

The Thorns of Barevi

By Anne McCaffrey

CHRISTIN BJORNSEN WONDERED IF SUMMER on the planet Barevi could possibly be the only sea-son. There had been remarkably little variation in temperature in the nine months since she'd arrived here. She'd been four months in what appeared to be the single, sprawling city of the planet when she'd been a slave, and now had racked up five months of comparative freedom-tooth-and-nail survival-in this jungle, after her escape from the city in a stolen flitter.

Her sleeveless, one-piece tunic was made of an indestructible material, but it would not be very warm in cold weather. The scooped neckline was indecently low and the skirt ended midway down her long thighs. It was closely modeled, in fact, after the miniskirted sheath she had been wearing to class that spring morning the Catteni ships had descended on Denver. One moment she was on her way to the college campus; the next, she was one of thousands of astonished and terrified Denverites being driven by forcewhips up the ramp of a spaceship that made the Queen Mary look like a bathtub float. Once past the black maw of the ship, Chris, with all the others, swiftly succumbed to the odorless gas. When she and her fellow prisoners had awakened, they were in the slave compounds of Barevi, waiting to be sold. Chris aimed the avocado-sized pit of the gorupear she was eating at the central stalk of a nearby thicket of purple-branched thom-bushes. The bush instantly rained tiny darts in all directions. Chris laughed. She had bet it would take less than five minutes for

the young bush to rearm itself. And it had. The larger ones took longer to position new missiles. She'd had reason to find out.

Absently, she reached above her head for another gorupear. Nothing from good old Terra rivaled them for taste. She bit appreciatively into the firm reddish flesh of the fruit and its succulent juices dribbled down her chin on to her tanned breasts. Tugging at the strap of her slip-tight tunic, she brushed the juice away. The outfit was great for tanning, but when winter comes? And shouldn't she concentrate on gathering nuts and drying gorupears on the rocks by the river for the cold season? She wrinkled her nose at the half-eaten pear. They were mighty tasty, but a steady diet of them ...

A low-pitched buzz attracted her attention. She got to her feet, balanced carefully on the high limb of the tree. Parting the branches, she peered up at the cloudless sky. Two of the umpteen moons that circled Barevi were visible in the west. Below them, dots that gave off sparkles of reflected sunlight were swooping and diving.

The boys have called another hunt, she mused to herself and, still standing, leaned against the tree trunk to take advantage of her grandstand seat.

Before her chance to escape had presented itself, Chris had picked up a good bit of the lingua Barevi, a bastardization of the six or seven languages spoken by the slaves. She had gleaned some information about her captors, the Catteni. They were not, for one thing, indigenous to this world but came from a

much heavier planet nearer galactic center. They were one of the mercenary-explorer races employed by a vast federation. They had colonized Barevi, using it as a clearinghouse for spoils acquired looting unsuspecting non-federation planets, and as a rest-and-relaxation center for their great ships' crews. After years of the free-fall of space and lighter-gravity planets, Catteni found it difficult to return to their heavy, depressing home world. During her brief enslavement, Chris had heard the Catteni boast of dying everywhere in the galaxy except Catten. The way they "played," Chris thought to herself, was rough

176
r

enough to insure that they died young, as well as far from Catten. Huge predators roamed the unspoiled plains of Barevi, and the Catteni considered it great sport to stand up to the rhinolike monsters with only a single spear. That is, Chris remembered with a grim smile, when they weren't brawling among themselves over imagined slurs and insults. Two slaves, friends of hers, had been crushed under the massive bodies of Catteni during a free-for-all. Since she had come to the valley, she had witnessed half a dozen encounters between rhinos and Catteni. Used to a much heavier gravity than Barevi, the Catteni were able to execute incredible maneuvers as they softened their prey for the kill. The poor rhinos had less chance than Spanish bulls and, in all the fights Chris had seen, only one man was slightly grazed. As the flitters neared, she realized that they were not acting like a hunting party. For one thing, one dot was considerably ahead of the others. And by God, she saw the light flashes of the trailing flitters' forward guns firing at the "leader."

Hunted and hunters were at the foot of her valley now. Suddenly, black smoke erupted from the rear of the pursued flitter. It nosed upward. It hovered reluctantly, then dove, slantingly, to strike the tumble of boulders along the river's edge, not far from her refuge.

Chris gasped as she beheld a figure, half-leaping, half-staggering out of the badly smashed flitter. She could scarcely believe that even a Catteni had survived that crash. Wide-eyed, she watched as he struggled to his feet, then reeled from boulder to boulder to get away from the smoldering wreck. With a stunningly brilliant flare, the craft exploded. Fragments whistled into the underbrush as far up the slope as her retreat, and the idiotic thorn-bushes she had recently triggered sprayed out their lethal little darts.

The smoke of the burning flitter obscured her view now, and Chris lost sight of the man. The other flitters had reached the wreck and were hovering over

157
it, like so many angry King-Kongish bees, swooping, diving, trying to penetrate the smoke.

An afternoon breeze swirled the black clouds about and Chris caught glimpses of the man, lurching still further from the crash. She saw him stumble and fall, after which he made no move to rise. Above, the bees buzzed angrily, deprived of their prey.

Catteni don't hunt each other as a rule, she told herself, surprised to find that she was halfway down from

her perch. They fight like Irishmen, sure, but to chase a man so far from the city?

The crash had been too far away for Chris to distinguish the hunted man's features or build. He might just be an escaped slave, like herself. If not Terran, he might be from one of the half-dozen other subjugated races that lived on Barevi. Someone who had had the guts to steal a flitter didn't deserve to die under Catteni forcewhips.

Chris made her way down the slope, careful to avoid the numerous thorn thickets that dominated these woods. She had once amused herself with the whimsy that the thorns were the gorupear's protectors, for the two invariably grew close together.

At the top of the sheer precipice above the falls of the river, she grabbed a long vine which she had hung there for a speedy descent. On the river bank she stuck to the dry, flat rocks until she came to the stepping-stones that allowed her to cross the river below the wide pool made by the little falls. Down a gully, across another thom-bush-filled clearing, and then she was directly above the spot where she had last seen the man.

Keeping close to the brown rocks so nearly the shade of her own tanned skin, she crossed the remaining distance. She all but tripped over him as the wind puffed black smoke down among the rocks.

"Catteni!" she cried, furious as she bent to examine the unconscious man and recognized the gray and yellow uniform despite its tattered and blackened condition.

With a disdainful foot, she tried to turn him over. And couldn't. The man might as well have been a boulder. She knelt and yanked his head around by

158

the thick slate-gray hair which, in a Catteni, did not indicate age. Maybe he was dead?

No such luck. He was breathing. A bruise mark on his temple showed one reason for his unconsciousness. For a Catteni, he was almost good-looking. Most of them tended to have brutish, coarse features, but this one had a straight, almost patrician nose, even if there was a lot more of it than an elephant would want to claim, and he had a wide, well-shaped mouth. The Catteni to whom she had been sold had had thick, blubbery lips, and she'd heard rumors-never mind about them!

A sizzling crack jerked her head around in the direction of the wreck. The damned fools were firing on the burning wreck now. Chris looked down at the unconscious man, wondering what on earth he had done to provoke such vindictive thoroughness. They sure wanted him good and dead.

The barrage pulverized the flitter, leaving the fire no fuel. The wind, laden with coarse dust, blew odorously from the wreckage. The man stirred and vainly tried to raise himself, only to sink back to the ground with a groan. Chris saw the flitters circling to land on the plateau below the wreck.

"Going to case the scene of the crime, huh?" It was completely illogical, Chris told herself, to help a Catteni simply because there were others of his race out to get him. But . . . she backtracked, just in case he had left any trace for them to follow. She went back as far as she could on the raw rock. Where dirt began, ash had settled in a thick layer, obliterating any tracks he might have made. After all, the Catteni

might stumble on her if they thought their victim had escaped the crash.

He had got to his feet when she returned. She tried to lend her support but it was like trying to guide a mountain.

"Come on, Mahomet," she urged softly. "Just walk like a nice little boy to the river, and I'll duck you in. Good cold water'll bring you round."

A sharp, distant gabble of voices made her start nervously. God, those Catteni had got up that rock

159

face in a hurry. She'd forgotten they could take prodigious leaps on this light-gravity planet.

"They're coming. Follow me," she said in lingua Barevi.

He groaned again, shaking his heavy head to clear his senses. He turned toward her, his great yellow eyes still dazed with shock. She would never get used to such butter-colored irises.

"This way! Quickly!" she said, urgently tugging at him. If he didn't shake his tree-stump legs, she was going to leave him. Good Samaritans on Barevi had better not get caught by Catteni.

She pulled at his arm and he seemed to make a decision. He lurched forward, one great hand grasping her shoulder in an incredible viselike grip. They reached the river bank, still ahead of the searchers. But Chris groaned as she realized that the barely conscious man would never be able to navigate the stepping-stones.

The shouts behind them indicated that the others were fanning out to search the rocks. Urgently she grabbed his hand, leading him to the base of the falls.

"If you don't float, it's just too damned bad," she said grimly, and taking a running start, she knocked him into the water.

She dove in, right beside him, and when he did indeed continue to sink, she grabbed and caught him by his thick hair. Fortunately the water made even a solid Catteni manageable. Exerting all her strength and skill as a swimmer, she got his head above water and held him up with a chin lock.

By sheer good luck, they came up in the space between the arc of the falls and the cliff, the curtain of water shielding them from view. As the Catteni began to struggle in her grasp, the five hunters leapt spectacularly into view in the clearing by the pool. Her "Mahomet" was instantly alert and, instead of struggling, began to tread water beside her.

The Catteni were arguing with each other, and each seemed to be issuing conflicting orders.

Mahomet released himself from her chinhold, his yellow eyes never leaving the party on the bank. They

160

watched, keeping the swimming motions to a minimum, though the falls would hide any ripples.

One Catteni, after a heated argument, decided to cross the wide pool in a fantastic, to Chris, standing leap. He and another began to move downstream, carefully examining both banks and casually surmounting up-ended coffin-sized boulders with no effort. The other three went charging back the way they had come, arguing violently.

After an endless interval, during which the icy water chilled Chris to the bone, the refugee finally touched her shoulder and nodded toward the shore. But when she realized that he was going to head

back the way they had come, she shook her head emphatically, pointing to the other side.

"I've a flitter. Over there," she shouted at him over the noise of the falls. He frowned. "Safer. That way!" she insisted, jabbing a finger in the direction of her hidden vehicle. Stunned as she suddenly realized what she had done, she stared at him. "Oh, God!"

He raised an eyebrow in surprise, and she hoped for one long moment that he had not understood what she had said. But he had, and now his yellow eyes gleamed at her in the gloom with a different sort of interest.

He's like a great lion, Chris thought, and almost choked on fear.

"You have aided a Catteni," he said, rumbling in a deep voice. "You shall not suffer for that."

Chris wasn't so sure when she tried to climb out of the river and found herself numb with cold, and strengthless. He, on the other hand, strode easily out of the water. He looked down at her ineffectual struggles, frowning irritably. Then, with no apparent effort, he curled the long fingers of one hand around her upper arm and simply withdrew her from the water, supporting her until she got her balance.

Shivering, she looked up at him. God, he was big: the tallest Catteni she had ever seen. She had inherited the height of her Swedish father and stood five foot ten in her bare feet. She had topped most of the Catteni she had seen by several inches, but his eyes

161

were level with hers. And his shoulders were as broad as the scoop of a road-grader.

"Where's the flitter?" he demanded curtly.

She pointed, furious that she obeyed him so instantly, and that she couldn't control the chattering of her teeth or the trembling of her body. He reached for her hand, relaxing his grip a little at her involuntary gasp of pain.

Replace "grubby paws" with "high-gravity paws," she told herself in an effort to keep up her spirits as she stepped in front of him.

"I'll have to lead the way through the thorns," she said. "Or maybe thorns don't bother Catteni hides?" she added pertly.

To her surprise, he grinned at her.

"Catteni are always cautious."

As she turned, she realized that she had never seen a Catteni smile before. She noticed, too, that he was following carefully in her footsteps. It was good to know that he was no more anxious to disturb the thorn-bushes with their vicious little barbs than she was.

They were halfway to the hidden flitter when both heard, off to the right in the valley, the staccato volley of orders in loud Catteni voices.

Mahomet paused, dropping to a half-crouch, instinctively angling his body so that he did not touch the close-growing vegetation. He listened, and although the words were too distorted for Chris to catch, he evidently understood them. A humorless smile touched his lips and his eyes gleamed with a light that frightened Chris.

"They have seen movement here. Hurry!" he said in a low voice.

Chris broke into a jog trot; the twisting path made a faster pace unwise. When they broke into the dell just before the extensive thicket, she paused.

"Where? Are you lost?" he asked.

"Through those bushes. Watch. And when I say move, move!"

He frowned skeptically as she picked up a handful of small stones. With a practiced ease, she began casting at the thickets. Gauging carefully, she threw right and left, watching and counting the thorn sprays to be sure she had triggered every bush. To be on the safe side, she scooped up one more handful of pebbles and broadcast it. No further thorns showered. "Move!" His reaction time was so much faster than hers that he was halfway across the clearing within seconds after the order escaped her lips. She rushed in front of him. "We have five minutes to cross before they rearm."

An expression that was almost respectful crossed his face. Impatiently, she tugged at him and then began to weave her way among the bushes, following no recognizable route. When she made the last turn and he saw the flitter, its nose cushioned in the heavy cluster of thorn-thicket limbs, he gave what Chris assumed was a Catteni chuckle.

She waved open the flitter door and bade him to enter with a regal gesture. He walked straight to the instrument panel, grunting as he activated the main switch.

"Half a tank of fuel," he muttered, and then checked the other dials. He seemed pleased as he nipped off the switch. He glanced up at the transparent top, camouflaged by the interwining leafy limbs, at the bed she had made herself on the deck, at the utensils she had fashioned from spare parts in the lockers.

"So it was you who stole the commander's personal car," he remarked, looking intently at her.

Chris jerked her chin up.

"At least I landed it in one piece," she replied.

At that he laughed outright, once.

"You're one of the new species?"

"I'm a Terran," she said with haughty pride, her stance marred by uncontrollable shivering.

"Thin-skinned species," he remarked. He looked down at her heaving chest, and slowly started to stroke her shoulder with one finger. His touch was feathery-and more. "Soft to the touch," he said absently. "I haven't bothered to try a Terran yet . . ."

Before she could draw back, his left hand cupped her breast and the other grabbed her tunic at the back, ripping the garment from her in one sharp,

163

powerful jerk. The fingers of his right hand pulled her inexorably toward him.

"I saved your life . . ." she said in protest, her heart beating in panic.

"And I intend to reward you suitably."

"Not that. . ."

"A Catteni's honor is involved," he said, both hands exerting such pressure on her body that his caresses were painful.

With no effort at all he picked her up and deposited her on the bed. When she tried to wiggle away, he laid a hand, like a ton of bricks, on her chest. With the other, he stripped off his tunic, exposing his immense chest, each well-defined muscle rippling sinuously under slightly olive skin. The rest of his clothing followed.

"Oh no!" Chris cried in desperation. "You're ... I can't!"

He glanced down at her wide, curving hips, and shrugged.

"Catteni have been enjoying your race since you were discovered," he reassured her calmly.

"Yes, but have we enjoyed it?"

She made a frantic attempt to evade him as he leaned down. But there was no escape from that implacable male. She arched her back, only to realize that she had made it much easier for him. She continued to struggle out of pride.

"You enjoy pain?" he asked, a puzzled frown on his face. His fingers tightened just that much more so that she felt she'd been caught in a vise and, with a shuddering moan she relaxed, too exhausted to offer even token resistance. "Now we will both enjoy," he said, and proceeded to prove his point.

Just as she was certain she would be split apart, apprehension was replaced by a surging emotion far more powerful and overwhelming. Somewhere, in that flood of intense relief and unexpected ecstasy, she heard him exclaiming, too, in loud surprise.

A harsh curse broke the silence that had settled in the hidden flitter. The warm, strong body of the Catteni stiffened. Chris glanced up at him in alarm.

He brushed his hand warningly across her lips, all

his attention focused in the direction of that swearing. The flitter door was still open, and both Chris and Mahomet heard the vrrh, vrrh as the thorn-bushes released their darts. There were loud cries of pain and further curses. Chris saw the Catteni's eyes dance with malicious amusement.

An authoritative voice uttered a rough command, and even Chris understood the "Get the hell out of here, nothing can pass this way."

She and Mahomet lay still, almost breathless, although the flitter was buried a good hundred yards from the edge of the thickets and could not possibly be seen. They waited until they heard no sound except the brief sighing of the wind.

With a low laugh, the Catteni finally withdrew from Chris, stretching leisurely, his joints popping and cracking with startling loudness.

"I'd heard there was a run on Terran women, and now I can see why. They use their heads as well as their tails."

Chris slapped at his hand, feeling like a flea attacking a Great Dane, but determined to make a gesture. He began to stroke her body, gently exploring it rather than attempting to arouse passion. He was curious, like a small intrigued boy.

"Yes, I can see why," he repeated with a chuckle. He lay back, glancing about the flitter. "This car has been gone five months. Why have you stayed so long alone?" he asked. "Are there others of you here?" He propped himself up on one huge elbow, looking suspiciously out the windows.

"Just me."

He relaxed and smiled. Sensing his receptivity, she dared ask him why he had been chased by his own people.

"Oh," and he shrugged negligently, "a tactical error. I was forced to kill their patrol leader. He had insulted the accomplishments of my squadron. And, as I was without allies, I withdrew."

"He who fights and runs away, lives to fight an-other day?"

"The next day," he corrected her, absently.

"The next day?"

"Certainly. It is against the Catteni Law to con-tinue a quarrel past the same hour of the following day. I have only to lie hidden," and he grinned at her, "until tomorrow at sun zenith and then I can return."

"Won't they be waiting for you?"

He shook his head violently. "Against the Law. Otherwise, we Catteni would quickly exterminate each other."

"You honestly mean to say that, if they can't find you before noon tomorrow, they have to give up?"

He nodded.

"Would that Law apply to slaves, too?"

He looked at her intently. "It can. And I shall per-sonally see that in your case it does. However, while we're waiting for tomorrow . . ." And he reached pur-posefully for her.

Batting at his possessive hands, she squirmed to free herself.

"What? Was I not tender enough with you?" he asked, concern flitting across his face. "We Catteni pride ourselves that we are gentle with our women."

Chris could think of a hundred argumentative re-plies to that statement, and yet had to admit that he had been considerate, gentle, and that even at the height of his passion, he had not forgotten to adjust his strength. His hands were caressing her now, softly, and despite herself, she was responding to him, wanting more of that strong gentleness.

"It's just . . . well . . . you've had quite a day," she temporized, aware that her body was already conforming itself to his even as she protested, "you've been in a crash, half-frozen in icy water and . . ."

"Like the thom-bushes of Barevi," he said, smil-ing, "it takes the Catteni little time to rearm."