

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Freedom's Ransom

Anne McCaffrey

About the Book

The inhabitants of the penal planet Botany had fought a grim and dangerous war to free themselves from their Eosi overlords. Now the Eosi were gone, and both Botany and Earth were free again – but in serious trouble as the theft of all their communications satellites by the Catteni (working for their Eosi masters) had left them isolated and in a desperate situation.

Hoping that everything stolen from them would be returned, they found that Catteni greed had triumphed. The merchants of Barevi refused to give up the stolen goods unless a substantial ransom was paid.

Earth was in a particularly bad way: disease, vandalism, starvation and the breakdown of their mechanical world had left its people fighting for survival. They desperately needed the goods the Barevi were hoarding.

And so Zainal, Kris and a courageous team from Botany set off to try and outwit the thieving merchants. But their expedition led to a horrifying replay of an old nightmare for Kris – and only Zainal could save her and the future of both Earth and Botany.

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About the Author

FREEDOM'S RANSOM

Anne McCaffrey

*This book is respectfully dedicated to the people I've met
on my
chat line: herewith listed in their on-line nicknames.
I apologize in advance if I have forgotten anyone, and
this list is current even to newbies as of 19 June 2001.
Many of you gave me your time, encouragement and
often explicit help throughout this book. I am pleased to
have met all of you listed below. Ciao.*

*Allettah
Ambrosius
An
Anareth
Angele
Anneli
A'ron
Aviendha
Barbie
BD
Beck/Coelura
Belarion
Betsy
Birgit
Bonnbon
Bowser
Brina
Cami
Cheryl
Chris
Cindy
Clueless
Corsaith*

C'ris
Dark Steps
Debbiedamoodymom
Dianna
Draig
Elfinfriend
Elrhan
Emma
Freev
Gail
Gill
Gizmo nine
Grainne
Grey Bear
Gynna
Habit 2
Happy Butterfly
Heideth
Hishin
Ivo
Jax
Jeffrywith1e
Jenna, Trivia Lady
John
Jojo
Jor
Jorine
Khricket
Kismet
K'Nan
Koolness
Kris raven
Kyky
Lady Cygnet
Laurel
Leia

Little Bit
Loiosh
L'rry
Mallory
Marie
MasterHarper 57
Mavron
Melissa
Michael
Miranda
Moomin
Mousertx
Mpatane
Natalie
NCC2235
Nemkitty
Nemlee
Nirgal
Peanuts
Princess Jennifer
Quixotic
Ranen
Rapunzel
Raz
Rimmer
Rogue Wolf
Rosli
Rube
Simon
Sparkies
S'ran/Sokar
SW
Tail Kink2Enniem
Tankiawee
Thalarob
Thunderchild

Tsarina
Wendy
Wolf Shadow
York Harper

Acknowledgements

In putting together the details required for a book, the author is sometimes thrown out of his/her depth and seeks the help of experts in particular fields for advice and information.

In this fourth of the Catteni/Freedom series, I required more knowledge of dentistry than my experience or memory could give me. Dr Les Latner, DMS, Los Angeles, and A. M. Price, DMD, were generous with their help in answering my somewhat rambling requests for information.

Thanks to my loyal friend, Lea Day, I was put in touch with Tony Diorio of Dariene Coffee, Babylon, New York, who gave me information about the transport of coffee beans from their various locations and how it is handled. Wendy Gilbert (aka Hishin) surfed the Web and friends and found out more about coffee plantations in Kenya, for which I am indebted.

Bobbie Parker (aka Short Wave, aka Jake) improved my understanding of satellites beyond the information I found on the Net at various locations. He put me wise to certain minor space difficulties and even designed the KDM ships that transported my heroic crew on their space adventures. It's not so much gaining information as interpreting it correctly to my needs that is my major problem. Therefore, all mistakes are mine!

My son, Todd J. McCaffrey, as a licensed private pilot, was once again on the spot with accurate landing-type protocols.

I also wish to let it be known that I am grateful for the encouragement and help I received from the chat line on

my Web site. They were wonderfully generous with their time, thoughts and encouragements. They even let me use some of their real names and not just their on-line nicknames. As I have met very few of them, I hope I did not offend in my portrayals from just a name and chats on-line.

My collaborator, Margaret Ball, found me more information about the Masai and their tribal system.

And finally, my thanks to my daughter, Georgeanne Kennedy, for her careful editing and comments. My deepest gratitude to Susan Allison at Putnam Berkley for her continued encouragement and especially for her patience.

List of Characters

xcellent Lady Emassi Kris Bjornsen
xcellent Emassi Zainal – her Catteni mate
azil – Zainal’s elder son
eran – Zainal’s younger son
my – Kris’s daughter
ane – Kris’s son

n Botany

arens, Dick – mechanical genius
alenquah, Sev – ex-test pilot
ayes, Herb – electrician
empechat, Iri – judge
everly, John – ex-general
ollinger, Anna – reactionary
lune – ex-leader of the Diplomatic Corps
ummings, Mpatane – lieutenant, communications specialist,
Catteni speaker
ane, Leon – chief medical officer
argle, Mack – jack-of-all-trades
itsy – ex-member of the Diplomatic Corps
ouglas, Ed – lieutenant, lexicographer, Catteni speaker
oyle, Lenny – ex-plumber
oyle, Ninety – jack-of-all-trades
uxie, Walter – mining engineer
wardie, Dorothy – psychologist
asley, Peter – publicist, father of Zane
erris – ex-member of the Diplomatic Corps
loss – ex-member of the Diplomatic Corps
uhrman, Dirk – flight mechanic

lalstrip, Ian – communications specialist
larvey, Katherine – captain, trainee pilot
lessian, Herman – Freudian psychologist
shell, Beth – Catteni speaker
liznet, Jacqueline – captain, pilot
iendgens, Dutch – flight mechanic
lcColl, Alexander – major, pilot
lcDouall, Sarah – medic, crèche manager
laddocks, Sam – colonel
larley, Joe – medic, botanist
larrucci, Gino – pilot
lateru – Masai chief
filler, Mike – head of mining
litford, Cherry – physiotherapist, cousin of Chuck
litford, Chuck – ex-sergeant, US Marines, father of Amy
litford, Rose – pharmacist, sister of Cherry
lullinax – lieutenant, astrogator, Catteni speaker
alit, Yuri – UN resettlement officer
axel – messenger, nephew of Zainal
achs, Eric – dentist
cott, Ray – ex-admiral
hort, Jerry – duty officer
nyder, Peter – engineer
terling, Bob – communications specialist
toffers, Sally – Catteni speaker
ullivan, Gail – lieutenant, communications specialist, Catteni
speaker
aglione, Bob – botanist
urpin, Janet – reactionary
lately, Ben – communications specialist
lorrell (Worry) – administrator

n Earth

ecky – tunnel guard
injury – aid to Dan Vitali
ollin – friend of Chuck Mitford

lover – guard
lace – catering supplies officer
elco – guide
ejas – tunnel escort
laus – tunnel guard
lac – trader
lurray – driver
embu – Kenyan chief
pivak, Eddie – dental supply shop owner
pivak, Suzie – his wife
tandish, Dr – Kenyan physician
itali, Dan – New Jersey Co-ordinator (Coord)
Wendell, John – communications specialist
Wylee – guard

n Barevi

rone – ex-pilot, tutor
rbri – footless veteran, friend of Natchi
apash – market manager
ierse – merchant
adade – port commander
uxel – dental patient
fischik – dental casualty
latchi – one-armed veteran, friend of Erbri
lilink – merchant
avis – buck-toothed dental student
erkay – merchant

‘We dropped, we stay!’
SLOGAN OF THE BOTANY COLONISTS

Preface

When the Catteni, mercenaries for an alien 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 the prisons on the planet Barevi, a hub of the Catteni empire, was dumped on an M-type planet of unknown quality, given rations and tools, and left to deal with the conditions of the planet. Chuck Mitford, former marine sergeant, took charge of the mixed group, which included sullen, pugnacious Turs, spider-like Deski, hairy Rugarians, vague Ilginish and gaunt Morphins, with Humans in the majority. Astonishingly enough, there was one Catteni, Emassi Zainal, who had been shanghaied onto the prison ship. Though there were those who wanted to kill him immediately, Kris Bjornsen, latterly of Denver, suggested that he might have valuable information about the planet on which they were stranded. Zainal's knowledge, scant as it was, of the planet's predators saved their lives.

Installed in a rocky site, with cliffs and caves to give them protection, Mitford quickly organized a camp, using the specific abilities of each species 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 extensive croplands and the six-legged bovine animals. The colonists quickly

learned how to dismantle the machines and design the sort of equipment they needed.

In a confrontation with yet another slave ship, dropping off more prisoners, the colonists got hold of aerial maps of the planet. Among the features of the maps was what appeared to be a big artificial installation, presumably constructed by the original owners of the planet. A member of the discovery team launched a homing device – more for curiosity than intent. Both the Eosi overlords looking for Zainal and the genuine owners of the planet noted the release of the device. An Eosi search crew sent to bring Zainal back to face his familial duty to be an Eosian host failed. The owners of the planet, whom the colonists named the ‘Farmers’, came and were revealed as peaceful life forms with no connection to the Eosi. The Farmers made it clear that the colonists were welcome to stay, and even acted to protect them from the Eosi.

As they explored the new world together, Kris learned that Zainal had a three-phase plan – one that he hoped would end the domination of his people by the Eosi and, incidentally, would include the liberation of Earth. Zainal explained to Mitford and to other naval, airforce and army personnel how he meant to proceed – initially by capturing the next Catteni ship to drop slaves on Botany.

The successful execution of Zainal’s plan netted the colonists not one but two usable spaceships. Even with the capability of leaving Botany, Zainal was often heard to say, ‘I dropped, I stay,’ a defiant attitude, and a phrase that became a rallying cry for the Botany colonists.

While the Eosi surveillance satellites were on the other side of the world, the two ships now available to the colony were able to successfully infiltrate Barevi and acquire much-needed fuel and supplies. Kris, who had already learned enough Catteni to deal with merchants, and other Catteni-speakers disguised themselves to accompany Zainal on this mission. While there, they rescued a number

of Humans whose minds had been wiped by the Eosi. While on Barevi, Zainal also made contact with dissident Emassi, Catteni leaders also pledged to end Eosian domination.

With Zainal's first efforts so successful and Botany safe, the colonists were more than ready to follow his leadership. To continue his efforts to free not only his own people but also Earth's, a special mission was sent to Earth, where an active underground movement already was eroding Catteni occupation.

In *Freedom's Challenge*, Zainal risks his life in a bid to destroy the Eosi with the help of the dissident Catteni hierarchy and wins for Botany its freedom and the freedom of other enforced colony worlds inhabited by Humans. But that was the first phase of his plan. Kris knows Zainal well enough to understand that he still intends to make contact with the Farmers and discover their home world. But that wish is yet again interrupted when the colonists discover that most of the technical materials they need have been looted from Earth and are now stored on Barevi. As the Barevian merchants insist on being paid to surrender the loot, Zainal and Kris must again face the necessity of leaving Botany and finding a way to ransom the materials they desperately need to help both Earth and Botany.

1

KAMITON'S MESSENGER CAME in a Baby-type fast scout, and Jerry Short, the duty officer in the hangar, immediately informed Zainal of its imminent arrival and request to land. Zainal, in turn, called Kris, Peter Easley and Dorothy Dwardie, as members of the Botany Management Board, to join him. He had good relations with Kamiton and wanted to keep everything 'above-board', Kris's often-used idiom for openness. He recognized the call sign of the scout as one that Kamiton frequently used so he was somewhat prepared for bad news but did not warn the others, preferring that they take whatever news came with this messenger without any pre-disposition. It might not be bad news. But why else would Kamiton be sending a messenger, which suggested something he did not wish broadcast on the Botany comm lines?

Kamiton had chosen a nephew of Zainal's, firstborn son of Zainal's favourite sister, which confirmed Zainal's premonition that the news was bad. As Kris often did, she compared the new arrival to her beloved Zainal. She did not expect any familial resemblance, although she noticed as the young man - probably in his mid-twenties - approached that he was slightly shorter than Zainal but still tall for a Catteni. He had the heavy build of the true Catteni, born and adapted to Catten's heavier gravity. His greyish skin and yellow eyes were expectable. Zainal's Botany tan had altered his skin tone to a more vibrant shade of taupe and made Paxel seem drabber by comparison. But it was in the features that the main difference was plainly visible. She had always liked Zainal's

nose, which was not as fleshy as most Catteni. Certainly, Zainal's mouth was better shaped, not as thick as Paxel's and far more flexible, often giving her hints as to his mood. It was severe enough right now, though; she noted the little flattening of his lips, indicating that he found this situation disagreeable and wanted to get it over with as soon as possible. She suspected then that he was anticipating a problem.

So, in his capacity as one of the governors of Botany, Zainal greeted his nephew Paxel affably and offered him coffee – a great new favourite of Catteni. Paxel grinned, showing three gold caps, a sight that caused Kris to have to hide an astonished grin. Zainal covered her astonishment by introducing Paxel, name and rank, first to Dwardie.

'This is a sister's firstborn, Emassi Paxel. I make you known to Eminent Dwardie, and my mate, Excellent Lady Emassi Kris, and Peter Easley.' He reached for the message, which Paxel somewhat reluctantly handed over.

It bore Kamiton's name, plus the characters that confirmed that Tubelin and Nitin were at least aware that a message had been sent to him. That did not bode well. He waved Paxel to a chair at the table in the hangar office. Then he broke the seal and could not suppress a grunt of dismay. When he had digested its import, he tossed the letter across the table to Kris, who could read some Catteni, though probably not all the diplomatic terms and courtesies. The gist of the message stood out as if written in red: 'Barevi merchants will not surrender any Terran goods retrieved by the Eosi or Catteni captains.'

Paxel's eyes had mirrored astonishment when Zainal gave the message first to Kris, rather than to Peter. Very few Catteni women were ever consulted on matters of significance.

'You mean, they need a bribe to give us back anything?' she demanded, outraged. 'And sent your sister's firstborn with the news so you wouldn't kill him out of hand?'

Zainal managed not to grin at her quick understanding of the ploy. She flicked the message across the smooth table towards Peter.

‘What?’ Dorothy Dwardie was equally incensed. She read the note over Peter’s shoulder.

‘They’re very acquisitive, the merchants of Barevi,’ Kris said, having dealt with them during her enslavement on the trade planet and more recently during her clandestine visit disguised as a Catteni officer.

‘They don’t mind dealing in stolen goods?’ Dorothy asked, frowning at the message that Peter peered at in a total lack of comprehension, for it was in Catteni script.

‘Most if not all of what they sell has been “acquired”, one way or another,’ Kris said, watching Paxel’s reaction.

‘Business is at a standstill now that there is no new material coming in from Eosian’ – Paxel cleared his throat – ‘development.’

‘Development?’ Peter echoed, glaring at the young man.

‘Polite terminology for forced acquisition,’ Kris translated composedly. ‘However, knowing how Barevi operates, this doesn’t surprise me,’ she said, indicating the message. ‘I didn’t think we’d get anything back without a quid pro quo.’

‘A what?’ Zainal frowned at words he didn’t understand.

‘Old Latin saying. Something for something,’ she told him in a low voice.

‘But we must have the loot returned to us,’ Peter said, ‘since the production lines for many essential parts are no longer functioning. The spare parts that the Catteni “acquired” could rectify a great many useless vehicles.’

‘Agreed, to the necessity to repossess the parts, especially those communication elements,’ Kris said.

‘Business on Barevi is at a standstill, and the merchants refuse to surrender trading goods,’ Paxel repeated, as if that was the most important consideration.

‘Even if we used the same technologies ...’ Peter began, irate.

Kris held up her hand. ‘It’s a fine sample of Catteni psychology,’ she said, smiling at Paxel. Being a firstborn was some protection for Paxel as far as *his* treatment as the messenger was concerned, but Kris did not intend to mince words or exchange false courtesies. ‘It drops, it stays – until it’s paid for – one way or another,’ she went on, using the slogan facetiously in an effort to relieve the tension in the office.

‘We were promised restitution of materials forcibly removed from Earth’s manufacturing facilities,’ Peter said. She gave him a long, cool look.

‘The merchants require compensation.’

‘That’s piracy,’ Dorothy said, equally annoyed.

‘That’s business,’ Kris said. ‘I know the merchants. They love haggling. It’s a way of life. Besides which, we’ve already made use of many pirated commodities that the first Barevi expedition brought back.’ She gave Dorothy a quelling look. Dorothy probably hadn’t considered those goods as ‘loot’ since they had been paid for, at least at the Barevi market. Now Kris could wonder if the merchants had been paid for the tab run up against a bogus ship’s account. Oh well, that was for the Catteni accountants to resolve.

‘But Kamiton—’ Peter began.

‘Supreme Emassi Kamiton,’ Paxel said, ‘promised in good faith what regretfully he cannot now deliver. He is trying to resolve a delicate situation for all concerned.’ His bow to Zainal was full of respect.

Zainal was impressed by Paxel’s poise and tried to hide his disappointment at finding many of his own, perhaps too ambitious plans now being thwarted by Barevian high-handedness. Establishing easy communication links between Botany and Earth was vital as the present connection was fragile and subject to more delays than

mere distance. The 'spurt' technique of communications, developed for contact with the Martian colony, was ideal for shooting wads of messages from Earth to Botany and reduced, somewhat, the time lag, but he had hoped to install similar links to the other forced colony worlds that would strengthen Botany in the new balance of power in this part of the galaxy - at the least in having like-minded Terran-populated worlds.

The restoration of some basic commodity manufactories in the food industry, flour mills and food preservation, was essential not only to revive local economies and open the infrastructure of the damaged urban areas, but also to provide trade goods to the now hungry markets of Barevi. The setback of having to ransom what the Barevian merchants had lying about useless in their stalls was a further insult. Of primary importance was the repair and recommissioning of power sources that had fallen in the initial Catteni onslaught, or later when the Resistance forces were trying to force the Catteni conquerors off Terra. The restoration of easy communications was vital to the reconstruction effort. It was imperative to know where relief supplies were most critically needed as well as how to help relieve local emergencies. Priorities had to be assessed by appropriate experts and on-site information was needed to do so. He would like to see comm sats above the other nine Catteni worlds and links to Catten and Barevi. He grinned at Paxel: messages would then be easier to send and less dangerous to give. He wondered idly if Kamiton had quite anticipated the problems he was facing as the new leader of the Catteni. Certainly, when the man blithely promised the return of looted material - and Zainal had specifically mentioned what had been transported to Barevi, since he already knew how much captured goods were on display in that marketplace - Zainal had been dubious, even then, about the possibility of an easy repossession. Kamiton was obviously not enjoying as much

support as he had anticipated or Zainal had hoped. So Kamiton had dumped the problem back in Zainal's lap.

Zainal could bluster and threaten, but as he had no retaliatory power or armed forces, threats were empty. Zainal had no effective way to force Kamiton to comply. His priority had been to secure Botany's autonomy and that of the other Terran forced colony worlds. The martial arm of Catten was still intact even if the Eosi had been destroyed, and Botany was in no position to succeed against the formidable Catteni fleet – especially now that the Farmers' remarkable and impervious bubble had been removed from the space around Botany. Kamiton would not have permitted an armed and defensible Botany nor had Zainal suggested it. He had aimed instead for restoring all the forced immigrants to their home world – if they wished to go – and independence from Catteni interference if they elected to stay. Botany was the most tenable and developed of the enforced colonies, so this had been quite a concession on Kamiton's part. Possibly it had come under review and criticism from the conservative Catteni, who were now in charge of their home world.

'But we have nothing more than food stores to ransom the goods we need,' Dorothy said, adding, 'that is, if I have properly understood what you said. A quid pro quo. Something for something.'

"Ransom" is the right word, Dorothy,' Zainal replied, nodding graciously at her.

'And we can't in conscience use the Farmers' stores,' Kris replied. She and Zainal had been leading opposition to that. 'At least not for such a purpose. Feeding the hungry on our own world is one thing.'

'Feeding the greedy on Barevi is not,' Peter said firmly. 'Have we nothing else with which to barter?' Peter was fascinated by Paxel's dental work, Kris noticed. He caught Kris's eye. 'See what Mike Miller has in.'

She nodded, understanding what he meant.

‘An ounce for what quantity of goods?’ Zainal asked in quick comprehension. ‘Kris, if you would be good enough to contact Mike?’ He jerked his head towards the main communications bank in the hangar. ‘First we have to know what we have. And perhaps, Paxel, you would be good enough to suggest commodities.’

Kris smiled at Paxel and rose gracefully. ‘Be right back.’ She couldn’t help lapsing into a provocative stroll since Paxel was obviously watching her. She was by no means vain about her tall, lithe figure or that her long blond hair was attractively arranged. She didn’t consider herself beautiful even if Zainal often told her that he thought she was but she knew that she wasn’t unattractive.

She made her way into the main hangar where Jerry Short was sitting, looking extremely nervous.

‘It’s all right, Jerry, we aren’t killing the messenger,’ she said with a grin.

‘I heard tell the Eosi did allatime,’ he replied, not completely reassured.

‘The Catteni is a nephew of Zainal’s.’

‘I don’t think that would have bothered the Eosi.’

‘Neither do I, but Zainal is not Eosian. Would you please see if you can get Mike on the com?’

‘Mike Miller?’

Kris took what looked to be the most comfortable of the three battered chairs facing the comm unit.

‘The very one.’

‘Why? Do we need more gold for teeth?’ Jerry asked over his shoulder as he looked up Miller’s comm-unit number and tapped it in.

‘Now, you know, that’s a very good notion, Jerry,’ she said, smiling at him. One of her private priorities was going to be new chairs for this place so no one would have back and coccyx problems from long hours on duty. ‘I wonder how many spare-part packages we could get for an ounce of dust?’

‘How much dust does it take to build a gold cap? Do we have any dentists on our roster?’

On another board, Jerry tapped in a sequence. ‘I’ll find out.’ Just then Mike’s gravelly voice answered the prime call.

‘Miller here. What can I do for you?’

Mike was in a good mood, Kris thought at his jocose greeting, and she hated to spoil it.

‘Kris here, and it’s what I can do you out of again, Mike. I’m begging. Have you mined anything valuable enough to use for ransoming our equipment back from the merchants on Barevi?’

‘What?’ The force of that simple word reminded Kris that Mike had a reputation as a brawler: a big energetic man who had done hard physical labour all his life and would have been a match in a brawl even with a Catteni. Maybe she should take him with them to Barevi. By the same token, maybe she should not. While Zainal had not yet mentioned a large mission, Kris knew that it would be necessary, and would require every other Catteni-speaker. ‘As I heard it, all they’ve got is goods they looted from Earth. Thought they were supposed to give it over to us.’

‘That was the general idea, but it evidently doesn’t work for the Barevian merchants.’

‘Thought Zainal had figured out how to make them,’ Mike said and started cursing under his breath.

‘They’ve got crates of stuff they can’t use, which they won’t release until something is paid over. So we just have to cut bait and ransom what is most needed, Mike. I don’t like it any better than you do, and Zainal is apoplectic.’ Which was hyperbole but she knew that Zainal was not at all pleased by the situation. Terrans had had to swallow considerable amounts of pride since the day the Catteni invaded Earth, and most people had had to do worse.

‘You’re in luck, Kris. We’ve been mining that diamond pipe Sergei found. Beautiful stones. Collectors would pay a

premium rate for them,' he added, with an upward inflection that suggested immense curiosity. 'Uncut, of course, but it's the "water" of the original carats that's important. Let someone else have the stress of cutting the stone to make the most out of it. Didn't think they'd be useful so we've been screening for industrials. The big stones are not something anyone here would want to spend colony credits on.'

'Could you put your hands on more?'

'Why? It was the Eosi who collected gemstones in the Catteni economy. I heard they were all gone.'

'I wonder who'd want gemstones if now they're all gone.'

'Good question, Kris. Anyone got answers?'

'There were a few who hadn't come to the big Council and are still alive and free, somewhere in the galaxy. But I doubt they'd know where the others kept their proceeds.'

'Would they put in an appearance where they could be caught?' Mike asked, surprised.

'Not likely. All I care about now is that the Barevian merchants will take what we have to offer in exchange for what we need. We'll sort out the ethics later.'

'Well, caveat emptor, then.'

Kris chuckled to hear Latin for the second time that morning.

'Yes, indeed. Have you much gold?'

'Actually, we do. Bart Crispin was keen-eyed enough to spot some nuggets and flakes in one of the streams up here and we've had the devil's own time keeping everyone at work in the mine shafts. I let them go prospecting in the evening. Ain't much else exciting to do up here.'

'D'you speak any Catteni, Mike? Does anyone else up there? We might need to muster you for the aid of the party.'

'New faces would be nice, even if they are Catteni bastards. In fact, you can put me on record as saying that if

I could suss out what they are selling, I might be able to suggest other likely items to secure what we need.'

'I'll tell Zainal of your willingness to be in the ransom party,' she said, knowing that Mike would not be a prime candidate, though she might be doing him a disservice. He managed difficult miners handily enough. If he could keep his temper, he might be an asset.

There was also the minor problem that she didn't think Barevi merchants would deal with a woman, beyond selling her food or fabric. She'd managed before only because she was in a Catteni uniform, disguised and bearing proof of her captain's authorization. She didn't care to be in disguise again unless it was absolutely vital.

'How much gold is available?'

'Depends on the rate of exchange, but I've over thirty pounds of dust, a bagful of forty-five nuggets of various sizes, and a couple of bars where we melted down the little stuff so we wouldn't lose the flakes.' She quickly jotted down a note about the variety of raw materials. 'About a hundred pounds each of tin, copper and zinc. I'm told the Catteni are in chronic need of raw materials.'

'Thanks, Mike. I'll get back to you,' she said, signing off the line. She gathered up her notes, thanked Jerry with a nod, and went back to the office, where she passed Zainal the note without comment. When he pointed to her scribble of 'gold', she tapped a front tooth.

'The main point is, Paxel, if we bring goods, will the merchants trade?'

The young Catteni leaned forward, opening his hands wide in entreaty. 'Any business will be welcome right now, I think.' He gave Zainal a knowing smile. 'With the Eosi gone, and no new development available, they are feeling a pinch they haven't known in decades.'

If Kris said 'too bad' to herself, she smiled winningly at Paxel.

'Can Kamiton guarantee their "cooperation"?''

Paxel shrugged diffidently. 'He expected their cooperation before now, especially since your people have provided so many unusual items for Barevi markets and Barevi wants to continue the influx. Barevi has a reputation to maintain.' He grinned. 'So the need is always to have many new items to intrigue and entertain customers.'

'I wouldn't have taken the Catteni culture as consumer-oriented,' Peter remarked.

'Never mind that they can't use half the stuff they have in storage,' Zainal said, leaning back in his chair and smiling. 'They always did display a wide variety of goods.'

Paxel grinned back. 'There are always Emassi to supply. Our scout ships, as you should know, Zainal, often use trade items when encountering a native species.'

'Ah, yes,' Zainal murmured.

'I always wondered,' Dorothy remarked with an acid-sweet smile, 'what they first offered Terrans in trade. Beads?'

'Those records are sealed,' Paxel replied, but his eyes sparkled.

'Do you think someone sold you out to the Catteni?' Zainal asked, giving her a sharp look.

'"Take me to your leader" was never a headline prior to the invasion fleet,' she said noncommittally. 'But that didn't mean there weren't private deals made.'

'Nor that it was a very equitable trade,' Peter remarked, 'whatever was offered.'

'Beads probably, or was it tomahawks and firearms?' Dorothy said with a very bright smile.

Paxel's reference to scouts and ships reminded Zainal of a very important fact. All scouting-mission reports as well as booty were processed through Central Barevi Air Traffic records, as well as where slave ships had taken their cargoes, so all the records they needed to repatriate Terrans were on file at Barevi – somewhere. Now that he had a legitimate reason to go to Barevi, he could possibly

accomplish a lot more than just reclaiming loot. A gold nugget in the appropriate hand and he might be able to review those records. The Resistance movement had lists identifying which ships had landed in which major population centres on Earth, and now he could find out where the various ships had deposited their cargoes. So he'd be able to repatriate specialists vitally needed back on their home worlds. Zainal had no idea how he might accomplish such an exchange.

Lives were wasted on the mining planets. More workers had always been available to the Eosi 'development' programme. New supplies of workers had been one of the primary aims of Eosi searches. The other had been finding planets with the raw materials necessary to supply the ever-increasing requirements of the Eosi. The Turs had been the first reasonably intelligent species the Eosi had found and almost as difficult to deal with as Catteni. The Rugarians had been slightly more cooperative, but the Deski had been physically unsuited to the hard labour required of captives. The Terrans would be physically more suited to such arduous work. It was likely to prove difficult to exchange the current labourers at those facilities.

This Barevi trip might provide him with more information than Kamiton wanted him to have, but since the opportunity had been dropped into Zainal's lap, he would 'stay' with it. It was also a chance for him to take his sons into a Catteni world where, he hoped, they would absorb more of the training they would need to function as adults. The Masai had done well with them, encouraging them in warrior skills, but they needed more than that to cope successfully in the Catteni culture. He would find a tutor for them at the hiring hall in Barevi. He was pleased that they had learned English - albeit with a Masai cadence - but they needed to acquire an adult Catteni vocabulary and adult Catteni skills. Kris always wanted to see more of his sons, and this would be a good opportunity. They had

toughened and she would no longer feel 'sorry' for them and treat them with the softness so often exhibited by Terran mothers. Not that he doubted Kris's sincere desire to do well by her mate's offspring. He had a lot to get under way now that he knew what the situation on Barevi was and how Botany could mitigate the problem. He would wind up this conference with Paxel and send him back - unharmed - to Kamiton, he hoped not much the wiser of how things were progressing on Botany: save that there were Catteni-style cargo ships, KDLs, lying idle outside the landing field.

'Well, Paxel, delighted to see you and do give my greetings to your mother, my favourite sister, and your sire. And to Kamiton, of course. I expect there will be no trouble if I arrive in one of the cargo ships?'

'No, none at all. Kamiton asked me to encourage you.'

'To solve the problem, no doubt.'

'I believe he hopes you can,' and Paxel leaned in a little on the final word, and then realized that might have been less than diplomatic but had the sense not to try to retrieve the error.

'I'm sure he does,' Zainal replied amiably, smiling. 'Expect us within five days.'

'Or perhaps a little later,' Kris said. They'd particularly need Chuck's assistance and possibly that of some of the others who had returned to help rebuild Earth. 'There's a lot to organize, especially as some of our more fluent Catteni-speakers are currently on Earth and will need to be recalled.'

'That is all too true, Paxel.'

Paxel nodded. 'It is up to Zainal, and you, to set the time of return, Excellent Lady Emassi,' he said, giving her a polite but stiff nod of his head. Plainly he was surprised that a woman would enter into a conversation with a male, especially one of Zainal's status. But, even on Catteni, certain mates did have special privileges, and doubtless he