

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Freedom's Challenge

Anne McCaffrey

About the Book

The inhabitants of Botany - a mixture of humans and extraterrestrials - had managed to build a thriving and productive world out of what had originally been intended as a slave planet. And now they had plans to overthrow the terrible Eosi, who for centuries had existed by subsuming members of the Catteni race, living in their bodies, and ruling space through them.

The Botanists had received mysterious and unexpected help from the great beings they knew only as 'Farmers' - for the 'Farmers' had thrown up a huge impervious space bubble round Botany. Even as the Eosi ships tried to pulverize the rebellious planet, the bubble held firm.

But, safe though they were behind the protective device, Kris Bjornsen, Zainal, and all of the Council knew they had to go out and destroy the Eosi on their own ground. It fell to Zainal to risk his life in a desperate and daring mission to vanquish the monster life forms forever.

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Also by Anne McCaffrey

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About the Author

FREEDOM'S CHALLENGE

Anne McCaffrey

Dedicated to the memory of

Joe Mulcahy

(1980-1997)

Don't look back in anger, I hear you say.

*No longer mourn for me when I am dead
Than you shall hear the sullen surly bell
Give warning to the world that I am fled ...*

William Shakespeare, Sonnet 71

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Especially helpful was Dr Susan Edwards, PhD, author of *Men who Believe in Love*, a psychologist who guided me toward the social psychology and trauma techniques which have been so demonstrably useful in assisting casualty and hostage victims recover from stress. A similar application of these techniques was invaluable to my story.

Margaret Ball, bless her heart, studied Swahili dialects and has her PhD in linguistics. She gave me useful phrases as well as hunting down information about the customs and traditions of the Masai tribes of East Africa.

I also wish to thank Georgeanne Kennedy for her careful copy-editing and invaluable suggestions concerning what she wanted to 'know more about' in this story. What errors a spellcheck, even the most advanced ones, do not catch, the sharp eye of the intelligent reader does. And I give my spellcheck a lot of hard names to cope with. Thank goodness it can't complain ... *aloud!*

List of Characters

Humans

Aarens, Dick - youthful mechanical genius
Ainger, Geoffrey - ex-naval officer
Ansible, Dr - Victim
Areson, Sandy - cook, potter and manager
Ayckburn - ex-governor
Balenquah, Sev - ex-test pilot
Barrow, Norma Sophie - ex-laboratory manager
Baxter, Nathan - photographer
Beggs - Scott's aide
Belton, Mavis - nurse
Bempechat, Iri - judge
Beverly, John - ex-general
Bjornsen, Kris
Bjornsen, Zane - Kris's son
Bollinger, Anna - reactionary
Bovalan, Ben - psychologist
Caleb Materu - Masai chief
Clune - leader of the Diplomatic Corps
Dane, Leon - physician
Dargle, Mack - jack-of-all-trades
Ditsy - member of the Diplomatic Corps
Doyle, Lenny - ex-plumber
Doyle, Ninety - jack-of-all-trades
Duxie, Walter - mining engineer
Dwardie, Dorothy - psychologist
Easley, Peter - publicist
Farmer, Ricky - Victim

Fawcett, Jeff – Victim
Ferris – member of the Diplomatic Corps
Fetterman, Bull – ex-General
Flax, Marjorie (Marge) – Victim
Floss – prime mover in the Diplomatic Corps
Gambino, Fred – cook
Greene, Jay
Greene, Patti Sue – Victim
Hessian, Herman – Freudian psychologist
Ihde, Peggy – Victim
Isbell, Beth – Catteni speaker
Kamei, Riz – optician and lens-maker
Kariatm, Lex
Langsteiner, Kurt – computer expert
Latore, Joe
Laughrey – ex-Concorde pilot
Lincoln, Bart
McDouall, Sarah – medic
Maizie – orphan
Marley, (Francis) Joe – medic and botanist
Marrucci, Gino – pilot
Massuri, Leila – 3rd drop
Mayock, Thor – physician; hooch-maker
Mitford, Chuck – ex-sergeant, US Marines
Moussa, Hassan – ex-spy
Mpeti Ole Surum – Masai chief
O’Hanlan, Jane – ex-radio anchorwoman
Pakai Olonyoke – Masai chief
Palit, Yuri – UN resettlement officer
Parmitoro Kassiaro – Masai medicine man
Put, Bert – mission specialist
Rastancil, Jim – ex-major general
Rowland, Mic
Salvinato – ex-colonel
Scott, Ray – ex-admiral
Seissmann, Will – Doggo Victim

Sikai Ole Sereb – Masai chief
Simonova, Raisha – pilot
Slavinkovin, Boris – pilot
Snyder, Peter – engineer
Stoffers, Sally – Catteni speaker
Su, Matt – engineer
Tepilit Ole Saitoti – Masai chief
Tomi, Bart – cook
Turpin, Janet – reactionary
Whitby, Basil – Victim
Worrell ('Worry') – administrator
Yowell, Vic – ex-aircraft carrier landing officer

Catteni and Eosi

Ba – Eosi
Bazil – Zainal's elder son
Bolemb – renegade Emassi
Co Mentat – Junior Eosi
Ix Mentat – Senior Eosi
Kabas – Catteni captain
Kamiton – renegade Emassi
Kasturi – renegade Emassi
Kivel – Emassi field keeper
Klotnik – Emassi controller around Catten
Kulek – alias used by Zainal
Le Mentat – Senior Eosi
Lenvec – Zainal's younger brother; subsumed by Ix
Mentat
Milista – Nitin's mate
Niassen – commander of H-class ship
Nitin – renegade Emassi
Pe – Junior Eosi
Peran – Zainal's younger son
Perizec – Zainal's sire
Plovine – administrator on Earth

Rodinit – spaceship captain
Se Mentat – Junior Eosi
Sibbo – Kamiton’s mate
Tiboud – renegade Emassi
Tubelin – renegade Emassi
Ugred – renegade Emassi
Valicon – renegade Emassi
Venlik – alias used by Zainal
Wenger – Catteni pilot
Yoltin – repair supervisor
Zainal – renegade Emassi

Deski and Rugarians

Coo – Deski
Fek – Deski
Fil – Deski child
Pess – Deski
Slav – Rugarian

Preface

When the Catteni, mercenaries for a race called the Eosi, invaded Earth, they used their standard tactic of domination by landing in fifty cities across the planet and removing entire urban populations. These they distributed throughout the Catteni worlds and sold as slaves along with other conquered species.

A group rounded up from Barevi, the hub of the slave trade, were dumped on an M-type planet of unknown quality, given rations and tools, and allowed to survive or not. A former marine sergeant, Chuck Mitford, took charge of the mixed group, which included sullen Turs, spiderlike Deski, hairy Rugarians, vague Ilginish and gaunt Morphins, with humans in the majority. There was also one Catteni, Zainal, who had been shanghaied on to the prison ship. Though there were those who wanted to kill him immediately, Kris Bjornsen, lately of Denver, suggested that he might know enough about the planet to help them.

The Catteni remembered sufficient from a casual glance at the initial exploration report to suggest they move under cover, preferably rock, to prevent being eaten by night-crawlers, which oozed from the ground to ingest anything edible.

Installed in a rocky site, with cliffs and caves to give them some protection, Mitford quickly organized a camp, utilizing the specific qualities of the aliens and assigning tasks to everyone in this unusual community. However, the planet was soon discovered to be inhabited – by machines, the Mechs, which automatically tended the crops and six-legged bovine animals. After being caught by the Mechs

Zainal and his scout party not only escaped but rescued other humans trapped by the Mechs in what proved to be an abattoir.

However, human ingenuity being rampant among the mixed group, they soon learned how to dismantle the machines and design useful equipment.

Zainal, in a conversation with one of the Drassi drop captains, got not only a supply of *plersaw*, the drug which would keep the Deski contingent from dying of malnutrition, but also aerial maps of the planet. And he discovered a command post, presumably built by the real owners of the planet. While this had obviously not been used, a mechanically inclined member of the scouting party launched a homing device.

Both the Eosi overlords looking for Zainal and the genuine owners of the planet noted the release of the homing device. A search to bring Zainal back to face the consequences of his delinquency continued, but he managed to lure the searchers into the maws of the night-crawlers and acquire their scout vehicle.

Meanwhile, six more drops of dissidents from Earth and a few other aliens swelled the population of Botany, as the planet was now called, to nearly ten thousand, some with skills that benefited the colony and improved conditions. Zainal, with his constant companion Kris Bjornsen and others, explored this new world.

What Kris slowly discovered from her 'buddy' was that Zainal wanted to implement a three-phase plan: one that would end the domination of his people by the Eosi and, incidentally, would involve the liberation of Earth. Zainal explained to Mitford and other ex-naval, airforce and army personnel how he meant to proceed: by capturing the next ship which dropped more slaves on Botany. In the event, this plan required some alteration when the ship turned up in such poor condition that only quick action saved it from blowing up. Its captain had time, however, to send out an

emergency message, and looked forward to being rescued from the planet. Through a clever plot, the rescue ship, a new one, was captured by Zainal and other 'Catteni' staff, thus giving them two operational ships plus the bridge equipment of the one which they had cannibalized for parts.

Zainal's younger brother Lenvec was made to take Zainal's place, becoming subsumed as a host body for an Eosi, the Ix Mentat, who was somewhat amused to discover his host body's violent hatred of his brother. Soon the Ix Mentat became obsessed with finding the runaway.

An immense ship, during a fly-past of Botany, replaced the machines which the colonists had salvaged to provide themselves with useful vehicles and equipment. At this reminder that they lived on Botany only on sufferance, the entire colony decided they should show goodwill to their unknown landlords by leaving the farmed continent on which they had been dropped and moving to a smaller, unused continent across a small strait. They were in the process of moving when the Ix Mentat did a search of the planet to try to find Zainal - without success.

No sooner did this inspection tour end than the real owners of the planet, the Farmers, arrived in unusual form. They were able to give personal messages to all they met; the important news was that the colony was permitted to remain. The Farmers, moreover, protected it with a most incredible device, the Bubble, which surrounded the entire planet; although still permitting the sun's rays to filter through, the Bubble impeded the passage of the Ix Mentat's fleeing ship. Once free of the obstacle, the Mentat ordered its ship to fire on the Bubble, but this had no effect on it. The impenetrable protection of the planet infuriated the Mentat, who decided that the shield must be broken and the recalcitrant colony disciplined. To this end, the Mentat retired to its home world to accumulate an armada

and to probe the minds of human specialists to see what knowledge they might possess.

While the two Eosi satellites were on the other side of the world, the two ships owned by the colony were able to leave the protection of the Bubble and to succeed in raiding Barevi for much needed fuel and supplies and more *plersaw* for the Deski's diet. Kris, who had already learned enough Barevi to deal with merchants, and others accompanied Zainal. While on Barevi, they learned of the plight of those humans whose minds had been wiped by an Eosian device in order to enhance the basic intelligence of the Catteni race. From Barevi, Zainal made contact with dissident Emassi, likewise pledged to end Eosi domination. Having found pens full of mind-wiped Victims of the Eosi, the humans from Botany were unable to leave their compatriots to sure death in the slave camps, and so contrived to take over yet another ship. Using the two ships they were able to rescue several thousand Victims, careless of the problems this might cause the colony.

Zainal's first two phases were successful: the planet was safe and the colonists possessed ships with which to seize additional supplies. But would he be able to talk the colony into supporting his third phase - to liberate not only Earth but also the Catteni from Eosi domination?

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WHEN ZAINAL HAD organized the data he wanted to send to the Farmers *via* the homing capsule, he let Boris Slavinkovin and Dick Aarens fly it down to the Command Post for despatch.

'You have a nasty sense of humour, Zainal,' Kris said when the hatch of the scout vessel Baby closed behind the messengers. She had been surprised by his choice of Aarens, considering the man's behaviour on their first visit to the Command Post.

'Well,' and Zainal gave a shrug of one shoulder and an unrepentant grin, 'Aarens has had experience sending one off. Let him do it officially this time. As a reward for his improvement.'

'What improvement?' Kris still had little time for the self-styled mechanical genius who had deliberately launched a homing capsule without authorization on their first trip to the Command Post.

They both stepped back from the take-off area, as much to avoid the fumes as the wind, although Boris lifted the little craft slowly and cautiously. They watched as it made an almost soundless vertical ascent before it slanted forward and sped off, disappearing quickly in the dusk of what had been a very long and momentous day.

The wide landing field that stretched out level with the immense, Farmer-constructed hangar could accommodate a half-dozen of the K-class ships that had arrived today. They were now out of sight within the hangar. At the far end of the landing area grew small copses of lodgepole trees - young ones in terms of the age of the mature groves

above and beyond the hangar. In the nearest of those groves the cabins of the colonists were being constructed, out of brick or wood, in separate clearings to allow the privacy that everyone preferred. Further up the slope were the infirmary, which today was crowded, and the huge mess hall, which served food all day and well into the long Botany night. The largest building that faced Retreat Bay was that of the administration, where Judge Iri Bempechat held court when necessary, with the stocks just outside as a reminder that offences against the community would be publicly punished. This building also held the living quarters for the judge and other members of the Council, which included those with experience in management and administration to run the affairs of the colony. In the earliest days, when Master Sergeant Charles Mitford had taken charge of the dazed and frightened First Drop colonists, he'd kept records on pieces of slate with chalk. Now the admin building posted weekly work rosters detailing the community services that all were required to perform. (It still shocked Kris to see Judge Iri washing dishes – he did it more cheerfully than many.)

Ex-admiral Ray Scott had elected to live in a small room behind his office in the hangar complex. It was he, disguised as a Catteni Drassi, who had insisted that the Victims be rescued from the fate to which the Eosi had condemned them: working as mindless slaves until they died in the appalling conditions that existed in the mines, quarries and fields. There had been no way that those of his crew who had been among the first dropped on Botany would have allowed those battered people to be transported to their deaths.

Considering the excitements of the day – the unloading of the Victims of the Eosian mind-wipe experiment, which had occupied a good third of Botany's settlers – the field was now abnormally quiet, peaceful. Kris sighed and Zainal gave her a fond look.

'Zainal? Kris?' Chuck Mitford's parade-ground voice reached their ears over the muted sounds that Baby was making. They looked back to the hangar and saw Chuck urgently waving to them. He was talking to someone who had just pulled up in a runabout.

'Oh, now what?' The testy demand left Kris's mouth before she could suppress it. She was tired and earnestly desired a shower and a long sleep. She'd even arranged with the crèche to keep Zane overnight, since she knew herself to be stretched to the limit after the tense voyage home and the stress of landing all the pitiful mind-wiped people.

'We'd better see,' Zainal said, taking her hand in his big one and pressing it encouragingly.

'Don't you ever get tired and just ... have too much, Zainal?' This was one of those moments when his equanimity bordered on the unforgivable.

'Yes, but it passes,' he said, leading her to where Chuck Mitford waited for them with the passenger of the runabout.

It wasn't a long walk, but long enough for Kris to get her irritation and impatience under control. If Zainal could hack it, so could she. But when would she get a shower? She stank! Well, maybe her body odour would encourage whoever this was to shorten their errand.

'What's up, Sarge?' she asked, noticing that he was talking to a woman she vaguely recognized from the Fourth Drop - as much because the woman managed to look elegant in the basic Catteni coverall. Kris wondered if she'd taken it in at crucial spots to make it look so fashionable. She was fleetingly envious of such expertise.

'This is Dorothy Dwardie, who's heading the psychology team and needs some of your time, and right now,' Chuck said. He had the grace to add, 'Though I'd guess another meeting's the last thing you two need right now.'

'It is,' Kris said without thinking, but she smiled at the psychologist to take the sting out of her candour.

'It is important?' Zainal's question was more statement than query.

'Yes, it is, quite urgent,' Dorothy said with an apologetic smile. 'We need to know more about that mind-probe before we can proceed with any sort of effective or therapeutic treatment.'

'Why'n't you use the small office?' Chuck said, gesturing to that end of the vast hangar.

Zainal squeezed Kris's hand and murmured: 'This won't take long. I know very little about the probe.'

'I was hoping you'd know something, if only the history of its use among your people,' Dorothy said ruefully. She looked around for a place to park the runabout.

'I'll take care of it for you,' Chuck said, so helpfully that Kris smothered a grin.

Dorothy Dwardie gave him a warm smile for his offer. 'We've had a bit of outrageous luck,' she said as they walked to the right-hand side of the hangar, where other small offices had been constructed.

'We could use some,' Kris agreed, struggling for amiability.

'Indeed we could, though I must say that hijacking all those poor people out from under Eosi domination is certainly *their* good luck. And you deserve a lot of credit for that act of kindness.'

What she didn't say rang loud and clear to Kris. Were there some who weren't sure she and Zainal deserved any credit? As well for them that Ray Scott had loudly declared that he took full responsibility for the decision to save the damaged humans, so no one could blame that on Zainal or her. Actually the guilty were the Eosi but too many people failed to make a distinction between overlord and underling. Kris's mood swung back to negative again.

‘But until we’ – Dorothy’s hand on her chest indicated all the psychologists and psychiatrists on Botany who would now take charge of the mind-wiped – ‘understand as much as possible about the mechanism ... Ah, here we are ...’ She opened the door to the small office and automatically fumbled for a light switch on the wall.

Kris had seen the cord and pulled it.

‘Oh ... I suppose I’ll get used to it in time,’ Dorothy said with an apologetic grin.

‘You’re Fourth Drop, aren’t you?’ Kris replied as neutrally as possible while Zainal closed the door behind them. There were several desks against the long stone wall but a table and chairs made an appropriate conference spot by the wide window. There was nothing but darkness outside since the hangar faced south and there were no habitations yet beyond the field. ‘You said you had a bit of outrageous luck?’ Kris asked when they were seated.

‘Yes, not everyone in the group you brought *had* been mind-wiped.’

‘Certainly the Deskis, Rugs and Turs weren’t,’ Kris said.

‘Nor all the humans,’ Dorothy said, smiling over such a minor triumph.

‘They weren’t?’ Kris asked, exchanging surprised glances with Zainal.

‘Yes, some faked the vacuity of the mindless ...’

‘Faked it?’

Dorothy smiled more brightly. ‘Clever of them, actually, and they got away with it because those in charge weren’t keeping track of who had been ... done.’

Kris let out a long whistle. ‘All us humans look alike to Eosi? Proves, though, doesn’t it, that the Eosi aren’t all that smart after all. Clever of us humans to run the scam.’

‘They’re also able to gives us names for many of the people who no longer remember who they are.’ Dorothy gave a little shudder. ‘I’ve dealt with amnesia patients before, of course, and accident shock trauma, but this is on

so much larger a scale ... and complicated by not only emotional but also physical shock and injury. We have established - thanks to Leon Dane's work with injured Catteni - that there are more points of similarity than differences between our two species since both are bipedal, pentadactyl and share many of the same external features, like eyes, ears, noses. We can't, of course, cross-fertilize.' To Kris's surprise, Dorothy ducked her head to hide a flush.

'As well,' Kris said drily.

Dorothy flashed her an apology and continued. 'Internally, though the Catteni have larger hearts, lungs and intestinal arrangements, Leon says that the main difference is the density of the brain matter. The Catteni brain is larger though similarly organized to ours as far as the position of the four major lobes is concerned. Leon was amazed at what damage a Catteni skull could take without permanent injury. I think,' and she paused, frowning slightly at what she did not voice, 'that the initial injuries to the prisoners were attempts to recalibrate the instrument to human brains.'

'Initial injuries?' Kris asked.

'Yes.' Dorothy seemed to wish to get over this topic very quickly. 'Though they would have been dead before their nervous systems could register much.'

'Oh?'

'Yes, and leave it at that, Kris,' Dorothy went on briskly. 'Will Seissmann should not dwell on the details, although he seems to want to ... a part of his trauma.'

'Will Seissmann?' Kris asked.

'Yes, he and Dr Ansible ...'

'Dr Ansible?' Kris shot bolt upright. 'But he's - was, rather - at the observatory. Only I think he was away on some sort of a conference when the Catteni took Denver.'

'Yes, he was, and he took refuge at Stamford,' Dorothy replied, nodding. 'He tried to argue others he knew into following Will's example. I don't know whether or not the

dogmatic scientist has an innate martyr complex or not but only a few would resort to the trick to save themselves.' She broke off with a sigh. 'At any rate, we are able to put names to most of the victims. But I need to know whatever details you may have, Zainal. They will be so helpful in treating the trauma ... if, indeed, we can.'

Zainal shook his head. 'I know little about such Eosi devices.' Then his expression changed into what Kris privately termed his 'Catteni look', cold, impassive, shuttered. 'I do know - it is part of the Catteni history - that they have a device that increases and measures intelligence.'

'Oh?' Dorothy leaned forward across the table in her eagerness. 'Then it could possibly extract information, too?'

Zainal blinked and his expression altered to a less forbidding one. He gave a slight smile. 'It would seem likely, since I only know of the one device. The Eosi used it on the primitive Catteni to make them useful as hosts.'

'Really?' Dorothy's expression was intense as she leaned forward again, encouraging Zainal to elaborate.

'Yes, really. Roughly two thousand years ago the Eosi discovered Catten and its inhabitants. We were little more than animals, a fact the Eosi have never let us forget. About a thousand years ago my family started keeping its records, for our ancestor was one of the first hundred to have ... his brain stimulated by the device. Each family keeps its own records - how many males it has delivered to the Eosi as hosts, and details of children and matings.'

'A thousand, two thousand years to develop into a space-going race? That's impressive,' Dorothy said.

'Humans did it without such assistance and *that* impresses me,' Zainal said with an odd laugh. 'But that's how the Emassi were developed. To serve the Eosi.'

'They didn't use the mind thingummy on the Drassi?' Kris asked.

‘To a lesser degree,’ Zainal replied and turned to Dorothy. ‘There are three levels of Catteni now. Emassi,’ and he touched his chest, ‘Drassi, who are good at following orders but have little initiative or ambition: some were rejected for the Emassi ranks but are able to be more than Drassi – ship captains and troop leaders. Then there’re the Rassi, who were left as they were.’

‘Rassi?’ Kris echoed in surprise. ‘Never heard of them.’

‘They do not leave Catten and are as we all were when the Eosi found us.’

‘So you, as a species, did not evolve by yourselves? You had your intelligence stimulated?’ Dorothy asked. She turned to Kris. ‘The Eosi evidently never heard of the Prime Directive.’

Kris giggled. A psychologist who was a Trekkie? ‘The Prime Directive dictates that an advanced culture is not supposed to interfere with the natural evolution of another species or culture,’ she explained to Zainal.

‘The anthropologists will have a field day with this,’ Dorothy said, jotting down another note. ‘Was one ... application sufficient to sustain the higher level of intelligence?’ she asked Zainal.

He shrugged. ‘I do not know that.’ Abruptly his expression again changed to his shuttered ‘Catteni’ look. ‘When I had my full growth, I had to be presented to the Eosi, to see if I was acceptable as a host. And what training I should be given.’

‘And?’ Dorothy prompted him when he paused.

‘I was passed and I was to be trained to pilot spaceships.’ Then his grin became devilish and his Catteni look completely disappeared. ‘My father and uncles had worried that Eosi would find me too inquisitive and unacceptable.’

‘Too inquisitive? Why would that make you unacceptable?’ Dorothy asked.

‘Eosi tell Emassi what they need to know. That is all they are supposed to know.’

‘Before you start training? Surely you had basic schooling?’ Dorothy asked, surprised.

Zainal gave a snort. ‘Emassi are trained, not schooled.’

‘But didn’t you learn to read, write and figure before you were fourteen?’ Dorothy was having difficulty with this concept. ‘Surely you’ve had to learn mathematics to pilot spaceships?’

Zainal nodded. ‘Emassi males are taught that much by their fathers ...’ He grimaced.

‘The hard way?’ Kris said, miming the use of a force whip.

‘Yes, the hard way. One tends to pay strict attention to such lessons.’

‘And yet you were curious enough to want to know more?’ Dorothy asked.

‘Because it was forbidden,’ Zainal said, again with a twinkle in his eye. He must have been a handful as a youngster. Kris was immensely relieved that his intelligence, which she suspected was a lot higher than hers, was natural rather than artificially stimulated.

‘So the device assessed you. Can you give me any description of it?’

Zainal looked down at his clasped hands as he organized his response. ‘I was taken into a very large white room with a big chair in the centre and two Eosi, one at a control desk. I was strapped into the chair and then the device came down out of the ceiling to cover my head.’

‘Could you see what it looked like?’ Dorothy asked, and Kris realized how eagerly she awaited details.

Zainal shrugged. ‘A large shape,’ and he made a bell form with both hands, ‘with many wires attached to it, and dials.’

‘It covered your head or just your face?’

‘My head down to my shoulders. It was heavy.’

‘Did you see any blue lights?’ Dorothy asked, scribbling again.

‘I saw nothing.’

‘And the sensations? What were they like?’ She turned to Kris as Zainal once again considered his answer. ‘We’re trying to establish if any invasive probe is used: needles, or possibly electrical shock. We need to know whether the brain itself has been entered and damaged; whether or not there has been physical damage – rather than just memory, emotional and fact erasures.’

‘There aren’t any scars on the victims?’ Kris asked.

Dorothy shook her head. ‘Not visible ones, certainly. Which is why Zainal’s recollection is so vital to us.’

‘Like electricity,’ Zainal said, putting his hands to his temples and moving them up to the top of his broad skull. ‘And here,’ and he touched the base of his cranium. ‘But no blood. No scar.’

‘Oh, yes, that’s interesting, very interesting.’ Dorothy wrote hastily for a minute. ‘No pain in the temples?’

‘Where?’ Zainal asked.

‘Here,’ and Kris touched the points.

‘Oh. Not pain – pressure.’

‘Isn’t that where lobotomies are done?’ Kris asked Dorothy apprehensively.

The psychologist nodded. ‘Anywhere else? Pressure or pain or odd sensations? I’m trying to discover just which areas might have been ... touched by this device. If they coincide with what factual, emotional and memory centres humans have,’ she added as an aside to Kris. ‘There are more parallels than you might guess.’

‘A sort of stabbing, very quick, to the ...’ and Zainal put his hand to the top of his head, ‘inside of my head.’

‘Quite possibly a general stimulation,’ Dorothy murmured. Then, with a kind smile, went on. ‘So you were assessed and passed. Then what happened?’

‘I was told who to report to for training.’ He grinned. ‘I know my uncles were disappointed that I was acceptable. My father was relieved. More glory for our branch of the family.’

‘How old are you now?’ Dorothy asked, a question which Kris had never bothered to ask.

Zainal hesitated and then with a grin and a shrug replied, ‘Thirty-five. I have been exploring this galaxy for sixteen years.’

‘Sixteen?’ Kris was surprised.

‘That would make only four years of formal training? Of any sort?’ Dorothy asked, equally surprised.

‘Three. I have been here two years now. Two Catteni years.’ And he grinned at Kris.

‘Pilot training is all you had?’

‘I learned what I needed to know to do the job which the Eosi ordered for me. I worked hard and learned well,’ Zainal said with a touch of pride.

‘Amazing,’ Dorothy murmured as she made more notes.

‘But you know a lot about a lot of things,’ Kris protested.

Zainal shrugged. ‘Once I was officially a pilot’ – he gave Kris a mischievous look out of the corner of his eye – ‘it was no longer wrong for me to learn what I wished so long as I piloted well. The Eosi,’ and his face slid briefly into Catteni impassivity again, ‘require their hosts to have been many places and seen many things.’

‘Then you don’t have any knowledge about your own body? No biology?’ Dorothy asked.

‘Bi-o-lo-gy?’ Zainal repeated.

Dorothy explained and he laughed.

‘As long as my body does what I need it to do, I do not ask how it does it.’

Both Dorothy and Kris smiled.

‘When I compare what our astronauts went through to qualify as space pilots ...’ and Dorothy raised one hand in amazement.

‘The earliest aviators flew by the seat of their pants,’ Kris remarked.

‘Seat of their pants?’ Zainal asked, frowning. Dorothy and Kris took turns explaining the meaning. ‘I did that, too,’ he said when they had finished, ‘when training did not cover all I needed to know. So I made those who built the spacecraft show me how everything worked.’

‘And those ... engineers ... were trained by families who were also engineers?’ Dorothy asked and Zainal nodded. ‘Very restrictive educational system. Only a need to know. However did you manage?’

‘The Eosi do the “manage” part,’ Zainal said in a caustic tone. ‘Emassi follow orders just like Drassi and the Rassi.’

‘It’s amazing even the Emassi can do what they do,’ Kris remarked, regarding Zainal with even more respect.

‘Yes, it is,’ Dorothy agreed, ‘and we tend to rely on the educational process ... or the genetic heritage.’ She gave Kris a look. ‘Depending on which school of thought you adhere to.’ She gave another sigh and then said more briskly, ‘Are there any special aptitudes which Catteni have which humans do not? For example, the way the Deski can climb vertically and have extraordinary hearing?’

‘Night vision,’ Zainal said promptly. ‘Our hearing is more acute than yours but not as good as the Deski’s. We can last longer eating poor food ... or is that body difference, not brain?’

‘Metabolic differences certainly,’ Dorothy said, having written ‘eye’ and ‘ear’ on her pad. Kris could read the short words backwards. Then the psychologist spent a moment doodling. ‘Could you possibly draw me a sketch of the device used on you?’ She turned to Kris in explanation. ‘Those that got a good look at it can’t talk and those who can talk didn’t see it.’

‘Zainal’s very good at drawing devices,’ Kris said, with a touch of pride.

‘Yes.’ Zainal complied, using the pen with the quick, deft strokes that Kris had seen him use in delineating the Mechs. ‘There!’

Dorothy regarded the neat sketch and hummed under her breath. ‘Yes, well, it looks like something an evil scientist would create.’ She sighed. ‘Considering who the Eosi chose to brain-scan, they seem to have been on an information hunt. But why? Their level of technology is so much more sophisticated than Earth’s. Or were they just trying to strip minds that could possibly help foment riot and rebellion? Or maybe reduce humans to the level of your Rassi?’

Zainal made a guttural noise and his smile, while it did not touch his eyes, was evil. ‘Ray Scott said that he recognized some of the people as scientists. So the Eosi are looking for information. If they were wiping minds to make you like Rassi, they would start with children and block learning.’ He grinned. ‘The Eosi look for ideas. They have had very few new ones over the past hundred or so years.’

‘Really?’ Dorothy remarked encouragingly.

‘Maybe they need to stimulate their own brains,’ Kris said. ‘Would it work on them?’

Zainal shrugged.

‘Will Seissmann and Dr Ansible felt that the Eosi were taking a vicious revenge on humans by destroying minds in a wholesale fashion,’ Dorothy said in an expressionless voice. ‘There seemed to be no reason to include some of the individuals – TV reporters and anchor men ... and women ...’

‘Really? Who?’ Kris asked in astonishment.

‘Who? Anchor men and women?’ Zainal didn’t understand the term.

‘Oh,’ he said, after Kris had explained, ‘information would be the first thing the Eosi would want to control. All your satellites and communications networks were destroyed in the initial phase of the invasion.’

‘Did you know they were choosing Earth?’ Dorothy asked.

Zainal shook his head with a rueful grin. ‘I was exploring on the far side of this galaxy. I had stopped at Barevi for supplies and fuel when ...’ He shrugged as if both women knew his history from then on.

‘Zainal picked a fight,’ Kris said, answering the querying look on Dorothy’s mobile face, ‘killed a Drassi and went on the lam. I saw his flitter crash and went to see whom the Catteni were after this time. I had no idea what I was rescuing. If I had,’ and she gave Zainal a mock dirty look, ‘I might have thrown him to the wolves. But I decided I’d better get him back to Barevi. Only we both got caught in one of those gassings the Catteni spray to quell rebellion.’ Kris knew Dorothy would be familiar with that tactic, which was often used on Earth. ‘And we ended up here on Botany.’

‘For which many of us are exceedingly grateful,’ Dorothy said sincerely. ‘Will Seissman, Dr Ansible and a former radio reporter, Jane O’Hanlan, were able to bring us up to date with the situation on Earth, by the way. Which I can give you without benefit of sponsors or commercials,’ she continued, in a droll tone. ‘I think there was probably more than one reason for the Eosi to resort to extracting information from human beings. Not only have we here on Botany produced a new wrench in the works, with the Bubble, but also resistance is increasing on Earth despite the Eosi’s attempts to control or contain it. I gather that there will be an effort made to support activities on Earth now that there’re three spaceships at our disposal.’ She looked at Zainal for comment.

‘We haven’t heard of any,’ Kris said and added ‘yet’. Zainal had been so busy getting pictorial proof to send to the Farmers that they hadn’t discussed any future plans.

He shrugged. ‘Three ships are too few against as many as the Eosi have.’

‘Not even for a teensy weenie hit,’ and Dorothy left a very tiny space between her forefinger and thumb by way of illustration, ‘just to serve notice on the Eosi?’

‘I think we’ve just done that,’ Kris said with a grin.

‘They will try to penetrate the Bubble,’ Zainal said. ‘They will have to figure out what it is and how it is maintained. That will annoy them seriously.’ He was patently delighted. ‘We must hope that it remains. The Eosi have other weapons that destroy planets.’

‘Do they?’ Kris felt a twinge of fear under her bravado.

‘If they cannot possess, they do not leave it for others to have.’

‘Oh!’ Kris had no flippant reply for that.

‘Does the Council know?’ Dorothy asked, concerned.

‘I will tell them,’ Zainal said, nodding solemnly.

‘Well, then, that’s all I can bother you with,’ Dorothy said, beginning to gather up her notes. She paused, tilting her head at Zainal. ‘You don’t have any idea where the Eosi came from, do you?’ When Zainal shook his head, she managed a selfconscious laugh. ‘From a galaxy far, far away?’

Kris chuckled, delighted that Dorothy was not only Trek-oriented but could also quote from *Star Wars*.

‘Thank you, Zainal,’ said Dorothy. ‘You’ve given me valuable information.’

‘I have?’

The psychologist smiled. ‘More than you might think. I do apologize for besieging you after what has been a very difficult day, but we needed this input.’ She held up the notes. ‘We can design appropriate treatment now. In so far as our resources permit, that is.’

Zainal opened the door and they stepped into a moonlit night.

‘Over here, Dorothy,’ Chuck said, flipping on the runabout’s light.

‘Oh, thank you and thank you again, Zainal, Kris.’ Dorothy hurried over to the little vehicle, murmuring her thanks to Mitford before turning it northward.

‘I’ve one of the flatbeds and there’s room on the boxes for you two to ride back to your place,’ Chuck said. ‘Don’t want any night-crawlers grabbing you.’

‘Thanks, Chuck,’ Kris said, only too grateful for both the offer and the sentiment. She was dragging with weariness right now. Sitting down for a spell had not been as good an idea as it had seemed. It only emphasized her fatigue.

‘Over here.’ Chuck reached the flatbed and turned on its light to guide them.

Kris was already climbing onto the cargo before she realized that the boxes didn’t resemble anything she had purchased on Barevi.

‘What’s all this, Sarge?’ She couldn’t see the printed labels in the dim light.

‘It’s the books we found,’ Zainal astonished her by saying.

‘*Books?*’

‘Yes, books,’ Zainal repeated calmly. ‘Ray saw them. As trading captain of the KDI, I thought such paper stuff would be good for packing material.’ He grinned. ‘The Drassi did not argue – glad to be rid of the stuff.’

‘But there must be fifty boxes here. They’re not *all* the same book, are they?’

‘Nope,’ Chuck said. ‘The Catteni looted libraries, too. We’ve got some former librarians just drooling to catalogue what we managed to “liberate”. This is only part of what we unloaded. Our kids won’t grow up ignorant, though they might have some rather interesting gaps in their education.’

‘Books,’ Kris said, and suddenly realized how much she had missed books ... certainly the availability of books. ‘Wow! That was a real coup.’