

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS



Maelstrom

Anne McCaffrey and
Elizabeth Ann Scarborough

About the Book

In *Powers That Be*, *Power Lines* and *Power Play* Anne McCaffrey and Elizabeth Ann Scarborough told the story of a sentient planet, Petaybee. Now they have returned to the planet and introduced the reader to Ronan and Murel, twins who can transform into seals and converse telepathically with the creatures of Petaybee.

After a daring rescue from an uninhabitable planet the human and turtle, or Honu, survivors are given a new home on Petaybee. The twins, in their seal form, decide to escort the Honus to their new home in the middle of the ocean.

During the long journey Murel falls asleep and becomes separated from the others. She is attacked by a pod of Orcas and telepathically calls Ronan for help. He races back to try to save her. When he arrives he finds Murel surrounded by the Orcas but before he can help her they are both caught up in an underwater whirlpool and dragged down to the ocean floor ...

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Also by Anne McCaffrey

About the Authors

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Maelstrom

Book Two of

THE TWINS OF PETAYBEE

Anne McCaffrey
Elizabeth Ann Scarborough

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO
DR. TONY AND JEANNETTE ROGSTADT,
PHYSICIAN, VET TECH,
AND RESCUER OF MANY CRITTERS
DOMESTIC AND WILD.

The authors would like to acknowledge the advice
and support of their editor, Shelly Shapiro.

1

WAVING GOOD-BYE TO their parents and friends, their beloved river and forests, to their home world, Petaybee, Murel and Ronan Shongili strapped themselves in for another launch into space.

So soon! It seemed they'd only arrived home and now it was time to go again.

It'll be great fun, sure it will, Ronan assured his twin sister in thought-talk. *We'll see new places, meet new people, make new friends—*

I'd have liked a bit more time with the old places and old friends nevertheless, Murel complained. *But here we are again. It feels as if we never left.* She looked around the lounge of the *Piaf*, a luxury liner much larger and more sophisticated than Kilcoole, the tiny village that was home. The lounge alone was as long as Kilcoole's main street and could have held eight of the village's largest building, the latchkay lodge, inside.

Except for that, Ronan said, with a meaningful nod at the one big difference in the lounge since their last trip.

Since they'd traveled from school back to Petaybee less than three short months before, the small saltwater tank had been replaced by an enormous one that dominated the lounge and dwarfed its occupants. Now the tank held a single Honu, the sentient sea turtle that was the sacred totem animal of their friend Ke-ola. The tank looked vast and empty despite the energetic game of tag between the Honu and Sky, the twins' river otter friend. On the return journey, if all went well, the tank would hold many more -

and even larger – Honus traveling with their people to what would become their new Petaybean home.

During takeoff, the ship's owner, Marmion de Revers Algemeine, and Captain Johnny Green, its commander, remained on the bridge. Marmion's friendship had helped their family, their village, and their planet countless times over the years. The twins had known her all of their lives, and by now she knew their most important secret, as well as their father's. Many people on Kilcoole knew but very few outsiders. Johnny was not an outsider, since he'd been born on Petaybee. When the time had come for him to leave the Company Corps, he had chosen service with Marmie over life on Petaybee, but he was Petaybean all the same.

Ronan, Murel, and Ke-ola watched the liftoff from the lounge's viewport and the bank of screens that flanked it. Ke-ola was the reason for their current journey – and the reason Ronan and Murel were using thought-talk. They didn't want him to overhear their complaints and get the idea that they hadn't wanted to come.

The actual sight of Petaybee receding to a cold white and gray ball seemed no more real than its image on the screens. The cabin's pressure and gravity were so well maintained that the ship might have still been on the ground. They could not hear or smell or taste the passage, or feel it in the wind that was not there. They felt no sensation of lifting or moving.

The water in the tank didn't so much as slosh, but the Honu and Sky swam to the side to watch the departure. Then Sky tagged the Honu's shell and they began their game afresh.

The twins and Sky had become swimming friends before they were sent away to Marmie's space-station school. When they returned, Sky was waiting to help them find their missing father, even though Da had been lost at sea where river otters didn't ordinarily go. For their sake, the otter had even allowed himself to be transported in a helicopter,

which was how he, as the first and only otter of any kind to inhabit Petaybee's skies, however briefly, had earned his name: Sky, the sky otter. Murel hoped that now that the little fellow was going into space he wouldn't want to change his name to Space. She'd just got used to calling him Sky.

As soon as the ship was free of Petaybee's gravity, the twins and Ke-ola unstrapped and raced to the tank to swim with the Honu and Sky. Ke-ola climbed the ladder to the top of the tank. The ladder had a staging platform on the top and was situated right beside the wide waterslide that ended in a shallow pool from which the water was recirculated into the tank. Sky and otter-kind in general loved to slide. Also, when it came time to remove the Honu from the pool, the slide would allow the tortoise to descend to the smaller pool without injury.

Murel clambered up the ladder behind Ke-ola and pulled off her clothes so that she wore only the harness holding the tiny bag containing her dry suit. A passing crew member would have seen a brief flash of white skin and dark hair before she dived into the water. Instantly she transformed into a silver-brown seal and streaked through the water after Ke-ola, Sky, and the Honu. A moment later they were joined by Ronan, also in seal form.

The water was saline to suit the Honu, but it didn't smell or taste quite right to the twins. No fish, for one thing. Still, it felt wonderful to be wet again. They dived, surfaced, splashed, tackled, were tackled, escaped, and dived again until Sky suddenly said, 'River seals, look!'

He swam to the front of the tank where Marmie stood. She was saying something as she looked up toward the top of the tank.

Ke-ola, who had to go up for air more frequently than the others, was on the surface. He dived again, touched each of the twins, and pointed toward the top of the tank. Then with

a pump of his arms and a thrust from his muscular brown legs, he shot upward.

Sky streaked past everyone and flung himself through the opening at the top of the tank that formed the lip of the waterslide. *Hah!* he cried. *Otters first!*

Ke-ola surfaced almost at once, followed by the twins. At the bottom of the slide they jumped onto the wet deck and shook themselves dry until they resumed human shape. A privacy screen installed beside the pool provided cover for them to pull their dry suit packets from the harnesses on their backs and pop into the suits before joining anyone else who happened to be in the lounge.

When they came out, Ke-ola and Marmie were sitting in bright cushioned chairs, sipping from tall drinks on the table between them. Sky sat on another chair, grooming his coat. A pot and four cups for tea sat on the table, along with a plate of chocolate biscuits. When Murel picked one up, she found it was just-baked warm.

Marmie smiled as they approached and took the other two chairs. 'Ah, *mes petits*, I am sorry to interrupt your play, but we need to talk.'

'Certainly, Marmie,' Ronan said, sitting erect and using his best manners. Marmie had changed out of the white, fur-trimmed snowsuit she'd worn on Petaybee into a long skirt made of many colored patches of smooth and textured fabric that looked as soft as the coat of one of Clodagh's cats. With it she wore a long-sleeved turtleneck the color of the deepest part of the river on a sunny day. The fabric shimmered from midnight blue to steel gray with flashes of silver and cobalt. Around the high collar was a copper torc in the shape of a clamshell. Now and then Sky looked up from his preening to peer at the neckpiece.

'What's the matter?' Murel asked.

'Oh, nothing! But some of your fellow Petaybeans had questions about why you, mere children, only recently returned from school, were chosen for this mission instead

of adults still able to travel. Do you two also have such questions? Or any others?’

‘It’s okay, Marmie,’ Ronan said, with a quick glance at Ke-ola, who seemed more interested in selecting a biscuit.

‘Well, actually . . .’ Murel said, hesitating. She didn’t want to appear reluctant to help, but after all, Marmie was giving them the opportunity to speak up. Who knew when another chance would come? ‘I do wonder about one or two things.’

‘Yes?’ Marmie asked, cocking her head and leaning forward slightly, her light exotic perfume flavoring the recycled air of the lounge as if a few flowers had blossomed there.

‘I don’t think I know why exactly you *need* us to come. Ke-ola can tell his people about Petaybee and that it wants them to come and live there. They’ll believe him before they’d believe us, surely.’

‘Yes, *chérie*, but Ke-ola is not yet considered a Petaybean. It was very difficult to convince the Federation that Petaybee is not only a sentient planet but that people who live there for any length of time acquire a symbiotic relationship to the world. People died—’

‘Laverne!’ Ronan said. ‘Liam’s mum. The Corps arrested her and she died when they took her offplanet for questioning. Bunny and Diego have a really sad song about it they sing at latchkays sometime.’

‘Yes, and your mother and father fought very hard to convince the company that removing your people from Petaybee and taking them elsewhere would be fatal to them. Ultimately they and other scientists were able to provide enough scientific evidence that the Federation recognized officially what you grew up knowing about Petaybee. The board feels that only people native to the planet have a unique interest in fulfilling Petaybee’s wishes.’

‘And they – the Federation – think that if we are symbiotic with Petaybee, we won’t want to do anything that goes against what Petaybee needs because it’s what we need

too, is that right?' Murel asked. 'Because it isn't really about wishes, you know, Marmie. Clodagh says we don't always understand why Petaybee requires what it requires, but it doesn't ask much of us, so when it does, we should pay attention.'

'Clodagh and the Federation Council are in accord regarding that understanding,' Marmie said, 'though of course the council has no idea just how profound your particular link with your planet is.'

'That's just it. They don't know how different we are. I was wondering why Johnny couldn't represent Petaybee. He's a native and knows all about it too. Besides, he's the captain of a spaceship and people look up to him. They'd believe him and Ke-ola before they'd believe us.'

'He was born on Petaybee, it's true, but he has not resided there for long enough periods since leaving to undergo the adaptation that makes other adults *unable* to leave.'

'So any adult who is Petaybean enough to represent the planet isn't able to leave, and anyone who is able to leave isn't considered to be under Petaybee's influence enough to have its best interests at heart?' Ronan asked. With a snort he added, 'Does that ever sound like the PTBs!'

Marmie shook a scolding finger at him but her eyes sparkled with amusement. 'Now now, Ronan, not all of the powers that be, as your people call them, are unreasonable. I, for instance, am considered powerful in many circles.'

'Not you, Marmie! I mean, we know you're powerful and everything but you're our friend!' he protested.

'Oh yes,' Murel agreed. 'You're completely different! You could be a Petaybean if you wanted to!'

'*Merci, chérie*. Unfortunately, in this situation, if I were to presume to represent Petaybee, others would accuse me of promoting my own interests when interpreting Petaybee's. They would say I was taking an unfair business advantage over my competitors. Since Johnny works for me, that is another reason why he cannot represent Petaybee.'

‘It doesn’t seem fair,’ Murel said.

‘Perhaps not but it is as fair as the council could make it. *Vraiment*, I fear you have me to blame. I insisted that in certain matters the planet be personally represented by a native or natives. As the oldest native-born people still able to leave the planet, you are uniquely qualified.’

‘I wonder what they’d say if they knew how unique we really are,’ Murel mused.

‘With caution and luck we will never find out,’ Marmie said. ‘Your parents and I foresaw that you might one day be called upon for this kind of mission. As you recall, that was one of our reasons for bringing you to Versailles Station to study.’

‘This is my fault, isn’t it?’ Ke-ola asked. ‘You having to come to invite my relatives?’

‘No, no, Ke-ola, we don’t mind, honest,’ Murel said. ‘We *want* your people to come, don’t we, Ro? Ever since you told us about them and what’s happened to them.’

‘Course we do,’ Ronan said. ‘And what if we don’t get to be home as much as we’d like for a while? Like Marmie said, it’s only going to be a very short time that we can do this for Petaybee. Pretty soon we’ll be too old too.’

‘And nobody put a laser to our heads, Ke-ola,’ Murel said. ‘We *could* go home and go swimming and have fun all the time, but then if something happened to Petaybee because we had wussed out when it needed us to speak for it, it’s like Marmie and the Federation figure. Anything bad that happens to Petaybee would happen to us too. So doing this is an honor, really. Not one that anybody else could be chosen for, apparently, but an honor all the same.’

‘That’s right,’ Ronan said. The two of them nodded to Ke-ola and then stared at Marmie, presenting a united front.

She gave the table a satisfied little slap with her fingers and sat back. ‘*Bon!* Then we are in accord?’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ the twins said together.

Marmion walked out of the lounge. She was satisfied, on the one hand, that the children understood as much as possible beforehand what was needed from them and why. On the other hand, it was sad, so sad, to have to ask them to grow up so soon. They had been adorable babies, adorable seal pups, so lively and playful, bright and full of mischief. But she had not known for sure that they possessed the intelligence and resourcefulness needed until she saw for herself how well they did in the space station school, both academically and, after an adjustment period, socially. Their handling of the situation between their science teacher and the Honu had clinched the matter for her. Their actions once they returned to Petaybee had further reassured her and their parents.

Now no one could say she had not been frank with them – the conversation had been recorded, of course. The children had the facts, and they understood and felt they were up to the task – the many tasks, she feared – that would be required of them.

Oh well, at least they had had some childhood to enjoy. In other places, on other worlds, children were worked to death before they reached puberty, and nobody found it remarkable, much less lamentable, that they had to do so. It was simply how life was in those places.

Melancholy slowed Marmion's footsteps and she retired to her own cabin. She turned the cabin lights low and set the color therapy and aroma therapy settings, put on dreamy music, and lay down upon her soft bed, which massaged her back with soothing vibrations. It had been a long journey with very little time to recuperate on Petaybee. She had been negotiating very hard to acquire the slenderest thread of permission to relocate Ke-ola's people under any circumstances. Even that had not actually been through proper channels, and now she was exposing these children to danger, as she had once been exposed. The only difference was that in her case there was no good reason

that she had to endure what she did, and certainly no one to explain the reason to her had there been one. But the twins were much better protected. On Petaybee they had the wisdom and good sense of their parents and Clodagh and most of the village where they'd grown up. And offplanet they would have her, always, and all that she was able to command.

When Marmie left, Murel said aloud, 'Well. It's nothing we didn't know already, I suppose, but I guess it's official now, isn't it?'

'I'm glad she told us what was going on and we were asked - sort of - instead of like the last time when Petaybee wouldn't let us in the communion cave. I asked Clodagh about that while you were off helping Bunny sew clothes for her baby. Clodagh said it was just Petaybee's way of telling us we didn't belong at home right then - that we were supposed to go.'

'Hmph,' Murel said. 'I wish it had just had Marmie tell us to begin with. I liked her way better.'

Ke-ola looked from one of them to the other, raising his eyebrows in bewilderment.

Murel explained: 'Before we came to the space station, the last day we spent at home was our birthday, and there was a night chant after our birthday latchkay. Petaybee wouldn't let us into the communion cave.'

'It wouldn't?' Ke-ola asked. 'Why not?'

'We thought it was mad at us because we'd got into a little trouble with some wolves the day before, when we met Sky for the first time,' Ronan answered. 'I'm just glad to know now that we were wrong.'

'But how did it keep you out?' Ke-ola asked.

Murel found a lump rising in her throat all over again as she told him how they had been unable to follow their family and friends into the cave. The communion cave was the best part of the night chants, better than the food at the

latchkay. It was where Petaybee shared its presence with its inhabitants and they opened their minds and hearts to their world.

Ke-ola nodded. He had experienced the cave and it had welcomed him too; it had given him that sense of belonging that Murel and Ronan had taken for granted before it was denied to them.

'We don't know how it did it, exactly. We just couldn't pass beyond a certain point.'

'Like a force field?' Ke-ola asked.

'Sort of. Yes, I guess so.'

'Wow, that was pretty cold. You guys must have been plenty upset.'

'We were,' Ronan said, 'and when everybody else came out, Marmie and our parents told us we were supposed to go visit her on her space station to go to school. It was all part of this, but they didn't tell us that then.'

'Well, they did, actually,' Murel amended, trying to be fair. 'But I guess maybe we were too young to understand. We didn't believe them. We thought they were making excuses and we were being sent away because we'd been a handful. Again.'

'But that wasn't it at all,' Ronan explained. 'It was the beginning of getting us ready for what Marmie was talking about. We've got a real mission, like she said. We're essential, we are.'

Murel smiled, glad that Ronan was pleased. For her own part, she had been looking forward to another lovely cold winter undulating her gray-brown seal's body beneath the clouds of river ice. Even with the crisis with Da missing and the volcano erupting, she had enjoyed the chance to swim freely in seal form and explore the previously unknown sea. Still, Ro was right. Being chosen like this was an honor. She should be – was – proud, but she was also wishing it was over and they were returning with everything accomplished, waving at the grateful populace and so forth before running

to the river and diving in without so much as a 'last one in is a rotten fish.'

Later, they shared dreams as they sometimes did. They swam urgently down empty corridors toward a place they absolutely had to find before they - or maybe it was the place - ran out of air. The problem was, they had no idea where the place was or what it looked like. When they tried to search, they were caught in a dizzying galactic spin of anonymous stars. Then the stars turned into the lights on an instrument panel that extended as far as they could see. If they pushed the wrong button, they would die. If they pressed the right one, they would reach the place they'd been seeking. But which one was which? How would they know?

The thoughts they shared when they woke up were almost as confused, the dreams half forgotten, but the anxiety they'd produced remained.

Johnny was in the lounge when they arrived that morning. Ke-ola was talking to him, and the twins knew he'd been talking about them by the way both he and Johnny looked up at them with carefully blank expressions.

'So,' Johnny asked, 'how did you sleep?'

2

THE TWINS TOLD Johnny and Ke-ola as much about their dreams as they could remember, but it wasn't a lot.

'You knew about them, though, didn't you?' Ronan asked Ke-ola.

'The Honu picked up that you were not having a good sleep,' Ke-ola admitted.

'Hmph,' Murel said, her irritation magnified by the fitful sleep. 'Honus should mind their own business sometimes. It's not nice peeking into other people's dreams.'

'He didn't. All he said was that you were having bad dreams.'

'I'm not a bit surprised myself,' Johnny said, 'after your conversation with Marmie yesterday.'

'And how did *you* know about *that*?' Murel demanded. 'Isn't anything private around here?'

'Shush,' he said soothingly. 'I know because we both talked it over with your parents and Clodagh before ever she spoke a word to you on the matter. It's a great deal to lay on the shoulders of young ones. As for the corridors and stars and strange instruments in your dream, I'm no psychic but do you know what I think?'

They shook their heads.

'Well, I've not a clue about the corridors but I do know about stars and instruments, so what do you say to spending less time in the lounge and more on the bridge so I can teach you—'

'You'll teach us to fly the *Piaf*?' Ronan asked, going from depressed and disheartened to euphoric and elated at warp speed.

‘As much as I can, though she’s a very complex ship, is the *Piaf*,’ he replied. ‘But I can help you learn what many of the instruments are for and teach you to fly shuttles and flitters and such. And the ship’s computers are good for more than fairy stories and games, you know. In your dream, so you said, you didn’t know where you were going or how to recognize it. The universe, of course, is vast and it’s impossible to know everything about everything. But we do know a few worlds fairly well and have collected information on others you might find enlightening. Perhaps if you learn more about your destination and what we’ll be passing on the way, you’ll feel better able for your task.’

‘So,’ Murel said. ‘More school, eh?’

‘It’d be *flying*, Mur,’ her brother said.

‘I’d not say school,’ Johnny told her, ‘but educational yes. The professional emissaries and ambassadors would call it fieldwork, I believe. And that’s different altogether.’

She sighed, as if accepting his suggestion reluctantly, because her mood was still dark. In truth, she felt a bubble of excitement rising inside of her. This wouldn’t just be study for its own sake. This would be learning things they actually needed to know. ‘It will pass the time, if nothing else. Swimming in the tank is better than not swimming at all, but it’s not nearly as good as swimming in the river or sea at home.’

Ke-ola asked, ‘Can I come too?’

‘You can,’ Johnny said, heartily clapping him on the back. ‘Come along, all of you.’

They accompanied Johnny to the bridge, where he introduced them to each of the crew members by name, listing the person’s credentials. The instrument panels surrounding the bridge were almost as intimidating as the gigantic one in their dreams, but Ro was looking at it hungrily now, and Murel could tell he was already trying to guess what each one did. Johnny sat in the command chair and asked the navigator and first officer, Commander

Adrienne Robineau, to relinquish her seat beside him, and beckoned Ronan to take her place.

‘Commander Robineau, would you be good enough to show Murel and Ke-ola the path our journey will be taking?’ he suggested, and to Murel he added, ‘Next shift you and your brother will change places, but I can’t be having you kids replacing more than one of my crew at a time until you’ve had a few more lessons.’

When the commander was seated at the navigator’s duty station with Murel on her right and Ke-ola on her left, Murel was pleased to see that her first lesson involved just as many instruments on the panel and stars in the cosmos as Ronan’s. The viewport spread from just above the top of the panel and curved high overhead on the ship’s bow. The navigation charts were available on an array of screens and scanners encompassing the shallow U-shaped panel that sloped up an arm’s reach from Commander Robineau on all sides.

She showed them how the screens reflected the individual stars, planets, and formations that were reference points for each immediate stage of the journey. As these points were encountered and bypassed, the screens shifted to the next set of reference points.

‘Where’s our world – Halau?’ Ke-ola asked.

‘We’re too far for it to show up yet. It should be on this screen,’ she pointed to the one indicating the farthest set of reference points, ‘in four standard days hence. Meanwhile, let us begin with the closest reference points on the screen, and as they show up in the viewport, I’ll help you identify them by site and we’ll learn the factors you use to determine which one you are seeing, okay?’

‘I thought navigation involved a lot of higher mathematics,’ Ke-ola said.

‘It does, in the creation of these programs and cues, and if you ever go into the Corps Academy, you’ll be introduced to that process to see if you’ve an aptitude for it and to learn

some basics in case of equipment malfunction. But on a day-to-day operating level, the calculations are already embedded in the program and the computer plots them in the required combinations. We use what it shows us on the screens. This, for instance, is Kayenta, another of the border worlds terraformed by Intergal. Most of what we'll be encountering on this journey are such worlds, all, like Petaybee, here on the outer rim of charted space.'

Once that lesson was done, Ronan came to work with Commander Robineau while Ke-ola was sent to the engine room and Johnny introduced Murel to the *Piaf's* sophisticated systems.

She had expected the information would be so technical and complicated that she'd be too swamped with details to sort them into anything she could actually use. However, although it wasn't easy and there was a lot to learn, processing this information was no more difficult than learning the rivers and streams of Petaybee and relearning them as the seasons changed. Ice and eddies, new channels and shifting currents, fish and floods, constantly altered. When they were in seal form, the twins learned the changes in their habitat without having to think about them. Learning the star charts and the ship's instruments required more concentration and asking a lot of questions, but Johnny and Adrienne – as she told them they could call her – were both patient.

The engineer, Cadwallader Brown, was different. He got on well with Ke-ola and Ronan, apparently, and they seemed to enjoy their lessons with him. However, he had no time for Murel's aversion to the noises and smells of the engine section and her trepidation at touching any of the enormous and dangerous-looking equipment. He rolled his dark eyes in exasperation and his explanations were delivered in a curt and cutting tone.

Murel was delighted when she was told to move on to the hydroponics garden for instruction in intergalactic

biocultural ecology by the erudite gardener, Midori Eisenbeis. Midori had taught at the academy, but said she found actually traveling far more rewarding. Murel was happy to spend the rest of her assigned watch helping Midori plant and prune, graft and cull, fertilize and water miniature ecosystems essential to many different peoples across the universe.

The tropical one was the most beautiful to Murel, who had never seen flowers so large or in such profusion, on such huge trees and bushes. Petaybean flowers bloomed large and bright during the brief growing season because they received sunlight all day and all night for almost three standard months. But the tropical flowers came in colors Murel had never seen on a growing thing. Midori smiled.

‘I’ve enlarged this section a bit since I researched the original environment occupied by the people now living on Halau. When your planet’s new zone is ready for settlement, we may be able to transplant some of these there.’

‘That would be amazing,’ Murel said.

At the end of their watch the twins and Ke-ola swam and played with Sky and, in a more sedate fashion, with the Honu, and afterward fell asleep without any dreams at all.

When their instructors were too busy to give them lessons, the *Piaf*’s cadets were encouraged to learn as much as they could about the worlds among which they currently traveled.

At the end of the day’s second watch, while Ronan was in the engine room and Ke-ola with Johnny, Murel found the file for Halau.

A landscape like a rolling green sea with giant bubbles rising to the top appeared on the screen. As the camera zoomed closer, she could see that the bubbles were interconnected. The views switched to the interiors of the bubbles, quick shots of pools, gardens, beautifully furnished

homey interiors, and lounge areas flashed across the screen.

A melodious female voice said, 'Aloha! Intergalactic Enterprises welcomes you to view the latest modern settlement on one of its reclaimed worlds, Halau. The world's new name is taken from the native Kanaka tongue of its new tenants and means *school*, a designation highly appropriate for a place that has many intriguing lessons to teach those lucky enough to live here. Halau has been especially micro-terraformed to meet the requirements and taste of its lucky new tenants. Every possible amenity and convenience has been provided to make this world a happy home for its new inhabitants.'

The voice went on to describe the climate-controlled environs, thirteen indoor swimming pools – including three saline ones for the cultural 'pets' of the proposed inhabitants – the gardens, the woven grass and wood furnishings of the homes, and the equipment in the workshops where residents could produce handicrafts for sale to other worlds. Flowers like the ones Midori was growing bloomed everywhere within the bubbles. Finally, she described the small but efficient space port, capable of docking two large vessels simultaneously.

It was very pretty and pleasant looking and didn't seem nearly as bad as Ke-ola had described it.

The hatch to the research compartment hissed and Ke-ola said, 'Whatcha doing, Murel?'

'Admiring your home planet. This looks pretty posh, Ke-ola. Are you sure your people will even want to leave to come to somewhere as cold as Petaybee? There's no telling how long it will take for the volcano to build a new island home for them and settle down enough for them to live there. From the looks of this, they don't have it so bad where they are.'

'Huh. You think I was kidding around when I told you how bad it is?' he asked, offended.

‘No, I know you think it’s bad, but here are all these thirteen swimming pools and three saline ones and the gorgeous lounges and living areas, the space port and workshops—’

‘That’s all sim, Murel, can’t you tell?’

‘Well, no . . .’ she said, staring at the screen more intently. ‘I can’t, actually. You mean none of those amenities and conveniences she describes are there?’

‘You’ll see soon enough. But this thing you’re watching? We play it once in a while on Halau and have a good laugh. Bitter, but good. The bubble networks aren’t nearly as extensive as they look. We had to plant the gardens ourselves, and there were only a couple of pools, one salt and one fresh, but no way to maintain them. There were holes mapped out for others but our water allotment from Intergal wasn’t enough to have water to live with and pools too. We did find another source eventually but it’s got a few drawbacks. The furnishings were cheap, and they broke almost at once because the gravity is heavy enough that not even the pressurized bubbles are enough to keep us from trashing things. Including, I’m afraid, each other. Making handicrafts and babies doesn’t keep people involved enough to keep them out of trouble. Aunt Kimmie Sue did the cultural classes to try to hold us together, but a lot of people couldn’t believe that we could have ever had something as good as she described. The company makes sure that the only way out for us is the worker resource program they organized for their subsidiaries, or enlisting in the Corps.’

‘Well, I’m sorry I believed the lies, then.’ She shook her head, trying to reconcile what he was describing with the glowing images on the screen. ‘I’m glad we can offer you and yours a home.’

Ke-ola nodded, but he looked worried.

3

THE TWINS AND Ke-ola were on the bridge watching as the *Piaf* approached Halau. It was a large planet, orbited by two moons and an asteroid belt. As Ke-ola had intimated, it didn't look like the pretty pictures on Intergal's vid clip. Its surface was as pocked and colorless as someone in the last stages of a contagious illness.

It didn't look like a place anyone would want to visit, much less live. Nevertheless, the *Piaf* was not the only ship in the vicinity. In the huge viewport, plainly visible between them and the asteroid belt that partially obscured the pitted planet, another ship hung in space.

The com screen lit and suddenly another bridge with another life-size crew was looming above the deck of the *Piaf's* bridge. A woman with dark, almond-shaped eyes and strawberry blond hair bobbed asymmetrically across her forehead and down one cheek to just below her ears was looking straight at them. She wore a uniform similar to the one that hung in a bag in Mum's wardrobe. Company Corps. Of course, she was only a lieutenant, and Mum had been a colonel by the time she quit for good.

'This is the Intergalactic Enterprises Company Corps carrier *George Armstrong Custer*,' the woman announced. 'You have entered restricted Intergalactic Enterprises airspace. Please identify your vessel.'

The *Piaf* had a com officer too, Steve Guthe, who spoke twenty-seven languages and could sing in even more, but Johnny spoke up instead. 'This is the passenger liner *Piaf*, flagship of Allgemeine Intergalactic Enterprises. Captain John