

HOMECOMING



SUE ANN BOWLING

HOME COMING

Sue Ann Bowling

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Homecoming

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CENTRAL

SNOWY

12/1/33

The living sculpture could no longer control its body, even to blink its eyes or turn them away from the horror in the mirror ... No, Flick thought. His eyes. My eyes. I am still I. I am he. He could still hear and feel—if only he could stop hearing, and feeling, and even seeing! His master's body stepped behind his own in the mirror, and the ice and silver eyes of his sculptor's reflection traveled lazily over his distorted body. Zhaim was a handsome creature—oh, yes, with black hair braided into an elaborate crest above the smooth, bronze face, and a body that might have been designed by a far saner sculptor than the owner who had made a distorted mockery of his own body. Flick hated his owner with a passion that verged on madness, but while Zhaim had no qualms about invading Flick's mind, he never seemed aware of his young slave's hatred. Unaware or uncaring? Flick felt despair sting his unblinking eyes. What did it matter if a statue loathed its creator?

The R'il'noid sculptor walked around his latest artwork, and Flick fought desperately to move, to scream out his hatred—

“Snowy, Snowy! Wake up!”

For a moment Snowy was lost, trapped in confusion between the horror of Flick's emotions and awareness of his own identity. Then the feel of Flame's arms around him, and the concern and caring he picked up from Timi and Amber, and most of all the fact that he could move his own body to burrow

closer into Flame's embrace brought him back to himself. "Nightmare," he muttered. "Sorry to wake you all up."

Behind him, he could hear Timi yawn. "You do less of that than most of us," Amber reassured him. "Go back to sleep. We've got a busy day tomorrow."

"Right," he mumbled. "G'night." He readjusted his position against Flame, and closed his eyes. He felt the physical comfort of his friends, bodies jumbled together like a pile of puppies. What had happened was no nightmare, and he knew it. His sensitivity to the thoughts of others, though it had increased greatly in the last year or so, was under at least crude control. His ability to share emotions had also increased—but that was something he could not block without constant, conscious effort. When he slept, those blocks went down. And he was most sensitive to those he cared about. Like Flick.

He owed Flick. Without the older boy's encouragement, he would never have started dancing with Flame, back in the days when he was a ten-year-old catamite and she a slave-bred concubine of the same age. That had led to a blessed respite from the worst of the abuse and more, to a realization on the part of their owner at the time that they were worth more together than separate. Later they had integrated Timi and Amber, both captives, into their dancing group. For the first time in his life, Snowy had friends he had some hope of keeping with him. For that matter, it was the first time he had had a market value high enough that he had some hope of surviving into adulthood.

Sure, he was good looking, with his bronze skin, snow-white hair, and golden eyes. So was Timi, with his black silk skin, matching, loosely curled hair and flame-amber eyes. And the two girls—Flame with her copper hair and alabaster complexion, and Amber with blond hair, blue eyes, and creamy-tan skin—set them off beautifully. But attractive young pleasure slaves were easy to find, here on Central. It was the dancing, and the increased value that gave the group, that had kept them together for over two years now.

Flick—the first real friend Snowy had found since being sold away from his mother—had been sold even before Snowy and Flame had fully developed their teamwork. Snowy forced himself to lie quietly, not wanting to disturb the others again. He didn't know how to control the linkage between himself and Flick, and he didn't dare ask the Masters who might know. His odd talents weren't supposed to exist in a slave. *He* wasn't supposed to exist—his mother had made that clear enough. He'd be killed without mercy if the Masters even suspected his abilities. He couldn't even discuss the situation with his friends—he trusted them, but he did not trust their ability to keep their thoughts shielded from the Master, and he didn't trust the Master at all.

It wasn't the first time he had shared Flick's emotions, and distance seemed no barrier. He was pretty sure it was daytime where Flick was and night here, yet he had experienced everything Flick had felt. Snowy cared about his dancing partners, even more than he had dared care about Flick. Would he share their pain, as he now shared Flick's, if they were sold apart?

He suppressed a shudder, and forced his mind away from that path. Flick's situation was the immediate problem, and not entirely because he knew he would continue to share Flick's agony. He owed Flick whatever help he could give. But what help was that?

He chewed on his lip, sharply aware of the chill darkness around him and the hardness of the floor beneath his body. Sharing a single covering with the other three, though, was definitely preferable to sharing a warm, soft bed with their Master. It didn't bother him or Flame, both slave-bred, nearly as much as it bothered Timi or Amber, but they were all happier in their corner of the slave quarters than in the Master's bed.

So what could he do about the situation with Flick? Maybe nothing—but just maybe ...

He didn't dare leave anything Zhaim could read in Flick's mind. He remembered something Zhaim had once said, while showing off his living sculptures to a visitor. "I am not Lai's property, and I do not agree with his soft-headed treatment of Human slaves as people! As the last of the pure R'il'nai, he deserves respect. But his ideas are outdated. When I, as the ranking crossbred, take his place, the Jarnian Confederation will be run as it should be, for the benefit of R'il'noids such as us. I left the Enclave because my father refused to grant me the artistic freedom I needed. He is not welcome here. But he can hardly refuse me the mental privacy he grants even to slaves!" Clearly Zhaim never even thought of granting mental privacy to slaves.

Snowy took a deep breath and released his blocks against sensing emotions. He hadn't actually tried to tap into a specific person's feelings before, and it took a certain amount of awkward fumbling before he could ignore the sensations of his three friends. Once he reached Flick he had to brace himself against the intensity of the older boy's agony and hatred, even worse than they had seemed before. He couldn't leave Flick like this!

He hated going into another mind, even to read thoughts or emotions. It left him feeling sick, as if he'd been swimming in garbage. Actually affecting another's thoughts or emotions was even worse. He'd done it—twice to save his own life, and once to save Timi's—but those experiences had left scars that were still painful. And the only way he could see to help Flick was to go into his friend's emotions deeper than anything he had tried before. He didn't think that what he had in mind would be reversible, either.

Clamping his teeth on his lip, Snowy tried to build an image of what he intended in his mind. No words; Zhaim might be able to detect those. Only emotions. What remained of Flick's personality to be separated entirely from bodily sensations, and sent dreaming. Not of the last few months, or even the last few years, but of the time before his capture, when he had been part of a group rebelling against an unjust and arbitrary planetary government. Only the body left tied to physical sensations, so that changes in heart rate and breathing would convince Zhaim that his captive still felt his manipulations. A shallow smokescreen of the mental reactions Zhaim would expect. But no way of returning from the dream. When he had the emotional message complete, Snowy tried to transmit it to Flick, with a sense of question.

The response was immediate, overwhelming, and positive.

Snowy hesitated an instant longer. It wouldn't work if Zhaim went deeply into Flick's mind, but he rarely did that, not any more. Snowy was a slave himself; there was no possible way he could get Flick away from Zhaim physically. And Flick hadn't really understood that he was being offered a choice; his response had been more of "if only this were possible." What frightened Snowy most, though, was his mother's remembered warning. Could the interference with Flick's emotional state, if Zhaim ever recognized it, be traced back to Snowy?

But the alternative was leaving Flick in his current state of suffering.

Carefully, Snowy went deeper into Flick's emotions. He knew what he wanted to do, and he was pretty sure it was possible, but he was working by trial and error. Several times he had to back up, realizing he had made a wrong step, but finally he had the configuration he was after. He attuned himself to Flick's changed emotions for a moment. Not peaceful, no, but hopeful, excited, looking forward to a better world. A world that would never come, now, for Flick—but Flick didn't know that, and never would. I still owe you, he thought, if there's anything I can ever do. Then he made the last move of his scheme, cutting himself loose permanently from Flick's emotions. The hatred dropped away as he felt his own body around him again.

Not all of the pain dropped away, though. His lower lip was throbbing, and he tasted blood. A quick inspection confirmed that he had bitten it through. Again. Hastily he opened to his friends' emotions, confirming that they were all asleep. And with his head buried against Flame's shoulder, the injured lip wasn't likely to be on any of the monitors. Guiltily he reached for the damaged tissues, and began Healing the injury.

* * * *

Flick's situation and the minor annoyance of his own bitten lip were by no means the only things Snowy had to worry about. The following day was more than just "busy." Master Kuril had guests that evening he was determined to impress, and the dancing group was a large part of his entertainment. Not just as dancers, either—he had made it clear that he expected them to entertain his guests in more—personal—ways after the dancing.

"I think—Ow!—he's losing interest in us," Snowy commented after the guests had left, while Davy, the overseer of Kuril's slaves, was massaging his sore muscles. His scalp hurt, too—there were times when his hip-length hair had him envying the kitchen slaves, who were kept hairless to protect the Master's food.

"Sorry," Davy said absently, his hands continuing to knead the boy's shoulders. "But you'd all be a lot stiffer tomorrow without this."

Snowy sighed and tried to relax muscles that still wanted to knot with tension. "I know. Davy, you're the best overseer we've ever had. You won't get in trouble for this, will you?"

"Not 'til he trades in about fifty pounds of fat for muscle and quits thinking he can get away with things that'd strain even a fit body. He needs me too much. I don't know how you kids got off as easy as you did. I saw some of the roughing up those guests gave you."

Snowy didn't have to be reminded of that. His ability to Heal his own injuries, and to some extent those of his friends, had allowed him to take care of the worst damage. But quite aside from the care he had to take not to be suspected of doing anything unusual, Healing took energy—lots of energy—and while he had eaten everything he'd had a chance to that evening, he had been ravenous and shaking by the time Davy arrived.

"They weren't all bad," Timi giggled drunkenly.

Timi, admitting that any slave user on Central was less than an ogre? Snowy turned his head slightly so that he could see his friend. He'd already scanned Timi enough to know that his only serious problem was from the level of alcohol in his blood, and he suspected that Timi had cooperated fully in that particular bit of abuse. As far as he could remember, he had seen Timi with only one of Kuril's guests, a slender but fit-looking man whose hair, skin and eyes were all the same shade of golden brown. Snowy had found himself dealing with three at once, and he had barely managed to protect himself without revealing his talents.

"Who'd you get, Timi?" he asked.

"Guy called Derik," Timi caroled happily. "D'you believe it? Saw I didn't like it and he just had me rubbing his back 'n talkin'. 'N shared freshments." He hiccupped.

“Obviously,” Davy said sourly. “I hope you remembered how to do a back rub properly.”

Davy had drilled them all on that, Snowy thought. One more skill that increased their chances of survival. He’d been too busy himself to pay much attention to Timi’s partner, but if Kuril was losing interest as fast as Snowy suspected, they’d likely be sold soon. He turned his head a little farther, and rolled his eyes up to where he could see Davy. “Know anything about him?” he asked, knowing that the overseers, slave and free, had a loose communication network.

“Don’t like his overseer,” Davy replied. “Derik Tarlian himself—well, he’s way above our Master. High R’il’noid—Inner Council level, half brother to Lai himself, and supposed to be a top esper. Number two to Zhaim, I think. Overseer complains he spoils his slaves—but that overseer sure doesn’t. Doesn’t let Derik know half of what goes on in the slave quarters, either.”

Davy wouldn’t name someone he disapproved of, Snowy had observed. The fact that he used Derik Tarlian’s name without hesitation, while refusing to name either the overseer or his own owner, told Snowy more than his explicit comments had. And if the overseer was really hiding what went on in the slave quarters, Derik Tarlian was probably not in the habit of probing unwilling minds. Snowy had tried to avoid owners who might suspect his abilities in the past, but he had a fair degree of confidence in his own ability to project an image of a normal slave mind. Owners completely lacking in esper talents certainly existed—most Human slaves had Human owners—but they rarely had the credit to buy a group as expensive as theirs. And if this Derik did not try a deep probe ... He looked back at Timi. “What did you talk about?” he asked.

“Dancin’,” Timi yawned. The slur in his voice was increasing. “An’ music, ’n food. Wanted t’ know who did our cho.. chor—uh—’rangements. Tol’m you did.” His eyes closed, and he began to snore gently.

Snowy chewed on his lip. Timi was hypersensitive to esper probes and hated them. Unlikely this Derik had probed him. Maybe it would be safe enough. Kuril was far from the worst owner he’d ever had—Colo Kenarian, who’d owned him briefly even before he’d met Flick, had been far worse, and from what he’d learned from Flick, even Colo was not the worst possible. But if Kuril was going to sell them, this guy might be worth encouraging. Carefully. Staying open to the R’il’noid’s emotions might give Snowy the information he needed to act in a way that would attract the man, and without alerting Derik that there was anything unusual about Snowy. If Derik visited again, Snowy decided, he would check the man out himself. Davy’s attitude toward Derik’s overseer bothered him a little, but overseers could sometimes be maneuvered into getting rid of themselves. And it was owners,

not overseers, who generally had the final decision on buying or selling a slave. Yes, he decided as his muscles finally relaxed under Davy's manipulations, bad overseer or not, this guy looked like he might be a better owner than Kuril. Snowy hoped Derik would come again before Kuril sold them.

Derik

1/30/34

Four five-beat measures in a row—no, the fourth measure had only four beats, followed by one with—seven? Derik shook his head ruefully. He'd heard that particular piece a dozen times or more, but the rhythm still took him by surprise now and then.

He didn't generally like Kuril's taste in entertainment, but then he wasn't here for the entertainment; he had work to do, of a sort. Derik was an influential member of the Inner Council, the R'il'noid body that handled interplanetary affairs and at least in theory had no influence at all in planetary matters. Kuril, technically Human since less than half of his active genome was R'il'nian-derived, was a leader in the Planetary Assembly—part of the fifth of that body with obvious R'il'nian traits. In practice, people varied from pure R'il'nian to pure Human on a continuum, with the Çeren index providing a legal separation only. And the Councils had to work with planetary governing bodies, not just on Central, but throughout the Confederation.

Kuril was relatively new to his high position, and still seemed to think that he needed to ingratiate himself socially with the Council members. Derik couldn't actually refuse his invitations without appearing to insult the man, but he personally considered this by far the most boring part of his job.

Now, Derik, he chided himself, the man keeps an excellent cook, and the musicians are well above average, even if you don't care for their music. From the glazed look on his host's face, Kuril didn't care for it either. This composer's—Fisan's—music was currently fashionable, but Elyra's half brother Loki was the only person Derik could think of who actually *liked* it.

Thinking of Loki, one of Central's outstanding choreographers, reminded him of Kuril's dancers. Quite young, no more than thirteen or fourteen, but easily the best he'd seen for their age. At least Kuril had learned a little from Derik's reaction at the last of his parties the High R'il'noid had attended. The young dancers should have been resting or limbering up between their performances. Kuril still hadn't caught on to that, but at least this time he had the youngsters serving food rather than being pawed over by his guests.

Derik glanced over at the young slave kneeling at his side, offering a platter of pastries. He'd intended to take the same slave he'd had last time—the boy had seemed so pitifully grateful that Derik wanted only to talk and have his back rubbed, and he'd been good at the massage. Instead, Derik had found himself with the white-haired boy his previous companion had indicated was the group's choreographer. Just as good a masseur, he decided, but at the moment the youngster appeared totally absorbed in the music, fingers moving slightly as he tried to follow the beat. "Going to make a dance out of that one?" Derik whispered, trying to keep the grin off his face.

"Not for the group," the boy whispered back. "It might make a solo, though." His fingers continued to move with the music.

Derik stared at the boy. He'd asked Loki about dancing to Fisan's music once, and been treated to a lecture on the impossibility of what he'd suggested. He felt his lips twitch with the urge to call the boy on such an outrageous statement. And why not? It wouldn't really hurt the youngster. He grinned. "And just what part do you think you can make a dance to?" he whispered.

The boy tipped his head to one side, thinking. "About eight minutes after the start there's half a minute of silence and then a great crashing discord," he said. "The five minutes after that. It won't be polished and I might fall flat on my face, but I do have the rhythm."

Which is more than I do, Derik thought. He pushed his request for a repeat of the section the boy had described toward Kuril, getting the man's puzzled agreement. He'd liked the black, but he hadn't seriously considered trying to buy him—Kuril wouldn't want to break up the group. This one, however, promised to be every bit as much fun. Outwardly, the boy's demeanor was perfect—eyes lowered, head bowed, responsive to Derik's slightest whim. Inwardly—Derik would not probe an unwilling mind, but that claim of accomplishment was unusual for a slave. "Show me," he challenged.

The boy rose to his feet, eyes still lowered, and walked gracefully to the raised center of the floor. Silence fell, broken by the crashing chord, and then the boy began to move. Watching, Derik suddenly felt the rhythm not as bars and beats, but for the first time as an organic whole. Other faces in the room stayed glazed as ever or even annoyed, not realizing what they were seeing.

Derik wanted to applaud as the boy finished his improvisation and walked back to his lounge, but that would have been a shocking breach of manners. One did not applaud a slave; one thanked its master. Stupid. He would not probe an unwilling non-esper, but he could and did use his conditional precognition to check if bringing the youngster into his own household would be safe, and was astounded at the strength of his own positive response.

"Want me to buy you?" he asked as the boy, breathing deeply from his exertions, returned to his side.

The eyes, golden as honey in the bronze face, flicked briefly to Derik's and then slid away. "The others—we dance best together. Oh! That's our cue." Still gasping, he moved to join the other three.

Kuril, Derik thought angrily, did not deserve the group. At the very least, he should have given the boy a few minutes rest after his unplanned dance. And the boy hadn't protested that he did not want to leave Kuril, as would only have been proper slave manners, he had wanted to stay with his friends. Loyalty was a trait Derik prized. And bringing the whole group into his household raised no more warning flags than buying the boy alone. Derik narrowed his eyes, watching the group dance, but this time trying to estimate their fair market value. *How much would you take for them?* he finally 'pathed Kuril.

Kuril might be a borderline telepath, but his shielding technique was leaky. His struggle was clear to Derik—run the price up for the obviously interested R'il'noid? Lower it, and hope the favor would be returned? In the end, the price he named was close to what Derik had already estimated the group was worth, a little more than a dealer would have paid, but still less than the amount that dealer would have asked. Good. Derik had no intention either of accepting a bribe or being cheated. He knew Kuril would expect a little bargaining, so he added, *That would include costumes and props, of course.* Kuril agreed, and by the time the group finished their dance the sale was final.

He'd call the boys Noon and Midnight, he decided, and the two girls Sunrise and Sunset. He could hardly wait to show them off to Loki Faranian.

"I've bought all four of you from Kuril," he told Noon, now visibly gasping for breath, as he came back to the lounge. "Tell the others, will you? My overseer will be picking you up tomorrow morning."

Relief flooded the boy's features. "Yes, Master," he said as he turned away. And was there just a hint of—smugness?—in his expression?

I've been manipulated, Derik thought in astonishment, and not by Kuril, either. He watched as the guests dispersed and the other three slaves rejoined Noon, and his smile widened still more. That boy's got a brain. This bunch is going to be *fun!*

Maybe even more than fun, he added as his eyes followed the boy. He disapproved of the casual use of slaves, but in the thirteen centuries since he'd settled down from the wild excesses of his first two centuries he'd had a number of long-term slave lovers. The last, Janna, had died in his arms five years before. Old age had been beyond even the Healers, back when there were R'il'nai who could Heal. He was ready for another lover, and while most

of his lovers had been female, it had always been the spirit within that really mattered. Could this boy be the next?

Wait and see, he told himself. Wait and see.

Lai

2/20/34

As a party, it was low key to the point of boredom. Fine. Lai had avoided social functions since his father had died years before, leaving him the last survivor of the R'il'nai, and he had no desire to host a party in the usual sense. A casual gathering of a few of his and his partner Elyra's R'il'noid relatives, however, he could tolerate and even enjoy. He leaned back against the angle of the pool walls, letting his legs float while he sent his mind beyond the weather shielding over the enclosed patio. Good, his weather sense was accurate as usual; the clouds were lifting and the sunset should be magnificent.

Beside him, Elyra's half-brother Loki chuckled. "Sure no problem telling them apart when they're side by side." He nodded toward the two women examining one of the plants in the atrium, and Lai smiled slightly in agreement. The two, niece and aunt, shared the same delicate features and milk chocolate coloring—skin, eyes and hair. But Elyra, who'd shared his home and bed for the last year, would fit easily under his outstretched arm. He had to look up at her aunt Kaia when they were both standing.

Lai's own half brothers, Derik and Nik, were racing the length of the pool, Nik slightly in the lead. Loki applauded. "Thought you were the athlete, Derry."

Nik grinned, shoving his red hair back from his freckled face. "Advantage of living on a tropical island. Derry spends his time on horses and gliders instead of swimming."

"Don't forget the sailing, diving and caving." Derik stretched out on his back in the water.

"Try dancing," Loki replied. "Believe me, that works every muscle in your body, and takes perfect coordination, too."

"No argument there!" Derik said. "Loki, you've got to come over and see this new dancing group I've bought. They're all athletes, but the leader is incredible. Don't think he ever saw a horse before I got him, and he's staying with me cross-country. First time I've had a rider good enough I can have him try out my obstacle course designs."

"But can he dance?" Loki challenged.

“Improvised a solo to one of Fisan’s pieces. And he actually had me feeling the music’s rhythm—I’d have sworn it didn’t have any.”

Lai hid a frown. It sounded to him as though Derik was falling in love again. Most R’il’noids had fairly short-term relationships, with neither party continuing the relationship much beyond pregnancy. Most of those few R’il’noid women who were fertile at all shifted their interest rather sharply from their partner to the unborn child—and they simply were not interested in men who could not give them children. Those of both sexes who were infertile varied between Nik’s total disinterest in sex to total promiscuity. A few—a very few—had an interest in sex that went beyond the merely physical to the inner essence of the partner. This had been the R’il’nian pattern; an interest that lasted long enough to see any child of such a pairing reared to adulthood. Since a pure R’il’nian woman was fertile only about once a century, and the R’il’nai never aged, it made sense for them.

Derik had that desire for a long-term relationship, coupled with near-sterility. He was non-aging—still youthful at fifteen centuries of age—and no non-aging woman would agree to stay with him for the century or more he wanted, either because they wanted children, or because they wanted variety. His solution had been to buy Human slaves as lovers. Such a slave would have a long, full and luxurious life, but no choice. Lai supposed it was a better fate than most slaves could hope for, but it still bothered him, as did Elyra’s purchase of slave nannies for her children. Granted, the nannies were well educated during their time of service, and freed when it was over, but he still didn’t like slavery. Not that he had any say in what was legal on Central.

“Looks like it’s clearing off,” Elyra called from across the atrium. “Let’s go out on the lawn and watch the sunset.”

“Put some clothes on; it’ll be cool outdoors after this rain,” Lai warned as he levitated himself out of the pool, teleporting away the water that clung to his dark bronze skin and black hair almost without thinking. The atrium was large and open to the sky, but it was also weather-shielded and climate-controlled. When they walked through the entryway to the lawn beyond, the wind was cool against Lai’s skin.

A line of light had opened along the western horizon, between cloud deck and sea, and the sun was a scarlet ball almost too bright to look at, its upper edge still hidden by the westernmost edge of the clouds. Slowly it dropped as the clouds lifted, and the flame color on the underside of the clouds brightened and flowed eastward. Then the eastward surge slowed and reversed, the color fleeing westward with the sinking sun, reflecting from the metallic eye veining of the watching R’il’noids.

His beloved Cloudy would have found inspiration in the sunset, Lai thought. She would have retreated for a few days to brood in her workroom,

and come out of her seclusion triumphant, the beauty of the sky captured in tangible form. She might have carried a vase with the colors of the sunset in its glaze, or a delicate mobile of spun glass. More than fourteen years, and the pain of her desertion was as sharp as on that day he had returned from nearly a month off-planet to find her gone, and a note begging him not to try to find her. It seemed he missed her more with each passing year.

Colors were dimming to violet as the sunset faded, and the wash of autumn gold on the foothills to the east slipped away. The computer touched his mind, lightly. “Supper’s ready,” he said. “Shall we go in?” He herded the others to the foyer, pausing to admire the crystal bird among the fountains and flowering plants. He’d received it as a legacy from his great-aunt, but it was far older than that. Faran, one of the handful of R’il’nians with the spark of creativity in their souls, had carved it. Loki probably traced some of his talent to Faran, though most of it undoubtedly came from his Human ancestry. Was that what Jarn had seen in the primates he had encountered when he was stranded on Earth, over a hundred millennia ago? Certainly his crossbred descendents, both those who had followed him back to the stars and those who had stayed behind to become the planet-bound Humans of Earth, had far more creativity than the R’il’nai had. And Lai had more than a suspicion that was the reason the R’il’nai had welcomed the Humans among them, and agreed to guide and protect them.

Dinner was spread on small tables scattered through a corner of the atrium. Finger foods, mostly—seasoned meats on skewers or wrapped in tender pastry, crisp vegetables in bite-sized pieces, berries and cut fruits and small frozen confections in stasis. An assortment of dipping sauces was beside each lounge. Mental and physical conversation ceased briefly as the guests took the edge off their hunger, but Loki’s eyes kept returning to Elyra’s waist. *Lyra*, he finally broadcast, *You aren’t eating for two, are you?*

Elyra managed to suppress her laughter long enough to swallow the bite she’d just taken. *Told you one of my relatives would figure it out*, she thought at Lai. Then, more generally, *Yes, we’re expecting. Close to the south solstice. Lai thinks a girl, healthy, and probably R’il’noid.*

Too early to tell for sure she’s R’il’noid, Lai added. *But most of the genetic material the embryo’s shed is Human-derived.*

Nik swallowed a bite and looked accusingly at Elyra. “The Genetics Board ...”

“I’m the head geneticist,” Elyra replied. “Are you arguing that Lai and I aren’t compatible?”

“Of course not. But you never came in for the Çeren procedure.” He looked bewildered.

“We did it the old fashioned way,” Lai replied. “And yes, I know the statistics. One child a century per R’il’nian father. Jarn was stranded on Earth for three millennia, and he had just twenty-seven children to proto-human mothers. Twenty-three of those were fertile, and the modern Human race is descended from them. And when I checked his *Journals*, I found something else. Those twenty-seven had just seven mothers, and they were the seven women he really loved. I think he wanted those children. And without even realizing it, he did something with esper that was similar to the Çeren lab procedure. I *think* I’ve figured it out, but it’ll be another seven months before I’m sure. And if I’m right, it’ll do some things the Çeren procedure doesn’t.”

“How?” Derik demanded eagerly. “Can any of the rest of us use it?”

“Ask me again in seven months,” Lai replied. “For right now, I’m hoping it’ll stop the birth of more like Colo.”

“And Zhaim,” someone muttered almost inaudibly.

“Lots of decent R’il’noids start out wild,” Lai protested. “Look at Derry.”

Derik winced, but made no attempt at denial. Elyra sighed. “Derry was irresponsible, yes. But not cruel. Zhaim was, and I’m not positive he’s changed. Sorry, Lai. I know he’s your son and you love him. But I think he’s very careful that some things don’t get to your ears. The rest of us—well, we worry about him being your heir.”

Why couldn’t they get off his back about Zhaim? Yes, he’d had to slap Zhaim down pretty sharply a couple of centuries ago—but that was over with now. He’d seen nothing since then to suggest the problem had not been taken care of, and much to be proud of in his heir. Look at the genetic engineering he was doing. No one else had done as much to make borderline planets habitable, but some people could not forget Zhaim’s early years, even as they could not forget Derry’s. Of course Derry’s wild years had been before Lai was born, but still ...

“How long are you going to stay with Lai, Lyra?” Loki blurted into the awkward silence.

“Until our child is weaned, at least.” Given Elyra’s firm commitment to the idea that a woman should not have more than one child by the same father, that was actually more than he should have expected, but Lai still wished she would commit to staying longer. Cloudy would have. But Cloudy could never have borne him a child. Healthy herself, she had carried the gene for the Coven syndrome, and one in four of her children would have had the dominant Coven gene but lacked the other dominant that suppressed the neurological effects. Coven itself was bad enough, but Coven combined with projective telepathy ... No, he couldn’t argue with the Genetics Board’s refusal even to consider Cloudy for the cross-breeding project. But how

much part had the Genetics Board's attitude played in her eventual decision to leave him?

They had certainly reinforced the idea that no woman should have more than one child by the same father. They claimed to be following the R'il'nai in that practice, but how much did he really know about R'il'nian society? The only women left alive by the time he had been born were his mother and his great-aunt. He knew that R'il'nian women were physically incapable of more than a child a century, and his own desire for a lasting relationship, together with the records his ancestors had left, suggested that in his species the parents had stayed together to rear that child. Certainly that was what he wanted. He looked at the others. Elyra, her aunt and her half brother were discussing her child to be, Nik was angled toward them and occasionally offering a suggestion, and Derik was sampling the various sauces—no doubt hoping to find something new to his gourmet palate. All R'il'noids by Çeren index, all well over half a millennium old, and five of his closest friends. He'd have included Zhaim as well, but Elyra did not get along well with Lai's son, so he'd timed the announcement party for a time when Zhaim was off planet.

The stars came out overhead, and he dimmed the atrium lighting to a soft glow over the food. Nik was obviously fighting sleep—he lived eight time zones away, and was the only non-teleport present. "Want a 'port home?" Derry asked him.

"I'd appreciate it," Nik mumbled around a yawn, and the two made their farewells to Lai and left. Kaia and Loki followed, leaving Lai and Elyra alone.

"Well, they know now," Lai said.

Elyra chuckled. "Only thing that really surprised them was that we did it so fast. Even the Çeren procedure can take a couple of years. We did it in what? Six tries?"

"Four. First couple I was trying to figure out what to do." He instructed the computer to clean up, then walked with Elyra towards his private quarters. His eyes went automatically to the tri-dee of Cloudy in the niche above his wall screen. She hadn't been a great beauty—washed out, even, with her pale skin, white hair and light brown eyes. But the love and caring that shone out of those eyes had captivated Lai, and the tri-dee somehow captured that aspect of her personality. If only she hadn't taken the Genetics Board evaluation so personally!

Beside him, Elyra caught her breath sharply, and he realized he hadn't been shielding his emotions that strongly. "Lai, we never meant to hurt her. Even less to drive her away. She was good for you. We were so worried about you, when your father died ..."

“You had reason to be—I didn’t want to live until Cloudy pulled me back from the edge.” He forced down the tightness in his throat and looked questioningly at Elyra, not trusting himself to try more direct contact.

She was no longer driven as she had been before her pregnancy began, but she clearly felt his need. “Come,” she said softly as she led him into her sleeping room.

3/2/34

“Damn it, Colo, don’t you have any sense of responsibility at all?” Derry’s voice, and his frustration was clear to Lai’s empathic senses. Lai paused, eavesdropping shamelessly. From the sound of it, Derry was having the same argument with Colo that he’d had all too often himself, but would Colo pay any more attention to a fellow R’il’noid than he did to a R’il’nian?

“For Humans? Derik, we’re R’il’noids. That’s where your loyalties should lie, not with mere animals.”

“The Confederation, in case you’ve forgotten, is a Human creation, from a time when there were no R’il’noids. When the Kharfun epidemic had killed them all, along with most of the R’il’nai. And without the R’il’noids that had been their leaders, and the R’il’nai as backup, the Human planets couldn’t defend themselves against Maung infestations. Not to mention that some planets started attacking each other without R’il’noid leaders.”

“Or that they couldn’t foresee natural disasters or epidemics, or identify choices that would lead to disaster?” Colo laughed. “I don’t deny they need us and they need the Confederation, though they don’t always realize that. But we certainly don’t need them, except as slaves. Wake up, Derik.” Lai felt him teleport away, and resumed his own progress.

Derry’s face was dark with anger, and his jaw was set. “Losing your temper won’t help,” Lai said sympathetically.

“I know. Doesn’t stop me from wanting to throw him through a wall. Lai, I’ve known Humans who were worth ten of him.”

“So have I. But without the R’il’nai there wouldn’t be any Humans, and certainly not off of their home planet. We’re responsible for them. And you’re right, Colo has no sense of responsibility.”

“You can’t blame it on youth, either. He’s almost as old as you and Nik. There weren’t any adult R’il’noids that way when I was growing up! That’s why they made such a fuss about my being wild.”

“And you’d outgrown that by the time I was born, or my parents wouldn’t have let you teach me the basics of using esper. Ah, well, Colo’s Colo. I can’t get through to him, either. At least his Çeren index puts him as barely Inner

Council level, so he doesn't have that much influence. Thanks for trying, Derry."

Why did the Humans put so much emphasis on Çeren index? he wondered as he continued down the corridor. It was objective, but it didn't really identify the traits the Humans needed most. He'd have said Kaia was the best choice if he had to pick a successor, then Derry, then Zhaim. Çeren index put them in the opposite order. Oh, well, they were all competent High R'il'noids. And he had no premonitions about his own death at any time in the near future.

Snowy

3/5/34

Derik, Snowy rapidly decided, was easily the best owner he'd had. The R'il'noid seemed to keep slaves as much for company as for service, and he'd introduced them to everything from simply being outdoors to horses and hang gliding. "Explore the estate," he'd urged them once they'd had a quick tour. "See if you can find some novel backdrops for your dancing."

He even noticed that Flame's skin, and to a lesser extent, Amber's, was red and painful after he'd first taken them outdoors, and ordered Brak to provide them with a cream they were to rub into their skin before exposing it to the sun. Brak. Snowy sighed and glanced again at the rain pouring down outside the door.

It was generally wisest not to catch Brak's eye when the overseer was in one of his foul moods. As he was today. Helping the horsemaster with the horses or following Derik's orders to explore outdoors to find new backdrops for their dancing generally kept them out of Brak's way, but between the rain and the horsemaster's being away with Derik ... "We could look for places to dance indoors," Timi suggested.

"We've already checked most places upstairs," Amber said thoughtfully. "Why don't we go down, for a change? Where the wines and cheeses are stored."

"They're locked up," Timi said.

"Not the corridor they open off of. We don't know what's farther down that."

Flame frowned in concentration. "The far end was kind of dark. We'd better take some glow sticks. And it was pretty cool, too."

“Snowy and I’ll get jackets, and you girls get the glow sticks,” Timi said. Jackets were beginning to be needed outdoors, but none of their previous owners would have provided them.

A few minutes later, the four of them were running down the stone stairs to the underground corridor. There was a lift shaft, but it wasn’t for slaves, and they knew it. They looked wistfully at the food and wines stored in stasis behind locked grills, but their goal was the darker end of the corridor. “The walls are getting rougher,” Flame said in surprise.

“And it’s getting cooler,” Amber remarked as she took a jacket from Snowy. “It reminds me ... Oh, I’m being silly.”

“What does it remind you of?” Snowy asked. Then he froze as he heard heavy steps around the curve of the corridor behind them. “Hide,” he whispered, tucking the glow stick he carried inside his jacket and ducking behind a part of the rugged wall that stuck out a bit. Farther along, he heard a gasp from Amber, and then her hand was pulling at his. A moment later, he realized she had actually found a slit in the wall.

“It *is* a cave!” she whispered excitedly. “My parents showed me one once, before the slavers came. And there’s no way Brak could get through that slit!”

Any of the four dancers could get through, Snowy thought, but Brak was far too wide—and the width wasn’t muscle, either. Blocking the entrance to the slit with his body, he held the glow stick deeper into the darkness. The light was dim, but it was enough to show him that the slit, twisting a little, continued for a considerable distance. “Timi, Flame,” he leaned back to whisper. “Here.” A moment later all four were looking wide-eyed at a narrow path, walled and roofed by stone that looked like candle wax, leading down to a small stream.

“We need to be careful we don’t get lost,” Amber warned, but her eyes were shining with excitement.

“Leave one of the glow sticks to mark where we came down,” Snowy suggested. “There’s a sort of path beside the water. Let’s go the way it’s running, for starters.”

The path was easy to follow, though they had to duck rock formations often. Long points of stone, sheened with water, hung from the ceiling, with stumpy pillars rising beneath them. The glow sticks didn’t reveal much color, but Snowy thought the rock was mostly cream-color or reddish. Like the cave Derik had led him through on horseback, but much narrower and with a slicker floor. What had Derik called the rock formations? Stalactites from the ceiling, and stalagmites from the floor, that was it—but these were far more extensive and varied in appearance. Here and there the path crossed the stream, and where the stream was too wide for a single step, there were stones in the water.

“Oh, look,” Flame said softly as they rounded a bend to see a cluster of fine, hollow pipes hanging from the ceiling.

“Brak’d never find us here,” Timi commented.

“Yeah, and we’d get pretty hungry and cold after a while,” Snowy replied. “It’s a great place for getting out of sight for a few hours, though. Let’s see if we can find a place we can sit down.”

So far there had been only one path, but the dim light of the glow sticks revealed a trickle of water ahead, flowing into the stream they had been following from the right. “Let’s see where it comes from,” Amber said. “I’m starting to feel closed in.” She’d left her glow stick as a marker, which left her hands free to scramble up the tumble of rocks the new stream flowed down. Snowy held his glow stick to light her way as well as he could as he climbed behind her. “It’s drier than below,” she called back. “There’s a little spring, but not much room. And it’s a dead end.”

Snowy followed, with Timi and Flame close on his heels to find a small, sand-floored cavern with a spring at one side. There was barely room for the four of them to sit, but as a secure hiding place from Brak, it was ideal.

“Wonder where the main stream winds up,” Timi said.

Amber shook her head. “Not today. I don’t want to risk getting lost. Maybe we could come back with a long piece of string or maybe that heavy thread they use to repair the horse gear. But if we need to get out of sight for a few hours, this place looks ideal.” She looked around and shivered. “I feel like it’s closing in on me,” she added. “I don’t think I’d want to stay here very long. But at least Brak won’t be able to find us here.”

No, Snowy thought, he wouldn’t. But they needed an excuse to be in the corridor above, in case they were caught on the way. Maybe his earlier idea, of the corridor as a dance backdrop? Not the cave itself, of course, that was their secret. He stared at the glow stick in Flame’s hand, but what he was seeing was the corridor, squared off with some white stuff at the end nearest the stairs, but dwindling away to roughness and the color of pale stone as it grew narrower toward their end. Not too high—they’d have to limit the height of their leaps. But the grills fencing off the storage areas—they could use those. Maybe combine their dancing with food service? A sort of dance of plenty, showcasing the food and wines stored here? Gradually the excuse grew into a real dance in his mind.

Southward Equinox, ’34

They didn’t spend all of their time, or even a large fraction of it, hiding from Brak. A few months later Snowy was leaning against a horse’s shoulder, putting his weight into the strokes of the brush against the silky bay hide.

The horse leaned into the brush, eyes half closed and lower lip twitching in pleasure. Timi sighed theatrically in the aisle. "You know, the robot groomer could do that."

"I like doing it," Snowy replied. "The autogroomer doesn't scratch the itchy spots, and it's no good on cowlicks. Besides, think what else I could be doing, with any other owner we've had." He stood back, looking the horse over. The bay shook himself, disarranging his carefully combed mane and tail. It would be a lot easier, Snowy thought, if Derik didn't prefer flowing hair, on slaves as well as horses. He punched the button to lower the suspended saddle and pad onto the horse's back, controlling the final fingerwidth or two by hand to be sure the pad sat smoothly on the animal's coat.

He bridled the horse, and then glanced at the time display on the stable wall. Twelve minutes. Time enough to clean himself up. "Watch the horses, would you, Timi?" Snowy shucked off his coverall, felt to be sure his hair was still tucked under the loose waterproof cap, and stepped into the stable sponge cabinet.

"Well, learning to sail's fun," Timi conceded from the aisle. "And a couple of those new dances you've put together are really great. Horseback riding ... It beats the alternative, but I'm just as sore afterward. Jumping off cliffs holding onto a sail I want no part of, and Brak ... Well, at least he doesn't care for horses so he stays away from the stable." Snowy could imagine his shudder. "But I still don't like not having any choices about things."

Timi's voice faded out briefly as Snowy twisted under the rinsing jets and then stood, arms out, as the remaining water was blown off his body. He wasn't sure if Derik was too lazy to find out just how his overseer treated his slaves, or so busy he simply trusted all slave management to Brak. Of the five months they had been here, Derik had been off planet for at least two, mostly a few days at a time. And Brak wasn't a slave himself, like Davy. The one thing Snowy really held against Derik was his refusal to listen to any complaints about Brak.

The cabinet finished its cycle, and Snowy stepped out and began pulling on riding clothes. "Wonder how long he's going to stay interested in us," Timi commented.

"A good long time, if I can manage it," Snowy replied.

"Sometimes I think you aren't even interested in being free," Timi accused.

"Free to starve, or be kidnapped and sold by an illegal dealer?" Snowy replied as he settled his riding jacket into place. "Not that kind of free. But I think we've got a better chance of freedom, long-term and knowing enough to stay free, with Derik than any other owner we've had." He shook his hair out

of the cap, released the loose braid that had kept it from tangling too badly, and began combing the hip-length white silk.

“Work from inside the limits again, huh?” Timi commented as he began working out a snarl Snowy couldn’t quite reach. “Well, I don’t like being a pet. Better watch out he doesn’t seduce you. He’s interested.”

Snowy shrugged. “If that’s what it takes to keep him interested. Can’t say I like it, but seduction’s better than rape, and I’ll take physical rape over mind-rape any day. It just doesn’t bother me the way it does you, Timi. I’ve been a slave, and taught that was what to expect, since I was born. You were free ’til you were eight.”

“And it makes me sick even to think about it,” Timi said. “Just don’t get to trusting him too much.

“I’m not *that* crazy.” Snowy wondered if he could get away with tucking his hair under his jacket collar. Probably not.

“Who’s the third horse for?” Timi asked as he stood back to give Snowy a final check.

“Some friend of Derik’s,” Snowy replied. He glanced back at the time display on the wall. “They’re due. You’d better get back out of sight.”

The friend turned out to be a boy, only a couple of years older than Snowy, and the young slave looked sharply at the newcomer’s neck. No slave chain, and the youngster displayed none of the subservience Snowy was careful to show in his own movements. Not a slave rival, then. Snowy dropped to one knee and bowed his head to his owner. Derik might not insist on formality himself, but it was always safer to follow slave protocol scrupulously in front of strangers.

“Hope you’ve picked a good mount for me, Father,” the newcomer said as they approached and Derik signaled the slave to rise. Derik’s son, then? Interesting. Snowy had thought the dancers were being treated as substitute children themselves. And family members could be even more dangerous than slave rivals.

“Oh, I think you’ll find Sundrop frisky enough, Coryn,” Derik replied, “even though you’re used to helping your mother train.” He didn’t wait to be handed the reins to his gray but checked the girth and swung up onto the eager animal.

Coryn took the reins of the chestnut when Snowy offered them, but checked his own girth and waved off the young slave’s offer to give him a leg up. Snowy hastily mounted the bay he’d just finished grooming, knowing how Derik hated to be kept waiting, and they all walked their horses toward a door that opened into a blaze of sunshine as they approached.

The sun made Snowy’s eyes water, and the light breeze kept blowing his unbound hair into his eyes. He looked at Derik’s hair, tied back for riding,

and Coryn's, braided under the protective helmet he wore, and wished he dared braid his own. Still, squinting and an occasional mouthful of hair were a small price for the sense of freedom he got from the wide sky overhead and the surf pounding against the cliff to his left. It was a freedom few pleasure slaves ever tasted, and one of the reasons he was determined to stay with Derik as long as he could.

He followed the others inland, along a trail that wound through stands of resinous woodland and finally entered a broad meadow, crisscrossed with fences, rocks, trees and streams. "An obstacle course," Coryn exclaimed delightedly. "And a good one, from what I can see."

"I've been working on it," Derik replied. "Thought you and Noon might enjoy a race."

Coryn turned in his saddle, really looking at Snowy for the first time. "Not fair," he said. "I've got to wear this stupid helmet."

Derik turned to look at Snowy just as the breeze blew the boy's hair into his eyes again. "I'm not sure that's an advantage to him, but we might as well even things out," he replied. His eyes took on a closed, inward look for a second, and a helmet appeared in his hand. He passed it to Snowy. "Put that on, and tuck your hair into your collar."

"Yes, Master," Snowy said politely, trying to keep the relief out of his face. He'd have to make sure he lost to Coryn, of course, but he'd just as soon not lose because he was blinded by his own hair.

"I'll use the beacons to mark the course," Derik continued. "Show Coryn the tunnel and slide, Noon. They're not very visible from here. And Noon, you ride to win. That's an order."

This time Snowy couldn't quite keep the consternation out of his face. Defeating a member of the master class was dangerous for a slave. But so was disobeying a direct order. And while Derik's order gave plenty of room for Coryn to defeat Snowy in an honest contest, Snowy thought his owner was astute enough to detect any attempt on his part to lose to the older boy. The most he could do was to counter the very real advantage he had in knowing the two horses and the course.

"Sundrop's faster on the straightaway," he said quietly as they jogged over to the tunnel, a natural cave they would have to race through, dodging stalactites. "KoKo isn't as fast as Sundrop, but he has more endurance and he's more maneuverable. I'll walk through the cave with you now—it's easiest if you come in on the left and then cross to the right about two thirds of the way through. Footing's good that way, and you don't have to duck as many stalactites."

Coryn nodded, looking ahead as they exited the cave. “There’s the next jump—yes, you’d want to come out on the right for the best approach. And then the slide ... I don’t believe this! Is that a jump halfway down?”

Snowy looked down the seemingly vertical cliff and nodded. “It’s not a very high jump, and both horses are used to it. But Sundrop’ll try to fly it, and the water’s swimming deep if she lands out away from the bank. Fine if you were crossing the stream, but the course doubles back and comes up the same bank you slide down. There, upstream, where the sandbar peters out. See?”

The beacon was easy enough to see, next to a break in the streamside vegetation. Coryn leaned far out, studying the entry to the climb. “I forgot Father makes a hobby of designing courses for the big competitions. Thanks for the information, Noon. And don’t worry about beating me. I want an honest race.” He grinned at Snowy.

The young slave lowered his eyes. A free man, thanking him? He didn’t dare try to initiate eye contact with his owner’s son, but he did reply, shyly, “Thank *you* for the helmet. I thought I’d be riding blind with my hair in my face.”

Coryn threw his head back and laughed as they rode together back to Derik.

Coryn and Sundrop surged ahead at the start, which was fine with Snowy. The faster Sundrop wore herself out, the better chance he’d have. Snowy held KoKo to a pace he knew the bay could hold for most of the course, with some reserve for a sprint at the end. Vertical fence first, then a spread, both narrow enough that he had no desire to try them shoulder to shoulder with Coryn. A four-rock weave, and he made up time on that one. A shallow stream that could be jumped or splashed through, and he asked KoKo for a jump as he looked ahead. Sundrop was slowing under a firm hold from Coryn. Try to pass now? The tunnel, the slide, the weave through nine trees and the pen jump had to be negotiated one horse at a time, and the lead horse in a tight race had an advantage. He asked KoKo for a little more speed, and saw Sundrop speed up in response. Evidently Coryn had listened to his advice. Intellectually, that was fine and losing honestly was the best possible outcome of the race for Snowy. Emotionally, Snowy discovered with some surprise, he wanted very badly to win.

Another jump and then the tunnel, with Snowy flattening himself against KoKo’s neck to avoid the stalactites, and the two jumps after the tunnel. The second jump was a spread and he took it fast, urging KoKo to increased speed. Coryn must have known that he wasn’t really trying to pass this close to the head of the slide—but Sundrop didn’t, and started down the slide fighting Coryn’s control. Snowy started down the slide just in time to see Sundrop jump out and land in the stream. He took KoKo down fast but under control,

popping the horse over the low jump onto the sandbar and asking for an immediate right turn.

The maneuver put him in the lead, but not by much. Coryn was no more than a length behind him going into the weave through the trees, but KoKo had the advantage on that obstacle, and gained a good three lengths. Just the pen jump to negotiate now—check a stride or two ahead, pop the first fence well to the left, one stride to recover balance, with the reins warning the horse of the pivot to the right, then one stride and jump out at right angles to the entry. Finally the straight run to the finish line where Derik waited. Snowy saw Sundrop's head from the corner of his eye, and dropped against KoKo's neck, for the first time urging the horse to top speed.

The chestnut's head dropped back and then returned, creeping up until the nose was almost level with KoKo's shoulder. But KoKo's superior endurance was beginning to tell. Sundrop began dropping back again, and they crossed the finish line with KoKo clearly in the lead. Snowy felt a brief thrill of triumph that rapidly abated as he realized what he had just done. I did what Master Derik told me to, he thought rebelliously as he eased KoKo down to a walk and circled back toward his owner.

But would that be enough? He could hear Coryn as he returned to Derik: "Can I borrow him, Father?" Snowy's mouth felt dry, and KoKo began to dance under him in response to the boy's tension.

Please, Snowy thought, tell him no, but Derik only said, "I'll have to think about it, Cory." Then he lifted his head, saw Snowy, and smiled. "Good riding, Noon. Better walk them both dry."

Snowy was already sliding off KoKo, and he quickly loosened the girth and slipped the bit out of the horse's mouth. Coryn was a little slower to dismount. "I've only got another two hours before I have to head back to school," he said.

Derik raised one eyebrow. "You could ride back double behind me if you'll promise not to tell your mother," he suggested. "Noon, you can lead both horses back, can't you? They should be cooled down pretty well by the time you're back to the stable."

"Of course," Snowy replied, reaching for Sundrop's reins. Unfair, something inside his head screamed. Unfair? That was Timi's complaint—but slave life *was* unfair. You took the unfairness for granted, while trying to make it affect you as little as possible. So why was he thinking this way?

Sundrop rubbed her head against his shoulder, trying to scratch the sweaty skin under her bridle, and he pushed the uncomfortable thought away. Better use the fact that Derik generally *was* fair toward the horses. "Could I have a rag to rub them down a bit?" he asked.

Two rubbing cloths appeared, draped over Snowy's arm. Derik must be in one of his show-off moods, he thought. I could do that, but sooner or later I'd get caught. He didn't trust Sundrop quite enough to take the bit from her mouth, but he did wipe under the bridle before beginning to lead the two horses along the trail back to the stable. At least he'd be free of Brak for a while. The one place the overseer almost never came was the stables.

Derik

10/20/34

"So my whole trip was a total waste of time," Derik concluded. "And why is it that I always wind up twelve hours off my home time zone when I go off planet?" The sun was rising over the mountains behind the Enclave, but Derik, whose home was in the same time zone, was ready for a long, relaxing massage and bed. It didn't help that Elyra was laughing openly at him, and even Lai was fighting to keep back a grin.

"It wasn't a waste of time, Derry," the R'il'nian soothed. "Sure, it was just a communication problem. But if you hadn't straightened it out now, it would have been a lot more than that ten years from now." Tactfully, he didn't mention the time zone problem, at least not beyond adding, "There's nothing scheduled for the Inner Council meeting today you need to be there for. I'll brief you on what happens later."

"Better have some breakfast," Elyra suggested. "Even with Lai's help, teleporting back here's bound to have run your blood sugar down." She placed a loaded tray on Derik's lap, and then left the room. When she returned, she had a baby on each arm. "Breakfast time for them, too," she commented as she settled both to feed.

"Two?" Derik asked in astonishment.

"Ania's ours and we expected her," Lai said, "though we were delighted when her Çeren index identified her as a probable future Inner Council member. Wif was a total surprise, and we're still trying to figure out where he came from. But his Çeren index is a hair higher than Ania's."

"Eat," ordered Elyra.

Derik took a bite, more out of politeness than any sense of hunger, and blinked a time or two in astonishment. "Two? Çeren index a hundred twenty or more? That's hard to believe. Who was the last—Tethya? Ramil before her, and then Zhaim, and he's close to four centuries old." He took another bite,

and suddenly realized that he was ravenous. Elyra, he thought, was better at spotting the cause of his bad temper than he was.

“An average of one a century above a hundred and twenty,” Lai replied, “three times what it was before the Çeren technique came into use. High R’il’noids have gotten more frequent, too—several a year over a hundred and eight, now. And we’re getting more than we can socialize properly that qualify as R’il’noid, with half the active genes R’il’nian-derived.”

Derik swallowed another mouthful, thinking. Three times the number of those testing at the highest level on the Çeren index, yes. But of the three youngest members of the Inner Council he’d named, only Ramil had what he considered a normal attitude toward Humans. Some of the older members were even worse. Colo was openly a monster, making no attempt to hide his depravities. Zhaim—well, outwardly he’d straightened up since the shocking incident that had upset Lai so badly three centuries ago. Derik was not so sure. He suspected love still blinded Lai to many of his heir’s deficiencies, though he did not agree with Lai’s emotional certainty that Zhaim’s attitude was due to poor parenting and too much love on his part. As for Lai’s daughter Tethya, Derik reserved judgment. She was barely a century old, and thinking of himself at that age was enough to make Derik cringe. She might yet become a responsible member of the Inner Council. “Think your new technique’ll do better?”

“One’s hardly a valid statistical sample, but yes—if I’m doing what Jarn did, I think so. And I think some R’il’noids can use it—you, maybe.”

“Maybe,” Derik said skeptically, “but hardly likely. Who are the boy’s parents?”

“That,” Elyra replied, “is what we’d all like to know. His mother’s a kitchen slave, badly scarred. I have her, now. She’s not well, and I’ve got far more milk than Ania can use, so I’m feeding him right now. She’ll take over eventually, with help from Lai and me—the baby’s a little too strong an esper for a Human mother to cope with. Her former owner called the Genetics Board in a panic. *He*’d decided not to bother raising the baby. Luckily Wif has a very strong sense of self-preservation.”

Derik ducked his head, trying to hide a grin. It wasn’t really funny—a threat to an esper baby, when they needed good espers so badly. But the mental image of a slave owner who’d let a baby die, trying to cope with what that baby might be capable of in the way of self defense, tickled his overdeveloped sense of humor. “Who’s the father?” he asked.

“We don’t know,” said Elyra grimly. “The girl goes practically catatonic at the memory. Apparently it started out as a sex show, but the owner and his guests were high on drugs, and there were gatecrashers, and the upshot is that no one remembers who had her after the slaves who really had no choice

in the matter, and who couldn't have fathered Wif, anyway. She certainly didn't know them all. At this point I'm going on karyotype—who could have contributed Wif's R'il'nian chromosomes? I've ruled out all of the High R'il'noids in my database, even those who were off planet or dead. And all of the R'il'noids Kuril even thinks might have been there, and I've checked most of the rest. Right now I'm trying to get karyotypes on all known latents."

"So far," Lai commented, "the only possible match is me. I'm beginning to wonder if someone managed to steal some of my semen from the Genetics Board."

The baby did look like Lai, Derik thought. But from what Elyra had said, that didn't square at all with the mother's experience. "Kuril?" he asked aloud. "Uh—Lyra ..."

"Yes, you were there, and in about the right time frame. But not that night, I don't think you'd have been involved in something like that, and the karyotypes definitely rule you out. Sorry, Derry, I know you'd love another child, but Wif's not yours."

Thank all the gods worshipped on all the planets that he'd gotten the dancing group out of that! Kuril wasn't as bad as Colo, but Derik could not approve of a slave owner who'd simply let an unwanted slave baby die.

The little girl ...

Elyra had confided to Derik that she hoped raising another child of his own would help Lai deal with his feelings of inadequacy over Zhaim. If Lai was letting himself love his daughter, Derik could not detect it. If only Lai and Cloudy could have had a child, he thought. Elyra was a good friend, but Cloudy would have been a far better mother, and might well have led Lai into learning that he could love a child without doing damage.

He shifted position, preparing to rise, and flinched as his back muscles spasmed painfully. Elyra looked worried, and he forced a smile. "Don't need back muscles to teleport. I think I'd better get home for a massage, though." Noon, he thought. I'll have Brak send him up as soon as I get back.

But it wasn't Noon who arrived, but Midnight. A Midnight who looked flustered, out of breath, and generally worried. He'd have to get after Brak about sending up the slave he asked for, Derik thought, but then Midnight was a slightly better masseur than Noon. Not as good company, though. He relaxed and let the boy get on with his massage, and gradually the cramps released. "Where's Noon?" he finally asked.

Midnight jumped, his eyes wild for a second. "He, he had a hard day yesterday," he stuttered.

Derik turned to look at the boy, puzzled. "Hard how? I wasn't even on planet." The boy was silent, but his appearance of upset increased. "Midnight,

answer me.” Derik would not probe an unwilling mind, but he could and did open himself enough that he would pick up a deliberate lie.

“Noon asked us not to bother you, sir,” Midnight replied. “But he’s really not feeling well.”

The boy wasn’t lying, Derik decided, but he was terribly worried. Worried enough that his usual half defiant attitude was totally missing. “Has Brak called in a doctor?” he asked, and the boy shook his head.

“Says he’s just malingering. He’s not. But he didn’t want you bothered.”

Damn. Derik wanted to stretch the final stiffness out of the muscles that were beginning to relax under Midnight’s manipulations, and then go to sleep. If it had been any of the others, he thought, that was exactly what he would have done. But Noon ...

He simply could not picture Noon faking an illness. Sunrise or Sunset, possibly. Midnight, probably. Noon? He groaned and sat up. “Come on,” he told Midnight. “I’d better check on him.” He didn’t have much medical training, just the minimum given every R’il’noid who had to work off planet on short notice. He could diagnose his own problems, but he didn’t know much about Human diseases. Still, he could at least tell if Noon needed more medical help than he could give. He’d call on Nik if the boy was really sick, he thought. He had somewhat less faith in most doctors who would bother with slaves than he had in those who attended his horses.

He’d ordered Brak to give the four a room to themselves with comfortable sleeping mats, and his first reaction on coming into that room was amusement that the four had pulled the mats together to make a single large sleeping area. Then he got a good look at Noon, with Sunrise and Sunset sitting on the mat next to the young slave, and all thought of some mild childish ailment disappeared. The boy’s face was flushed and oddly rigid, and when Derik lifted a fold of skin on the back of Noon’s hand, the muscles beneath felt almost unbearably tight. Nor did the fold of skin snap back.

“How long since he’s had anything to eat or drink?” he asked the girls, concern sharpening his voice.

Sunrise swallowed hard as she brushed back the golden hair that had fallen over her eyes. “About two days,” she responded shakily. “It’s been that long since he could swallow. He was still able to talk a little then, and he didn’t want you bothered when you came back.”

Dehydration Derik could deal with, but it would be easier in his own quarters. The rest ... Brak stuck his head in the door, and Derik turned to him. “Get a cocoon with a levitation circuit down here. I’m taking Noon up to my quarters, and the other three to nurse him.” He turned back to the girls, scowling a little as he tried to remember what little he knew about Human ailments. “Did he say anything earlier, when he could talk, about how he felt?”

he asked as he triggered the levitation unit on the cocoon and started guiding it back to his quarters.

“Pain, to start with,” Sunset replied. “Fingertips and toes, and then working in toward the body. Dancing started to hurt him two or three fivedays ago, not long after you left. I don’t think the pain ever stopped, but pretty soon the muscles started knotting up and cramping where it had hurt a few days earlier, and massage didn’t help at all—just made the pain worse, he said. After a while he couldn’t control the muscles at all, but they kept on twitching.”

Not a minor ailment, he thought as he eased the cocoon with its helpless occupant down on his own bed and hunted through the emergency supplies for dilute saline. But not a Human disease he was familiar with, either. He reached mentally for the computer, feeding Noon’s symptoms to the medical program even as he set up the rehydration. Nothing quite matched.

Derik’s estate was set on a cliff facing the western ocean, south—poleward—of Lai’s home, which faced the same ocean. The sun, high in the northern sky this close to the solstice, was beginning to touch the balcony rail outside his window. Not quite noon, he thought. Nik would still be awake, though it would be an hour after sunset for him. There was no doubt in Derik’s mind that he needed Nik, but if he could tell his half-brother what was wrong with Noon when he made the initial contact, it might save an additional teleport to bring in whatever medical supplies Nik would need. Nik, though an outstanding physician and respected member of the Genetics Board, was not quite able to manage a teleport by himself. And Derik had not replenished his own reserves enough to do much more than assist Nik in teleporting here.

He turned back to the boy lying immobile in the cocoon. He could describe Noon’s symptoms to Nik, he decided. Easy enough. Classic Kharfun symptoms, if the young slave were R’il’noid. But Kharfun in Humans was a mild disease, self-limiting and often unnoticed. It had just about wiped out the pure R’il’nians and the early R’il’noids, and led to the modern crossbreeding program, but it simply did not make Humans particularly sick. And while many Humans were not slaves—there were far more Human slave-owners than R’il’noid—R’il’noids could not be slaves. Noon was Human.

Wasn’t he?

He’d bought the group from Kuril, who’d owned Wif’s mother, and at about the time Wif was conceived.

Noon was too young—not even fourteen at the time.

Not outside the limits for a Human—and crossbreeds showed up with every possible maturation pattern. No correlation with Çeren index, either.

He turned to Sunrise—youngest of the four, but he thought the brightest after Noon. “Did you know a girl, a kitchen slave with a scarred face, at Kuril’s?” he asked.

“Feline? Of course. She and Noon were good friends.”

“I understand Kuril once used her in a sex show. Was that while you were there?”

All three faces hardened. “A couple of fivedays before you bought us,” Sunset answered.

“And the boys?”

Midnight’s face showed both anger and surprise. “We cooperated or they put the harnesses on us. The girls say it’s easier without.”

“Lots easier,” Sunset confirmed. “Especially Sn—uh, Noon. He’s really gentle. Feline asked him to be first.”

R’il’noids weren’t always physically distinguishable from Humans, and crossbreds who didn’t have many overt R’il’nian traits often went right back into the Human gene pool, lost within a few generations. Noon wasn’t an obvious crossbred, but ... Derik reached for the boy’s head, and gently pulled back one eyelid. The eyes were rolled back, but he could see enough of the iris to confirm the color. Honey gold, as he remembered, but when he looked closely, there were metallic gold flecks almost hidden in the gold. Not as obvious as his own gold-veined brown, but just as sure an indicator of R’il’nian genes.

He reached for Nik’s mind, letting his anxiety show, and got a “what’s up?” response almost at once.

I think I’ve found Wif’s father, he sent back. Bought him from Kuril as a slave, but he’s got all the symptoms of a bad case of Kharfun, and if you look closely enough, he shows the eye veining.

He felt Nik’s shock even as his half brother grabbed an emergency kit and began hunting a few extra items. *Telepath?* Nik sent in reply.

Haven’t tried. He’s in no shape to ask if he’s willing.

You’d better check. Confirm the symptoms, at least.

Double damn and a few swear words he wouldn’t say with the kids listening. He started to speak the name he’d given the boy, then caught himself and turned to Sunset. “You started to call Noon something else,” he said. “His own name? The way he thinks of himself? What is it?” Panic bloomed in the girl’s eyes for a moment, and he added, “Not to hurt him. Only to get his attention, if he’s conscious at all.”

The redhead’s eyes flicked back and forth between the other two slaves. Finally, reluctantly, she answered his question. “Snowy. He said it’s what his mother called him.”

Snowy. And fifteen years ago Lai had been in love with a white-haired, brown-eyed woman nicknamed Cloudy. How had he failed to see the resemblance? “Snowy,” Derik said gently, cupping the boy’s face in his hands, “it’s all right. I’m not going to hurt you. Just relax and let me have enough contact to check how you’re feeling.” He kept the contact light, ready to pull back if he felt any resistance, but all he felt was thirst, pain, and half delirious thoughts of water. *It’s all right*, he thought at the boy. *We’re taking care of the thirst, and we’ll help you with the pain.* Before he could get a response, Nik’s *Ready* echoed through his mind.

He broke contact with Snowy and made full contact with Nik, blending his mind with the physician’s for the teleport to his room, remembering only after he heard gasps of dismay that Snowy’s friends would not be used to people appearing out of thin air. Or to Nik’s hasty blood typing, which involved touching his tongue to a drop of the boy’s blood.

“Nik’s a very good doctor,” he told the three, “and he’s going to fix what’s wrong with Noon. You’ve all helped a lot, but I don’t think there’s anything more you can do. On back to your quarters, now.”

The three closed ranks almost audibly, turning to him with identical angry, stubborn expressions. He couldn’t teleport them away, and he *would* not force their minds. “He’s getting the best medical care on this planet,” he told them, and began pushing them toward the slave quarters telekinetically. They weren’t far from the door, and he had them well on their way before they had a chance to react. Then he turned to Nik.

He didn’t have to ask if his diagnosis was correct. The vial in Nik’s hand was choked with fluorescent green crystals, and for the first time Derik felt really frightened for the boy. “That bad?” he asked anxiously.

“I’ve never seen a case so advanced. When were you last boosted, Derry?”

“Couple of years ago—titer says I’m good for another half century, at least. I’m not worried about myself, dammit.”

“Neither am I, but the boy’s blood type matches yours.”

And the first line of defense against a severe Kharfun infection was passive antibodies. Derik hastily peeled out of tunic and shirt, and held out his arm to Nik. “I’d still better contact Lai,” he said. When Nik raised an eyebrow, he added, “Cloudy.”

Nik continued setting up the transfusion, but his eyes went to the boy on the bed. “She was sterilized, but reversibly,” he said slowly. “Lai could have reversed it, maybe without even realizing what he was doing. But the boy’s not Coven affected. Not with that skin tone. Too bad we can’t get a Çeren index with the Kharfun, but let me run a karyotype to confirm. Lai’s going to be livid about this, you know.”

Livid, Derik thought, was an understatement. He, Lai and Nik all shared the same R'il'nian father, Tarl. Derik was the oldest, by some three centuries, and he'd given basic esper training to both of his younger half-brothers. He knew Lai as well as anyone did—including Lai's deep attachment to Cloudy. Lai had grieved for Cloudy when she had left him. How he would react when he found out she had probably left him to give his son a chance at life ... Well, Derik wasn't sure, but he was reasonably certain that his own close relationship with Lai would see some major changes when Lai found out he'd owned Cloudy's son as a slave. He could only hope the changes would be temporary.

"Do you have a birth date on him?" Nik asked.

"He was registered a little after Northern Solstice in '20. Makes him fourteen and a half, now."

"Conceived a couple of months before Cloudy disappeared, then. Well, he's definitely half-bred. And he has both the R'il'nian chromosomes that've been driving us up a wall in Wif. I should have listened harder to Lyra. She felt when Ania was conceived that Lai was rediscovering something he'd done before. We put it down to his 'rediscovering' Jarn's technique."

Derik swayed a little, and Nik moved to cut off the blood transfer. "He's stabilizing," he added. "I can start second stage treatment in half an hour or so. He's going to need pain blocking for that."

"I'll contact Lai," Derik said, but his eyes went to the boy's face. Not a slave, but Lai's son. His nephew. He wasn't sure how to handle that, and he rather doubted that Lai would give him much chance to handle it himself. But the next stage of treatment would be agonizing for the boy without pain blocking, and Lai was a lot better at initiating that than Derik was. *Lai*, Derik reached out, *I think you'd better come out here. Emergency.*

Lai

10/20/34

Lai was rarely caught off guard by events. He had in full the R'il'nian talent of conditional precognition—the ability to foresee how his own actions would influence the probability of future events—and he used it regularly. He had used it, he remembered now, when Cloudy had left him. But he had used it in his usual mode, for the welfare of the Confederation as a whole. His own happiness, and Cloudy's, had evidently counted very little against the birth of the child now lying before him.