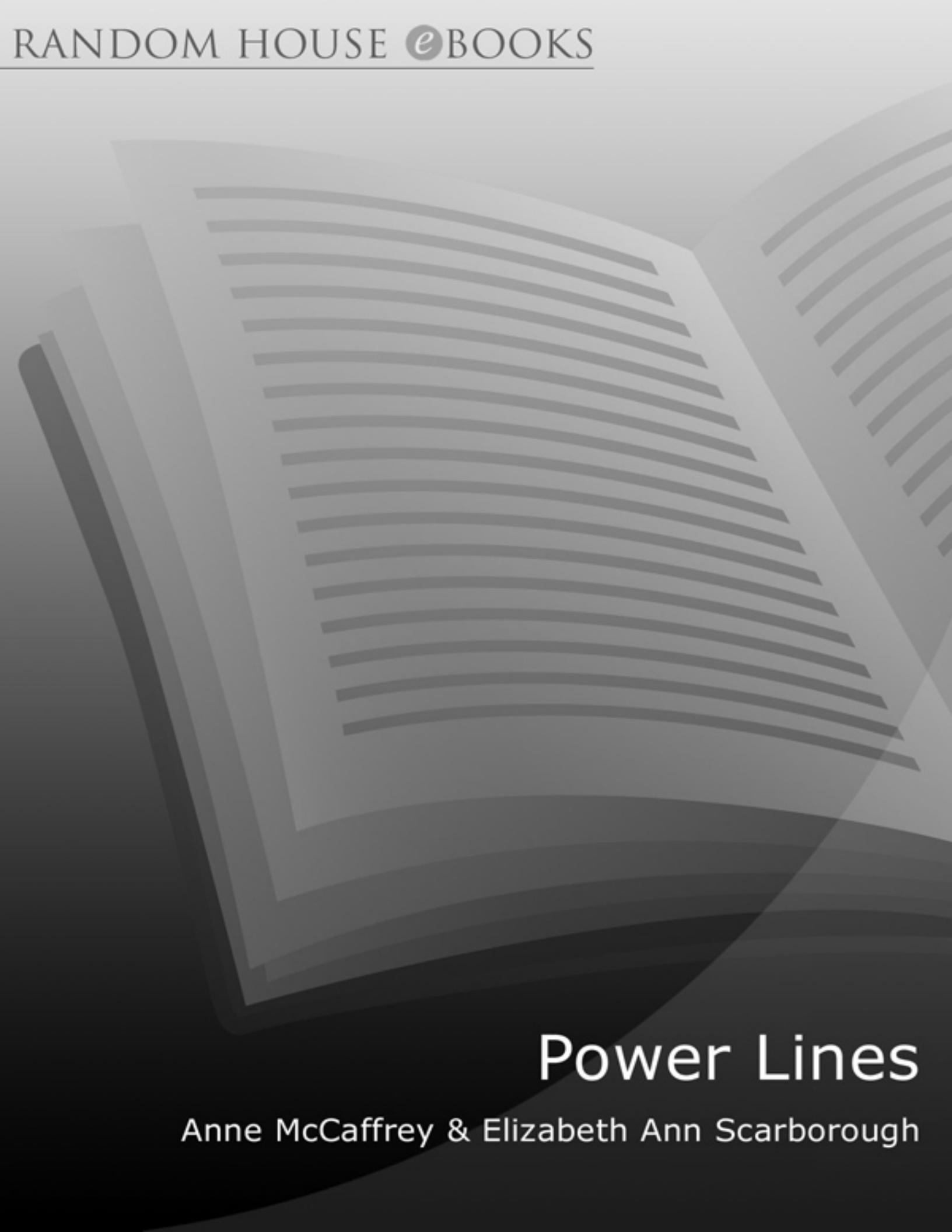


RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS



Power Lines

Anne McCaffrey & Elizabeth Ann Scarborough

About the Book

The miraculous and mysterious world of Petaybee was to be investigated. No-one – no-one outside Petaybee, that is – could believe that the planet was a living, breathing sentient entity, that every plant and animal was in symbiotic communication with the spirit of the Petaybean world.

Matthew Luzon was one to the investigators, an arrogant, wily, manipulative man who didn't believe there was anything in the universe that couldn't be controlled by hard scientific methods. His plan was to crush Petaybee, strip it of its mineral assets, and subdue or destroy the inhabitants.

Major Yanaba Maddock – who had been sent to Petaybee to die, but who now understood its secretive curative powers – with the help of Sean Shongili, Clodagh, and all the gifted ones of Kilcoole, was determined to fight for their world. It was a battle in which every human, every plant, and every secretive telepathic creature – most especially the famous orange felines of Petaybee – was to be put at risk. Luzon was determined to destroy them – whatever the cost.

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Also by Anne McCaffrey

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About the Authors

POWER LINES

Anne McCaffrey

&

Elizabeth Ann Scarborough

This is for two fur gentlemen of great dignity
and courage who have meant
a great deal to both of us in their separate
ways and on different continents

Mr Peaches & Simon Big-Paws

1

SPACEBASE OCCASIONALLY STILL rumbled underfoot as if to remind everyone that Petaybee planet was by no means pacified. The riders from Kilcoole village had kept well to the trails through the woods furthest from the steaming, freshly thawed river, now merely rimmed with ice like a frosting of salt along the top of a glass. Several times on their journey, the planet shook and shifted as if telling them of the urgency of their mission, but by now the Petaybeans calmly accepted the planet's new mood.

Major Yanaba Maddock, Intergal Company Corps, Retired - well, mostly retired anyway - looked around at the faces of her lover, her new friends and neighbours. Their mood was both happy and expectant as they dismounted in front of the SpaceBase headquarters building. Clodagh Senungatuk, Kilcoole's healer and one-woman information centre, dusted her divided skirts while her curly-coated horse gazed impassively as flurries of its freshly shed hairs floated on the unseasonably warm air.

Sinead Shongili, Yana's own beloved Sean's sister, assisted Aisling, Clodagh's sister, from the saddle while Buneka Rourke held the reins of her Uncle Seamus's and Aunt Moira's horses as they dismounted. The churned mud that formed the roads at SpaceBase was dotted with stones and boards and pieces of metal to be used as steps. Hopping from one of these to the next, the party of Petaybeans made their way to the building entryway.

They all had such high hopes for this meeting, Yana thought, almost with irritation. Personally, she hated

meetings – always had. Most of them contained no more input than a two-second burst on a comlink. Waste of time, ordinarily. She took a deep breath and neatly tucked under her belt the shirt tails of the uniform blouse which Dr Whittaker Fiske had suggested might be the politically tactful costume to wear for the occasion. Though partisan, she was the most neutral person attending the meeting. While the company she kept announced her leanings, the uniform would remind the bosses of her long-standing company affiliation.

Sean Shongili, sensing her tension, reached up briefly to knead the back of her neck, and she gave him a nervous smile. As the chief geneticist for this area of the planet, Sean was a key member of the Petaybean delegation. He and the others seemed to think that it was predestined that the company men would see reason and accede to the requirements of their planet and its people. Sean, who despite his profession was no more experienced at being a prospective parent than Yana was, had already suggested that her pre-meeting trepidation was at least in part a hormonally stimulated response. He was wrong, but as he had been born and bred on the planet, she could hardly expect him to understand.

Petaybeans gathered only to entertain themselves and each other or to discuss a problem and arrive at a consensus for solution. Company meetings were more often power plays where the issue was secondary to whose view prevailed. But then, she had never before been to any meeting where the issue was the survival of a sentient planet and its people.

Two deep breaths and she followed Sean into the building and on into the conference room. As the Petaybeans and Yana entered, Dr Whittaker Fiske stood, forcing the other dignitaries to do likewise. Here, most of the cracks caused by the earthquakes had been sealed. The screens along the walls were still slightly askew on their

brackets but functional. There wasn't enough seating for all the Petaybeans who had been invited but the major players ringed the beautiful table, handcrafted from native Petaybean woods.

As nominal chairperson, Whittaker Fiske sat in the centre with his son, Captain Torkel Fiske, and Yana. Sean Shongili, Clodagh and the Petaybean survivors of the last ill-fated exploratory mission were on the left; Francisco and Diego Metaxos and Steve Margolies on the right along with various other company dignitaries. The latter looked considerably more confused than the Petaybean group who were, to a person, optimistically resolute.

A bare half-hour later, when the comlink with Intergal Earth had been established, the resolution remained, but the optimism on many faces had been replaced with disgust and dismay at the unreason of certain officials.

'And you actually have the unmitigated gall,' declared the occupant of the main screen, Farringer Ball, the secretary-general of Intergal's board of directors, 'to tell me that the planet is making these demands on us?' Ball's round fleshy face had taken on a reddish-orange hue.

Yana thought some of that had to be generated by the faulty connection or the disrupted innards of the comscreen. No human flesh could turn such a shade.

'Yes, Farrie, that's what I'm saying,' Whittaker Fiske replied, smiling gently as a fond parent might to an erring child. 'And I've proof enough that I haven't lost my marbles or melted my circuits or any damned thing else you can think up to account for such a ...' Whittaker Fiske paused and grinned before he added, 'delusion. Delusion it isn't!' He said that with no smile whatever and a very solemn expression. 'We may not have encountered such a phenomenon before, Farrie, but we have now and I don't need my nose rubbed in it any more than it has been. So let's get on with ...'

'We'll get on with nothing, Fiske,' Farringer Ball said explosively and a thick finger rose from the bottom of the screen, followed by a hand that was shaking with anger. 'I'm sending a relief company down immediately, with a squad of medics to check out every single ...'

'Just be sure none of the company or the medics happen to have Petaybee as their planet of origin,' Torkel said.

'Huh? What's that, Captain?' The secretary-general shifted his scowl slightly towards Torkel.

'It'll be hard to do, Secretary Ball, since most of your best men and women come from this planet.'

'I don't believe what I'm hearing,' Farringer turned his head to face the others on his end of the communications channel. 'We've got a planet issuing orders, respected scientists gone barmy and now captains telling secretary-generals how to choose reinforcements! This situation is now Class Four!'

'You never are reasonable, Farrie,' Whittaker Fiske remarked in an amiably placatory tone, 'when you come up against something remotely unusual.'

'Remotely? Unusual?'

'Like I said,' and now Whittaker glanced around the screens at the other people who were attending this conference. 'You can't handle what isn't in the book. This isn't. I came here myself to sort out what looked like a minor glitch. And it's the majorest one I've ever encountered. However, keeping both mind and options open, I'd still like to get on with the substance of this conference. Take a trunk, Farrie, and listen, will ya? I'll explain if you stop interrupting me.'

'We do owe Whittaker the courtesy of hearing him out, Farringer,' said one of the other board members, a woman of elegant bearing and composure. She had a beautiful countenance, sculpted on classic lines that owed nothing to surgical skills, for she was still young enough not to need anything but her own good health. Her black hair waved

back to frame her heart-shaped face: even with the often harsh colours of a comunit, her complexion was porcelain fair, the blue of her eyes had not turned sourly murky, her make-up was discreet, and the only hint of her high rank were the exotically set fire-stones that she wore as earrings. Marmion de Revers Algemeine had made several fortunes on 'hearing' people out. 'I rather fancy the idea of a planet knowing what it wants and doesn't want! Sentience on a vast scale.' She leaned forward, elbows on the surface in front of her, and rested her chin on her fists. 'Besides, Whittaker never gives boring reports.'

She flicked her glance sideways but as each of the speakers were in different offices, at widely separated locations, it was impossible to tell if she referred to someone in her vicinity or one of the other attendees.

'This won't be the least bit boring, Marmie,' Whittaker said, grinning. 'Torkel here sent me an urgent call that there was a breakdown in the terraforming on this planet - we used Terraform B which has never before broken down - so I figured that a simple adjustment would suffice but I certainly wanted to be on hand ...'

'Yes, yes, we know your grandmother developed that programme ...' Ball said testily, flicking his fingers for Whittaker to get to the point.

'The point, then, my impatient friend, is that no breakdown has occurred. Unless one counts evolutionary development of a quite extraordinary nature as breakdown.' Whittaker said the last triumphantly and Yana saw some of the Petaybean contingent nodding in agreement and looking relieved.

'Am I missing something here?' Ball demanded. 'Have you found a way to extract the minerals we require after all? Or located the missing members of the teams?'

'No, but one surviving team member, who has made quite a spectacular recovery, is sitting here in this room. Dr Metaxos?'

‘Secretary-General Ball,’ Francisco Metaxos nodded to the screen. Metaxos’ hair was now spectacularly white, but otherwise he looked much younger than he had when he was first found, closer to his own forty-odd years. When Yana had first seen him, she’d thought him a man of seventy or so. The only change that hadn’t reversed was the hair. It had been, when he landed, as black as his son’s, or so Diego had said.

Marmion Algemeine suddenly smiled. ‘Frank! We heard you were ...’

‘I was,’ Metaxos said, returning her smile. ‘But as happens with many maladies, once the cause of mine was made clear, the appropriate treatment was administered and I’m fine now.’

‘Why is everybody talking in riddles?’ Ball asked, almost plaintively.

‘If you’ll allow me, sir,’ Torkel cut in before his father or anyone else could speak. ‘I think I have the explanation. It seems that all of us, myself included, have been under some sort of mass hypnotic illusion. It is quite strong, quite real-seeming. Under this illusion, one becomes *certain* that this terraformed rock on which we stand is actually a sentient being. That is, of course, impossible, a bit of superstitious nonsense, but I assure you the quality of the illusion is exceptional. I feel that it is induced primarily through two of the inhabitants of this area, the woman called Clodagh and this man, Dr Sean Shongili. Even our own Intergal agent, Major Maddock here, has fallen under their influence and ...’

‘None so blind as the man who will not see, son,’ Whittaker Fiske said sadly.

‘Even my father has been taken in, sir ...’

‘Excuse me,’ Yana said. ‘I thought we were here to present evidence, to talk over solutions. There is the evidence of Lavelle Maloney. The autopsy report is objective enough. There were physiological changes in

Lavelle's body that the doctors couldn't explain. Dr Shongili here can. Whether or not the company accepts the explanation is another matter but you should at least hear Dr Shongili out.'

Ball waved a dismissive hand. 'We've seen the reports and the treatise he sent in with its highly imaginative explanation of Petaybean adaptation. Still smacks of obstructionism. Besides, Shongili is one of the ring-leaders down there, if certain parties are to be believed.'

The Petaybeans cast resentful eyes on Torkel Fiske, who smiled, a wronged man vindicated.

The elegant Marmion spoke again in her slow, considered way. 'Tell me, Dr Shongili, Miz Senungatuk, are your perceptions that the planet is sentient shared by other Petaybeans, planet-wide?'

Clodagh nodded but Sean looked dubious. 'We aren't in direct contact with the southern land-mass.'

'Not directly,' Clodagh said, shrugging. 'But they know.'

'You seem so sure.'

'How could they not know a thing like that?' Clodagh asked, though Yana had the distinct impression that she was hedging, that she had good reasons for saying what she did which she didn't want to divulge just then. Knowing Clodagh, that would not be out of character. The woman was like the planet; round, subtly active and full of mysteries. In Yana's experience, they were mostly comfortable, benign mysteries, but mysteries none the less.

Marmion let it drop for the moment, but another member of the committee, whose balding head with its long pale hair caught in a ponytail at the nape of his neck had been turned to the comscreen, now turned to face them. His eyes were a beautiful celestial blue but his mouth was a thin hard line, the upper lip breaking over the lower like a snapping turtle.

'We must ask them, certainly,' he said. 'We must conduct a survey all over TBeta and enquire of its inhabitants what

their beliefs are concerning the planet and what experiences they have had there. It is a study long overdue.' His speech contained a slight lisp and an odd intonation, an accent perhaps, mostly erased.

Yana thought Marmion and Whittaker Fiske might find support in the man's suggestion, but instead, Whittaker visibly scooted his chair further from the table and the comscreen, and Marmion let the tip of her tongue show against her upper lip before answering carefully, 'An excellent suggestion, Vice-Chair Luzon. I shall go personally.'

'And I as well will go, Madame Marmion,' Luzon said. 'I am most interested in the belief patterns and customs of colonial peoples, especially those who have been without the benefit of extensive company contact over the years.'

'I'm sure you'll find Petaybee a fountain of information, Matthew,' Whittaker Fiske said with a somewhat strained attempt at his customary amiability.

Putting together the first and last names of the balding man - Matthew Luzon - Yana knew she had heard the name often before; and that the associations she had with it were not good. However, it was not until Fiske continued that she remembered what she had heard of Luzon.

'Your investigations and attempts to correct the thinking of colonists are well known, if not widely appreciated. But I think an actual fact-finding expedition, led by Marmion here, is in order now. Her delegation could take advantage of the warm weather to use audio-visual recording equipment generally too sensitive for the climate on this planet. I think the more subjective material could wait until later.'

Luzon allowed the corners of his mouth to curl in his version of a smile. 'Oh, no. I think my presence will be of great assistance. Come, come, Dr Fiske. I do not take up so much room. I will accompany Madame Marmion.'

The floor trembled beneath their feet and the screens wobbled on their brackets for a few moments. Yana happened to glance at Clodagh. She watched the image of Matthew Luzon with a certain studied wariness that Yana had never seen on the big woman's face before. It wasn't fear exactly; dread perhaps. That was when it hit Yana who Luzon was. And she was instantly appalled to learn that he had risen to such prominence in the company in the time since she had last had any association with him, however distant.

Luzon was a cultural anthropologist by training, a discipline which should have made him more broad-minded and accepting of others. Instead he had the reputation of using his eminence to condemn the 'less civilized' or 'unenlightened' peoples, using their cultural differences as cause to withdraw or withhold company support or co-operation. Saved the company a lot of money, she supposed. His name was bandied about when the inhabitants of the central continent of Mandella were herded into tenements so that the jungles and bogs they had formerly inhabited could be tapped for fossil fuels. The tenements weren't well built, the re-education programme didn't go into how to use the implements in the new homes, including the sanitation devices. Those Mandellans not killed in the great fire that swept through the tenements died later of the communicable diseases. None of this was Luzon's fault probably, but his reports were used by the company to sidestep its responsibility when dealing with the Universal Court. In fact, at one time Yana had heard something about Luzon being under consideration as a judge for the court.

And now the man was proposing to come looking down his nose at Petaybee!

'Well, I'm not coming down there,' Farringer Ball said. 'Lot of damned nonsense. I have a company to run here. Can't go traipsing around to every backwater bush planet

whose colonists get a little peculiar. Hell, if they weren't peculiar, they'd be in the corps or out in space ...'

Marmion raised an eyebrow and he desisted.

'Anyway, I can't and won't interrupt my work to go. But Matthew's done some crack investigating before and Marmie will bring back the goods. I'll be guided by their evidence.'

'That's a relief,' Whit snapped. 'You sure as hell haven't shown any inclination to be guided by mine, or that of Metaxos and Margolies.'

'Of course I have. I read the reports and I haven't evacuated the place and stripped it back to rock yet, have I?'

'Sir,' Torkel Fiske said. 'What about the additional troops? And I insist that Major Maddock face an official inquiry and possible court martial for her actions.'

'We're already talking about an official inquiry, Captain, or hadn't you been paying attention? If the inquiry determines that there's been subversion or sabotage, I doubt Maddock will have gone far, and she may be able to assist the investigators. Now then. There'll be an escort with Madame Marmion and Dr Luzon, of course, and additional technical personnel. If we decide to evacuate, we'll call in more then. Meanwhile, you've got enough manpower on hand, I should think. It's not as if an army's going to be any help in stopping earthquakes and volcanoes. This meeting is concluded.'

Goat-dung knew that she was evil, wilful, spiteful, malicious, and would someday, if she didn't mend her wicked ways, be prey for the creature from the bowels of the planet. She had been told this often enough, as the welts from the Instrument of Goodness impressed the lessons on her backside.

For her crimes, she usually got the hardest, dirtiest work to do of anyone her age and sex, but when the

warming came, melting the ice falls on the sides of the cliffs and turning the floor of the Vale into a great lake, the rest of the community joined her in scrabbling up the sides of the Vale to higher ground, carrying with them the teachings of the Shepherd Howling and all of his sacred implements, plus what food, clothing and housing materials that could be salvaged. All of the greenhouse gardens were lost and many of the animals drowned.

For days the waters rose up the icy walls of the Vale, creating slush and even mud underfoot and also a steaming mist that made it impossible to see. Goat-dung and the other children, packs strapped to their backs, climbed the walls of the canyon and carried dripping parcels to the adults, then splashed back down in the bright cold water to try to retrieve other articles.

Bad as she was, even Goat-dung was so used to obeying the will of the community, the will of the Shepherd Howling, that she failed to see the possibilities for escape in the situation.

She'd just climbed up again after falling three times back into the water. Despite the warmer air, she was shivering with cold, her skin muddy and scraped, bruised, half-naked as she warmed herself by the fire and ate the bowl of thin soup she had at last been permitted to ladle out for herself. The soup was mostly cold, and the fire, a pitiful stinking thing of damp animal dung, was nothing but a slightly sultry draught that failed to chase the ache and chill. It didn't banish the goose-bumps, never mind the frigidity in her bones.

For once, no-one else was better off than she. The one hundred or so followers of the Shepherd huddled along the rim of the steaming Vale of Tears, their lives and homes inundated by the Great Flood the Shepherd claimed had been sent to try them.

'The Monster seeks to subjugate us to its will in this fashion,' the Shepherd said over and over again. 'We shall

not succumb. When the waters subside, we'll return to our Vale and continue to defy that which would corrupt us.'

The Shepherd, instead of staying within his offices and superior quarters, was now among the flock organizing, counselling, exhorting - and observing. Feeling the disapproving eyes of the rest of the flock on her was bad enough but twice Goat-dung looked up from her misery to see the Shepherd himself watching her, and his regard made her colder than the waters in the Vale.

She rested from her last climb, as the still-short day drew to a close and the mists from the Vale crept up over the edge of the encampment. She heard soft footsteps approach and Concepcion, her belly still as flat as it had been before the Shepherd married her and her name was Swill, squatted beside her.

'Good news, little sister,' she said.

Goat-dung said nothing. Until she knew what Concepcion wanted, that was safest.

The other girl, a bare four years older than Goat-dung, held forth a piece of metal. 'You've been chosen,' she said simply, and rose to go.

Goat-dung stared at the piece in her hand. It was cut into the shape of a heart. The Shepherd had chosen her to be his wife.

'What? When?' she called after Concepcion.

'Tonight,' the older girl called back and was lost in the mist.

And that was when she did the worst thing she had ever done in all of her wicked days. She ran.

The mist covered her trail and the slush muffled the sound of her steps. She ran as hard and as long as her exhausted, undernourished body could. She had no idea where she was going. She had known no other people but her own, though sometimes the Shepherd made allusions to others, outsiders, those who had fallen into error. They

were horrible people, the Shepherd said, who would sacrifice girls like her to the Great Monster.

Better that than be a dutiful wife to the Shepherd, like Swill-Concepcion and Nightsoil, now known as Assumpta. Wives of the Shepherd, though they were no older than children who retained their childhood names, were given adult names, usually related to the Teaching.

Assumpta, once a rosy-cheeked, Titian-haired angel of a girl, full of childish agility and grace, was now old at thirteen. She had lost four children to a bleeding disease and was beaten after losing each one. She no longer walked very well.

Concepcion, on the other hand, was still barren at fifteen and she was beaten for that as well. Their own mother, Ascencion, was another of the wives, and supervised the beatings herself.

Goat-dung's mother had also been the Shepherd's wife although Goat-dung herself was not one of his own lambs. One reason she was so wicked, the others told her, was that her parents had been outsiders. She had been too small when her mother died to realize it, but it was said that her mother was an extremely unrepentant outsider who had not wanted to be the Shepherd's wife and only through the firm kindness of the flock had she been prevailed upon to accept the blessing of union with him. No-one among them had met Goat-dung's father, who died in ignorance and error and slavery to the Great Monster.

Goat-dung ran and ran, splashing through slush, hot with her effort, as long as light remained in the sky, then ran to keep from freezing as the night swallowed the planet. The moons came up and she stumbled on by their light, until she could run no more. She ran on and on, down and down, as if into another Vale. Looking back, by the moonlight, she saw the peaks of the mountains behind and above her, the Monster's back, its snout, its teeth.

She dragged herself a ways further. Down here the slush gave way to mud in places and a stream ribboning down the mountain steamed just as the water in the valley floor did. As she drew near it, it gave forth warmth and when she touched it, it was as hot as if it had been heated in a pan and had only cooled slightly.

She eased her way into it. It was deeper than it looked and had quite a current. It buffeted her along, lapping her with warmth, until it ran into a kind of tunnel, carrying her with it.

She was too tired, too full of lassitude from the water, to avoid being swept into the side of the mountain, and remembered, just before she hit her head on a rock and all became blackness, that the Shepherd taught that this was the very sort of place never to be caught.

2

'WELL?' BUNNY ROURKE asked breathlessly as the elders and the company friends of the Petaybeans filed out of the building. She handed the reins of the curlies to each rider. 'How'd it go?'

Clodagh shrugged. 'Like usual. They pretended we weren't there and if we were, that we'd nothin' sensible to say. They're sendin' down more investigators.'

Yana sighed. She'd known it wouldn't be easy but something else was disturbing her. As they rode back through the woods to Kilcoole, she asked, 'I don't get it. Torkel was with us. He felt the planet too. He knows about it. If he had really rejected it, he'd be like Frank Metaxos was.'

'Denial,' Diego said, drawing on his own counselling experience. 'He knows, OK, he just can't stand to admit it. He's not a complete creep, after all. You and he used to be friends, didn't you, Yana?'

'Friendly at least,' Yana said. 'Or I thought so. But he's been so unreasonable ...'

'Maybe irrational's a better word,' Sean said. 'He might not have had the reaction Frank did, but it strikes me that Fiske isn't sledding on both runners any more, if he ever was. Maybe his unwilling contact with the planet has done him more harm than shows on the surface.'

'At least it's that lady coming to investigate,' Moira Rourke said with some relief.

'Yes, but I don't like the look of that bald fella,' Clodagh said.

'Nor do I,' Yana agreed. 'At the risk of sounding like the conspirator Torkel thinks me to be, I suggest that all of you avoid any direct contact with Luzon and save your explanations strictly for Madame Marmion. He is known to ... twist ... anything he's told.'

As they neared the village, they were met by a pride of cats, all of them striped bright rusty-orange, and all of them mewing and purring and twining dangerously around the large snowshoe-sized hooves of the shaggy curly-coated horses.

'What a welcoming committee!' Yana said as Marduk, or at least she assumed it was he, hopped up behind her and rubbed his head against her back briefly before hopping down again. 'Did you call them, Clodagh?'

Clodagh shook her head. 'No, but I was worried, before we left, about how committed the other villages were to the planet. So far the PTBs have questioned only us but I figured they'd get around to asking some of the others sometime soon. These little ones scattered as soon as we left and here they are back again.' She tilted her head as she looked down at the cats.

'What's got 'em so antsy?' Bunny asked.

Clodagh reined her curly-coat to a halt. Immediately the cats converged on her, stropping the legs of the pony who regarded this activity with mild surprise and didn't so much as twitch a muscle.

'You'll get muddy doing that,' she added, since the pony was coated up to and including his belly with good wet Petaybean earth. With a groan, she heaved one leg over the saddle and dismounted, ignoring the fact that her skirts immediately became as dirty as the pony's legs. 'Now, what's all this?' she said, hands on her hips and addressing the entire pride, looking from one upturned cat face to the next.

Clodagh's special relationship with her cats was known - or at least suspected - by everyone in Kilcoole. So the

others, except for Sean, Bunny, and Yana, rode politely around the cats and pretended not to notice anything more than a woman being greeted by overly fond pets.

Frank Metaxos, in whose healing process the cats had had a rather unusual role, remained behind, too, as did Diego. Steve Margolies, still on the company's payroll, had stayed on at SpaceBase.

Both cats and Clodagh waited for the rest of the village to parade past before the mewing and chirruping began.

Ordinarily, the cats would have sat down to impart what was evidently a long story but the mud offended their dignity. So they prowled around her, twitching their tails high, as they communicated their messages. The humans waited patiently.

Sparks of uncharacteristic anger flickered in Clodagh's eyes as she raised them to Sean and Yana. 'We got all kinds of trouble now.' She gave a disgusted snort. 'Seems like some villages want Intergal to come down and mine, while the mining's good and they can get paid for working.'

Sean frowned and Yana told her heart to stop racing. 'How many dissidents?'

'Four towns that the cats know of.' Clodagh's usually merry face was sad as well as solemn.

'Which ones?'

'Deadhorse, McGee's Pass, Wellington and Savoy.'

Sean let out a burst of sour laughter. 'That figures.' He sighed deeply. 'Have the cats any good news?'

'Yes, but the bad news is they haven't had a chance to check everyone out. If four villages oppose us ...'

Clodagh named the villages which in recent years spurned contact with the others.

'How many more might be disaffected and looking to please Intergal for the sake of wampum?' Sean asked.

'So, the good news?' Yana prompted with a sigh.

'Well, we do have at least twelve communities behind us solid. Tanana Bay, Shannonmouth, New Barrow, Twin Moon

Village, Little Dublin, Oslo Inlet, Harrison's Fjord, Kabul, Bogota, Macchu Picchu, Kathmandu, and Sierra Padre.'

'Most of the closest ones,' Sinead said, looking encouraged.

'And the ones,' Clodagh said with a pessimistic expression, 'that have the most Petaybean boys and girls in company service.'

'What bothers you about that?' Yana asked. 'Wouldn't they be on their folks' side in this?'

'Might be, if they weren't required to lean on their folks to do what the company asks,' Clodagh said gloomily.

'Oh!' Yana sighed now. Dirty tricks department. Farringer Ball and Matthew Luzon would pull every one they needed out of storage to see their interpretation became the official one. 'Could you be wrong about which side of the blanket the Petaybean troops would fall on? The pilots, O'Shay and Greene in particular, gave us some support during the volcanic crisis.'

Clodagh shrugged her broad shoulders. 'You can always be wrong about anything. Sure, I think a lot of them would feel loyalty for us and for the planet. But they've been out there,' she nodded towards the heavens, 'for a long time. They're used to the kind of stuff you're used to. Some of 'em have prob'ly forgot how to cook, too, like you, and how to hunt. How to take care of themselves. And if the company decided to punish them and us by dumping them here and pulling out support, well, that'd be pretty hard on them, pretty hard on us, and pretty hard on the planet. I figure if all the Petaybee troops still working for Intergal got sent back here, it'd triple our population. At the least! I don't know how many kids those troops have had. Course, they'd be welcome and the planet would provide, but it might be as hard on it as some kind of mining operations.'

Frank cleared his throat 'The eco-system in these icy regions is quite fragile.'

'You know it and I know it but Integal seems oblivious to the fact,' Sean said.

'Are those villages one hundred per cent in favour of selling out?' Yana asked.

Clodagh smiled patiently. 'Now, Yana. You've been around the universe a few times. When did you ever meet any group of people who were one hundred per cent in favour of anything?'

'Exactly. So presumably there are some people there who aren't in favour of the mining. And probably, in the remaining villages, a few who are. I think we need to know who's fer us and who's agin us, as they say in the Wild West vids, and maybe try to convert some of the unaffiliated. I thought everybody had the same relationship with the planet that you do.'

Clodagh shook her head. 'Not everybody wants to. Those who have enough respect to follow the rules and live wisely survive better though, so even if they don't acknowledge the presence of the planet, they get by as long as they keep out of the special places. The others, the foolish ones, don't live so well or so long. Those people would much rather try to please the bosses than forces they don't *want* to understand. Fortunately though, around here there's not much to do except pay attention so the planet gets through to most folks.'

'Well, sounds to me like we need to do a little campaigning,' Yana said.

'We will make them songs so they understand,' Clodagh said.

'Cool,' Diego said. 'Just like the old radical songs from Earth. Ah, if only I had a guitar.'

'What's that?' Bunny asked.

'A musical instrument. All of the old protest singers had them. There's some wonderful mining songs in the memory banks back - back at my old place.'

'I wish you had one then,' Bunny said loyally.

'Me too, except I don't know how to play.'

'I bet you could learn,' Bunny told him. 'You make better songs than some people who've made them all their lives.'

'Buneka,' Clodagh said sharply. 'Each song is a good song if it says what the singer means it to say.'

'Course it is, Clodagh. I know that. But Diego's sound better. He says what he means to say so everybody can understand it. That's all I meant.'

Clodagh smiled, a slightly bawdy smile, with a wink to Sean and Yana. 'That's all right then, alannah. He does make good songs.'

In the short distance to Kilcoole and Clodagh's house, they discussed the finer points of what needed to be said to the villages, both those which dissented and those which Clodagh felt sure could be counted upon to support the planet.

The cats had bounded off ahead of them, but when they reached Clodagh's, they found the entire village waiting outside in her yard. Yana found, looking at the yard, that she missed the snow. The village looked like a garbage dump with its stores of winter provisions half thawed in the snow, the trash that had been buried, the salvaged equipment lying around the yard, all of the items that had been lost throughout the long winter. Not to mention the leavings of the various dogs and cats and horses housed there. Also, without the snow, the roofs of the houses looked patchy, the siding of Clodagh's worn despite its fresh pastel colours. And everything and everyone was smeared and splattered with mud.

This dreary aspect didn't seem to lessen their regard for each other in the slightest, however, and the villagers crowded as cheerfully as ever into Clodagh's tiny house and began discussing what was to be done.

'We need to have another latchkay,' said Eamon Intiak. 'We should have one and invite the people who don't

understand. Petaybee would speak to them and then they'd know.'

'You'd think they'd know already by now,' Sinead Shongili said.

'Now, Sinead,' her partner Aisling said reasonably, 'such things take some folks longer. Their worries about the everyday things in their lives get in the way of understanding what's here.'

'We'll each go away and think about these things and make songs,' Clodagh said. 'Then we'll go talk to the other people. Sinead, you and Sean and the Maloneys must go the farthest because you're the best travellers. I would like to send Frank with you, Sinead, and young Diego with Liam. Yana, you go with Sean. We need you people who know about the company to make talk with the neighbours who are taken in by the promises too.'

With that, everyone began to leave. Yana would have left too. She was tired. She wanted to rest and eat and bathe in the hotsprings and make love to Sean, not necessarily in that order. But Sean laid a restraining hand on her arm and lingered a moment.

'And how about the other pole, Clodagh?' Sean asked gently. 'How do we reach those people?'

'Can you not do it, Sean?' Clodagh asked.

'Sure, I could but it'd be a long journey no matter how fast I went. The PTBs would already have been there and found out what we need to know. Besides, I hate to leave Yanaba for so long at a time like this.'

'What do you mean, Sean?' Yana asked. 'I'm barely a month along. I wouldn't even know I was pregnant if you hadn't found out via your hotline to the planet. Other women have had babies before ...'

'Not,' Sean said significantly, 'my babies. If only my sister and Rourke had been able to map that passage.'

'Sinead?'

'No. Our sister Aoifa and her husband, Bunny's parents. They were trying to map some of the planet's inner passages. Bunny was barely eighteen months old—'

'And that Aoifa was pregnant again!' Clodagh said fondly. 'They hadn't been married long, but that girl was a real Shongili. Not even pregnancy hampered that one, and her as curious as one of the cats!'

'What happened?' Yana asked.

Sean shrugged. 'We don't know.'

'Couldn't you find out. From the planet, I mean?'

'You've been with it. The information you get isn't usually that specific. And Aoifa and Mala had this theory that some of the special places that lead from one river and lake to the next here on the land lead under the sea in the same way. I searched but I never found them. Never even got a glimmer.'

Clodagh made a sound like 'Yuh'. Then said, 'They must have gone very far. Much farther than anyone has ever gone.'

'On foot or by sled or horse maybe,' Yana said. 'But there are other ways to travel and other ways to get to the south, if the planet doesn't mind the intrusion too much. If I can reach Captain Greene or that O'Shay fellow, maybe they can give us a lift ...'

'Ah, you spoiled modern woman,' Sean said with a kiss to her cheek. 'I love you.'

'I know it's not the Petaybean way, Shongili, but until you come up with a mutant bird to match your cats and horses, we have to make do with what poor mechanical means I can muster.'

'I'm workin' on it, Yana. I am. But until then, you're quite right. We'll have to use company equipment to fight its masters. Now then, what say we go meditate at the hotspring and come up with something to say to these people once you finesse the pilots into transporting us?'

'I thought you'd never ask,' she said.

It was small, it was warm and wet and the pelt was of a most extraordinarily tattered nature, fine flapping threads and matted bits interspersed in an unkempt coat. It smelled like food, but not the superior sort.

It leaked savoury blood into the water sloshing around it. The water was the problem. In order to reach the little morsel, one would have to get wet. Of course, one could reach down from the ledge with one's claws, and if one stretched - stretched - stretched - ah! One caught a piece of the pelt and could heft it to where one could support the weight of the rest in one's jaws and - ah - it moved. Still alive then. Good. Fresh meat was best. All it would take was biting down a bit on the neck, under the mane and the kill would be clean, the meat fresh. There would be no necessity for leaving the relative shelter of the ledge.

One leaned forward, resting on one's chest, and extended one's neck to meet the bit rising on clawtip and - it slipped! It was trying to get away! The other paw lashed forward, claws extended, to help the first and one instinctively leaned forward, one's jaws coming into play to assist one's claws and - and - the thing slipped again before one could sink a tooth into it. The pelt was flimsy stuff and tore out of the claws just as the other paw grabbed the morsel in a second place. The morsel let out a terrified squeal, rather like a rabbit. One was about to smack it to silence and lean forward for the fatal chomp.

Then the cave shook, the ledge broke under one's overbalanced weight, and one tumbled tail over nose into the pool, relinquishing the morsel, which yelped again. Inconvenient and embarrassing to be so indisposed in front of the food. One climbed out of the pool and shook the water from one's coat and began to wash before one's meal.

The morsel began to flail frantically towards the den's entrance. One padded nonchalantly after. The cave, the

ground, the world, shook again. One knew when one was being addressed. One sat on one's haunches and perceived.

The morsel was also arrested in mid-flight. 'Did you - d-do that?' it asked. 'Are - are you the G-Great Monster?'

One yawned.

The world shook again and one realized that one had understood the speech of the morsel. One also understood that it was a youngling, and female.

One waded forward while the youngling waded backwards, outlined in the dusk outside the mouth of the cave. One's paws dripped water, albeit warm water. One lapped a bit. The youngling stood still.

'You're not so terrible,' it said. 'You're nothing but a big cat.'

One had one's dignity to maintain. One lashed one's beautifully and delicately marked tail and growled.

And from beneath one's sodden paws, the world growled back at one and bucked, sending a wave of water to swamp one, knocking one onto one's back, drinking more deeply of the spring than one cared to, paws overhead, and propelled backwards, away from the young.

When one got to one's feet, one saw that the youngling - it no longer seemed safe to think of it - her - as a morsel - had not used the opportunity to run away. Indeed, it, too, was just arising from the water, sputtering and snorting. Ah, good. It had not seen one's discomfiture. Dignity was preserved.

'I'm not afraid of you,' the youngling declared as one advanced - claws sheathed, teeth safely contained within one's lips, growl little more than a polite, enquiring rumble in one's throat. A mere purr, actually, one corrected, as the waters bubbled and sloshed ominously. 'I used to know a cat. A little one. I was a baby then. Shepherd Howling made my mother kill my cat. He - he tried to anyway - he - she wouldn't and - and ...' Something odd was happening to the youngling now. It began leaking again, saltiness into