyes never leaving the spot where Joran stood concealed. When the haziness rippled away, Joran's face was as grim as she had ever seen it.

'Am I allowed to know what it is?'

'You'll have to know. Fighting has broken out in Prime between Kristan's supporters and the other alliance groups. Your father has repudiated his alliance with Faction Harravay and has attempted to rescue your mother. They're now trapped in the Nestar town quarters, and it's unlikely that they'll manage to hold out against their attackers.'

She went white. 'Can't you help them?'

'No.'

'But surely you came to Evral to prevent further bloodshed?'

'I'm sorry. I really cannot intervene in a minor dispute, not when so much depends on the outcome, not as long as it remains localised, anyway. What you as Envoy can do and understand in the cause of peace, your government must agree to follow. The Decision Group is, to all intents and purposes, your government. Kristan will never agree to peace. If he gains control, occupied nation status is an inevitability.'

'I think you're wrong not to intervene in this.' She was a crisp and alert military officer again, her need for release from stress set aside instantly.

'I dare not.'

'What do you mean by that? You have the power to do anything you want on Evral.'

'It's not within my powers to change the base rules of our intervention procedures. I dare not do anything, Channa, much as I would like to help your parents.'

'You'll let them be killed, then?' Her voice came out tight and angry.

'If necessary.'

She gazed at him with coolly assessing eyes, her personal hurt supplanted by fear for her people. 'I didn't quite realise until this moment how strong you are, Mediator. Perhaps too strong for my taste.'
'I hope not, Envoy. But even so, I shall not change my decision.'

29

The day started like any other in Prime - the marching feet along the underground corridors and avenues, the shouts and calls of officers, the vehicles patrolling the streets above ground, the ebb and flow of people on tides of official business. No need to see the crowds; the noise they made hummed through every building.

Sandur, idly watching the flickering security screen, looked distastefully at the people loitering in the broad subterranean avenue outside Harknell Town Quarters. He much preferred the peace of his own residence to the noise of TQ and he missed his views of the green countryside.

A movement by the gate caught his eye and he gave a mirthless grin. Kristan's watchdog was there, as usual - as obvious as a brood mother on a sortie. Sandur had never quite decided whether Kristan was deliberately allowing the observer to be noticed, or whether Kristan was too unconcerned about subtleties to realise how obvious his watchdog was. They had not found a trace of any other observers, so Sandur inclined to the second view, but with dear little Kristan - his lips curled in a vicious snarl at the thought of his dead friend's son - you could never be sure.

Suddenly Sandur tensed and frowned. Someone had come up to speak to the watchdog, who was pretending to run a refreshment facility. When the man abandoned his equipment and hurried away with the messenger, Sandur became suspicious. He strode out into the anteroom next to his personal quarters. 'Kristan's little watchdog has just left at top speed without taking his equipment. Something must be brewing. Send someone, no, send several people around town to check things out.'

He watched one of the duty officers leave at top speed, nodded to the others and then returned to his own chamber, but he continued to feel uneasy. The subterranean avenue outside was now deserted and that was highly unusual. When he heard Fellass outside asking for admittance, he opened the door himself. 'What's wrong?'

'I think - no I'm sure - that Kristan is about to stage a coup, Father. I've had a quiet warning from a friend that Mother's in danger. Will you allow me to take some guards over to Nestar TQ? They're ill-equipped to deal with trouble there - they only keep one Combat Hundred in town.'

Something snapped in Sandur. He had been waiting long enough for a suitable moment to strike. If this was an attempted coup, he would at last be able to make Kristan pay for killing Nerlin. If it was a false alarm, he would use the occasion to manufacture an excuse for taking action. 'I'll do better than that, son. I'll take half a Combat Hundred over there myself. No, don't argue! I'm in a much better position than you to stop any attempts on Riahn's life - and my interest is deeper. Stay here in case I need you. Take any action you feel necessary. Wait!' He poked his head out of the door. 'Bear witness! In my absence, Fellass has my authority to act as he sees necessary. Should anything happen to me, he will become leader.'

Tillith's 'Yes, sir!' betrayed surprise. Fellass had not so far played a prominent role in the faction.

As Sandur ran through the narrow back lanes at the head of his guards, his anxiety increased. Even the main streets were almost deserted, and anyone they did see scurried out of sight as if the whole pantheon of Deoran demons were approaching. Damn! How had they missed the preparations for this coup?

Almost immediately he answered his own question. There was only one way. Kristan must have involved the dispossessed, those with no faction, who lived on the underside of urban society. Deslar's influence there, no doubt. That was how Faction Reinal had been created in the first place. Young Harravay was more cunning than they had realised, and more ruthless. However, he'd gone too far this time. No member of the high nobility would countenance arming the dregs of the nation against the factions. Some

things were unforgivable.

At Nestar TQ, armoured vehicles bearing Supreme Command insignia were parked in a semi-circle around the main entrance. Some of the guards were wearing Harknell colours.

Sandur gestured to his own men to stay back. 'Are those men ours?' he asked his second.

'I don't think so, sir. I don't recognise any of them.'

'Then how in hell's name did they come to be wearing our colours?'

'I don't know, sir.'

Sandur did not allow his fury at this dishonourable trick to warp his judgement. Nerlin must be turning in his grave, but he would be avenged and his faction purged of traitors. Keeping under cover, Sandur led his team towards a small supplies entrance at the side of the building. Only one vehicle was there, its personnel deployed behind it, ready to fire at anyone trying to get out of Nestar TQ. Very careless. They had no one posted to watch their own rear.

He tried to radio back to Faction Harknell to raise a general alert and ask for reinforcements. Part way through, the transmission was jammed. 'Better kill that vehicle's crew,' he said, putting his com-caller away, 'then get inside ourselves.' He was gambling their lives that enough of his message had got through to alert Fellass. Intelligent man, Fellass. He'd come out of his shell a lot recently. A son to be proud of, especially in planning for peace.

Taken by surprise, the vehicle's crew offered easy targets, then Sandur placed a ten-team of genuine Harknell guards outside the entrance, with orders not to make heroes of themselves, but to retreat inside Nestar TQ if they were attacked in force. He went himself to stand in front of the spy-hole in the door, hands at shoulder height, well away from weapons.

'What do you want?' a voice inquired from above their heads.

'Faction Harknell, Sandur here. I've brought half a Combat Hundred to help out and I've sent for further reinforcements. I offer help to Faction Nestar freely, out of kin-alliance, and I hereby repudiate our alliance with Faction Harravay. Now, are you going to let us in or do we have to stand here all day providing a target for the Harravays?'

The door swung open and Sandur led most of his guards inside. A woman officer motioned him to follow her and he left his second conferring with the door-guard.

Riahn was in the operations room. 'Sandur! What a pleasant surprise! What brings you here today of all days?' Her eyes were wary.

'Kin-alliance. I've publicly repudiated Faction Harravay, as your officer will bear witness.' He smiled briefly. 'Did you think I'd work against you, Riahn, and support that murderous young lunatic? I needed to buy time, but I'm ready now to take my stand against him.'

She relaxed visibly. 'I had allowed for the possibility that you'd keep to the Harknell-Harravay alliance, Sandur, but I confess that I didn't regard it as a probability.' She raised her voice. 'The help of Faction Harknell is accepted with gratitude and the kin-alliance shall be strengthened by this mutual support.'

The faces around the operations room brightened.

Sandur became crisply official again. 'What's the situation?'

'Kristan's sent two Hundreds over to demand our surrender, on charges of treason against Shavla. Some of them are wearing Faction Harknell colours, by the way. That worried me a little.'

'I noticed that. He'll regret violating our faction rights.'

'Naturally, we didn't submit. I don't trust any message from Kristan. The officer in command out there says the charges have been approved by the Supreme Commander, but I don't believe that, either. Meran would never doubt our faction's loyalty.'

'Have you checked with her?'

'I can't get through to her. The com-system seems to be malfunctioning. We've only got an internal emergency com-system working here now.'

Sandur breathed deeply. 'It's my guess that Meran has also been accused and that Kristan's staking everything on a bid to become Supreme Commander himself.'

'He must be counting on your support.'

‘Yes. Or rather, he’s counting on my abstaining from action because of the long kin-alliance between our factions. Stupid of him, isn’t it?’

‘Not that stupid. It’ll destabilise the whole situation if Faction Harknell changes sides now.’

‘It’ll tear the alliances apart.’ He spoke soberly, for there was no pleasure in the prospect of civil war.

Riahn laid her hand on his shoulder for a second and he touched it with his own, before turning to one of his aides. ‘Get some messengers back to Harknell TQ.’ He was fumbling in his pocket for some voice-recording tokens as he spoke, activating them quickly with his fingertip. One of his Scientific Corps’ latest inventions. A sad way to try them out.

‘Sandur Harknell speaking. Faction Harknell allies itself with Faction Nestar against Harravay for as long as Kristan is Faction Leader. Whatever that costs. Send reinforcements to Nestar TQ at the soonest.

Personal message to Fellass. Take over leadership, if necessary. Preferred outcomes for Faction

Harknell. One: death of Kristan and any loyal to him. No quarter given. Two: selection of new Harravay

Faction Leader from another main-line branch. Three: re-forming of Harknell-Harravay alliance - if

viable.’ He chewed at his lip, said, ‘Message ends,’ then handed the ten tokens to his aide. ‘Get these to Harknell TQ. Suicide mission, if necessary. All honour to the bearers. Faction survival depends upon this.’ The man saluted and ran out.

Sandur’s expression was bleak.

Riahn looked at him sympathetically. She, too, loathed sending guards to their deaths. ‘Will you take over here, Sandur? Your military skills are undoubtedly superior to anyone else’s.’ She gazed calmly round at her officers. ‘Any problems with my decision? I’ll vouch for Sandur Harknell’s honest dealing in this with my own life and honour, if necessary.’

They nodded acceptance. There was no higher expression of trust than that she had just offered them.

Besides, many of them knew Sandur Harknell, who was a regular visitor at the Nestar Estate.

Back in Harknell TQ, Fellass was busy. Prime’s com-system was not functioning at all. The

above-ground streets and the below-ground avenues were filled with armed vehicles. Faction Harravay

colours were everywhere, and some illegal Harknell colours had been spotted as well. A message from

his father had been cut off half-way through, so he had to guess what steps his father would wish taken.

He was very sure that these would not include submission to Kristan Harravay.

He turned to the group of duty officers who had gathered in the ante-room. ‘My father has repudiated our alliance with Faction Harravay.’ There was a low murmur of surprise. ‘It’s my guess that he’ll send individual messengers back, since transmissions have been blocked. Send out special skirmishers to help them through. They are to take any action necessary to get those messages back. It’s also my guess that Kristan Harravay has struck at all Decision Group members and is relying on Faction Harknell to keep out of the fighting. We shan’t do that.’

Kerrall, leader of Sandur’s Personal Guard, interrupted. ‘I don’t think we can take such important decisions without our Faction Leader’s say-so.’

‘We must. He’s in danger. Besides, Father authorised me to take over before he left, as Tillith here will bear witness.’

Tillith’s dark Harknell features nodded support. At that moment he bore a surprising resemblance to Sandur.

‘I still question the wisdom of this.’ Kerrall had become increasingly conservative during the past year or two and was very hostile to the peace negotiations. ‘We should at least convene a Faction Council on this. Harknell and Harravay have been kin-linked for as long as records go back. You’ve got to be mistaken about this.’

‘Kerrall, those links have now been broken. We’ll ratify the decision later. Delay in acting would be disastrous.’ Fellass’s eyes narrowed as Kerrall still shook his head. ‘I hope you’re not going to challenge my decisions, Kerrall, because believe me, I’m sure of what I’m doing. Father and I have had some interesting discussions lately with members of the other factions in the Decision Group.’

He remembered suddenly that Kerrall’s daughter had had a breeding contract with someone from Faction Harravay and his eyes narrowed as Kerrall’s fingers crept towards his handgun.

Fellass drew his own weapon so swiftly that everyone was taken by surprise. As Kerrall scrambled to activate his handgun, Fellass fired at him, reducing the hand to a mass of bloody pulp. Tillith rushed to Fellass's side, handgun ready to finish the job, as guards erupted into the room.

After a swift glance around, one of them pointed his handgun at Fellass. Tillith's weapon whined and the man fell to the ground, clearly dead. No one else made any moves which could be considered hostile.

'The taint has even spread into our own faction,' said Fellass bitterly. 'I never thought to see you betray us, Kerrall.'

'I never thought to see us negotiating peace with those Deoran scum, or a cripple given the leadership over my head!'

Fellass did not respond to the personal insult, but Tillith growled something under his breath as he gestured to the guards. 'Arrest Kerrall. Two charges, insubordination and suspicion of complicity with another faction against the interests of Faction Harknell.'

'It's not against our interests!' shouted Kerrall. 'You're too soft to know what's right, Fellass, and always have been. I demand a faction judgement group by my peers. I demand a chance to claim leadership!' He struggled against the guards who were trying to lead him out. 'I have that right!'

Fellass said coldly, 'Knock him unconscious if he won't be quiet and secure him somewhere. We haven't time for his little diversions just now. He can claim his rights once this is settled. Faction need. Oh, and take that body away.'

The remaining guards and officers could not hide their surprise at these events and there was some hesitation.

'Well,' snapped Fellass, 'are the rest of you going to obey my orders, as authorised by our Faction Leader, or do you wish Faction Harknell to be defeated in this coup?'

A woman stepped forward, daughter of Sheera, leader of the Scientific Corps. She kept her hands carefully spread, away from her handgun. 'I'll follow you, Fellass, by kin and blood.'

'Thank you, Arra. I shall not forget that.'

Tillith cleared his throat. 'I, too, Fellass. By kin and blood. And I'll bear witness to Sandur's authorisation for you to act as you see necessary and to take over as leader if he fell.'

That prevented any further disputes.

Within minutes, ten-teams on foot were out scouring Prime for Harknell messengers. Only two of the messengers got through to TQ, but the message they brought was enough to swing the whole faction firmly behind Fellass.

By now, flurries of fighting were sweeping through the streets and avenues of Prime as the other factions involved in the Decision Group continued to resist Kristan's efforts to arrest their leaders. Buildings were damaged and blood flowed as it had not done for decades, for the war against Deora had maintained the unity of all factions, whatever their individual interests.

Fellass gave a string of orders, some of which puzzled his men, but he was obeyed without question.

Tillith and Arra appointed themselves his personal aides, and to them he confided his full strategy.

Although this was totally alien to the normal practice of warfare, their eyes gleamed at the daring of it all.

If they had to die, it would be fighting, not cowering in the shelter of faction TQ.

When Kristan's guards arrived at Jansiv TQ, some were wearing the Supreme Commander's insignia and some Faction Harknell colours. Georn was inclined to submit to their demands and allow them inside. If Kristan had Harknell support, he thought it wiser, long-term, for Faction Jansiv to support him.

The deputy leader, Shelar, a man who loathed Kristan personally, slapped his hand over the voice output. 'We're not submitting to Kristan Harravay.'

'You'd disobey my orders?' demanded Georn, red-faced with fury.

'No. I'm challenging them. There's a slight difference.' He looked questioningly at the other officers.

'And I think I have enough support to make myself heard.'

The others all nodded. Georn's vacillations had not endeared him to them as leader.

'We won't stop you going with them,' Shelar added, grinning.

Georn glared at him, thumbed the com-switch and declined to accompany Kristan's men, then he

watched aghast as they turned their guns without warning on Jansiv guards. A pitched battle was soon raging outside the entrance and it cost twenty Jansiv lives to clear the avenue of attackers.

The internal com-system beeped a priority message and one of the Jansiv guards appeared on the viewscreen. 'Sir, at least three of the bodies are wearing Faction Reinal colours under the Harknell tunics, and one of them is a man I know personally. He's definitely a Reinal.' The camera followed his pointing finger.

Georn gazed at the scene it revealed, stunned. 'They're not Faction Harknell!' he whispered, then straightened his shoulders and held out his hands, palms up. 'I resign the leadership freely to you, Shelar. I admit my poor judgement, but you'll find no fault with my loyalty to the faction.'

Shelar nodded. 'Temporary leadership accepted. Take command of the first Hundred that becomes available, Georn. I have no doubts of your loyalty.' His expression showed no satisfaction or triumph, only grim determination. 'I think we'll have to give Kristan Harravay a few surprises. Let's address ourselves to re-establishing the com-system first, eh? We're closest to Com-Q. We need to know who our allies are in this.'

Inside Nestar TQ, the situation was growing steadily worse. Ten of the Harknell reinforcements had been sent out with messages, the ten who had been guarding the side entrance had been driven inside, with a loss of four personnel, and the rest had been deployed around the building.

So intense was the fighting that in a very short time the ground-level apertures in the building were beginning to show signs of damage. The below-ground areas were in a somewhat better state, but the whole TQ was too thinly staffed to maintain the defences for long, even with Sandur's reinforcements.

'If we get out of this alive,' said Riahn grimly, 'we either close down our TQ or we staff it properly.' Sandur was keeping an eye on the surveillance system, which was working on the emergency generator only, as power had been cut even before their refusal to surrender. 'That young lunatic has his plans well laid. He must have been working on this for a while.'

He continued to give quiet-voiced commands, and the Nestar guards began a gradual withdrawal from the above-ground areas.

'We have a heavily protected refuge in the basement,' Riahn said a little while later. 'There's an escape shaft from there, but I'd be surprised if the outlet is undiscovered. This coup has been too carefully planned.'

'We'll hang on here in the operations room for another few minutes,' said Sandur. 'Fellass must be trying to get reinforcements through.'

The minutes passed and he shook his head at her. 'I hate to say it, Riahn, but I think we've been outmanoeuvred.'

'I doubt Kristan will hold power for long.'

'Unfortunately, it'll take a while for your scattered country alliance groups to get into action. I only hope the rest of our town forces can keep Kristan at bay until then.'

'Civil war.' Riahn's face was drawn with sadness. 'Deora will be the winner from all this.'

Everyone was silent for a moment. 'Time to move down to the basement, don't you think?' Riahn asked.

There was a loud tone from the com-system and Shelar Jansiv's voice came over the air. 'Control of com-system regained. Faction Jansiv repudiates its alliance to Faction Harravay. We can maintain the com-system if others are ready to deal with the insurrection.'

There were shouts of triumph from the group in the operations room.

Sandur flicked the switch. 'Nestar-Harknell repudiates its alliance to Faction Harravay. We're under siege at Nestar TQ. Urgent priority for relief.'

Shelar's face nodded in the flickering green mistiness of the com-system, which had obviously been damaged. 'Wait. Other messages coming in.'

The room shook and a crack appeared in one wall. Riahn took out her personal com-unit, 'All groups retreat to the operations room. Help is on its way.'

The screen flickered, then Shelar's face reappeared. 'Can you hold on for a while?'

‘We shall obviously try,’ said Sandur. ‘Serve Shavla!’

‘Honour to you.’

The walls shook again. Two or three at a time, the surviving guards slipped into the operations room. When no one else had appeared for a while, Riahn looked around. ‘Is this all?’

‘I think there may be one or two individuals trapped here and there, but not many,’ said a fresh-faced young man, wearing very new officer’s insignia.

‘All honour to our kin,’ Riahn said huskily. ‘Activate the portcullises.’

Sandur looked at her questioningly.

‘Sliding metal doors, installed a hundred and fifty years ago to prevent free passage into TQ, even after defeat. Old-fashioned, I know, but we didn’t bother to take them out. I never thought we’d have to use them in my lifetime. We service and test them every decade or so. Let’s hope they all work now.’

Rumbling sounds filled the building, followed by several loud thuds that shook the walls. A screeching sound suggested that one of the portcullises had stuck, but the visuals of the internal com-system had been out of action for the last few minutes and there was no way of telling what was happening. The building continued to shake at intervals and the screeching did not abate, drilling at everyone’s ears with persistent frenzy.

Fifteen minutes later Kristan’s voice yelled over the internal com-system. ‘All exits and upper floors have been taken by Faction Harravay. You are required to surrender, or explosives will be planted and complete destruction of Nestar TQ will take place.’

There was a growl of anger at this blatant abandonment of military protocols.

Sandur gestured towards the com-board and Riahn stepped forward. ‘With this day’s work, you have betrayed Shavla, Kristan Harravay. I name you Honourless.’ Her voice crackled with scorn. ‘We all prefer death to surrender. Faction Harravay has disgraced its name today by following you.’

‘Harknell and Nestar will be wiped out for that!’ Kristan yelled back. ‘To the last person!’

After that, they sat and waited in silence. The distant screeching stopped abruptly and the room shook again.

‘They must have blown it up,’ the young officer said. ‘It’s a relief to have the noise stop, anyway.’

Riahn reached for Sandur’s hand. ‘I thank you on behalf of our faction for your rescue attempt.’ The handclasp was a personal gesture and her feelings for him showed on her face.

‘This attempt may have failed, but I’m certain that the alliance against Kristan will be adequate to defeat him in the end,’ Sandur acknowledged, gripping her hand openly. ‘We’re all proud to die here with our honour unsullied.’

Time dragged on. The young officer fidgeted, caught Riahn’s eye and became rigidly still. Sandur had withdrawn into himself. Riahn sat hunched over the com-unit, sunk in grief at her faction’s losses.

As another hour dragged on, people started to exchange puzzled glances. ‘It’s taking them long enough,’ Sandur said thoughtfully. ‘Harknell’s Scientific Team could have blown the place up in half this time.’

Riahn nodded. ‘So could ours.’

They all tensed as the building shook again, the first explosion for some time. Silence for more long minutes, then suddenly the com-system hissed. ‘Fellass here. Is anyone still alive down there?’ There were no visuals.

Riahn stepped forward. ‘Thirty survivors, including your father and myself.’

‘Shavla be praised!’ They could hear the raw emotion in Fellass’s voice. ‘We have the building secure, but there are still some explosives to disarm. Do not, repeat not, attempt to raise the portcullises.’

Riahn was struggling not to weep openly and the young officer had suspiciously bright eyes.

Sandur moved closer to the com-unit. ‘What took you so long, son? We were getting hungry.’

as deeply as on Channa. The lines on his face seemed to grow deeper by the day and his body had lost its sleek, well-fed look, and become instead a tautly coiled spring ready to explode if it were pushed too hard.

It had started with anxiety over his father's state of health and that anxiety was still a major contributor to his stress. The medic who had examined Van Kledin found much cause for concern. Given time in a rejuvenating chamber, he said, he was sure that he could give the old man another twenty or thirty years of life. Otherwise, he'd be lucky to have twenty months. How ignorant these primitives were of their own bodies' needs!

Van growled something to himself, watching the replay of the medic's report.

'The medic wasn't expecting you to see his report,' Lilla murmured. 'We felt it more important to discuss things with you than to worry about being tactful.'

'Is that arrogant young softbelly a proper medic?'

'Oh yes. He's on probation for entry into the Peace Corps' Medic Team and this is his trial tour. He's a brilliant treatment synthesiser, but he'll need to learn some humility before we let him loose on his own.'

'And I thought you of the Confederation were all perfect!' Van spoke absently, his mind not on their repartee. Any real treatment would mean his father leaving Deora to spend some time on the space transport - and that Van Kledin flatly refused to do.

Van did not try to remonstrate with him. He fully understood why the Emperor could not leave Firstfall at this stage and he would have made the same decision himself, whatever the personal cost. Certain groups among the Deoran nobility would never understand or approve of their Emperor submitting himself to the ministrations of Those of the Confederation. If Van Kledin left Deora for rejuvenating treatment, he would not be able to come back. Nor, with Van away, would he be able to ensure that his son's inheritance was safe. And although Pedrix would make a loyal Regent, he was a man bred only for war, not one to lead the nation towards peace. The Agnates had only to form a few prudent alliances and really make a push, and they would be able to take control.

Such an outcome would hurt Van Makass personally, but more important, he knew beyond a doubt that no one except himself was capable of leading the Deorin towards peace. He knew how hard it had been, even for him, to come to terms with the realities of peace. If he or his father could not remain in charge, Deora would inevitably earn herself occupied nation status.

He did, however, persuade his father to allow Those of the Confederation to give him what treatment they could in the Deoran Grand Palace. That involved some risk, but the potential rewards justified it. Pedrix was flatly opposed to it, of course, but Van Kledin trusted his son's judgement and ordered his brother to do the same. Pedrix obeyed that order unquestioningly and kept silent about his reservations from then on, though he insisted on being present throughout the treatments, to the young medic's great discomfiture. Even primitives were intimidating when they were so large, so clearly mistrustful and so close to you.

Only ten days after Channa, Van Makass reached Stage Twenty, though Lilla worried that his was a borderline case, because his individuality was still so permeated by his duty as Heir to Deora.

'It's enough,' Joran said. 'Let him pass.'

'I'm not happy with . . .'

'It's my responsibility. I don't think Van will let us down.'

'Very well.' She shrugged. 'I bow to your experience. How are things in Prime?'

'Settling down.'

'Have they found Kristan yet?'

'No. Even our observers have not been able to trace him.'

'He planned for all eventualities, I suppose.'

Joran shook his head, a grim expression on his face. 'Psych-analysis says that it's not in character for him even to consider the possibility of defeat. I can only suppose that he fled on an impulse and was lucky enough to escape. I wish we could find him. Who knows what he'll be plotting now.'

'He'd have difficulty making a come back now that Sandur's got evidence of him killing Nerlin and

colluding with the remnants of Faction Reinal against the Decision Group, not to mention arming the dispossessed against the nobility.'

'Yes, but he's still likely to arrange an assassination or two if he's allowed to remain free.' Joran made a dismissive gesture with one hand. 'Well, time enough to worry about him when he re-emerges. With the robots to guard our envoys, we're in a fairly strong position.'

'But it's normal at this stage to start dispensing with the robots, Joran.'

'We'll choose our times and places for that rather more carefully than usual.'

It was two weeks after Kristan's abortive coup before the Decision Group was able to meet Channa formally again. She spent that time studying the observation data gathered by Those of the Confederation and fretting to see so much of Prime damaged or destroyed. Fellass had survived, but her brother Paal had been killed, as had many of her kin and fellow-officers. She grew very quiet and withdrawn, even with Joran, and in this phase, it was Van who seemed best able to understand her moods and offer her comfort. They spent hours walking together in the woods, talking and pondering the problems of peace for both their nations.

It was a changed Decision Group that formed at last. Sandur, Riahn, Meran and Sharifa remained, but there had been added Shelar Jansiv, now confirmed as Faction Leader instead of Georn, and Derras Malinnen, leader of another large country network of alliances. When the group flickered into view, Channa stood to attention and saluted, but without her old crispness.

Sandur was the first to speak. 'In the absence of any other suitable candidate, I have been persuaded to take on the role of Supreme Commander for a while. I greet you now in the name of the renamed Shavlan Peace Alliance - Mediator - Envoy.' His eyes lingered on his daughter for a moment, then returned to the Mediator.

'This is a step forward, then,' Joran said, 'if you're openly working for peace.'

'A hard-won step,' said Riahn. 'All honour to those who gave their lives to gain it for us.'

Channa bowed her head, 'All honour.' This was echoed by every member of the Decision Group.

After allowing a moment or two's silence, Joran spoke. 'You will be aware that your Envoy has passed Part Two of the peace negotiations, and has done so in a record time.'

Meran nodded. 'We are aware - and proud. At no small cost to herself, judging from her appearance. You look battle-worn, Channa.'

Channa shrugged. 'It was the only contribution I could make to Shavla.'

Derras Malinnen leaned forward. 'You've more than fulfilled your potential, Channa Hark-er Pro-Nestar. I'm proud to have been your first commanding officer.'

Riahn said quietly. 'Channa Nestar now.'

Channa blushed, both at the compliment from a man she admired and at her mother's open acknowledgement of her as a full member of the faction.

Sandur leaned forward to say harshly, 'We would be glad to welcome you back into Faction Harknell, Channa. My disavowal of you was a ruse to buy time from Kristan's importunings.'

Channa's eyes filled with tears. 'I guessed it might be, but I cannot change again. I owe Faction Nestar too much gratitude and loyalty for their acceptance of me. However, I will be glad to be recognised once again as your daughter, Sandur.'

'For Shavla we give our all,' he said tightly. 'A high price, daughter.'

She could only nod, or she would have disgraced herself by sobbing. More than anyone she understood his hurt at losing her from the faction.

'You know about your brother, Paal?' he added.

'Yes. Those of the Confederation keep events in Shavla under close observation. All honour to Paal. At least he's left children for our - for your line.'

Joran decided to interrupt. Channa did not need her burden of sadness to be emphasised. 'The purpose of today's meeting is to brief you on the next part of the negotiations.' He paused.

'Which is?' Sandur prompted.

'Which is for your governing group to accept peace and what it entails. Unless they do that, your Envoy

will have laboured in vain.'

Sandur nodded. 'We've already done so, by changing our name to the Shavlan Peace Alliance. This recent civil war is a blot on our history that we never expected to see again. The nation is shattered by its violence and the capital half-destroyed. Peace seems a good alternative to that.' And, he thought grimly, the nation is now in no state to continue a war with Deora, so peace is the only way out for Shavla.

Joran spoke in his official tone. 'Let it be noted that the Shavlan Ruling Group has now led us into the Third Part of this mediation, and that Shavla is moving willingly towards true peace.'

Fess stepped forward. 'It is so noted.'

'What must we do now to satisfy your official needs?' asked Meran. 'I presume it takes more than words to create peace.'

'We must start changing many things in Shavla. I have a team of experts ready to come down from the space transport to help you set your economy into a more productive mode. All armament production bunkers will need to be gutted, or at least drastically changed, so that no arms of war may again be produced there. Medical centres will need to be set up. We'll gladly share our expertise with you in that area. And the education programmes for the young will need to be changed, of course.'

Derras leaned forward. 'What about Deora?'

'At this moment, the Deoran Envoy is speaking to his father, the Emperor, and to the Advisory Council. If Deora's nobles cannot accept peace, then that country will be given occupied nation status, but with the possibility of accelerated progress, since their Envoy passed Part Two only days after your Envoy.'

'What?' Derras stood up, his famous bull-roar drowning out all other voices. 'I find the idea of even one Deoran accepting peace damned hard to believe.'

Joran smiled. 'But if true, a pleasant surprise, surely? You can now plan mutually for a true peace.'

Seeing Derras shake his head, Sandur took charge again. 'I must confess that we had not expected that. We had predicated our decision on Deora being separated from Shavla by your grey walls. We had not believed it possible that the Deorin would ever really agree to peace.'

Derras was not to be silenced. 'Peace is one thing; dealing with Deora is quite another. We can't possibly destroy our armament production bunkers if Deora is not to be carefully controlled.'

Channa broke in. 'Deora will be under observation in the same way that Shavla will. And for several generations. Peace is not lightly entered into or carelessly maintained, Commander.'

'You speak more like Those of the Confederation than a Shavlan,' said Sharifa, her disapproval showing in every line of her body. 'Surely, Channa, you have explained to the Mediator the dangers of allowing the Deorin unchecked liberty?'

'No more danger than in allowing Shavla unchecked liberty,' Channa said and, as she expected, they all stiffened at her words.

'How do we take that, Channa?' asked Riahn at last. 'Whose side are you on?'

'Shavla's, of course, Mother. You need not fear that Deora will be allowed to commit any acts of aggression if we agree to a peace. The technology that made Intervention possible also makes it possible to safeguard the Interim Phase.'

'You do speak more as an outsider than a Shavlan,' said her father slowly. 'I hardly recognise your tone sometimes, or the thoughts behind your words.'

It was the moment she had dreaded. 'In many ways I am more like them now,' she said, her voice catching a little on the words. 'Did you think I would remain unchanged by this mediation? I had to change - for Shavla's sake. I had to become - in part - something else. For Shavla, I, too, have given my all, Father. I can never again be the Channa you remember, never again be purely a Shavlan.' Her eyes were bright with tears.

'That sounds somewhat - disloyal,' Sharifa said, voicing the suspicions of the Decision Group.

Channa's head jerked up proudly. 'I have never been disloyal to Shavla, in thought or in deed!'

Joran intervened. 'In a mediation, an envoy is more than a representative of her people. To all intents and purposes, Channa is her people. What she can do, they can also do. She's had to demonstrate the ability to change, to accommodate to peace. It's an extremely painful process, since the normal rate of change

must be accelerated. It usually takes two or three standard years to complete Part Two of a mediation. Your Envoy has managed it in just over four standard months - as has the Deoran Envoy. They are both exhausted by it - war-weary, you might call it.'

Meran looked around her and gathered consensus to speak. 'We hadn't realised that the process would be so very painful for her. I presume her realignment to Shavla will be equally painful.'

'Inevitably,' said Joran gently. 'But her task isn't finished, so no realignment can yet start.'

There was dead silence around the table. 'What do you mean by that?' Sandur asked after a minute or two. 'What more does she need to do? We'd expected her to return to Shavla now. She's surely earned a respite?'

'Your people will need to learn to interact with the enemy, to accept Deorin into your lives. We - and you - will need Channa's help in guiding that process. She's still your Envoy, still the trailblazer for the rest of you.'

There was a rustle of movement, an instinctive shaking of heads.

'If you can't learn to do this,' Joran insisted, 'then your status will change, and the Interim Phase will last much longer. Until you can live in peace with your former enemies, you cannot be granted admission to the Confederation, cannot be allowed off-world, cannot be said to be truly at peace.'

'But the Deorin aren't trustworthy!' exclaimed Shelar.

'They feel the same about you.'

Another silence, then Channa spoke. 'Mother, I once said I would tell you when it was time to receive Van Makass at the Nestar estate. I think it will soon be time. Do you think Faction Nestar would accept that?'

Riahn frowned. 'I don't know.'

'Are you prepared to ask them?'

'Yes, of course I am. But I can't promise anything.'

'I shall need to visit Deora for the same purpose,' Channa went on. 'I think Van Kledin will agree to receive me, from what I've seen of him, and from what I've learned of his son.'

'I would suggest that before that happens your group should start learning more about Confederation ways,' Joran said, adroitly breaking the tension. 'Only thus will you be able to guide your people through the Interim Phase and into a true metamorphosis.'

'That seems reasonable,' said Sandur. 'I must confess to a great curiosity to learn more about Those of the Confederation.'

'Then I suggest that the Decision Group members come and visit the base. Here you can meet Van Makass in safety and judge him for yourselves.'

Meran nodded, but Sharifa and Derras looked horrified. Shelar had a thoughtful expression on his face.

'Interaction with the Deorin is a difficult thing to contemplate,' Sandur said carefully, his eyes on Derras.

'Is it possible to take the next steps very slowly and carefully without incurring any penalties?'

'Very possible,' said Joran. 'We shall go no faster than is acceptable to you. As long as we see some signs of progress, there's no need to rush things. Now, I'd like to end this session by inviting you all to visit the base as soon as is convenient. We can send a skim-wing to transport you. If I show you some examples of the safeguards our technology can provide, perhaps you'll feel better about the practicalities of implementing peace.'

Meran and Sandur both nodded together this time, and one by one the others signified agreement.

Channa sighed in relief. There was hope - but she dreaded her people's first meetings with Van.

* * *

Lilla and Van Makass sat waiting in the com-room. 'It's a bad sign that they're keeping us waiting,' he said abruptly. 'I don't like it.'

'My colleagues are keeping an eye on things. They'd have contacted me if there were trouble.'

A chime sounded and a minute later the com-screen flickered into life, showing the Emperor in robes of state and his whole Advisory Council gathered round three sides of a long, ornately carved table.

Van stood to attention and bowed his head. 'Your Majesty.'

Van Kledin gestured round the table. 'You see us gathered here to consider the next step, Mediator, Van.' Quickly he reintroduced the six men who had previously formed the War Council, then moved on to two men not clad in formal robes, who were sitting scowling on one side of him. 'I've invited two others to join us today. May I introduce Shastrix of the Agnate League, and Gennax of the Mountain Coalition.'

Van Makass hid his shock and saluted them both.

Lilla inclined her head. 'I'm delighted to meet you.'

Their scowls deepened and they favoured her only with the slightest of nods in return.

'I gather,' she said, bringing the problem out into the open at once, 'that you aren't in favour of a woman being involved in this negotiation.'

'Our women know their places,' said Shastrix. 'It's well-established that women's brains are smaller than men's and are further softened by child-bearing.'

'Slightly smaller, on average, that's all. Some are actually larger. And the bit about child-bearing's a complete fallacy,' said Lilla. 'I'll be happy to furnish the scientific proof for that.'

Shastrix jumped to his feet. 'Are you, a mere woman, calling me a liar?'

Van Kledin's thready voice somehow cut through the noise. 'It isn't lying to be mistaken, Shastrix, and I myself would be interested to see the proof. Besides, we must all remember that this is a woman of the Confederation, reared in a different manner to our own women. Her skills will therefore be different. In addition, she's far older than anyone here, and cannot but have learned wisdom in nearly a hundred years of life.'

Gennax gaped. 'A hundred! She looks only thirty.' He swung around to the Emperor. 'I find that hard to believe!'

Lilla bowed to the group of men. 'I shall be happy for your healers to confer with our medics and have that point proved to your satisfaction - once peace has been agreed.' She turned back to the two new members. 'You need take nothing upon my word, Gennax. I can prove every claim I make. In addition, you should know that Mediators are sworn not to tell lies during an Intervention.'

Van Makass raised one finger to signify his desire to speak. His father nodded.

'Honoured nobles of Deora, I will vouch for the probity of this Mediator with my life's blood and my family's honour.' He leaned back to watch shock course across every face save that of his father, who nodded again - a tiny private nod of approval aimed at his son.

'You're that sure of her?' asked Commander Yasoth, a grey-haired veteran sitting next to his uncle.

'Yes, sir. I've learned to be that sure during these months at the base. As one would when one has shared a long campaign with someone.'

They had all done that.

Yasoth nodded. 'We must, then, allow this to be a possibility, at least.' He turned to look at Gennax.

'Van Makass would not knowingly lie to us under that oath.'

There was a moment's fraught silence, then Gennax said tightly, 'I will allow it to be a possibility, then.'

'Pray continue, Mediator,' said Van Kledin.

'This meeting,' said Lilla, 'signals that your Envoy has passed the First Part of the negotiation process and has proved that peace is possible for Deora. You should know that only one person has ever passed through First Part more rapidly than your Envoy in the two millennia that we've been offering mediation to warring planets. That person,' she continued, though no one had asked, 'was the Shavlan Envoy who completed First Part only ten days more rapidly than your Envoy.'

A ripple of surprise and anger ran round the table.

'I was a little more suspicious than the Shavlan at first,' said Van, grinning, 'so I had a late start, but I went through the stages quite quickly once I'd made my decision.'

'And,' Lilla smiled warmly at them all, 'since no other mediation has achieved this in less than two of your years, those few days are an insignificant difference. You can, Your Majesty and Honoured Nobles, be very proud of this, your Envoy, and of the common progenitors that spawned both him and the Shavlan Envoy.'

The Agnate was looking even more sour than before, but Gennax was chewing his lip, she noted, as she continued quietly, 'You've already started receiving the benefits of this Mediation in the form of rapid-growth plants. Had your Envoy not learned to adapt, Shavla would now be far ahead of you on the path of peace. As it is, the two nations are at a parallel stage of revitalisation.'

Several sighs were audible, but no one put their disapproval of this situation into words.

'What happens now?' asked Van Kledin.

'Now, Your Majesty, we must plan for peace. As Emperor and Advisory Council, this group must be involved in the next steps.'

'Yes, but what are the next steps?' demanded Shastrix. 'We'll not agree to Deora being emasculated. Those Shavlan scum will . . .'

'Quiet!' Pedrix's voice cut through his bombast. 'His Majesty has granted you no permission to take decisions. You're here by courtesy of this Council, not by right.'

Shastrix jumped to his feet. 'And I'd not be here at all if you weren't afraid of us!'

'I am indeed afraid of civil war breaking out,' said Van Kledin in his husky voice. 'If that happened, Shavla would have won the war in every way that mattered.'

Shastrix smiled. 'They're in no position to win any war. I have it on very good authority that they're in the middle of a civil war themselves at the moment. They're vulnerable, Your Majesty, as vulnerable as they've ever been. One hard strike now and they'd crumble. The Agnates are prepared to do something about that, even if our War Leader has had his brain softened by these degenerates from the Confederation.'

The silence in that room was as telling as noise. Lilla sat very still. Such internal disputes must be settled by the belligerents themselves.

Van Kledin stunned them all by laughing. 'Oh dear me, Shastrix! I thought you'd have learned more sense than that after all these years as leader of the Agnates.'

Shastrix leaped to his feet, spluttering with indignation, and Pedrix immediately leaped between him and the Emperor.

Van Kledin seemed unaware of the tension. He carefully wiped his eyes, chuckled again and said quietly, 'Mediator, I wonder if I could trouble you for a display of the privacy cube for our friend here. It would be such a waste to let him and his friends march off towards the border.' Taking her compliance for granted, he pointed one finger at Shastrix. 'This will not hurt anything more than your pride, Shastrix. Ready, Mediator?'

'What . . . ?' began Shastrix and his voice was cut off in mid-sentence as a privacy cube suddenly enclosed him.

Lilla hid a smile. She was beginning to like Van Kledin, as she liked his son.

Gennax approached the grey substance very warily. 'What have you done to him?' he demanded.

'Mind your manners!' roared Pedrix. 'Who do you think you're talking to?'

Gennax mumbled something which could have been an apology, but his attention was on the grey cube. He tried to poke it, but his baton was deflected. After several attempts to get near it had failed, he turned to Lilla. 'What is this?'

'It's one of our defensive materials.' Her fingers flicked over the controls and the greyness vanished.

Shastrix erupted from the space in which he'd been confined, shouting, 'Attack! Treachery!'

Gennax and Pedrix stepped forward to restrain him as he moved towards the Emperor.

'No attack, Shastrix, just a small demonstration of Confederation technology,' said Van Kledin. 'You're unharmed - unless you bruised yourself trying to get out.' His lips twitched as if he found the whole thing rather amusing and more than one of his advisers seemed to be having trouble suppressing a smile, for Shastrix was still trembling with rage.

Gennax pulled at Shastrix's arm and the man opened his mouth, closed it again and threw himself down in his chair, scowling around the room.

A younger man at the end of the table said thoughtfully, 'Well, Your Majesty, I don't like the idea of dealing with Shavla, but I think it would do no harm to consider how peace might be implemented.'

‘There’s no need to commit ourselves at this stage to anything but willingness to give the matter further serious consideration,’ said General Yasoth. ‘Reconnoitring, as it were.’

Van Kledin looked at Lilla. ‘Is it possible to proceed slowly?’

‘Very possible.’ She returned his half-smile.

Gennax spoke again, his voice sour. ‘I’d like to know why, if Those of the Confederation are such wonderful, kindly people, Van Makass looks so worn and battle-weary after his stay at the base.’

Lilla leaned forward. ‘Better if I explain, I think, Van.’

Van Makass looked at her, his face expressionless. ‘Probably.’

Lilla took a deep breath. ‘Your Envoy has done in four months what usually takes two or three years. He has had to grow accustomed to the idea of peace and to all that it entails. He has also had to learn to interact with the Shavlan Envoy.’

‘What!’ Shastrix was on his feet again. ‘That is treason!’

‘Rubbish!’ said Pedrix. ‘That’s reconnoitring as well. We need to be sure whether their desire for peace is genuine.’

Van grinned at his uncle, then turned to look long and hard at Shastrix. ‘You bloody Agnates get up my arse,’ he said, with all the crude frankness for which he was famed. ‘You leave others to do your shit-shifting, then you bleat about treason. Well, let me tell you now that if I hear you accuse me of anything like that again, I’ll take my vengeance on your own body and on those of every member of your immediate family. I deny absolutely any charge of disloyalty to Deora or to His Majesty, deny it with blood and bone.’

There was another silence. This was the strongest personal challenge possible in Deora.

‘Retract, you fool!’ snapped Yasoth. ‘He doesn’t sound un-Deoran to me! Nor does he look like a man who’s been living a soft life. What’s the Shavlan Envoy like, Van? Is he as treacherous as they say.’

‘The Shavlan Envoy is a she, daughter of Sandur Harknell, no less,’ said Van. ‘And no, she’s not treacherous. She’s a sharp-tempered bitch at times, I’ll admit, but she’s got honour. If she’s typical of their rulers, we can maybe come to some accommodation with them. If she’s not, we’ll have to rethink our position.’

There were nods of agreement at this.

‘Reasonable enough,’ admitted Yasoth. ‘You always did show a sound understanding of possibilities, Van.’

‘Then perhaps we should meet her ourselves,’ said Van Kledin. ‘I believe that we’re expected to do so. We can’t fault her courage, at least, if she accepts an invitation to come and visit us here. What do you think, gentlemen?’

It took two more hours of wrangling before agreement was reached to them first visiting the base and then later inviting the Shavlan Envoy to visit Deora.

When the Deorin at last flickered out of sight, Lilla sank back into her chair and groaned. ‘Your Advisory Council, Van, are the most bloody-minded suspicious people I’ve ever had to deal with. Do they never take anything on trust?’

‘Not when it comes to war and Deora’s welfare, Lilla. Still,’ he beamed at her, ‘things went far better than I’d expected. My father was ready to use his power to veto their decisions, but they actually negotiated an approach to peace, even the Agnates.’

‘Now let’s see if they’ll keep their word,’ she said lightly.

‘I hope they will.’ His expression was grave. ‘I think they will. But so must the Shavlans, Lilla. So must the Shavlans.’

Pedrix, Yasoth and one Jussel Menda, representing the Merchant Guilds, together with the representatives of the Agnates and the Mountain Coalition stepped gingerly into the skim-wing. They sat down in its comfortable seats with the air of men facing a possible ambush. Throughout the half-hour flight, Shastrix, at least, maintained his watchfulness, but the others relaxed somewhat and murmured comments to each other on the speed of the craft and its resistance to the effects of the storm raging outside.

On arrival, they were led into the base by a very respectful junior Confederation officer, who handed them over to Van Makass and Lilla.

Shastrix glared at the carpet. 'Ostentatious decadence!' he said loudly. 'Just what you might expect.' 'One of the fruits of peace,' Lilla said gently. 'But such comforts will not be forced upon you. You can keep your life as austere as you wish.'

Van ignored his fellow countryman's rudeness and suggested a tour of the base. Before they set off, they were joined by Van's two robots, which caused another outburst from Shastrix. The others were more circumspect in what they said, but it was noticeable that no one was keen to walk near the robots.

'Do we have to have those things with us?' asked Gennax.

Lilla nodded. 'I'm afraid so. We've given an undertaking to protect your Envoy to the best of our ability. These robots are the best guards we have. Would you like a demonstration?'

The visitors nodded.

'Perhaps one of you would pretend to attack Van?'

They all looked uncomfortable at the mere idea of attacking the Heir Designate, but in the end Shastrix stepped forward. 'I will, with your permission, War Leader?'

'Of course.' Van grinned, looking forward to Shastrix's discomfiture. 'Only don't do it now, when it's expected. Choose a suitable moment during our tour and give no warning - just try to attack me.'

Shastrix clicked his heels and nodded, his eyes gleaming. As an expert in stealth attacks on individuals, he did not expect to lose and would be happy quite literally to rub Van Makass's face in the dust.

Van led them around the inside of the base, showing them his quarters, then the conference rooms and the gymnasium-pool complex. It was easy enough to find his quarters nowadays. Afterwards he suggested a walk outside to give them some idea of the size of the installation.

As they were walking through the woods, Shastrix made his move against Van. He was stopped before he had taken his second step. The expression of shock on his face was ludicrous.

'That thing is the fastest mover I've ever seen,' said Yasoth quietly. 'I can see that you've been well guarded, Van.'

'In fact, when there was an attempt on my life by a body plant, a robot was destroyed saving me.'

'Why was that information not made public? What did I tell you about Shavlan treachery?' demanded Shastrix, who had not been privy to Council affairs at the time of the attack.

'There was a similar attack on the Shavlan Envoy at the same time,' said Van, with gentle amusement.

'Nor were there any identifying features on the two attackers. They could have been Shavlan - or Deoran. I myself wondered if the Agnates had left the body plants.'

There was a burst of angry comment and discussion, and when that died away Van set off again, winking at Lilla.

As prearranged, Channa and Joran were sitting on the Terrace, sipping fruit drinks. The Deorin stopped dead at the sight of them.

Van strolled forward. 'May I present the Senior Mediator to this Intervention - Joran Lovrel.'

The Deorin nodded, but their eyes edged towards Channa.

'And the Shavlan Envoy.'

Shastrix growled something incomprehensible and tried to take a step backwards, but Yasoth was by his side, grasping his arm.

'A temporary truce is in operation between the Shavlan Envoy and myself,' Van said. 'If you break that, Shastrix, even your own party will disown you. A Deoran's word is his bond.'

Shastrix's face twisted with disgust, but he was as bound by the military codes as the rest of them. 'Your

pardon, Envoy!' he spat at Channa.

'Noble friends,' continued Van, his expression as bland as if this were a social gathering, 'may I present Channa Nestar, born Harknell, the Shavlan Envoy.'

Five pairs of heels clicked in unison and five heads inclined very slightly.

'Please come and sit down, gentlemen,' invited Joran. 'It's about time for refreshments to be served. Afterwards, we'll have a few demonstrations of Confederation technology, if you're interested.'

Food was dispensed rapidly, to a chorus of surprised muttering. Joran and Lilla served themselves first, to allay any suspicions that the food was drugged, but the Agnate still refused to eat or drink.

'How is your new Supreme Council coming along, Channa?' asked Van casually, as if this were not an amazing thing to discuss publicly with an enemy.

Pedrix leaned forward, as if to hear better.

'Well settled in now, and working together to plan for peace.' She looked at the Deorin. 'As I think you know, we had an attempted coup in Prime, gentlemen, by a group which opposed the very idea of peace. It caused us to re-form our ruling group and to rename ourselves the Shavlan Peace Alliance.'

Shastrix was rigid with shock at such openness.

'I - find that hard to believe, Envoy,' Pedrix said at last.

'I've been a little surprised myself at how quickly my fellow Shavlan have started working towards peace,' she admitted. 'Tomorrow, a group from Shavla will be visiting the base, after which Van and I will be going on a formal visit to my mother's estate to start the integration process.'

Even the Agnate was silent as the implications of that sank in. It was left to Pedrix to protest. 'Is that wise, Van? You're the Heir Designate. I'll gladly go on your behalf.'

'I thank you for that offer, Uncle, but I prefer to go myself. My father doesn't object.'

'I'd like to invite the Shavlan Envoy to visit us in Deora soon after that - subject to the Advisory Council's approval, of course,' Van Makass said gently. 'Though perhaps we'd better re-name it the Peace Advisory Council now. If my father agrees.'

Silence greeted his words and he dropped the subject.

After everyone had eaten, Joran said casually, 'Clear the table,' and the food slid away.

'More Confederation technology?' growled Gennax. 'Out to impress the savages, are you?'

'We've agreed to demonstrate some of our technology, gentlemen. That's merely one of our everyday conveniences.'

'Why don't you join us on the rest of our tour, Channa?' Van asked.

She hesitated. 'I don't wish to intrude. Perhaps your companions would prefer it if I stayed here.'

Van raised an eyebrow at the group and it was Jussel Menda, who spoke. 'I think, Envoy, that we must get used to each other's presence.' He made a graceful gesture of invitation and walked along beside her, asking seemingly casual questions about her stay at the base and her reactions to Confederation technology.

She answered with equal casualness, but was aware that she was being pumped for information about trading conditions in Shavla by a most skilful questioner. Van winked at her a couple of times and Joran listened courteously to another of the visitors as they walked. Lilla walked alone until Pedrix, out of innate courtesy, included her in his conversation.

The plant laboratories and synthesis systems were almost incomprehensible to the visitors and the marvels displayed there rendered them speechless again.

'It'd be a suicide mission to fight them,' said Pedrix when they were back in Firstfall.

'Made me feel like a savage,' admitted Jussel. 'Our War Leader seems to take it all in his stride now, though, so I dare say we'll get used to it.' Which made it clear that the Merchant Guilds were in favour of peace.

* * *

The following evening, Joran and Channa had a spa together after an exhausting day showing the entire Shavlan Decision Group round the base.

'Did you notice that my father took me aside after lunch?' she asked, making little splashes with her

fingertips.

‘Yes, of course.’

‘Did you play back the recordings?’ There was no longer any pretence that her every move was not under scrutiny.

‘Not yet. Should I have?’

‘You might have found them personally interesting - or perhaps you might not.’ He still had not spoken of the future, still had not told her whether he would be leaving once the negotiations were over. And yet he spoke sometimes of long-term possibilities for their relationship. And she wondered about a breeding contract - eventually, not for a long time.

‘Tell me why, Channa.’ He gave her one of his straight, serious looks that always made her feel wary.

‘He suggested that we look into making a dynastic marriage - between me and Van.’

‘Did he, now!’

‘He intimated that it might be the best way to cement a peace on Evral.’

‘And is it?’

‘It might be. But not the only way. I said that I wasn’t interested, not under any circumstances.’

‘You should think about it.’

‘I don’t want to settle down to child-rearing. You of all people know that.’

‘Why me of all people?’

‘Because you know me better than anyone else does. And because you . . .’ She broke off, not daring to put her feelings into words.

He finished the sentence for her. ‘Because I love you, Channa.’ He reached out to grasp her wet hand.

‘Oh, Channa mine, if only we were free agents, I’d invite you to come see the galaxy with me, to join my cohabitation group, to . . .’ He, too, broke off abruptly, then he said harshly. ‘But we’re not free.

Neither of us is free. And you’ll have to give your father’s suggestion very serious consideration.’

‘What about my rights as an individual? Surely I’ve earned those rights!’

‘What about Shavla?’ he asked softly. ‘Can you deny its need, if this is the best path towards peace?’

She shook her head. ‘No. For Shavla,’ tears were trickling from her eyes now, ‘I will give my all.’ She sniffed them away and raised her chin determinedly. ‘But only, Joran, if I have to.’

* * *

Two days later a skim-wing set off at an early hour to take the two Mediators and the Envoys to the Nestar estate. This would be their first visit to any other part of the planet for several months and normally Channa would have relished her freedom, but somehow, today she had a sense of decisions being forced upon her, decisions she did not want to face yet.

For this visit the robots had been left behind, but only after much discussion between the four of them.

Both Channa and Van Makass would be allowed to carry a minor weapon from now on, a parade dagger each, not because they were expected to be needed for self-defence, but because not to wear them would seem bizarre and even cowardly to both Shavlans and Deorin.

They were greeted in style, with an assembly of guards in dress uniforms and all section heads invited to share a meal with them. Sandur also joined them and might have been greeting an old friend in Van Makass. With his and Riahn’s social and diplomatic skills to oil the wheels, the encounter went as well as could be expected. Fenneth remained visibly suspicious, but the rest of the company made every effort to behave as if this were a normal visit from a new ally.

After lunch, Channa proposed a walk through the backlands. ‘The resin woods here are rather lovely. It’s nice to get right away from buildings sometimes into truly wild country, though it’s a rare treat when one is at war.’

‘Rare, indeed,’ Van agreed. ‘Hopefully the next generation on Evral will be able to enjoy more personal freedom than we did.’

‘Hopefully.’

As they moved into the resin woods, Van threw back his head and breathed deeply. ‘This reminds me a bit of my own estate.’

Somehow the two of them were walking together, and Sandur was smiling benignly at them as he kept the Mediators occupied. Channa's lips tightened. Trust her father to start scheming again. She might not carry the Harknell name, but she would never escape his manipulations as long as she stayed on Shavla. Riahn, too, nodded approval and Channa's heart sank as she realised that her mother was also in favour of a union with Van Makass.

'Is that where your wife lives?' she asked Van, to make sure he didn't get any false impressions about her own intentions towards him.

'No. Julian prefers life at court. She was raised for that and she knows nothing else. She hates country estates. She manages my father's household in the Grand Palace for him now. I don't see her very often, Channa. I've never found her very - er - entertaining. The place I call home is where my children live, where I lived myself as a child. You'd like it, I think.'

She made a non-committal noise and tried desperately to think of some other topic of conversation. Van was not to be deflected. 'I keep my children away from the court as much as I can - while they're young, anyway. The older boys still go home when they're on leave from the Cadet Corps. The older girls now live with their mother most of the time. Julian is training them for their future role as mothers of the nobility.'

'How many children do you have?'

'Six.'

She shuddered visibly.

He turned to frown at her. 'You hate the idea of breeding, don't you?'

'Yes.'

'We don't shut our women up in breeding pens like you Shavlans do, you know. We think a pregnant woman very beautiful in her fullness.'

She shuddered again, so he reverted to the subject of his children, whom he had missed greatly. 'None of my children show much promise, politically. No leaders there. If I married again, I'd not be dispossessing them. Their mother's family is not noted for its intelligence, rather for its stubbornness and conservatism. Channa . . .'

'Don't say it!'

'Why not? You must realise that if we two married, it'd be the best thing to cement the peace.'

'Has my father been talking to you?'

'No, mine. Yours, I presume, has said the same thing to you?'

'Yes. And I told him no. As I tell you. I have no wish to marry, no wish to breed in the Shavlan fashion, either. In fact, no wish to give up my freedom. And I see no need for it, either.'

'Do you and I really have any freedom?'

'So we were told during Part One of the mediation. They made quite a point of our accepting our individuality, if you remember.'

'It's not just duty, Channa. I wish to marry you more than you perhaps realise. It's not like a breeding contract or a dynastic marriage, not for me, anyway. I love you.'

'Van, don't.' She kicked at some resin balls, sending them skittering into a tree trunk and releasing their perfume. 'I love Joran very much indeed. I want to leave Evral with him, travel, see a little of the Galaxy. I don't want to settle down and bear children.'

'Has he offered you this?'

'Not in so many words. But I'm still leaving - with or without him. I'm not staying here and I'm not getting married to you!'

His grin was crooked. 'I can accept your love for Joran, if I have to, but can you deny your duty?'

She made no answer, but slowed her steps, so that they rejoined the group around her father. Van was not allowed to see that his words had hit home.

Before they left, Riahn took her daughter aside. 'There's someone whom I think you should meet.'

'Oh?'

'Come with me.'

Channa looked round and caught her father's eye. He gave her an encouraging nod in the direction of the doorway, so she followed her mother. 'Who is it?'

'You'll see in a minute.'

'Where are we going?'

'The breeding pens.'

Channa stopped dead. 'Why? You know how I hate such places.'

Riahn took her arm. 'For once in your life, just do as you're told and come with me.'

At the breeding pens, Riahn nodded to the doorkeeper and walked inside. Channa swallowed hard and followed her, past the living areas, past the bed chambers, past the birthing suites. They went through a locked door, to which Riahn carried a key and into another suite.

'What is this place?'

'It's our private suite. A sort of refuge. For those who need it. Sit down, Channa, and listen.' She seemed ill at ease, uncertain of what to say. 'Do you remember your cousin Mirral?'

Channa gave an involuntary glance around, double-checking that they were alone, then nodded.

'She's here. She wants to see you.'

'Mirral's here - alive?' The words came out as harsh scrapes of sound, so shocked was Channa.

Riahn was watching her daughter carefully. 'We rescued her - when we found out that Kristan had arranged for her to fail her verification. Unfortunately, not in time to prevent her enduring a living hell.'

'Kristan arranged it! By why would he do that?'

'Even as a boy he was obsessed with you. You and Mirral were inseparable. He resented that. Sandur had already arranged for him to be stationed as far away as possible, to give you time to grow up. What neither of us had expected was that he'd volunteer for Interrogator training - or that he'd pass all their tests brilliantly while he was still so young - or that he'd bribe someone to fail Mirral.'

'And my father still wanted me to sign a breeding contract with him?' Channa's face was rigid with the fury that she was trying to hold in.

'Yes. For the faction's sake. You know how Sandur places duty above everything else.'

Channa managed a nod, but her throat felt as if it had been glued together and she had to force the words out. 'I'll never forgive him for that - not after Mirral.'

'And yet it was Sandur who arranged her rescue, who contacted us, who brought her here. At some risk to himself. Don't forget that.'

'Huh!'

'Do you want to meet Mirral?'

Another nod.

There was the sound of a door closing as Riahn left and by the time Channa looked up, another door at the rear of the room had opened and Mirral had come in, a Mirral who looked twenty years older than Channa and who was hesitating in the doorway as if she expected to be rebuffed.

Channa flung herself across the room. The two women hugged each other and both shed tears, then Channa led Mirral to a couch.

'I thought you wouldn't want to meet me again.'

'How could you ever think that, Mirral?'

'Because I was - they made me into a - a recreation whore.'

Channa's arms tightened around her friend. 'That doesn't matter to me. It doesn't matter in the least. And if I ever see Kristan again, I'll shoot him on sight, like the filthy vicious madman he is.'

'Your father says he's disappeared.'

'Yes, damn him!'

Mirral shivered. 'I don't want to meet him - not ever again.'

An hour later, there was a knock on the door. Riahn poked her head into the room. 'Time you rejoined the others now, I'm afraid, Channa.'

As they walked back towards the main Residence, Channa stopped and looked at her mother. 'Will Mirral ever recover fully?'

‘Probably not fully. But she’ll lead a quiet happy life here, I promise you. She’s wonderful with children and now we can use her openly as a nursemaid.’

On the way back, Channa studiously avoided her father’s company. At the base she gave Joran a curt summary of the situation, then she vanished into her suite. Sometimes, you needed to be alone.

* * *

During the next two months, there was a great deal of ceremonial visiting by the Mediators and the Envoys, so that all the factions in Shavla and all the main noble houses in Deora could make a start in integration.

Inevitably the turn came for them to visit the Harknell Estate and it was with mixed feelings that Channa sat in the skim-wing and watched the land beneath them grow very familiar.

‘Home?’ Joran asked softly.

‘Not any more.’ Her eyes were clouded. ‘Nowhere in Shavla really seems home now.’

‘Yes. I was afraid of that happening to you. Negotiations sometimes leave envoys alienated from their cultures.’

‘What about Van? It doesn’t seem to have affected him.’

‘He’s more tied to Deora than you are to Shavla, and always was. If you had not been so quick to change, we’d have let him progress at a slower rate. As it was, we felt it best that he keep up with you.’

‘Is there no end to your machinations? What are you planning for me now, Joran? A cosy little marriage with Van? I won’t, you know!’ Her eyes sparkled with resentment and he thought that she was beginning to lose that war-weary look. Her hair was now shoulder length and she had stopped wearing the Shavlan uniform, though she would still not be seen publicly in a robe if she could help it. The difference between her and the militaristic automaton he had met that first day struck him regularly. As did her vibrant beauty.

He knew that she wanted to leave Evral with him and spend some time living together, but he could not make that offer at this stage, not until he had carefully analysed the probable outcomes of each possible course of action. He was under very special instructions from Central about these negotiations. Minimum intervention, except in an emergency. The analysts apparently found Evral a rich subject of study and considered it one of the most vitally-alive cultures they had ever encountered. He had not mentioned that to the envoys yet.

Over the past few days, his feeling that something would happen to disrupt the routine of their current round of visits had grown stronger, but he was not sure what that something might be. Like Channa, he was feeling his way by instinct, waiting. Like Channa, he was personally unhappy.

What he did not know was that Channa had more than a feeling that something was going to happen; she had a strong sense of foreboding that something very bad was going to happen soon. And she did not know what to do about it.

The Harknell Residence seemed smaller than she remembered and very alien to Channa. She smiled and nodded to her colleagues and to her kin, but a sense of unreality gnawed at her comfort today and a sense of unease whispered through her.

Sandur was at her side as soon as she stepped out of the aircraft. He drew Van Makass into a small central group and kept him there beside his daughter. She threw a glance of frustration at Joran, but he merely shrugged and turned back to Fellass and Sheera, who were beseiging him with questions about Confederation technology. Lilla was being monopolised by Tillith, who seemed very well established now

in the central power group.

After yet another ceremonial meal and speeches of welcome to 'our Deoran ally', Channa broke protocol and suggested that they go for a stroll in the grounds of the estate. 'I'd like to walk as far as the cave, and really stretch my legs. I think Van feels the same way. I'm losing my fitness, sitting around like this.'

Within the hour, she was striding along between her father and Van, followed by Joran and Lilla and a group of senior staff. Some walk, she grumbled to herself. More like an informal parade. If an enemy scored a hit now, they'd wipe out our faction. She stopped dead in her tracks on that thought.

'Father!'

'Yes?'

'Father, this is dangerous.'

'What?'

'This - the whole group. If someone wanted to wipe out our faction, they could do it with ease.'

'We're at peace now, Channa, are we not?'

'We might be at peace, but if you don't break up this group, I'll turn and head for the residence. I feel - there's something wrong about it.'

He stood and frowned. 'Well, if it makes you feel more comfortable . . . Joran, my daughter has just pointed out that we're exposing the whole of our faction's central command group in one place at the moment. It's making her uneasy, spoiling her pleasure in this walk. Would you object to some of us returning to the residence?'

'I thought we were at peace.' Joran raised one eyebrow at Channa.

'Yes. I just feel - it's too risky.'

'Perhaps we should all go back.'

She raised her face to the blue of the sky and let the clean wind ruffle her hair. 'I'd hate to give up my walk. I'd just - feel better if we weren't all grouped into such a nice little target.'

Lilla moved to join them. 'Perhaps our foursome could continue alone for a while. It's some time since we've enjoyed any privacy - no offence meant, Sandur. The negotiations have made the four of us feel quite coherent as a group.' Without waiting for an answer, she turned to her colleague. 'Joran, I have a whim to scramble among those rocks. They remind me very much of my home on Terra. Do you get tiny flowers in the crevices, Channa?'

'Yes. You'll probably find them beautiful.'

Joran and Lilla started off up the rock-strewn hillside and Sandur smiled as Channa was left with Van.

'We'll see you back at the residence, then. No hurry. I'll leave a five-team of guards here to wait for you.'

Once he had left, Channa turned on Van. 'Don't start again! I'm not marrying you and that's flat!'

He shrugged. 'Did I say anything? Let's just enjoy a brief taste of freedom. We don't get much of it in our lives.'

They followed Joran and Lilla up the hillside, overtaking them as they crouched over some tiny rock flowers, engaged in an animated discussion. Channa shook her head in puzzlement. She could not get enthusiastic about flowers.

'Our cave's just up here,' she said, as the flower talk persisted. 'I'd like to visit it once more, if you don't mind.' She managed to organise it so that she was paired with Joran and grinned to think of how annoyed her father would be at that.

'What mischief are you up to now, Channa mine?' he asked. 'I never trust you when you grin like that.'

'I'm just enjoying your company, Joran. It makes a change, with the way everyone is pushing me at Van.' She stared at him defiantly. 'And no, I haven't changed my mind. I won't marry him and become a royal brood mother.' Her resolution on this point only strengthened as time passed. Whatever Joran said or did, she had decided, she would not enter into a dynastic marriage, which might turn out to be even more permanent than a Shavlan breeding contract.

She pushed into the cave and he followed, stumbling until his eyes grew accustomed to the

semi-darkness. A thin fan of dusty filtered light from some holes high up in the rock illuminated the cave enough for them to make their way across the entrance chamber and down a passage to where the rocky shelf had provided seating for generations of Harknells and Harravays.

As they turned into this, a voice whispered, 'Move forward very quietly, or I'll shoot you both here and now.'

They both froze where they stood.

Kristan lounged out from behind a rock and gestured with the gun in his right hand. 'This is a regular handgun and gives you a clean death. The other one,' he wagged his left hand, 'is loaded with frenthene and gives you a long slow death. Your choice, Channa. How do you want your friend to die?'

She kept her hands slightly raised and moved forward as quietly as she could, hoping desperately that Joran would follow her example. She would not sentence her worst enemy, not even Kristan himself, to death by frenthene paralysis.

'Very sensible,' said that hated voice. 'But then, you've always been noted for your good sense, haven't you, Channa? You're a Harknell, after all.' That seemed to amuse him but his laughter was no more than a silent wheeze. 'Now, if you'll look on the ledge over there, you'll find some restraint cuffs.'

She turned and his breath hissed out, stopping her in her tracks. 'Move more slowly, Channa. I might get nervous with the frenthene. I have it aimed straight at your lover, you Deoran-sucking whore! Call yourself an Envoy!' He actually spat in her direction. 'All you've done is opened your legs to this softbellied bastard. Well, I hope you learned a few good tricks from him, because I'm going to need a lot of entertaining over the next few hours.' The left-hand gun wagged again. 'And as for you, Terran, if you so much as open your mouth, I'll fill it full of frenthene. Not - one - word.'

Channa walked slowly over to the ledge and did as Kristan had directed, making sure that every movement was visible and unthreatening. 'How do you wish him fastened?' she asked, as calmly as if she were Kristan's accomplice.

'Hands behind his back, what else? It's old-fashioned, but you can't beat it for keeping people out of trouble. Oh, and there's another pair there for his ankles. We can't have him moving around, can we?'

Channa made no attempt even to look at Joran as she secured him with the restraint cuffs. Kristan strode across, checked her work and then kicked Joran's feet from beneath him, laughing as he tumbled awkwardly against a rock. Channa remained where she was, slightly turned towards Kristan. 'What now?' she asked, still sounding calm and at ease.

'Now you come over here and take your clothes off. He'll probably enjoy watching me screw you. They're all perverts, those Terrans.'

She moved obediently across and started to remove her top, hoping that Van would hear something and come to their rescue. A heavy hand knocked her suddenly to the ground and she lay there for the moment, gasping with pain, her head spinning. 'There now,' said Kristan, 'I nearly forgot to trip the landslide.'

Her heart sank as he boasted, 'We'll be shut in here for a long time, Channa, a long long time. No hope of an early rescue, I'm afraid. I'm good with explosives. When that hill slides, it'll close us in here snugly, just the two of us.' He grabbed her by the hair and pulled her with him towards the side wall. 'You can even pull the trigger rope for me, and shut us in here. Nice and cosy, eh? Just the two of us. Oh, and him of course, watching.'

He chuckled as she hesitated. 'Frenthene or a bullet?' he prompted and she tugged on the rope. There was a loud rumble and the walls shook around them. When the noise faded away, they were in complete darkness.

'Shook that hill up, didn't we?' Kristan's hand was still holding her by the hair and his hoarse chuckle sounded next to her ear. 'Your two friends outside will think it's just a natural accident. How they'll scabble to get you out! But I made sure that all the passages would collapse. I've got food and water, so we won't die yet. I'm going to shoot you just as they reach us. Nice touch, that, eh? It'll upset your disloyal bastard of a father for the rest of his life. He should have kept his promises. Mind you, if I'm really lucky, he'll be close enough for me to shoot him as well before I die, then your mother will have to

weep alone.'

Channa remained perfectly still in the darkness, knowing that Kristan had too great an advantage over her at the moment. She felt his other hand paw her face, then he twisted her hair more firmly into his fingers again, making sure that it would hurt. 'Very wise. Keep absolutely still unless I tell you to move and don't make trouble you won't be able to handle.'

At least, she thought, while he was busy with her, he wasn't shooting Joran. When he dragged her back into the inner cave, and threw her on the ground, she simply lay there and waited. Light appeared suddenly and then she allowed herself a quick glance around. Joran was still lying on the ground, where Kristan had kicked him and his eyes gleamed at her briefly from the peripheral darkness. Kristan was standing over her.

'Get up, Channa. You were starting to take your clothes off.'

She stood up as slowly as she dared. She had once thought that to be in Kristan's power in a Correction Centre would be the most dreadful thing that could ever happen to her. This was worse, far worse, for at the end of it lay only death. All she could buy with her compliance was a clean death for Joran.

With teeth gritted, she removed her clothes, enduring Kristan's comments on her body and what he was going to do with it as stoically as she hoped to endure everything else. She discovered, however, that the sight of his arousal made it hard for her to maintain her veneer of calm. He fumbled in his pocket and produced yet another pair of restraint cuffs and her heart thudded as he jingled them suggestively.

'You're beginning to look nervous, Channa girl, and with very - very - good reason.' He jingled them again. 'You didn't honestly think that I'd leave you free to hit me over the head with a piece of rock, did you? Come over here.'

She would have liked to speak back to him, but found her throat too dry. He was, she remembered, her belly knotting with fear, an expert torturer. She did, however, manage to walk slowly across and hold her wrists out to him.

'Hands behind you,' he grunted. 'Turn round.'

She felt the cuffs snick into place and waited for him to start invading her body, but he didn't. Instead he ordered, 'Look at your lover.'

When she did so, he raised his left hand and calmly shot Joran.

'No!' she screamed. 'No!' She tried to run across to him, but could only stand there, with Kristan holding the cuffs behind her and laughing heartily. As she watched, that dreadful glazed frenthene look came into Joran's eyes and she knew that she had lost him. 'I love you, Joran,' she said loudly, hoping he would hear that.

She was clouted so hard she was thrown half across the cave. She didn't bother to get up, just waited for Kristan to come and claim her. Waited so long that in the end she rolled over to try to see what he was doing now.

He was just removing the last of his clothes and spreading a quilt on the ground. He saw her watching and laughed again. 'I might as well be comfortable - though I can't promise the same for you, I'm afraid.'

'I'm beyond caring, Kristan. You're insane and I'm as good as dead, so what does anything matter any more.'

'They all think that at this stage,' he said in a matter-of-fact tone. 'That's before I prove otherwise, of course. In about four hours, you'll be begging me to kill you. And I won't. Not until much later. Now, start crawling over here. I shall enjoy seeing you crawl.'

'No.'

'Dear me! You are asking for trouble.'

As she watched him start moving towards her, the blackness behind him moved and Kristan jerked suddenly before falling to the ground. She strained her eyes to see what had happened but the shadows were too deep.

When Van stepped out into the light he bent first to check his handiwork. 'Dead,' he pronounced.

Channa could not speak or move. So silently had Van moved that neither she nor Kristan had realised he

was in the cave with them. So quickly had Kristan died that she was still in shock.

Van's voice reached out to her across the cave. 'I didn't dare move until I could be sure of getting him. This damned ornamental dagger's not much use in a real fight.'

She managed to whisper, 'Van! Oh, Van!'

He was fumbling among Kristan's clothes. 'You're safe now, Channa, quite safe. When I've found the keys to those cuffs, I'll come and help you.'

Only then did she start to weep, because it was too late. There was no help Van could offer. Joran was in frenthene paralysis and there was no antidote. She continued to weep helplessly as Van unfastened the cuffs and then she flung herself upon Joran's body, caressing his frozen face.

Van let her cry for a while, but lifted her off as the flood of tears showed no signs of abating. 'Come now!' he said sharply, shaking her. 'He can hear all this. You're only making it worse for him.'

She gulped to a halt and sat there beside Joran, still touching his hand, but leaning against Van as well. 'I'm sorry. I just - I can't believe it's happened.'

'Do you want me to shoot him now? The poor bastard must be going through hell.'

If it had been a Shavlan, she would have agreed, would have given him that final mercy herself. But he was a Terran. What would a Terran want? She grasped Van's arm suddenly as a thought occurred to her. 'Do you think - is it possible that Those of the Confederation have an antidote to frenthene?'

'I doubt it. Bodies are still bodies and that's a strong poison. You'd be fooling yourself if you got your hopes up.'

'Yes, I suppose you're right, but - I still don't think we should kill him.'

'Whatever you say. Lilla went back for help before that lunatic triggered the cave-in. Let's hope they can get us out of here.'

'If my father can't, Confederation technology will.'

It was several hours before they heard a whine and felt the earth shake beneath their feet.

'Confederation technology,' said Van with satisfaction.

'Yes,' she said, but what did it matter if Joran was dead?

The first through the hole that fused through the rock was one of the robots. 'Fess, see to Joran first!'

Channa called urgently. 'He's been shot with frenthene. It paralyses its victim. We have no known antidote on Evral.' She held out the gun. 'This is full of frenthene. It may help you.'

The robot took the gun from her hand and scooped up Joran's body. It was out of the cave within seconds, moving in its usual blur of speed.

When it had disappeared, Sandur's voice came down the tube of fused rock. 'Channa? Channa, are you all right?'

Her voice was dull. 'I'm still alive, Father, and so is Van. We're crawling out now.'

When they got outside, it was nearly dawn. Channa stood up and could not think how to move another step. Van's arm around her shoulders was a comfort. Her father's torrent of words passed through her without making any impression.

'Shut up, Sandur. Your daughter needs a bit of peace and quiet,' said Van. 'Lilla? Oh, there you are! Does your marvellous technology have something to help her?'

Lilla stepped forward. 'Yes, of course. And you.'

He looked surprised. 'I'm all right.' Then he realised that tears were streaming down his face and that he was shaking nearly as much as Channa. A figure in white appeared beside him and granted him some blessed oblivion.

Channa awoke to a world of gleaming metal. She had no sooner opened her eyes than a voice asked, 'Can you hear me?'

'Yes. Of course I can.' She blinked her eyes into better focus and realised that the figure beside her was a medic. 'Where am I?'

'On the space transport. We have better medical facilities here.' A hand was feeling her forehead, moving the side of her head, which felt bruised, and generally behaving as medics' hands always did, as if it had taken charge of her body and owned it temporarily.

She shook him off as memory flooded back. 'Joran! How's Joran? Could you - did you - ?' she did not dare finish her question.

'Joran's in an intensive care bubble and will be there for several more days. That's the most virulent poison we've ever encountered.'

'You mean - you saved him?'

'Yes, of course.'

Relief made her head spin. 'He'll live? He won't be paralysed?' she persisted.

'I've just told you so!'

'Can I see him?'

'No, of course you can't.'

She lay back, feeling a wetness on her cheeks. She didn't care if anyone saw it. Joran would live! The medic continued to poke and prod and to ask questions, which she answered automatically. Eventually, he gave her grudging permission to get up and even helped her to don a ship suit. She was weaker than she had expected, but what did that matter?

With unaccustomed docility, she followed the medic to a cabin that was an aching reminder of her visits to the transport with Joran. It took her a while to realise that one of the peace robots was following them and even then, she only smiled briefly at the sight. 'How soon can I see Joran?' she asked as the medic as he turned to leave.

'I just told you. Not for several days.' He swung her round to stare into her eyes. 'Still some shock,' he grumbled. 'You should be in bed, really.' After that, he left her in the robot's care and she sat on the bed, trying to think what she should do.

Lilla poked her head round the door. 'Channa. How are you feeling?'

'Sort of numb. Joran is all right, isn't he?'

'Yes. You won't be able to see him for several days, though.'

'Just as long as he's all right.'

'Would you like to eat here or in the officers' mess?'

'I don't care - whatever you want.'

She could see Lilla looking at her sharply and tried to pull herself together. 'I - still feel - distant. I'll be all right.'

'Your father's waiting to see you.'

'Oh. Yes.' He would be.

Sandur and Riahn were both there and they pounced on Channa the minute she appeared. She answered their queries with weary patience and at last took refuge in a pretence that she was hungry. As she was choosing some food, Van appeared in the doorway. 'May I join you?'

'Please do,' said Lilla, but it was Channa on whom his eyes lingered, and Channa whom he sat opposite.

Afterwards, she managed to get a few moments alone with Van so that she could thank him properly for saving her life. She bowed her head as she finished her thanks and said the ritual phrases awkwardly.

'You saved my life; I give it to you now, in Shavla's name.' When he said nothing, she asked, 'Do you know our tradition?'

'Yes. I'm supposed to return your life to you now, am I not? To tell you I forgive you the obligation - in Shavla's name.'

'Yes. Unless you have any use for my life. Van . . .'

'I do have a use for your life, Channa, and I've no desire to set you free of your obligation.' His voice was gentle but adamant. 'Not just for myself, but for Deora - Shavla, too. You know your duty.'

She stared at him aghast. 'Van, please don't!'

'I must!' His voice grew louder, firmer. 'You know your duty as well as I do, Channa.'

The world seemed to still around them as she stared at him. 'Yes. My duty,' she managed at last.

'You've been saying "Serve Shavla" for nearly as long as I've been saying "For Deora". Will you deny that duty now?'

She was tired, too tired to argue. Besides, he had the right. He had not only saved her; he had saved Joran's life, too. 'No. I won't deny it now.'

'Give me your word.'

'On the blood of my kinfolk, I promise to - to do my duty to you.'

Van nodded, but to her relief, he made no attempt to pull her into his arms, just looked at her hungrily, as men often looked at her, as Joran never looked at her. 'It'll take a while to arrange the technicalities. Julian won't give me any trouble. She's never really been interested in me. So I foresee no difficulties about in our marrying.'

Marrying. It had such a final sound. She took a deep breath. 'I'd prefer a standard breeding contract.'

'No chance, Channa. We need to marry, to become the visible sign of union between Shavla and Deora.'

She swallowed hard, then shrugged. What did it matter? Van would be kind to her, at least. For Shavla, she told herself. For Shavla I will give my all. But the words echoed emptily inside her head.

She made only one condition. 'No announcement until I've spoken to Joran.'

'Very well. But see that you remember your promise.'

It was ten days before she could see Joran and she could not speak at first for shock. He was thin to the point of emaciation and looked considerably older, more like Joran's grandfather.

'Well, then, Channa?' he asked, with his old smile. 'Do you still love me as much as you did in the cave?'

She nodded, but dared not cross the room to touch him.

'What's holding you over there, then? I'm still too weak to do more than stumble around. You'll have to come to me.'

She chose to sit by his feet and lay her head on his knees. 'Van saved my life,' she said tersely. 'And yours. That places me under an obligation to him.'

She could feel him tensing. 'What's this leading to, Channa mine?'

'Joran, I've had to - to agree to marry Van, in fulfilment of that obligation - and because it's one way of serving Shavla. My duty, if you like.'

His hand began to stroke her hair and it was all she could do not to turn and throw herself into his arms.

'Do you want to marry him?' he asked. 'Would you have married him if he hadn't saved your life?'

'No to both those questions. Did you even need to ask?'

'Then I don't see why you should have to marry him, my dear.'

'I've given him my word.'

The hand paused for a moment. 'Hmm. Unthinkable that you break it. Could he still break the agreement between you?'

'He could, but he won't.' It was an effort to control her voice, but she had vowed not to weep.

'I think you would make a very poor Empress for Deora, especially feeling as you do.'

'I think so, too. But I have no choice. Van's determined to marry me.'

'A further piece of information has come to light during our treatment. Lilla wisely arranged that it not be revealed till I could speak to you.'

'Oh?' Her voice was toneless. Nothing could make any difference to her now.

A moment later, she had leaped to her feet and was glaring down at him. 'Say that again!'

'I said, you're pregnant.'

'I can't be!'

'You are.'

'You did this on purpose, didn't you?'

'I have to tell you that for all our marvellous Confederation technology, your impregnation was an accident. I did not do it on purpose. When I decide to have a child, I arrange matters joyfully - and usually, the mother shows some sign of interest in the business as well.'

She continued to glare down at him. 'Well, I've never, ever wanted to bear children, as you very well know! So you can just get me unpregnant again as quickly as possible. I presume your marvellous technology has some way of dealing with such mistakes?'

He scowled back. 'If I wasn't so weak, I'd shake you for that!'

'If you weren't so weak, I'd already have punched you in the face! How dare you get me pregnant!'

'You were unprotected as well, Channa. It takes two to make a child.'

'Oh, you'll have an answer. You always have an answer.' She marched across to the com-unit and shouted into it. 'Get me a medic! Immediately!'

Joran's voice cut into hers. 'Cancel that order. Leave us in complete privacy.'

'There you go again, imposing your will on me!'

He tried to get up and failed. Sweat was pouring off his face and he looked ghastly.

She paused in her pacing up and down to mop his forehead and push him back down. 'Lie there, you fool! You're still as weak as a two-year-old.'

'If you'll promise to stay next to me and talk this out.'

She sighed loudly, but sat down opposite him, arms folded.

'Do you honestly wish to kill our child, so that you may then bear one to Van Makass?'

She opened her mouth, shut it and the frown faded into bewilderment. 'Oh, Shavla!' She swallowed hard. 'I don't know what I want any more,' she whispered. 'All I know is, I gave him my solemn word that I would marry him.'

'Then we'll need to tell him what's happened. I won't give permission for you to kill my child, you know, Channa. And in the Confederation, it takes the permission of both parents before an abortion can be arranged. As you rightly surmise, the procedure is very standard and is carried out for many reasons. I won't allow it this time. If this child is the only thing I'm going to have to remember you by, then so be it.'

He leaned back against his pillow and listened as she raged at him.

Eventually, she ran out of steam and broke off in the middle of a sentence. 'Oh, damn you men!' she said fervently. 'Devil-bred, the lot of you!'

'Shall we send for Van now and see what he wants to do?'

'I suppose so.'

He watched her closely as he called instructions to the com-unit, but her face had become fierce, her emotions hidden beneath the anger.

When Van joined them, she took the lead. 'Something's cropped up, Van. Something I didn't expect.'

He was watching them both warily. 'Yes?'

'I'm pregnant.' She waited for a reaction and when he said nothing, she shouted, 'Did you hear me? I'm pregnant, damn you!'

'Him?'

'Who else?'

'Was this done on purpose?'

'No, of course it wasn't! It's the last thing I'd want. What do I care about motherhood?'

'Can you get rid of it?'

She jerked her hand at Joran. 'He won't!'

'We can fix that up in Deora.' He held out his hand to her, imperatively.

'You gave me your word,' he reminded her when she did not move.

Joran said quietly, 'She doesn't leave this ship until I have her word that she'll do nothing to harm our child.'

Van looked at him, then at Channa. 'You know his child wouldn't be acceptable to the Deoran nobility.'

'It isn't acceptable to me, either!' She glared at them both. 'It's easy for you men. You don't have to bear the children! Oh, I hate you all!'

Van looked back at Joran. 'Do you intend to jeopardise this whole mediation by your refusal to see sense?'

Joran shook his head. 'No. But have you thought how she'd fit into Deoran life, to child-bearing, to a restricted circle of nobly-bred buffoons? It'll be generations before things really change at court. She'd go mad - or explode - or kill someone.'

Van became very still.

Joran's face was full of sympathy.

Minutes crawled past as Van studied Channa, who was pacing up and down, muttering to herself, rage evident in every twist of her body. 'She wouldn't fit,' he said at last. 'She'd shock them rigid.'

Joran nodded. 'She would indeed. We ran an analysis on the probabilities. You wouldn't be happy in the marriage. Neither would she. And it'd do no good to Shavlan-Deoran relationships.'

After another silence, Van said tightly, 'Looks like you win, then.' He didn't move, just stood staring at Channa longingly.

Joran gave him an understanding look. 'She'll give me hell.'

'Yes, I'm sure she will. But I still envy you.'

Channa came to stand between them and put her hands on her hips. 'Stop talking about me as if I'm a - a thing to be handed from one to the other!'

Van smiled at her, his twisted smile. 'I release you from your obligation to me and from your promise.

Good luck, Channa.' He stood looking at her for a few more seconds, then strode out of the door.

Channa remained where she was, hostility radiating from her. 'Let's get one thing straight now - I won't be treated as your possession, Joran Lovrel!'

'I wouldn't dare, Channa mine, I wouldn't dare. Er - there's just one other thing you need to know.'

'Oh yes?'

'I was lying to you. You're not pregnant.'

'What!' She stood frozen in her indignation, unable to put her fury into words for a minute or two, then it poured out of her. 'You told me that mediators don't lie! You - you're as bad as the lowest Deoran spawn, Joran Lovrel. You had me convinced! I believed you! What other lies have you been spinning to me? And let me tell you that if you weren't so ill, I'd take great pleasure in demonstrating some of our dirtiest tricks of unarmed combat to you!'

He was shaking with laughter as he held up one hand. 'Wait just a minute before you attack me. Please, Channa.'

'You're laughing at me again! Why do you always have to laugh at me? I suppose I'm just a primitive fool to you! Well, I'm not staying here to be mocked and - and . . . '

He stood up with some difficulty and wavered across to her, half collapsing against her, rather than taking her into his arms. 'You're not primitive - well, not very.' As he looked down at her, his face showed only love, so that her anger stilled for a moment and she listened to what he was saying. 'Mediators don't lie, my beloved - but I'm no longer a mediator on this Intervention. I was relieved of my duties when your damned frenthene proved so difficult to shake off. It'll take me at least a year to convalesce, they tell me, and after that, no one can tell whether I'll be fit for further field work. So I'm going home for a time and after that I've agreed to serve for a year or so as a lecturer and researcher at the Peace Corps Academy.'

'Shavla protect the students!' she said fervently. 'Still, who better to teach them your dirty sneaking Terran tricks.'

He swayed. 'You'll have to help me back to the bed. I'm disgustingly weak.'

Fuming, she did as he asked, not surprised when he tugged her down to join him there.

'You didn't really want to marry Van Makass, did you?' he asked.

'You know I didn't. I don't want to marry anyone. Especially a two-faced liar like you.'

'Oh, that's a pity! As my partner, you'd be able to do a lot of travelling, see several other planets on the way back to Terra.'

She lay rigid beside him. 'Not your wife?'

'We don't really get married any more, Channa mine, just arrange a partnership agreement. You could call yourself my wife if you wanted.'

'I don't!'

'But the partnership agreement would contain a clause where you would promise to bear me a child.'

'I might have known you'd make a stipulation like that!'

'So if you're interested, you'd better start thinking about your own conditions and deciding whether you can meet mine. We haven't got long. There's a small jump-ship on its way to collect me and the recordings of this Intervention. I'll be leaving in a few days.'

She stopped fighting him. 'So soon!'

He was serious again. 'Yes, so soon, my love. It's best, believe me. Shall you come with me?'

She had lost all her anger. 'I'm thinking about it.'

'What about your family, your kin?'

'I shall miss them - but they seem - alien to me now. You knew that this would happen all along, didn't you?'

'Not quite. I knew it was a possibility, that's all. I didn't expect to fall deeply in love with you. And I certainly didn't expect such a rapid mediation.'

Her face was thoughtful. 'No, you didn't, did you?'

A knock on the door made them both jump. One of the medics bustled in. 'Just look at those readings! What on earth have you been doing to him, woman?'

'Me?' Channa's anger found a new focus. 'What have I been doing to him? Why don't you ask him what he's been doing to me?' She ignored the medic and stared at Joran. 'Very well. I'll come with you. You've got me trapped. But don't think I'm going to be just a - a brood mother!'

'I insist on the child.'

She swallowed hard. 'One child only.'

'No one who knows you could ever think of you as a brood mother, Channa mine! One child it is. Unless you've changed your mind about living with me.'

'I haven't. But I shall have some very stringent conditions of my own to impose, believe me!'

'I'd expect no less of you.'

The medic cleared his throat.

She scowled at him. 'What are you standing there like an idiot for? Can't you do something to help him?'

She stalked out of the room with only a brief nod at Joran. Not until she reached her cabin did she allow her feelings free reign. 'Who does he think he's kidding?' she asked the com-unit.

'I beg your pardon. I do not understand your request,' it told her.

'I said, who does he think he's kidding?' she repeated joyously.

Fess came in from outside the door. 'Channa, are you feeling well? You seem over-excited.'

'I am over-excited, you stupid piece of animated tin!' She bounced up and down on the bed. 'He loves me! He never had any intention of letting me marry Van. He's taking me back to Terra, do you hear that?'

The robot hovered over her, and if ever a machine could radiate anxiety, that one did.

Channa Harknell-Nestar, about to travel round the galaxy, threw back her head and laughed. 'I'm free,' she whispered. 'I did my duty to Shavla, but now I'm free to please myself. And we'll see about a child when he's better.'

She became very still and frowned, then shook her head. Something was bound to crop up before then. It need not happen. She thought of Joran and a little shiver of apprehension crawled down her spine and lodged in her belly. 'I'll make sure something crops up before then,' she vowed. 'You'll see, Joran Lovrel. I can be just as sneaky as you.'