

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS



Power Play

Anne McCaffrey and Elizabeth Ann Scarborough

About the Book

At last, the living, breathing, sentient world of Petaybee was about to become a recognized and independent planet. Colonel Yana Maddock, now married to Sean Shongili, was bidden to the meeting on Gal Three to give testimony and discuss the future of the miracle snow and ice world where every human, animal, and plant lived in harmony with the entity that was Petaybee itself.

But their arch-enemy, Matthew Luzon, who had been humiliated and nearly destroyed when Petaybee took her revenge on him, had still not given up his designs on the rich, varied, and unusual world. He was determined to destroy its chances of autonomy.

And so Petaybee found itself swamped with visitors, hunters eager to kill the wildlife, merchants and scientists ready to strip the land, and religious malcontents wanting to 'talk' to the planet. And then Yana - pregnant with her first child - was kidnapped by the infamous and enigmatic pirate, Onidi Louchard - and Yana's ransom was to be the world of Petaybee itself.

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Also by Anne McCaffrey

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About the Authors

Power Play

Anne McCaffrey and Elizabeth Ann
Scarborough

This book is merrily dedicated to

Maureen Beirne

Good Friend Staunch Ally

Cheerful Companion Experienced Tour Guide

for many kindnesses for many years

Outside Kilcoole

YANABA MADDOCK AND Sean Shongili held hands in a darkness illuminated only by the glowing eyes of hundreds of animals and the flames of hundreds of candles. The drumming had stopped now, replaced by the sweet lapping of sliding water, the beat of many hearts and the breathing of many creatures. One pulse was louder than all the drums had been, one breath a wind that guttered and flared the candles with each respiration.

‘So how do we do it here?’ Yana whispered nervously to her love and the father of her unborn children. ‘Does the planet give me away or what?’

Sean smiled and winked, ‘No-one has that right but you, love. Let’s just say that the planet acts as witness and honorary best being.’

‘*Best being,*’ an echo sang from the cavern walls, ‘*best being.*’

He stopped walking and she stopped beside him. All she knew was that they were getting married, Petaybean style.

She’d been so busy with her new duties as Petaybee’s administrator over the last two months that she hadn’t had enough time to enquire as fully as she would have liked into the rite or folkways of the Petaybean marriage ceremony before it was upon her. Sean’s niece, Bunny Rourke, one of Yana’s chief informants on matters Petaybean, had told her that it was a special sort of latchkay with a night chant at

the hot springs. Yana had attended the break-up latchkay when she first arrived. This occasion differed in that the night chant was at the beginning of the latchkay instead of at the end. As at all latchkays, there would be much singing, although probably more at this particular one. Both Sean and Yana were to prepare a song for each other. Songs were how Petaybeans celebrated or commemorated all their most noteworthy experiences. The mode was mostly either a rhyme scheme to some ancient Irish air or a free-verse poem chanted Inuit style to the accompaniment of a drum. Yana, whose heart was full but whose mind was too crowded with administrative details while her body was having to make physical accommodations to her pregnancy, had finally created her song. Other than that, she simply hoped that things would go well and allowed herself to be led through the proceedings by the people she had trusted more than once with her life.

Two hours earlier Kilcoole's *première couturière*, Aisling Senungatuck, had arrived with the gown she had created for Yana – rabbit hides crocheted together with woollen yarn in a long, panelled design with a flared skirt, scooped neck and long sleeves. The crocheted lace inserts were heavily decorated with beads made from scavenged wire and the little Petaybean pebbles found in certain streams. Tumbled, polished, and drilled, the stones were lovely and translucent. The gown was yellow, the Petaybean wedding colour, Aisling explained, 'Because most of the plants make yellow dye.' The rabbits were contributed from the collecting places of all the village hunters. Sean's vest was a darker shade of the yellow, trimmed with beaver fur and blue and white beads.

Now the motes of light formed a circle around the two, and Clodagh Senungatuck, Aisling's sister and village healer, stepped into the centre with Sean and Yana. Yana noted with some amusement that as many of Clodagh's

orange striped cats as could crowd around her feet did so, their eyes eerie and iridescent in the candleglow.

‘Sean Shongili and Yanaba Maddock, we’ve come here because we understand you got somethin’ to say to all of your friends and kin here where the planet hears you best, is that right?’

‘It is,’ Sean said. ‘I have a song to sing for you all.’

‘Sing for us,’ soft voices said from the shadows, accompanied by an underlying rumble of throaty feline purrs, the whicker of the curly-coats, and the affirmative yips of the dogs.

‘*Sing,*’ the echo said.

Yana had no idea how many bodies were clustered into the cave that day. The line seemed to stretch clear back to the village and included every man, woman and child, horse, cat, the larger track cats, everybody’s dog teams. She could have sworn that she saw wild game emerge from the brush and join in the procession just before Clodagh led them into the darkness of the cave behind the hotsprings waterfall.

Sean cleared his throat. The candleflame shadowed the chiselled planes of his face and softened the outline of his mouth as he began speaking.

‘Yanaba, she met the enemy
Coming to us, she met friends as well
And honoured them.
She met me, and I met love.
Aijaiji.

‘With her friends, here around her
With her lover, I who take her hand,
For these people and this world embracing us
She met the enemy again and again.
It is in her name to do so.
Aijaija.

'Yanaba, who knows my aspects
Yanaba, who has my heart
Yanaba, who honours my world and my people
Yanaba, who carries our future in her body
Yanaba, you are already part of my life
Yanaba, you already possess my heart
I tell you this here, with our world as witness,
I want you with me for ever.
Ajai.'

Yana's mouth went suddenly dry. Something soft and furry rubbed against her bare ankles. Her stomach gave a heave and she wondered could the baby be moving so soon, pushing her to speak. She took Sean's hands as much for support as encouragement and clung to them so tightly that she was afraid she'd leave bruises, except that he returned the strong grip. That gave her the courage she needed. She felt suddenly light-headed and needed to hold on to him to keep from floating to the top of the cave.

'Sean Shongili, my truest friend and love.
Here I am, a woman whose only song
Was of war and death.
How can I sing what I feel for you?

You gave me life when I was dying,
A home when I had known none in
Many years of wandering,
A family when all of mine is dead,
A life to bear
When I thought I could give only death.
You showed me a new world and
Invited me to make it my own.

'And I do.
In old songs by better singers

They say, "You are all the world to me."

I say so too.

Sean Shongili, you are all the world to me

And the world to me is you.

I love you. Take me as I take you.

As they used to say on Earth, "I do."

Sean took her in his arms then, and kissed her, letting his body rest against her belly which, although firm and a bit fuller and rounder than usual, wasn't that noticeable yet.

Then Clodagh clapped her hands and everyone dispersed leaving Yana and Sean alone in the cave but not in darkness. As the candles departed, a warm soft glow pulsed throughout the cavern and he eased her to the rock which seemed to melt into a comfortable bed as she and Sean made love. They always enjoyed that occupation but here, now, in the cave, where the planet was also part of this communion, she felt as if she had never before been so consumed by the passion that always fired up between them in the act of love. Sean felt it too, for his hands were tender, possessive in a fashion she would once have resented, exciting in ways she had never experienced. The climax was so extraordinary that she wept and knew, from the wetness of the cheek he pressed hard against hers, that he also had been rocked by the intensity of their consummation. For a moment, she thought she had died.

This time they did not sleep afterwards or dress as they left the cave to join the throng waiting outside at the thermal pools.

Cheers and laughter greeted them from the people and animals in the springs' three pools. Overhead the stars and moons, real and man-made, lit the sky while the candles planted along the sides of the pool garlanded it with ribbons of light. The big cats sported rather clumsily in the water while the dogs fetched various things thrown by their masters. The smaller cats sat disdainfully on the edge of the

pool. Yana laughed when one of the curly-coats took a running jump and dived into the pool making a whale-sized wave that swamped the shore and wet several disgusted felines who began furiously to lick themselves dry.

Then Sean pushed her in and a moment later, a seal appeared among the splashing, laughing, naked company. This activity continued till daylight and was the merriest, raunchiest festivity she had ever attended. Periodically, someone would hoist themselves out of the water and run bare-assed to the baskets beyond the candles to fetch something to cram into their mouths before diving back into a pool. Fortunately, all the food had been prepared in bite-sized portions, was easily chewed and swallowed, or was fruit that wouldn't be harmed if it got wet.

At daylight, everyone went ashore and dressed and walked limply home except Sean and Yana, who rode double on one of the curlies while Bunny led the village girls who spread flower petals and seeds on the path before them.

'I'm starving,' Yana muttered up into Sean's chin.

He nuzzled the top of her head. 'Good, you'll like this part then. The feast was prepared before we left. But don't eat so much or you'll be too full to dance with me afterwards.'

'*Dance?* You have to be joking! My legs feel like noodles. Umm, noodles. Do you suppose Clodagh made hers? The ones with the smoked fish and dried tomato sauce?'

'I have it on good authority that she did. Is all you think of your stomach?'

'I'm eating for two!'

'So you are. Forgive me,' he said, lifting her down from the curly-coat's back.

During the feasting, she had ample chances to rest and gaze into Sean's eyes and messily feed him and receive food from him, also part of the wedding protocol. The food was arrayed in the middle of the meeting house, and Sean and Yana as well as the other adults sat on benches along

the wall while Bunny led the youngsters of Kilcoole in offering them food.

Meanwhile, everyone occupied themselves by singing the songs *they* had written for Sean and Yana. Bunny sang of her first meeting with Yana and their wild ride down the river. Sean's sister, Sinead, told how she knew Yana would be one of them from the time she went on her first hunt. Adak sang of the hiding of Sean in the snocle shed with Yana, and making frequent clandestine trips which the powers that be did not know anything about.

Even Steve Margolies, now residing in Kilcoole with his partner, Frank Metaxos, and Diego, sang of how Yana and Sean had reunited him with his family. And Yana's neighbour across the street had a hilarious pantomime song about Yana throwing Colonel Giancarlo out of her cabin with the burned fish. That was one of the few songs rhymed and sung to an old Irish air instead of chanted to drums. Clodagh said she believed the tune went originally to a song called 'The Charladies' Ball'.

As the other young people began to clear away the empty serving plates, Diego took his newly crafted guitar and joined the drummers, Old Man Mulligan on his whistle, and Mary Yulipilik on her handmade concertina. All together, they wheezed up a quite respectable dance tune.

Sean took Yana's hands in his, led her out onto the floor and then swung himself opposite her at the top of the cleared hall. Two by two came Dr Whittaker Fiske, who had returned especially to dance at the wedding, partnering Clodagh, followed by Sinead with Aisling, Moira and Seamus, Bunny and her sister Cita, Frank Metaxos and Steve Margolies, Liam Maloney and Bunny's cousin Nula to form a complete reel line. Captain Johnny Greene, who had extended his shore leave for the occasion, had Captain Neva-Marie Rhys-Hall from SpaceBase as his partner for the dance in another reel line while his fellow copter pilot, Rick O'Shay, gallantly led old Kitty Intiak on to the floor. Orange

cats tiptoed daintily to the food which had been put on the side for them, while the dogs went home to their kennels to eagerly await scraps from the feast. Track cats lounged by the doors and on top of the roof and the curlies grazed in the last of the green fields left by the unusually long; warm summer, now turning to fall.

Somewhere in the middle of the third dance, Terce, who was minding the snocle shed, tapped Adak on the shoulder and he in turn tapped Johnny on the shoulder and whispered something in his ear. The two men left, accompanied by Captain Rhys-Hall, and returned in time to rescue Yana from a fifth dance.

Marmion de Revers Algemeine and two Company corporsmen in dress white uniforms were with them.

Yana and Sean stopped dancing to greet their friend, elegant as usual in a royal blue tunic with a purple underdress, the top heavily embroidered in jade and silver, matching Marmie's earrings and rings.

'Marmie! How wonderful that you could come!' Yana cried and Marmion kissed both her cheeks, then Sean's.

'Yes, and in addition to your wedding present, I'm afraid I've come to take you away from all this. The CIS court is reconvening a week from now and your testimony will be necessary to augment Commissioner Phon Tho Anaciliact's decision on Petaybee. I thought you'd want to do it yourself, since going off-planet would be lethal to native Petaybeans.' She glanced down briefly at Yana's middle and a look of consternation flowed over her classic features. 'Oh, my. Time flies, doesn't it?'

Yana smiled. 'It does indeed. But I see no reason . . .'

'I don't think it's wise for you to go off-planet this far into your pregnancy, Yana,' Sean said, his hand on her shoulder tightening protectively.

Others in the room had joined them by now. Clodagh and Whit Fiske also greeted Marmie with kisses on the cheeks and Bunny pushed her way through to them, trailed closely

by Diego, who had stopped playing and slung his guitar across his back as soon as he saw the newcomers arrive.

‘How long does she need to be gone, Marmie?’ Clodagh asked.

‘Not long, I should think. Counting the journey, two weeks your time, three at the most.’

‘Huh,’ Clodagh said. ‘I’d never last that long. Sean neither.’

‘I mean to be there too, Yana, though as an Intergal board member,’ Marmion said, ‘my testimony is assumed to be biased and self-serving in one of those peculiarly bureaucratic fashions that people can’t really explain anyhow. It’s too bad there’s no qualified native Petaybean to testify.’

‘I qualify and I think I could go too,’ Bunny said, pulling at her sleeve. ‘I’m young enough to go off-planet without any ill effects and I know everything that’s happened. I could sing them the song I made about it. Though Diego’s songs are better.’

‘If you’re going, I’m going,’ Diego said. ‘Now’s my chance to show you all those technical things you keep telling me couldn’t possibly work! Besides, I wouldn’t want your head getting turned by all those guys in uniform. And I could see my mom,’ he added with a glance at Marmion, as if the more conventional reason might sway her where his desire to be with Bunny might not.

‘We need Colonel Maddock – or is it Shongili now?’ Marmie asked with a twinkle.

‘I think for courtroom purposes I’d better remain Maddock for the time being,’ Yana said.

‘Yana, you’re four months pregnant,’ Sean said. ‘With *my* child.’ The emphasis, Yana knew, was not merely possessive. Because of Sean’s dual nature as man and seal, he was concerned just how many of his traits his children would inherit and how deeply an off-planet experience would affect them.

‘Many women are on duty right up until delivery now, Sean,’ she said, dropping her hand to his arm and giving it a reassuring squeeze. ‘And you heard Marmie, it will only be three weeks. If I have Bunny along . . .’

Clodagh touched Sean’s hand. ‘It should be OK that long, Sean. And Petaybee needs her to do this.’

‘I suppose so. I only wish I could accompany her.’

‘I’d take good care of her, Uncle Sean. You know I would,’ Bunny said, throwing her arms around his waist.

‘And I’d take care of both of them, Dr Shongili,’ Diego said, with a challenging look at Marmion.

Marmion smiled at him and said, ‘With you as adult guardian, I see no problem in Bunny and Diego accompanying you, Yana. In fact, I’m sure CIS Anaciliact would appreciate all the support he can get. I don’t suppose little Cita . . .?’

But Sean denied that choice with a firm shake of his head. ‘After all she’s been through she’s much too fragile in my opinion. Cita stays here. Besides, Coaxtl frets herself into moulting mountains of hair if the girl is out of sight for any extended period.’

‘I can tell what needs to be told, to anyone who asks,’ Bunny said at her staunchest.

‘Sean,’ Yana said, turning to look into his dear, worried face. ‘Duty does have a way of calling regardless of personal convenience, love.’

‘I wouldn’t stop you from doing what you think you need to do, even if I thought I could get away with it, Yana.’ His grin was slightly strained and anxious and so were his eyes. She understood his concern, and maybe more than just ‘understood’ after their union in the cave. ‘But be careful.’

Two hours later they were ready to depart, though Yana deeply regretted the necessity of leaving her new husband so precipitously. She consoled herself with the knowledge that what they had between them would keep, on the ice and in the heat, come what may.

Clodagh gave each of them an almost ritualistic kiss and embrace, putting a little leather bag on a thong around their necks.

As she hung Yana's around her neck, Yana asked, 'What's this?'

'It's dirt,' Clodagh said simply.

'Dirt?'

'Yes. Petaybee wants you to have something to remember it by. The dirt's from the cave.'

Not long before, Yana would have been stymied how to receive such a statement, but now she squeezed Clodagh warmly in an embrace of her own. 'This makes me feel a lot better.'

Then Sean clasped her in a farewell embrace and she, Bunny and Diego boarded the Company shuttle that would take them to Marmion's executive spaceliner, waiting in orbit. In Yana's carryall was Sean's wedding vest, to sleep with, and a hastily made town recording to Petaybean relatives in Company service. Bunny carried a frozen fish for her cousin Charlie from his parents and a basket of pemmican from the wedding feast for homesick Petaybeans. Diego carried letters from his father to his mother and a basket of his favourite Petaybean foods plus nutrients to keep himself and Bunny healthy on the journey.

Once aboard the spaceliner, Sally Point-Jefferson, Marmion's aide, tenderly placed Charlie's fish in the freezer. Bunny remained glued to the viewscreen, watching Petaybee shrink into a tiny point of light in the vastness of black space. She bent and unbent her fingers against the port in farewell as her home disappeared altogether.

Shipside

BUNNY TURNED AWAY from the window, a little gasp of dismay escaping her throat, her eyes misty with suppressed tears.

‘I never thought I’d see the last of Petaybee,’ she said in such a mournful tone that Diego immediately took her into a warm embrace, murmuring reassurances and some of the silly names that he had created for her.

‘Now, gatita,’ he said, the name meaning ‘little cat’ or ‘kitten’, ‘it’s not as if you won’t be coming back, or anything. It’s only for a little while. And I bet that no-one from Kilcoole has *ever* seen Petaybee from space like you just did. Looks like one of those stones Aisling polishes up, the bluey ones with the white bands.’

‘Yes, I guess it does at that,’ Bunny said, sniffing until Marmion handed her a tissue. ‘Oh, sorry. Didn’t bring anything to blow into.’

‘What the well-appointed vessel has in quantity – things you don’t remember to bring with you,’ Marmion said kindly. ‘I forget how hard it is to leave a place you love. Only think how excited you’ll be to see it in the viewscreen on your way back. The better view!’

Marmion then organized everyone into doing things: like settling into their cubicles, getting food, getting comfortable. ‘I’ve had Sally acquire clothing for you or you’ll all be over-warmly dressed where we’re going. It’s also very

important, I think, that we choose garments that will seem appropriate to our mission.'

'What's wrong with what we're wearing?' Bunny wanted to know for she was wearing the beautiful Gather Blouse Aisling had made out of the material Yana had gifted her with. The blouse made her feel very elegant and adult, and Diego said it was the nicest thing he'd seen her in.

'I'm not suggesting you change your style, dear,' Marmion said in a conciliatory tone, 'and that blouse is certainly lovely but you can't appear every day in it. So Sally and I scrounged around to see what would be *you* as well as ah . . . not *too* conspicuously different. Oh,' and she gave an exasperated sigh as she saw the defiant look on Bunny's face, 'for all I'm *supposed* to be so diplomatic, I'm not putting this in the right words, am I? But then, where we're going, one is not often judged by what they are, but what they *seem* to be. You know what I'm talking about, Colonel Yana dear, don't you?' And Marmion appealed to Yana on more than the one count she was trying to explain.

'I do, indeed, Marmion . . . ' Yana tried to pull a fold over her belly from the material of her one-piece suit and failed with a laugh. 'I'll need a size larger, I know.'

'Oh, you're easy to do, Yana,' Marmion said. 'Wasn't she, Sally?'

The aide laughed and nodded. 'With trouser pleats for expansion,' she said. 'And a tunic tailored just that little bit fuller across the . . . ah . . . hips.'

'It isn't my hips that worry me,' Yana said with a grin, hoping to clear Bunny's troubled expression.

'Diego, we've ordered you the very latest,' Marmion went on and then giggled in one of those displays of amusement which charmed her friends. 'In fact, the whole operation was a great deal of fun. Why don't you and Bunny go see what's in your wardrobes? We'll still have time to discard what you really can't possibly be seen in before you have to be seen in it.'

Diego escorted Bunny firmly to the cabins they'd been assigned. Only when the panel had slid shut behind them did Marmion's expression alter to one of concern.

'You *do* know what I mean, Yana?'

'Oh, yes, Marmion. I know precisely what you're trying to do and so does Diego. He knows the drills. So do I. So, now what? Or do we wait for the others to return before you tell us the bad news?'

'How ever did you know there is some?'

'Because you're taking such especial pains to make us seem normal, look normal and yet different enough so we'll still be "original" as well as acceptable.'

Marmion, hands loosely clasped in her lap, considered that. 'It will not be smooth sailing, although I have every confidence that common sense, at least this once, will prevail. Intergal, as well as other holding companies that have vast numbers of star systems held in fief as Petaybee is, will be watching. The scientifically acute are fascinated by the idea of a sentient planet. You must know that, with all the paper that's flooded your desk since they got a name to send messages to.'

Yana nodded ruefully. 'No kidding. There's been so much of it I haven't even begun to read it all, much less answer it. Sean's been doing a lot of the footwork, I suppose you'd call it, and that leaves Diego as the only other literate person in the north, other than his father and Steve Margolies, who are busy enough with their own work. Loncie Ondelacy is able to do some in the South. Diego's been teaching Bunny to read and write but, fast as she is, she can't learn enough in a couple of months to do more than help with alphabetical filing. Most of the letters seem to be from people who want to come to Petaybee for some reason or other - I can't believe there's so many out there all of a sudden when the planet's been so quiet for years.

'We've had several enquiries from drug companies too and I have no idea how Clodagh's cures can be reproduced

at this point. Even with a good growing season this year, the planet so far has provided just about enough to keep native Petaybeans supplied – if we’re actually going to try to farm some of Clodagh’s plants and produce her cures for a wider population we’ll have to do it in some way that doesn’t overtax Petaybee. Clodagh’s not even sure, at this point, if some of the ingredients can *live* off-planet. I knew this was going to take a lot of work, but it seems to me that someone’s been broadcasting outside the committee a lot of what ought to be classified information about the planet’s sentient nature. It’s pushing us to go much faster than we’re equipped to do at present.’

Marmion said, ‘I understand your concern, and discretion certainly has been urged on all parties where Petaybee is concerned. I’m afraid what you’re dealing with now is only, if you’ll pardon the expression, the tip of the iceberg. Some of our board members are expressing concern that other colonized worlds might try to claim similar status. They’re worried that Petaybee will set a precedent. If there were some way to reassure them that this is a one-off case of planetary sentience . . .’ and she cocked her head hopefully at Yana.

‘You expect me to be able to answer that, Marmion? I can barely cope with the knowledge that there’s *one* . . .’

‘And that’s exactly the attitude you ought to take, if I may make such a suggestion. Reaffirming it whenever asked just as you did to me now.’

‘But suppose Petaybee *isn’t* a one-off . . .’ Yana liked to know she was telling the truth, inadvertently or otherwise.

Marmion sighed. ‘All the more reason, from the board’s standpoint, for keeping information about Petaybee hush-hush. They’d just as soon not give inhabitants of other terraformed planets any ideas but, at the same time, I expect CIS is going to want some sort of poll to try to determine if other worlds formerly considered habitats are indeed sentient beings.’

She gave a gusty sigh. 'It all *seemed* so easy back there,' and she flicked her fingers in the general spatial direction of Petaybee. 'Lots of things seemed easy back there.'

'Mostly because there weren't so many *things* to cloud perceptions,' Yana said.

'Well, that's item one, Yana,' Marmion went on briskly. 'We have no way of knowing if there *are* more sentient planets so we'll pretend Petaybee's an exception. As such, it will make our job that much easier. I think.'

'What's item two?'

'Matthew Luzon is recovering from his injuries and . . .'

'Determined to somehow make us all pay for the indignities he suffered?' Yana supplied when Marmion hesitated.

'Yes, not to refine too much on it. That's why I've put some precautions in train. Sally . . .' and she gestured to her aide who immediately handed Yana a slim device which had a variety of depressible keys. 'This is precaution number one. Carry it with you at all times and as inconspicuously as possible. It'll fit nicely in your brassiere. Put it on the left, depression side up and memorize the positions of the various function keys so you can just . . .' and she placed a casual hand over her left breast '. . . signal what's needed.' She grinned. 'As you'll see, it's got a sensitive recorder and a few off-stage tricks that can be implemented. Rather handy.'

'Have you needed such a device?' Yana examined it, noting the icons as well as the abbreviations like REC and MAY which were self-explanatory.

'Not "needed" precisely,' Marmion allowed, 'but I always felt more . . . secure . . . when I was in unknown space as it were, with that gadget in place. Then I've also appointed you "assistants",' and now she did look slightly embarrassed.

'Assistants?' Yana cocked her head at Marmion.

'Yes, well, everyone who *is* anyone has them . . .'

‘And I must appear to be “everyone” or “anyone” . . . And who’s my assistant?’

‘You have three, Sally and Millard Ephasios for show, and someone you don’t need to have named as undercover guardian,’ Marmion explained, finishing with her charmingly ingenuous smile immediately counteracted by a sly wink. ‘And you won’t know who *that* is.’

‘Hmm. All these subversive measures—’

‘Discreet, my dear Yana,’ Marmion corrected her.

‘—Are necessary, you feel?’

‘I don’t like the weather report,’ Marmion said.

‘Have you minders for Diego and Bunny?’

‘I do and I know they’ll suit right down to the ground.’

‘Are you giving Bunny one of these?’ Yana held up the slim device, which was no more than two fingers long and two knuckles wide. ‘She loves gadgetry.’

‘No, their bracelets should be adequate. As I’m sure you noticed, Bunny’s unsettled enough about the venturing forth. I don’t want to upset her further. She’s naturally shrewd anyway and what she doesn’t know about human nature, Diego knows about space-faring ways.’

‘This trip will do her understanding of the galaxy a world of good,’ Yana remarked and, when Marmion gave her a startled look and started to laugh at her choice of words, she joined in. ‘Where’s the galley on this boat? You’d think the way I eat, I hadn’t seen food since break-up!’

‘You go with Sally to see your wardrobe and I’ll just fix a little something to tide you over to dinner time,’ Marmion said.

‘You? Cook?’ Yana said.

Marmion smiled a trifle archly. ‘Actually I’m rather good, aren’t I, Sally?’ And when her aide nodded affirmatively, ‘But I only do it for very special people.’

‘So you get to bear-lead me, huh, Sally?’ Yana said as she followed Sally to her cabin.

They passed the ones assigned to Diego and Bunny and heard the spirited discussions within.

‘And people wear things like this? I’d freeze . . .’

‘You’re not going to be *on* Petaybee and it’s a great colour for you, gatita . . .’

‘Well, I dunno about the way it clings . . .’

‘Trust me,’ Diego said, ‘it’s terrific.’

Yana grinned to Sally as they passed.

The selection made for Yana quite took her breath away. She’d never had many occasions to dress up and the extent of the apparel displayed for her approval ranged from severely tailored to rich formal attire.

‘Whenever would I wear something like this?’ she asked Sally, holding out a gore of the garnet synthisilk full skirt, even as she was mentally trying it on. Then she noticed the decorations – copying Petaybean designs – on the neck and sleeve bands.

‘There will be one or two formal occasions when you’ll need to be extra elegant,’ said Sally, taking another fold and holding it up to Yana’s face. ‘Yes, I thought this would be a good colour for you.’

‘I’ve never had anything so . . . so soft and . . .’ She couldn’t resist stroking the fine fabric against her cheek.

‘Feminine?’ asked Sally. ‘About time, then.’ Then she went to the more tailored semi-uniform garments. ‘You’ll have more use of these and—’

‘Oh,’ and Yana’s wondering fingers caught at the Petaybean designs discreetly worked into the pocket flaps.

‘Marmion was so taken with the Petaybean designs when we first arrived on the planet that we asked Aisling to do us some treatments. Subtle but noticeable and definitely smart. That woman has an excellent clothes sense. Too bad it’s been limited to rabbit skins and handwovens, not that’ – and Sally hastily corrected the impression that she might be disparaging – ‘those haven’t been handsome fabrics – just more . . . ah . . . practical than you’d need on Station.’

‘Which are we going to, by the way? Marmion didn’t say.’

‘Oh,’ and Sally tossed out this bombshell as non-chalantly as she could, ‘Gal-Three, of course.’

Yana gulped and her mind raced from one consideration to another: it was the largest of the Space Cities, certainly in this sector of inhabited space, the headquarters of half a dozen of the more massive and prominent diversified enterprises as well as CIS, Gallegal, Gal-naval and other galactic agencies. It was immense and was constantly updating its facilities with state-of-the-art technologies. Bunny would be totally overwhelmed and Yana understood why Marmion was going to such lengths to dress them – clothes can give you confidence just as uniforms can bestow anonymity at times – and why they would need hidden alert devices and ‘assistants’. Yana hoped that Diego knew something about Gal-3 – at least its reputation.

‘Baptism into civilization by total immersion?’ she quipped at Sally to cover her uneasy chagrin.

‘She’ll be well protected, Yana.’ Sally was deadly serious.

‘Then who’ve you got riding herd on her?’

‘Riding herd? Oh, yes. Good term.’ Sally grinned. ‘Marmion has roped –’ Sally grinned to ease Yana’s tension, ‘– a pair of her young relatives . . . not too young, though, and very knowledgeable . . . to help out. And a very competent person as the discreet guard. She’ll have fun, too. This is going to be quite a learning experience.’

‘Not just for her,’ Yana said with a sigh.

‘Well, do you approve?’ Marmion asked, coming in to the cabin with a loaded tray.

‘I’ll never be as well dressed again,’ Yana said, on the end of a sigh. ‘Oh, that smells divine . . .’

‘Good natural foods always do. This is earth chook.’

‘Chicken?’

‘Prepared from a much coveted family recipe known to the *famille* de Revers as the Colonel’s Southern Fried Chicken,’ said Marmion, snatching off the cover of the main dish with

a dramatic gesture. 'The colonel was my many-greats ancestor who fought in some sort of early war on Earth.'

'Ohhh,' and Yana, sniffing deeply, made no more concessions to courtesy but sank down on the chair by the table and served herself from the large platter.

'What smells so good?' Bunny asked, Diego right behind her, sniffing with his not so small proboscis.

'Yummy!'

'There's enough for all and more that can be hotted up if anyone has an appetite,' Marmion said with understandable pride as the young people pulled chairs up to the table.

Marmion and Sally exchanged glances at the success of their agenda.

SpaceBase

SEAN FORCED HIMSELF back to work after seeing Yana off. He had hoped that they would have had a little time to spend together. He'd arranged his investigations in the south so that they could. Damn CIS. But he had to trust Marmion de Revers Algemeine. She was awake on every count and more than able to handle whatever the ungood Captain Torkel Fiske and ex-chairperson Dr Matthew Luzon could be up to. Sean did not doubt for a moment that they had plans underway to discredit Marmion, Yana, Bunny and Diego, perhaps even to discredit Anaciliact - though he would be the hardest person to compromise of the lot of them that had gone so bravely forth today. Sean just didn't see either Torkel Fiske or Matthew Luzon forgetting the indignities both had suffered on Petaybee, well deserved though they had been.

Luzon may have broken legs but with new healing techniques those injuries wouldn't put him out of action much longer. And nothing had broken his brains any more than they already were or altered the sense of outrage the man had sustained when all his calculations had backfired. Of course, he had lost credibility with Farringer Ball, the secretary general of Intergal, but that would only make him more anxious to retaliate.

The Company too, was retaliating, apparently intent on drowning the newly appointed interim joint governors of

affairs Petaybean, himself and Yana, under a mountain of paperwork.

At SpaceBase, most of the several tons of paper that was stacked ceiling high in Yana's little cabin would have been electronically transmitted. So far Kilcoole had no electrical power, nor did it want to acquire any in the near future. The generator which ran Adak's radio was inadequate for the volume of communication the Company suddenly found necessary to transmit. The battery-powered comunits weren't up to the job either. So couriers were sent several times a day via two of the hovershuttles that had been sent down to aid in the repair of SpaceBase.

Three weeks after the planet had destroyed the landing fields and many of the surrounding buildings by extruding massed rock up through the centre of the facility, SpaceBase had been all but evacuated. Meanwhile, troops were busily relocating buildings around the old cleared perimeter and salvaging what they could until small shuttles could ferry enough material to build a new landing pad. Before the first shipment could arrive, however, the planet gave the Company another demonstration of its power.

Sean and Yana were riding the curlies towards SpaceBase and were just in sight of the standing stones the planet had made of the landing field. Suddenly both curlies shied and whinnied. About the same time, the trees began to shimmy, the river alongside the trail churned as if stirred by millions of giant fish, and the ground shuddered. Both curlies abruptly sat down, Sean and Yana still astride them.

'Earthquake!' Yana yelled but Sean had found himself grinning back at her and pointing.

For the standing stones were tumbling. The planet, with a mighty swallow followed by several small sips, was retrieving the stones and earth with which it had made such an impression on Intergal's principal Petaybean outpost.

Yana grinned back at him through the cloud of gritty dust and the grinding roar and slam of the planet's machinations.

‘Well, isn’t that something?’ she said when the tremors subsided. The curlies rose to their feet. The soldiers working around the edge of the base crept back to survey the damage done when the structures the planet had hoisted aloft suddenly settled back to ground level again, though not exactly in their former places or conformation. ‘And what, do you suppose, was that all about?’

‘Scientifically, I suppose this subsidence probably has something to do with the volcanic and seismic activity happening near the equator – since it’s busy building up layers in the sea there. Maybe it needed this bit elsewhere. What it looks like, however, is in light of the Company’s agreement to be sensible, Petaybee is showing that it’s willing to let bygones be bygones.’

Now he was wishing his planet was not so forgiving.

Though repairs and replacements had only brought SpaceBase back to about a fourth of its former capacity, it seemed to have plenty of power to generate the damned paperwork which only Sean and Yana were available or able to handle. Frank Metaxos and Steve Margolies, though literate and willing to be helpful, were still Company employees and as such kept far too busy with their own work to assist in administrative chores.

I really must get a literacy programme going as soon as possible, he reflected ruefully.

Until now he hadn’t really been aware of the volume of work, since he had been out canvassing the planet, trying to find out which needs the people wanted met, how they perceived the planet’s wishes in their areas, what sort of interaction they desired with the Company. He also assisted Clodagh in finding new areas where the plants for her cures grew and generally tried to obtain a feeling for what was needed beyond Kilcoole. Fortunately, Lonciana Ondelacy, a former Company Corpswoman, was also literate and she was able to do much of the work in the South. Unfortunately, all of the paperwork still had to be processed

at SpaceBase before that destined for the South could be sent to Loncie. Portage, the southern continent's landing base, wasn't equipped for a large volume of traffic or anything much larger than a shuttle. Whittaker Fiske had been helping transfer relevant documents to Loncie by loaning Petaybee's new administration the services and copter of his personal pilot, Johnny Greene.

Now Sean picked up a piece of paper, this one from the Ambassador of someplace called Petra 6. 'To whom it may concern,' it began.

We have recently been apprised of information leading us to believe that relatives of some of our settlers reside on Planet Terraform B. Our people would like to know how to comply with the visa process on your world in order to be reunited with their estranged family members.

Yrs Truly,

Alphonsina Torunsdotter, Ambassador.

Before he could think of a reply, the door to the cabin banged open and a pair of battered men, bound tightly with sinew rope and each wearing a dead animal around his neck, fell into the room. They were closely followed by the fuming form of Sean's sister, Sinead, who slammed the door shut.

'You won't believe what I caught these two, these two *murderers* doing, Sean!' Sinead said.

'I believe exhibits A and B might already be tied around their necks, Sis,' Sean said mildly.

'Yes, but they didn't claim this fox or this wolf from any of the culling places. They went into the woods and using their so-called civilized weapons -' she slapped two laser rifles atop a tottering pile of papers, causing an avalanche which all but buried the prisoners '- simply *slaughtered* these