

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Powers That Be

Anne McCaffrey & Elizabeth Ann Scarborough

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About the Book

It was a world of ice and snow – a planet that just supported life and that had been terraformed from frozen uninhabitable rock. The people of Petaybee were hardy, self-reliant, friendly – and also very secretive.

Major Yana Maddock, medically discharged from the service, was shipped to Petaybee in the hope that her burnt-out lungs might just recover in the icy air. And at the last moment, she was given a special commission. Unauthorized life-forms had been seen on the planet and, more seriously, geologic survey teams had vanished into nowhere, the odd survivor being discovered abandoned and insane. It was Yana's task to infiltrate Petaybee society and find out who – or what – was causing the eerie events on the planet.

She discovered a primitive ice-bound community of extraordinary people – people who possessed some mysterious quality of surviving – and people who Yana discovered she both liked and revered as she found herself becoming one of them.

POWERS THAT BE

Anne McCaffrey
&
Elizabeth Ann Scarborough

We dedicate this book to Neva Reece for holding down the Scarborough fort (and supplying the cats with TLC) while we wrote at McCaffrey's house in Ireland.

Thanks from us both, Neva.

1

STIFLING IN THE crowded processing centre of Petaybee's spaceport, Yanaba Maddock eyed the side door as a drowner would eye a drifting spar. Unobtrusively making her way to it, she hoped it wasn't locked. It was, but the lock was not proof against the skills she had acquired in her years as a Company soldier, investigator, explorer, training officer and, most recently, long-term resident of a medical facility. Automatically checking to see if her activity was being noticed, Yana slid the door open just wide enough to accommodate her thin body. She paused to pull on her gloves, for she always took briefings seriously and she had no wish to have the skin of her fingers stick to frozen surfaces.

For a moment she leaned back against the slide panel, to secure it in case she had been observed. Then the cold air hit her.

She knew from previous cold-weather training not to inhale the freezing blast that whipped around the corner of the building and slammed into her face.

'The tem-per-atch-chur of Planet, Terraformation B, commonly called Petaybee, at certain locations during certain points in time during the winter can range as low as minus two hundred degrees fare-in-height,' the computer aboard the shuttle from ship to port had cautioned. 'That's cold, troops. Do not touch metal objects with your unprotected epy-dur-mus. Do not run or the air will freeze into small icicles in your lungs and lacerate them. Always wear or carry your winter gear with you at all times. Do not

count on a nice warm vehicle for warmth. For one thing, there is a shortage of nice warm vehicles on Petaybee because machinery that doesn't freeze and crack in the extreme cold is expensive. For another thing, even the most expensive equipment breaks down and you may find yourself stranded. The tem-per-atch-chur at Kilcoole SpaceBase today is minus fifty degrees fare-in-height. Some of the locals have been known to regard this as relatively tropical by comparison with what they consider *real* winter. Bear in mind that summer to these same individuals consists of two months of fairly constant daylight as warm as fifty-five to sixty degrees above zero, still twelve to seventeen degrees colder than regulation shipboard settings of seventy-two degrees. So button up your outer gear 'cause the wind blows free and take good care of yourselves, remembering at all times that your ass belongs to the Company. That is all.'

Yana had laughed to hear the computer briefing given in the gruff voice and speech patterns of a senior NCO, but she was no more inclined to ignore the warning than she would have been had it been issued by a flesh-and-blood top sergeant. Minus 200, huh? Good thing she'd got here during a 'heatwave'. Icicles lacerating her already trashed lungs would do nothing for her convalescence.

Fumbling with outerwear that had been broiling her in the facility, she pulled her scarf across her mouth, flipped the hood to her head, pulled it down over her forehead which was fast becoming wooden with cold, and tucked the scarf securely up to her eyes before she tied the hood under her chin.

Cold though the air was, with a taint of overheated oil and spacefuel from the snow-rimmed plascrete landing pad, the freshness of it – warmed by her breath as she inhaled through the muffling fabric – was clean! One of the small joys of her life were those first moments of breathing fresh, unadulterated, unrecycled *air*: the real stuff.

She inhaled through her mask, catching a taste of smells which had permeated her scarf but they were inconsequential. She began to take deeper breaths, tentatively at first, because her lungs were still not working as well as they should – one of the reasons she was the perfect candidate for Petaybee in the eyes of her employers. But she wanted to flush the dead air of a spaceship out of her poor abused lungs. They'd have even more of a chance to heal, here, in an unpolluted atmosphere than in the rarefied aisles of that medical complex back on Andromeda Station.

She took in one deep breath too many and started to cough, gasp, choke until her eyes teared with the spasms. Panting with short chest inhalations, she managed to get control again. The tears froze on her cheeks and she brushed them away. Grimly she thought that you could have too much of a good thing – even air. And she'd better get back inside: for all she was wearing garb appropriate to the new climate, she could feel her fingers and toes numbing. She spared one look at the horizon, the great bowl of a blue sky without so much as a defence shield over the spaceport, and the ice-covered land and wondered if she really had made the right decision.

Slipping back inside, she pushed the hood off, pulled down the scarf and scanned her nearest neighbours. Only one of them seemed to notice that she had been and come back. He blinked and frowned before turning his attention to the screen at the far end of the long hall where the names of those to be processed were blinking. Y. Maddock was one of them.

Startled, for she was anxious not to call attention to herself in any way, she moved forward, squeezing past people until she came to the more eager layers of folk, packed tightly as they waited for release.

'Maddock, Y,' she said to the official, offering her plastics.

'ID,' he said without even looking up from his terminal.

She extended her left wrist and, with rough fingers, he turned it so he could see it, bending her hand painfully.

'You're cold!' He looked up now, seeing her as a person, not a number.

She shrugged. 'Leaning against that door.'

'Humpf. Didn't you listen to the briefing?' He frowned. 'Don't touch metal . . .'

'Even inside?' she asked with the innocent, enquiring look she had used to flummox brighter men than this one.

He frowned and then the terminal required his attention: her plastic having jumped out of the processing slot. It skidded half across the worktop before he caught it. Yana kept her face straight, for he looked the sort not likely to appreciate chasing anything: much less plastic.

A slip of film extruded from the slot by her hand.

'That has your work number which you will memorize, work assignment, living quarters, ration status, travel and clothing allowance, and the name of your official guide as well as his office hours. Your travel pack has already been delivered to your quarters.' Then he paused and startled her by smiling. 'You can take one of the waiting vehicles outside the terminal, Major Maddock. Welcome to Petaybee.'

Amazed by both the courtesy and the unexpected smile, Yana thanked him and moved smartly out of the way. Her place was immediately occupied by the stocky woman who had been peering over her shoulder during Yana's interview.

A translucent roof shield protected the area outside the passenger terminal. It didn't protect from the noise level and confusion of processed arrivees, most of them lugging their precious 23.5 kilos personal allowance sacks about as they searched for each other or transportation.

'Yellow slip, huh?' someone said in her ear, pulling her hand down to peer at it.

The someone was a young girl, in her early to mid teens. Though her keen grey eyes were alive with intelligence and interest, she was so bundled in furs that only her face was

visible, and that was slightly obscured by long wisps of fur and, possibly, her own hair.

‘I’m cleared for yellow, too,’ the girl added and her mittened hand shoved a plastic square under Yana’s eyes. The woman grabbed her hand for a longer look at the official-looking plastic. The girl didn’t resist, though her eyes widened slightly at the strength of Yana’s grasp.

The plastic-covered printed documentation licensed Buneka Rourke to convey passengers in an authorized snocle within the environs of the port but no further. There was a large A in the right-hand corner and a renewal date some time later on in Petaybee’s year.

‘How much?’

Buneka Rourke blinked and then grinned companionably. ‘From here to your place, it’s on the PTBs.’

‘The PTBs?’ Yana wasn’t sure she heard correctly.

Buneka’s grin broadened and her eyes twinkled with mischief. ‘Sure, P T B – the Powers That Be. Petaybee,’ she added. ‘You didn’t know that’s where this planet got its name?’

‘The briefing said it was Planet, Terraformation B,’ Yana said.

The girl waved her mitten dismissively. ‘They would manage to make it sound dull. But it’s really named after them – the Powers That Be that move us from A to B or Z or wherever they gotta plug holes or clean up disasters or fight wars. C’mon. Let me get you out of this mess and give you a proper welcome to Petaybee.’

The girl tugged at Yana’s sleeve, pointing to a battered-looking but clean orange/yellow snocle with fluorescent numerals, MTS-80-84. Those numbers had also been displayed on the plastic ID. But as Yana stepped off the curb, a big figure intervened.

‘Yellow ticket? I take yellow tickets,’ and the man glared menacingly at the girl. ‘You doan wanna ride with this flutter-face. She turn you over into snowdrift. No-one find you.’

Yellow ticket deserves big, warm snocle . . .’ and he gestured towards a large, sleek affair.

‘I’ve already . . .’ she began.

‘Terce, she’s legally mine.’

‘You ain’t cleared for yellows,’ the man said, hunching belligerently over the girl. He was a tall enough man, but the furs made him even more bulky.

‘Am, too.’ She waved her ID at him and, snarling, he batted at her hand, dismissing her qualification. ‘I got a passenger all legal, Terce. You weren’t even here.’

Yana deftly inserted herself between them and made eye contact with the intruder.

‘I’ve already accepted Rourke’s assistance but I thank you for your willingness to transport me.’

‘I gotta, dama . . .’

At first Yana thought he was swearing at her and then realized he was bowing with great subservience and that there was an edge of anxiety in voice and manner.

‘You’re safer with *me*,’ the girl said, glaring such a challenge first at Yana and then at Terce that Yana sensed that more was at stake than a fare.

‘Look, girl, another yellow ticket . . .’ And Terce distracted her with a gesture towards a man, yellow ticket plainly visible in his hand. ‘You take ‘im.’ Then he took a firm hold on Yana’s upper arm, swinging her towards his vehicle.

Deftly, almost automatically, Yana disengaged her arm and then strode across to the battered little MTS-registered snocle.

‘Dama, dama,’ cried Terce, real concern in his voice.

Yana ignored him, lengthening her stride when she heard the triumphant exclamation from Buneka and her boots slithering across the snowmush behind her. Yana hit the door release on the passenger’s side, paused a moment to catch her breath before she slung her sacks on to the rear storage shelf. Still chuckling over her success, the girl slid into the driver’s seat.

‘You’d better button up. This thing takes longer to warm up than Terce’s fancy sleigh.’

‘And I’m safer with you?’ Yana asked at her driest, as she rearranged her hood and scarf, belted into the seat, before slipping back into the fur mittens.

The girl’s eyes crinkled. ‘Well, Terce is known to do “errands” for folk. My hunch is he was there on purpose to collect you. If you’d wanted to go with him, you could have, of course, but you didn’t. So you didn’t know he was there to meet you. So . . . you’re safer with me . . . especially the way he was acting. He’s not very bright.’ Her remark was couched in a kindly tone but held a hint of caution, none the less. She glanced over to Yana, her eyes bright, alert.

Well, thought Yana. An hour on the planet and intrigue starts already. Never a dull moment, no matter what the spaceflot about Petaybee was. PTB! Powers That Be. She chuckled to herself but let that also be an answer for her driver.

The chuckle turned into one of her coughing fits and she fumbled in her sack between spasms for her bottle of syrup. She was suddenly weak with the effort it took to draw enough breath between the explosions which threatened to blow her ribs apart. The fur mittens made her hands clumsy and she almost dropped the bottle before she could peel a mitten from her shaking hand and get the plastic cap off. As soon as the syrup began to coat her larynx, the spasm eased. She cradled the bottle in her hands, against her chest. The preparation had a lot of alcohol in it but she wouldn’t risk it freezing.

The girl, Rourke, slowed the vehicle and looked back at her with wide eyes. Poor kid looked as if she was wishing that she’d let Terce take her fare.

‘Are you – all right, Major?’

Yana gulped another swallow of the syrup, this time feeling the warmth spreading into the poisoned cavities of her damaged lungs. Every time she coughed, the images

flashed through her brain of the graphic films the doctors had shown her when they'd explained why she was no longer fit for active duty. As if the fact that she couldn't laugh or hoist a duffle bag without a paroxysm of coughing wasn't evidence enough of her disability. Still, she was alive, which was more than the others were. She recapped the bottle, tucked it into her parka pocket, and pulled the mitten back over her hand. It was already going numb with cold. She noted with satisfaction, however, that there was no blood on either mitten.

Catching the girl's anxious look she said, 'Don't worry, Rourke, it's not contagious. Took a little gas at Bremport Station was all.'

'From the sound of that cough, you must have had a nasty time of it,' the girl remarked, speeding up slightly again but proceeding more cautiously than before, as if afraid the jarring would set her passenger off again.

'You might say that,' Yana said, thinking of the others. The hell of it was, she'd been through a lot worse in her younger days and had come through without a scratch. This was supposed to have been a routine training mission – new recruits, a couple of them from Petaybee, she remembered. She remembered just about everything from that mission, over and over again.

She used the technique she'd learned a long time ago from one of her old sergeants and switched her focus, letting her eyes rest on the panorama of blue and white nothingness, the featureless landscape soothing her, helping her blank her mind, the cold in the air matching the cold inside her.

Ground-hugging vegetation pierced lumps of snow with frozen stalks that looked like spines. Then she noticed that the snocle track was on ground slightly lower than the rest of the terrain.

'You guys dig a new road here, huh?' she asked her driver.

Rourke snorted. 'Not a bit of it. Do you think they'd be spendin' money on improvements for the likes of us? This - is the river!'

'No kidding?' Yana looked out and down. Where the snow had blown away in one patch, she saw the translucence of powder-blue ice. 'Anybody ever fall through the ice?'

'Not lately. Even this late in the winter it's still between minus seventy-five and minus thirty most of the time.'

'If everything is frozen, what do you do about drinking water?' Company leaders automatically considered such details.

'Oh, that. I'll show you.' The girl grinned and continued on.

After a few moments the ground had more rise and fall to it. Beside it, stunted trees, rooted and branched in billows of snow, began appearing closer and closer together until they formed a sparse forest on either side of the snocle. The girl veered the machine over towards the trees and, around the next bend, Yana saw a little pavilion set up on the ice, smoke rising from a hole in the top. Rourke had been decreasing the speed of her snocle and now drifted to a gentle stop.

The tent shook slightly from within and what looked at first like a bear emerged.

'Slainte, Bunny!' the bear said, waving, dispelling the illusion. The fur-clad man, and indeed his skins were ursine in appearance, too, lumbered forward, lifting his great fur boots high above the snow. His face bristled with icicles from the ruff around his mouth and nose which was only lightly frosted to his beard, eyebrows and moustache which were thickly encrusted with ice.

'Slainte, Uncle Seamus!' The girl waved back and cut the motor. The man's eyes flicked up through his personal icicles to glance at Yana, a searching look for all its brevity. 'This is Major Maddock, Uncle. She's going to be staying at Kilcoole.'

'Is she now?' He included Yana in his wave and she nodded at him.

'Do you have a thermos or two for me to take to Auntie, since I'm passing her way?' Bunny asked.

'Now that would be very good of you, Bunny. I've two now and I'll have more later when Charlie and the dogs come along. This dama doesn't mind stopping on her way, does she?'

'Nah! She won't mind. Will you, Major? You wanted to see how we got water. Come look in the shed.'

Moving a little more slowly than she'd like, Yana climbed from the snocle. Out here, on the river, the cold immediately clenched its fist around her face and thighs which weren't encased in synfur like the rest of her. She hoisted the muffler around her nose but that didn't filter out the sweet smell of woodsmoke. She wondered if that would set her coughing again. But there was Bunny, encouragingly holding up the flap of the tent. She pointed to the fire burning in a circle around the rim of a long black hole in the ice. An insulated container on a length of line stood beside the hole, along with two other containers which Seamus now gave Bunny.

Yana took a couple of steps towards the tent before the smoke from the fires wafted towards her. She felt her throat seizing up and stepped back, silently cursing her weakness. How the frag was she going to survive on a cold planet if she couldn't breathe in the presence of fire?

Bunny, her shoulders bowed as she hauled one of the thermoses with both hands so that the container bumped against her shins, nodded to Yana to return to the snocle. Yana was relieved not to put her lungs through any further ordeal. She turned with more enthusiasm than was prudent and her feet promptly began sliding on the ice underlying the thin covering of drifted snow. She placed her feet more cautiously then, and made it back to the snocle.

Seamus set the other water thermos in beside her and ran a mitten across his face, an accustomed gesture which dislodged some of his facial icicles.

‘Welcome to Petaybee, such as it is, Major. You need something, you just ask Bunny here.’

Yana nodded. ‘Thanks.’ It was just possible that, if her official guide was anywhere near as inept as she herself in this environment, she’d find Bunny’s unofficial assistance more useful.

‘It’s too late for you to inprocess today,’ Bunny Rourke told her as they arrived at Yanaba’s new quarters long after darkness had fallen, though by Yana’s calculation it was no more than late afternoon. Yana looked at the small single house standing alone on pilings beside others of similar construction. It had one window and one door that she could see in the gloom, and the window was small. Whatever. It was bound to be roomier than some of the berths she’d had and, compared with her place on the ward at the space station hospital, it looked palatial as well as incredibly private.

Bunny hefted her duffle out of the snocle for her and pushed open the door. The interior was spare, white as the outdoors, and contained a cot, a small table on which rested her survival pack, a chair and a stove for heating and cooking.

‘Sorry it took so long,’ Bunny said. ‘Look, wait here and I’ll get some blankets. You’d better take this water, too. No-one’s given you your ration.’ And she nodded to the thermos, cap beside it, on a shelf beyond the stove.

‘That’s for your auntie, isn’t it?’ Yana asked. ‘And I can scarcely take your blankets, too.’

Bunny shook her head. ‘They won’t care about the water and I can spare the blanket. You’ll be issued your own tomorrow.’

She drove away in the snocle and, in a short time, returned on foot, carrying a bundle of puffy cloth and a

packet. 'Smoked salmon strips,' she said, indicating the packet.

'What?'

'Fish. It's good,' Bunny said patiently. 'You'll like it.'

Yana's day had started back at the station hospital nearly thirty hours ago, and she couldn't face anything more taxing than rolling up in blankets and going to sleep as fast as possible. 'Thanks,' she said.

'OK, then. Shall I pick you up in the morning to meet your guide? I could get the blanket then, too.'

Aha, Yana thought, a little blackmail here to ensure the continuing custom. Very enterprising. 'That'll be fine,' she said with a weary lift of her eyes that would have to pass for a smile. Bunny showed her how to light the stove before she left and promised to help her organize more fuel the next day.

Without waiting for the room to warm up enough to remove her outerwear, Yana arranged the chair at the head of the cot, sat down, and stretched her legs out on the bed. She had only chewed a couple of bites of the salmon strip, which had an oddly spicy taste, before she fell asleep, as she had for the last few weeks, sitting up.

Bunny Rourke returned to her aunt's house after delivering the blankets to her client and returning the snocle to its special shed.

'I'll need to check it out again in the morning,' she'd told Adak O'Connor, the dispatcher and guard.

'No shuttles due from SpaceBase for another week,' Adak said, removing his headphones and turning away from the radio that connected him to SpaceBase and the few other places on Petaybee that had such advanced equipment. He scowled at his record book which contained the schedules for the port and kept track of the whereabouts of the vehicles - both of them. Bunny was licensed to drive one, Terce the other. They were the only authorized drivers to

and from Kilcoole. The shuttles belonged to InterGalactic Enterprises, known as Intergal, the omnipresent if not omnipotent corporation responsible for the existence of Petaybee and the boss of all Bunny's people. Bunny had only qualified for her licence because one of her uncles was an important man and owned his own snocle as *well* as dogs. When Bunny's parents had disappeared, Uncle had taught her to drive the snocle to help her make her own way in the village so she wouldn't be a burden. She was Uncle's driver on the rare occasions when he preferred the snocle to his team. She also made the trip out to his place to keep the machine running for him and repair it when it broke down – usually from neglect. Her uncle was a brilliant man but not mechanically inclined. Bunny took after her Yupik grandad. She could fix anything. And six months ago, on her fourteenth birthday, she obtained her licence to ferry passengers from SpaceBase to Kilcoole and back.

'I know there's no shuttles,' she told Adak, 'but my fare has to inprocess in the morning.'

'Can't she walk or go by sledge?'

'Nah. She's an important dama. An officer. But she's puny. Said something about being at Bremport.'

'The massacre when the Shanachie's boy was killed? Ah, the poor dama. And how is she puny?'

'She coughs. Bad. But she seems nice. Anyway, the snocle is authorized for official functions so I want to take her round to the outpost as quick as possible so she can settle in, like.'

'Good child. You've taken to this dama, have you?'

'She's sleepin' this night under my quilt Auntie Moira made me.'

'Then by all means take the snocle in the morning but mind you, no sight-seein'.'

'Thanks, Adak,' she said. 'I'll bring you one of Auntie Moira's cakes in the morning when I come, shall I?'

'That would be very welcome, Bunny. Good night now.'

‘Good night,’ she said and headed back to the shed behind her aunt’s house.

Ever since her older male cousins had turned a little too inquisitive about her development, Bunny had preferred to sleep out here, behind the kennel where Charlie kept his team of noisy and protective dogs who warned her of anyone approaching. Most of the people who came to see her brought her things – fish or moose chops, zucchini or tomatoes in the summer, or just came to visit her. There were a few people she didn’t want coming to her place – Terce, for one, but he was scared of Charlie’s dogs. Otherwise, she didn’t worry about it too much since she was personally related to a large percentage of the village, and knew who would help her and who to avoid. Mostly, everyone looked out for her. That would have made her feel like a child except that she looked out for them too. That was how it was in Kilcoole. She was actually very adult for someone her age, trusted with the responsibility of living on her own and holding down her own job.

Approaching her house, she was greeted by the hounds, who set up a good welcoming howl as she walked quickly through them, unclipping the lines from Pearse and Maud who was lead dog.

She was pleasantly surprised to see smoke rolling up from her chimney to the sky. As she followed its path she saw the lights were displaying tonight – just a simple pale green band of them whipping across the black sky, dancing and twisting and sequined with stars. The smoke from the chimney smelled grand – nutty and warm. Maud whined and stuck her long muzzle in Bunny’s pocket. The dogs were more used to Bunny, who had time for them and who usually fed and exercised them, than they were to Charlie, who was their owner. Bunny petted Maud absently. Even with her stove getting a head start on the chill, she’d need the dogs for warmth tonight without her quilt. She would let them in to get toasty by the fire while she ate her supper.

The big red dogs with their thick soft coats took up most of the floor space in the little shed. It contained her berth, a scrounged unit cut out of one of the dead ships at SpaceBase, a shaky table-top pegged into the wall and placed so she could sit on her berth to eat, plus the stove and the shelves she'd built from old storage crates to hold her few belongings. She had the three books left her by her parents, a set of tools – the gift from her uncle when she'd obtained her licence – and a selection of shells, rocks and tree tumours as well as hand-me-downs from the cousins and what little gear she had. On the table was the mare's-butter candle which gave a fairly bright light, though it didn't smell very good. Her shed was built of stone, of which Petaybee had plenty. She had caulked it with mud two Breakups ago and reinforced it with some plasti her cousin Simon had organized for her at the SpaceBase when he first joined the corps, before he shipped out.

The plasti had originally been used to repair the bubble around the SpaceBase garden and it did well in the cold, never cracking or contracting.

Something plopped down beside her on to the table and mewed up at her. She reached down to stroke the rust-and-cream stripes of one of Aunt Clodagh's cats, though which she couldn't say since so many of the Kilcoole felines were orange-marmalades. The cat pawed the door and Bunny smiled and followed, chattering to the cat.

'So Clodagh already knows about my passenger, does she, and left you here to tell me to report? Glad to, cat, as long as there's a bite in it for me.'

The dogs had ignored the cat, nor did the ones in the yard bark at the cat as it led her through the kennels. No-one's dogs ever barked at Clodagh's cats who went where they pleased and knew where everything was and what everyone was doing, as did Clodagh.

2

THE OFFICIAL GUIDE – only a second lieutenant, Yana noted – stood up when she entered the room.

‘Major Maddock,’ he said, saluting and flashing her quite an energetic smile. ‘Lieutenant Charles Demintieff, first Petaybee Military Liaison Officer, at your service, dama.’

‘Relax, Lieutenant,’ she said. ‘I’m reporting to you, not the other way round.’

‘Yes’m. It’s just that I’ve read your file and we don’t get many heroes back here.’

‘Most heroes don’t make it back anywhere,’ she said.

He laughed as if she’d said something extremely witty.

‘Then we’re luckier still to have you, Major. Colonel Giancarlo from SpaceBase snocled in this morning to welcome you personally. When you’ve had your chat with him, we’ll go over the routine stuff.’

Walking into the adjoining room, Yana felt as wary as if she were entering the bridge of an enemy-held ship. If the SpaceBase brass wanted to talk to her, why hadn’t he done it at inprocessing and saved himself a long cold ride?

The colonel, in contrast to the lieutenant, did not look happy to see her. His insignia was one she had only seen occasionally – Psychological Operations, a euphemism for the Intelligence branch. She reported and he waved her into a chair while he continued to type something into a terminal.

‘Well, Major,’ he said after she’d sat there long enough to become impatient and uncomfortable in her heavy gear. ‘What do you think of Petaybee so far?’

‘Seems friendly,’ she said, cautiously. He was testing her somehow but she wasn’t sure for what. ‘The air is clean, if cold. Fairly primitive technologically. New recruits from here used to need extensive training in the simplest equipment and it’s pretty obvious why, from what I’ve seen of my quarters and the village. Am I missing something?’

‘If you are, you’re not alone,’ he said, his eyes switching from the terminal to hers and boring into them. ‘There shouldn’t be anything here that we didn’t put here. This planet was nothing but rock and ice when Intergal claimed it. The Company terraformed it, upgrading it from frozen uninhabitable rock to a merely arctic climate. For the last two hundred years, it’s been useful as a replacement depot for troops, a relocation centre for the peoples who were being displaced by our other operations. Because the climate is rough on machinery, only SpaceBase contains much in the way of modern comforts. The transportation needs of the inhabitants are mostly supplied by experimental animals bred for the purpose.’

‘Experimental?’ Yana asked. ‘Like lab animals?’ She had been born on Earth but had spent her childhood being shunted from one duty station to the next with her parents. Lab rats and monkeys were somewhat familiar to her, along with a number of different alien species but the beasts she had seen on her way here today were different if oddly familiar.

‘Not exactly, although I suppose their ancestors did some time in a lab – originally. The Company hired Dr Sean Shongili to alter certain existing species to adapt to this climate. That’s how the resident equines, felines and canines, and many of the aquatic mammals, come to be here.’

‘I see,’ she said but she didn’t. The dogs obviously worked as sledge animals, the cats to keep down rodents. She couldn’t understand why Petaybee supported equines, too. Horses, as she remembered them, seemed rather

inappropriate for such a climate. As for hacking and burning holes in ice to secure water, to waste such effort on domestic pets seemed totally unproductive.

‘Well, Intergal doesn’t, entirely,’ the colonel said as if he had read her thoughts. ‘The animals we commissioned are here, but there have been sightings of other types that indicate perhaps Dr Shongili and his assistants were a trifle more creative than covered by their authorization. The current Dr Shongili, also Sean, is certainly an odd bird, not what you’d call a team player. We’ve monitored his records, however, and can’t find any evidence that he’s been exceeding his instructions. We could, of course, move him, but this is not a research area favoured by many in our employ and the Shongilis have done extremely well at producing viable species for arctic conditions so we’re reluctant to remove the current Shongili without more concrete evidence. Trouble is, unauthorized species are not the only anomaly. Something else is going on here – our satellite monitors have detected deposits of important minerals on this planet. When we dispatch teams, they either can’t find the location of the deposits or else they simply don’t return.’

‘That’s why psyops is interested?’ she asked, relaxing a little.

‘You got it.’ Suddenly he grinned at her, an expression that did not make him seem any more attractive. ‘That’s where we can help each other, Major.’

‘Sir?’

‘You’re here this morning technically to be demobilized. You’re a medical retiree due to spend the rest of your days on this iceberg, which is unfortunate for you. However, your experience as an intercommand investigator and your earlier work with preliminary data-gathering landing teams is of some interest to us, despite your disability, as is your record of combat experience. You don’t realize it yet, of course, but being a combat veteran carries considerable

cachet in this place where most families have at least one, and usually several, relatives in the corps. Furthermore your genetic stock is similar to these people's.' He eyed her and Yanaba knew he was assessing the sprinkle of white in the black hair that Bry used to claim had an auburn cast under bright light, the high cheekbones, the rather bleached-out olive complexion and slightly tilted green-gold eyes. Her body had once been lean and athletic with certain distinctly feminine variations but weeks of illness had reduced her to brittle gauntness at a weight she might have envied had her strength not deserted her along with the extra kilos.

'How's that?' she asked, mystified.

'The people on this continent are a mixture of Irish and Eskimo - we've resettled cold-weather natives all over the planet to assist the others in assimilation. In this area it's Eskimo: in other settlements, ethnic Scandinavians and Indo-Asians.'

'I don't exactly fit then,' she said, smiling as tolerantly as possible.

'Well, of course, you were practically born into the Company but your father was Irish and your first name, *Yanaba* . . .'

'*Yanaba*,' she corrected. 'That's Navajo - my mother's people. It's a war name, like a lot of traditional Navajo names. Means "she meets the enemy". The Navajo, by the way, were desert dwellers, not snow people.'

'Close enough,' he said. 'Desert can get damned cold midwinter,' and he dismissed her objection with a wave.

That told her she'd made a tactical error by showing up his ignorance before she heard what he wanted. But she had a fierce loyalty to her family. All she had of them now was the history recorded in the computers for her by her parents before their deaths. It was about all she had had in her life that hadn't been Intergal-issued.

'We think you can fit, Maddock,' he went on. 'And we want you to do just that because we need to know what's

going on. We want you to get to know the people, find out what or who exactly is responsible for these problems. If Shongili is concealing experiments in producing new life forms on this planet, we need to know about it. If the geologic survey teams are being deliberately ambushed and eliminated, we want to know that and we want to know whom we have to deal with. You don't have enough technical knowledge to locate the deposits yourself, but we want you to find out who's preventing our teams from locating them. If there's some kind of sabotage or incipient insurrection brewing, help us put a stop to it.'

'Wouldn't it have been more effective to recruit a local informant?' she asked.

Giancarlo snorted. 'There's something screwy about all of them. They all stick together all the time and every time I've had one of them in my office for any length of time, they start sweating and turn red. Why would that happen if they're not scared, hiding something? Even Demintieff sweats like crazy every time he comes in while I'm here. This office is always freezing when I arrive and even while I'm here, he keeps that outer office way too cold. These people also have gatherings that nobody from SpaceBase is invited to and if you ask one of the new recruits from here about it, they just shrug.'

'You haven't actively interrogated anyone yet then?'

'No real excuse so far. What would I ask? Why do you people sweat so damned much and how come I don't get invited to your parties?'

Yana nodded.

He leaned forward and stabbed at the desk with his finger, as if the gesture would somehow make his words plainer. 'We need someone loyal to the Company to gain their confidence, find out what's going on.'

'What if they just sweat because they're used to the cold and they have orgies or something at their parties and don't want to mingle with outsiders out of embarrassment?'

‘Major, perhaps I didn’t make myself clear. You were injured at Bremport, you saw what happened there. I shouldn’t have to tell *you* what swamps of insurgency these colonial planets can be. Unauthorized life forms *have* been spotted on this planet. Research and development teams *have* disappeared into nowhere. You can’t tell me these circumstances aren’t related. What you have to tell me instead is how they *are* connected with each other. Do you read me?’

She nodded, cautiously, and evidently mistaking her caution for hesitation he pressed on.

‘You said something about your quarters. They’re pretty standard for down here, but we certainly have the wherewithal to make them more comfortable. Also, you’re not full retirement age yet, nor eligible for full pension.’

‘I have a medical discharge, sir.’

‘Not exactly. Not yet. Actually your disability status as of now is’, and he tapped a key, ‘only 25 per cent. That won’t generate much of a pension. If you were on covert active duty, however, you could do a lot better. We could even throw in hazardous duty pay.’

‘Sir, with all due respect, while I wouldn’t sniff at the money, the doctors back at the hospital . . .’

‘You can’t contact them from here, Maddock. And in the event you need further, fairly expensive care, the transport from here back to there would be beyond your means, unless, of course, Intergal foots the bill. I’ll expect progress reports via Demintieff on a weekly basis unless, of course, something comes up that I should know about instanter. Demintieff will take you around, introduce you to people . . .’

Whatever this guy’s specialty was, it wasn’t the gentle art of psychological persuasion. He was about as subtle as a photon torpedo. But she owed Intergal her life and had spent her life in its service. She wasn’t going to turn them down just because this hammerhead thought he was blackmailing her. Besides, she *could* use the pay.

‘With respect, sir, I think maybe Demintieff should do the bare minimum of guiding me around. Seems to me I’d be better off on my own. I’d be less suspect to any possible terrorists within the area if an indigenous civilian helped me acclimatize rather than a uniformed professional.’

‘Good thinking, Maddock. This conversation never happened, of course.’ He dug a sheaf of old-fashioned hard copy from a case at his feet. ‘However, this contains a full briefing on what we know and suspect thus far. Familiarize yourself with it and burn it.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Enjoy your retirement, Maddock.’

Bunny Rourke was sitting on the edge of Lieutenant Demintieff’s desk when Yana and Colonel Giancarlo emerged. Neither of them were perspiring unduly as far as Yana could see, although at the sight of the colonel, Bunny nodded to her and fled through the doorway.

‘Demintieff!’

‘Sir!’

‘You’re to report to SpaceBase. Congratulations, son, you’ve been chosen for duty shipside.’

‘But, sir . . .’ the lieutenant, formerly so cheerfully obsequious, looked as stunned as if the colonel had suddenly kicked him in the balls. He evidently did not feel congratulations were in order.

‘Grab your gear on the double and you can ride back with me, soldier.’

‘Permission to say goodbye to my family, sir,’ Demintieff said, with some difficulty.

‘Permission granted as long as you can do it within the next forty-five minutes. Duty calls, son.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Maddock, in view of this man’s reassignment, you are authorized to requisition civilian assistance during your

civilian orientation process or until the position can be reassigned.'

'Yes, sir. May I suggest my driver, Miss Rourke, sir?'

'Sure, Colonel, Bunny will look after the major,' Demintieff put in, rather gallantly, Yana thought, in view of his own evident distress. 'She's my own sister's cousin-by-marriage and a very good girl.'

Seeing this side of Demintieff, and realizing how well-connected he was locally, Yana cursed herself for making suggestions before she got the lay of the land. He would have done as well as Bunny from the standpoint of gaining the trust of the villagers, but now he was being sent away from home, an assignment he obviously did not relish, to provide a reason for the change in routine. Damn fool shouldn't have enlisted if he didn't want to serve shipside, she thought fiercely, but she had trouble meeting his eye. Giancarlo returned to the inner room and Demintieff's eyes were brimming shamelessly as he turned towards her.

'Dama, would you and Bunny mind very much givin' me a lift up to Clodagh's? My gear's there and Clodagh'll see to it that my family in Tanana Bay get notified.'

Yana could only duck her head, as the lieutenant scooped up a tightly wrapped bundle from his desk, started to hand it to her, then carried it out to the snocle.

Bunny was starting the engine when Yana and Demintieff emerged from the building. She started to say something when Demintieff climbed in beside her, leaving Yana the back section, but Demintieff cut her off with, 'Take me to Clodagh's quick, Bunny. They're shipping me into space.' In his distress, Demintieff's voice had thickened into the same oddly precise brogue colouring Bunny's and her Uncle Seamus's speech.

'Brilliant start, Major Maddock,' Yana told herself. Even if everybody on this damned planet wasn't involved in the mass conspiracy Giancarlo depicted, they all seemed to be related to each other.

‘OK, Charlie, but I’ll have to drop you and Yana off and take the snocle back. I’m only checked out for another fifteen minutes. I’ll hitch up the dogs to take Yana home and bring you back over here.’

‘If there’s time. Giancarlo may requisition your snocle to take us back to SpaceBase, though Terce brought him out. You’ll look after my dogs, won’t you, Bunny? They already think you belong to them and I want them to be well-cared-for; they’ve been with me since they were pups.’ He dug through layers of fur and found a wallet, handing her a wad of bills. ‘Here’s to help you with their food.’

She released one hand from the wheel and accepted the money, stuffing it in her parka. ‘No problem, Charlie. I’ll keep on looking after them. You didn’t know about this reassignment?’

‘No idea. He decided just like that.’

Yana found herself leaning forward, wheezing into Demintieff’s ear, ‘You’ll be going to Andromeda Station to inprocess and for assignment. When you get there, unless he’s gone now, the master sergeant in charge of deployment is Ahmed Threadgill. Tell him Yana Maddock sends her love and reminds him of the time she alerted him to the Ship Police raid. He’ll know what I mean.’

If Demintieff gave Ahmed that message, he’d know she was calling in the favour and that he was to look after her friend. It wasn’t much when she’d inadvertently got him into the situation, but it could keep his hide intact.

‘Yes, Major Maddock. Thank you, dama.’

She clapped him on the shoulder, a little feebly, and sat back until Bunny skidded to a halt outside a house somewhat larger than Yana’s own quarters. The morning’s exertions had left her panting and trembling with fatigue, but she still took note of this house. The snow in front of it was full of huge strangely shaped lumps and the crusted snow all around them was lightly dotted with what looked like some kind of shit, which vaguely shocked ship-bred

Yana. Stiff oval nets with points at each end hung over the door, three pairs of what were unmistakably skis leaned against the side of the house, and from the back of the house issued a high-pitched keening, like a woman screaming.

‘I’ll take you back in a minute, Major, if that’s OK,’ Bunny called back as Yana climbed out of the vehicle. ‘Besides, you’ll want to meet Clodagh. She was asking after you last night at supper.’

Charlie Demintieff grabbed the bundle of cloth from the snocle and Bunny drove away.

The screams erupted again and Yana hung back, tensed, listening. Charlie, who had already taken a step towards the house, turned ponderously in his furs, saw her staring, and touched the elbow of her coat with his mitten.

‘That’s just the dogs,’ he said, his mouth spilling clouds of condensation into the air, as if his words were freezing there. ‘When our dogs were first made, our grandfathers called them banshee-dogs because of that sound, but they’re just saying hello.’

Yana nodded, hearing her own breath rasping in her ears above the screams of the dogs, and willed herself to relax and follow Charlie to the house. A feline with rust and cream markings stood on the roof above the doorway and looked down at them as if considering a pounce. On another corner of the house sat the cat’s twin, resembling pictures Yana had seen of the gargoyles decorating ancient Terran architecture. Another of the creatures sat in each of the windows flanking the door.

Just as Charlie reached the door, it opened before him and was filled by the largest woman Yana had ever seen. Of course, people on shipboard were required to keep their body weight to a certain level, a requirement necessitated by narrow passages, small hatches and the close confinement of the rooms. Also, anyone in space had to be able to fit into the suits and, should it become necessary,