

Tourist Trap

Tourist Trap

A novel of the Jarnian Confederation

Sue Ann Bowling

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Tourist Trap

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Other books by Sue Ann Bowling

Homecoming

Critical Acclaim for Homecoming:

Well-written science fiction expands the imagination. It is a book genre that explores the outer limits of reality, based on the reasoning and endless possibilities of science. Unfortunately, there is too much science fiction on the market today that has left this creative path of exploration, and instead offers readers a constantly rehashed mix of starship battle scenes and evil alien races bent on taking over the universe. Fortunately, in *Homecoming*, Sue Ann Bowling takes the reader back to the foundations of sci-fi, offering a completely original story, with both fresh ideas and sound science *Homecoming* is a truly compelling book. The author has done a superb job of creating characters that are well rounded and emotionally real. The plot is original and thoughtfully crafted, and the supporting science is fresh and exciting the reader will turn the last page hoping that a sequel is on the way.

ForeWord Clarion review by Catherine Thureson

While “Homecoming” has an ending that confidently wraps up all the loose ends in this part of Roi’s life, I’m left with the hope that Ms Bowling might one day let us see how Roi is doing as an adult. If you’re looking for a science fiction adventure that has some thought behind it, I highly recommend this story.

Reader Views review by Marty Shaw

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Characters

Amber: Technically Roi's Human slave, but in fact a companion of Roi's who will be freed as soon as she completes her education. Born free, and planning to study medicine.

Davy: Roi's Human attendant and physical therapist at school, now freed.

Derik Tarlian: Lai's High R'il'noid half brother, Lai's heir until Zhaim's birth. Roi's former owner.

Elyra Faranian: R'il'noid chief geneticist of the Genetics Board. She has a child Wif's age by Lai, but is currently in a relationship with Derik.

Feline: Wif's Human mother, now free and a member of Roi's household.

Flame: Technically Roi's Human slave, but in fact a companion of Roi's who will be freed as soon as she completes her education. Born a slave and not all that interested in freedom, but very attached to Roi.

Kyrie Talganian: High R'il'nian Confederation adjudicator, assigned to Falaron.

Lai: the last surviving R'il'nian until he discovered Marna, with whom he is now in a close relationship. He is the effective ruler of the Confederation.

Marna: The last survivor of the R'il'nai of Riya, a distant planet colonized long ago by the R'il'nai. Healer. Foster mother to Roi, and in some ways more his parent than Lai.

Penny Ansdor: Falaron tour guide, Human.

Roi Laian: High R'il'noid son of Lai and his lost Human love, Cloudy. Born a slave; now 18 and just graduated from Tyndall, an exclusive boarding school.

Timi: Technically Roi's Human slave, but in fact a companion of Roi's who will be freed as soon as he completes his education. Born free, in a culture based on starship trading.

Wif k'Roi Laian: Roi's High R'il'noid son, 3 1/2 years old.

Xazhar k'Zhaim Laian: Zhaim's High R'il'noid son, formerly Roi's schoolmate and rival at Tyndall.

Zhaim Laian: Lai's older son and formerly his heir, now displaced from the heirship by Roi.

A complete list of the characters in both *Tourist Trap* and *Homecoming* can be found at <http://www.sueannbowling.com/> . The glossary is at http://sueannbowling.com/glossary_297.html .

Background

Go back, over a hundred thousand years, to the time of the last interglacial. Imagine an alien starship designer, a R'il'nian named Jarn, stranded on Earth when his latest design proves to have some unexpected flaws. He befriends a group of primates, strikingly similar in appearance to himself, and eventually becomes part of their tribe, mating with their women and, totally to his surprise, having a few children. Some of those offspring even inherit his lack of aging and his esper abilities.

Over the next few thousand years his genes spread, and he guides the Humans that result into a short-lived civilization capable of building starships to his plans. He himself and some of his descendants return to the stars; others choose to stay on Earth, where their force-grown civilization is soon forgotten as they spread from Africa over the planet.

Those who followed Jarn to the stars create their own civilizations, with some help and protection from Jarn's R'il'nian relatives and led by those of Jarn's descendants expressing most strongly his abilities of conditional precognition and telepathy.

The telepathy is important in protecting the Human planets from the Maungs, whose life cycle is totally incompatible with that of Humans. (Although adult, healthy Maungs are no threat to Humans—and prefer different planets—their reproduction can result in Humans parasitized by what should be a Maung nervous system. R'il'nians are not affected, and consider the Maungs as valuable trading partners.)

Now fast-forward to the time when Humans on Earth are rediscovering agriculture. A new disease has arisen among the star-faring Humans. Kharfun syndrome is not serious for them—similar to a mild case of flu. But it is deadly to those leaders with a high fraction of R'il'nian genes, and lethal to the pure R'il'nai. Finally Humans and R'il'nai working together find a cure and a method of immunization, but only a small fraction

of the R'il'nai, and almost none of the crossbred R'il'noids, survive. The Human planets are threatened both by the Maungs and by their tendency to war on each other. The surviving R'il'nai are in decline, their already low fertility driven even lower by the aftereffects of the disease and by the immunization, which also affects fertility. Eventually a few of the Human leaders petition the R'il'nai to try hybridizing again with the Humans, in hope of producing individuals capable of detecting Maung infestations and stopping wars—duties the R'il'nai have become too few in numbers to continue.

Thus the Confederation is born. The pure R'il'nai continue to decline, but their place as peacekeepers and guardians against the Maungs is taken by the new hybrids, the R'il'noids.

The natural increase of the R'il'noids is insufficient to keep up with the growing number of Human-occupied planets in the Confederation. Shortly after the Saxons invade Britain on Earth, a R'il'noid, Çeren, develops a laboratory method of increasing the number of hybrids produced. He also develops a measurement, the Çeren index, which is used to rank R'il'noids according to the fraction of active R'il'nian genes their chromosomes contain. Those with a Çeren index of 72 or more (half their active genes are R'il'nian) are defined as R'il'noids, subject only to Confederation law.

Fast-forward yet again, to about the time of George Washington's birth on Earth, and we come to the start of *Homecoming*. Only a single R'il'nian, Lai, is left alive in the Confederation, and he is mourning his lost Human love, Cloudy. Humans are now running the last R'il'nian planet, Central, which has become both the de facto capital of the Confederation and the hub of the slave trade in the Confederation. Then Lai discovers that Cloudy left him when she learned she was pregnant—against the orders of the Genetics Board. Their slave-reared son, whom Lai names Roi, is alive, paralyzed by Kharfun, owned by Lai's half-brother Derik, and refusing to believe anything he is being told.

Beyond the borders of the Confederation is Riya, settled long ago by the R'il'nai. Here Marna is the sole survivor of a planet-wide epidemic, kept alive only by her determination to warn off any other R'il'nai who may find the doomed planet. She was on an isolation satellite studying a different disease when the epidemic started, but now the life-support system of the satellite has broken down. Can she avoid being infected,

two centuries after everyone she has ever known has died? Does she even want to?

When Lai finds evidence of Riya's existence, he journeys to seek it out. On the journey, Lai is forced to recognize that his heir by Çeren index, Zhaim, is not fit to take over his job as coordinator of the Confederation. But he has little choice in the matter, as selection by the Çeren index has been cast in stone by the Human inhabitants of the Confederation. Lai finds Marna and manages to save her from Kharfun syndrome, and she becomes a mother, mentor and Healer to Roi, who shares her rare talent of Healing. Roi, although demonstrating increasing intelligence and mastery of R'il'nian talents as he progresses through the Tyndall school, cannot at first be Çeren indexed because of the Kharfun. Eventually, at sixteen and a half, he is found to have a higher Çeren index than Zhaim. Meanwhile Derik has given him his three closest slave friends, the people who had become his surrogate family during his slave years: Flame, Amber and Timi.

Now a year and a half has passed, and Zhaim, still resenting the fact that Roi has replaced him as Lai's heir and the future leader of the Confederation, is attending the graduation ceremonies at Tyndall.

Preface

*Central: Zhaim
Northday, '38*

Zhaim looked at Tyndall's graduating class on the platform, and struggled to keep his features neutral. All of the graduates were crossbred, and most were R'il'noids. Many, like Zhaim, showed that heritage in their similarity to Zhaim's father, Lai—delicate features and eyes that clearly showed the metallic tracery common among R'il'noids, even at this distance. Zhaim himself, he was proudly aware, could have been his father's twin, black haired and bronze skinned, differing only in that Zhaim's eyes were ice and silver while Lai's were gold-veined green.

He had no problem with the class second, his own son Xazhar, beyond the fact that Xazhar should have been class first. But the—thing—that was class first Empaths were necessary, he supposed, but they were *not* suited to rule. And his father's preference for his bastard, slave-reared son over legitimate and properly socialized R'il'noids was going to destroy the Confederation if something wasn't done.

The brat didn't even look R'il'noid—more like its Human dam. It had yellow eyes that showed their gold flecking only if the light was just right, and white hair that marked it as carrying the gene that had prevented Lai's lover from ever being approved for the crossbreeding project. It should have been aborted, or killed at birth, but its dam had bolted before that could happen. And not only had Lai accepted it, it had actually proved to have a Çeren index higher than Zhaim's, thus replacing Zhaim as Lai's heir.

Zhaim glanced sideways at the only two R'il'nians in the school auditorium—the only two survivors of their species. Lai and Marna. Weak survivors. Far too easily swayed by sentiment, too sensitive to the emotions of others. Marna especially, and her red-gold hair and dark ivory skin

didn't even look like the R'il'nai he was used to, though her silver-veined dark blue eyes were typical enough.

Someone was going to have to do something, Zhaim thought, or the whole Jarnian Confederation was going to collapse around their heads. Over a hundred thousand years of R'il'nian rule, with the assistance of the part-human R'il'noids like himself, and all about to be torn down because his father refused to face reality. When—not if—Zhaim, as the ranking R'il'nian-Human crossbred, replaced his father, the Jarnian Confederation would be ruled properly, not allowed to drift as his father had let it. His eyes went back to young Roi, standing as class first at the far left of the platform. Somehow, he had to get rid of the bastard empath that had usurped his position as Lai's heir. The Confederation needed a strong leader, not a jumped-up slave.

Lai wouldn't agree with that, of course. In fact, Zhaim thought, he'd have to make damn sure his father never even suspected anything. But if they really let the bastard go off-planet on that idiotic vacation trip it wanted Zhaim never was sure, afterward, just when he had crossed the line between wishful thinking and planning.

Chapter 1

Central: Roi

4/1/38

“But he’s not even eighteen yet,” Marna said. “A manhood Challenge?”

Roi winced inwardly. Most of the time he enjoyed the way Marna had all but adopted him since his own mother had never been found, but there were times when her concern was downright smothering. After all, he’d taken care of himself for most of his life, and that life, as a slave, had been a lot harder than any of the adults around him realized. He glanced pleadingly toward his father, Lai, and Lai’s half brother, Derik.

“Marna,” Lai said quietly, “he’s R’il’noid, not R’il’nian. Half Human. And Humans mature a lot faster than the R’il’nai.”

“Zhaim hasn’t,” Marna snapped back, and Roi was hard put not to cringe. That was his own worst nightmare, that he might become like Zhaim, treating others as things rather than people. Some of his former owners, like Derik, had become good friends since he had been recognized as his father’s son, but he still had no reason at all to trust Zhaim, and very little inclination to let his older half-brother near him.

“At the moment,” his father replied, “I’d say Roi is considerably more mature than Zhaim in his attitude toward other people, even if he is several centuries younger in chronological age. And it shouldn’t be too difficult a Challenge. He’ll have his slave friends with him, and an experienced guide.” His soon-to-be ex-slave friends, Roi hoped. Derik had given him his three closest companions two years ago. He wasn’t comfortable about owning slaves, having been a slave for so much of his own life, but right now they were not ready to make their own way through the world.

“Matter of fact,” Derik said, “they’ll have the same guide Coryn did two years ago. You commented yourself on how much good the trip did Cory. As for the challenge aspect, over half of the planets in the Confederation

have some kind of test or challenge before granting adult status. Thanks be they now recognize each other's tests! My first adjudication was on a planet with a manhood test based on surviving an encounter with a particularly nasty specimen of the local wildlife. They wouldn't even listen to me 'til I passed the challenge, and they weren't really happy about the way I did it."

Roi fought back a grin. He hadn't heard of that particular incident before; a lot had happened in Derik's fifteen centuries, and he hardly expected to know all of it. But he knew his uncle well enough to guess that Derik, by far the best xenotelepath among the R'il'noids, had handled the challenge by using his talent to make friends with the critter—whatever it was.

Elyra, who'd moved in with Derik a year ago, winked a chocolate eye at Roi. Like Derik, she gave the impression of being monotone, with skin, hair and eyes the same color. But where Derik was all golden brown, she was the color of milk chocolate, and small enough to fit under Derik's arm. Not that there was anything small about her personality!

"Marna," Lai said, "are you picking up any precognitive warnings of trouble for Roi?"

Marna shook her copper-gold head. "No," she said, almost reluctantly. "And I've certainly tried hard enough. Maybe you're right, and I'm just being overprotective. If Roi really wants the Challenge, I'll withdraw my objections. But Roi, promise you'll keep in mind-touch with us, and don't push this Challenge to the point that you're in serious danger."

"That's the advantage of a Challenge journey on Falaron," Derik put in. "If the guide or the Company decides they are at real risk—say due to an unusual incident like an earthquake—they'll give them extra help. The Challenge is more sheer endurance in relatively primitive conditions than anything else."

So they would let him take the Challenge, after all. Lai had given him the trip as a graduation present yesterday, but he and Marna had both balked initially when Roi had said he wanted to take the full Challenge journey. Derik had backed Roi from the start. He'd been rather careful not to comment on how the Challenge aspect of the trip would help Roi's reluctance to make decisions that affected others, for which the young R'il'noid was grateful. He disagreed with Derik on that. If his decisions affected others, those others had a right to influence those decisions.

He'd miss his son Wif, now three and a half. But the kind of traveling they'd be doing was no place for a child Wif's age, even if Wif's mother Feline had wanted to go with them—which she emphatically did not. Leaving Wif with the child's overly possessive mother did bother Roi, but his own parents—he thought of Marna as a second mother now—would keep her from doing too much damage. His own mother Lai hadn't been able to find what had become of her, though he said he'd tried, and Roi had no reason not to believe him. She'd been sold, he said, not long after Roi had been sold away from her, and while he had tracked her through several owners, he had eventually lost the trail.

Four days to pack and be ready to go. And now Marna had finally given her permission, they could really start packing. Roi had been wanting this trip ever since Cory had taken a similar trip, though without the Challenge aspect, and he'd already set up the parameters. They would be dog sledding, hang gliding, riding horses, whitewater rafting, and rock climbing. Sailing, too, but that was really because Timi had insisted on it. They were all good at riding and hang gliding, and since the Challenge did not absolutely forbid the use of esper talents, Roi had little doubt of his ability to control the dog teams. The rafting would be the only thing really new, and he looked forward to that.

Timi
4/4/38

“Got your packing finished?” Roi asked, on the eve of their departure.

Timi flinched a little as he turned to answer. “Except for a few things I can't put in 'til the last minute,” he replied. “I just want to take a walk around the corridor system before we leave. Alone. Do you mind?” He knew his tone was sarcastic, but these meetings, exhilarating as they were, frightened him, as well. The one thing he could not be was relaxed and casual, but he could hardly explain that to Roi.

His owner looked at him, a slight frown wrinkling his forehead. “I wish we could just be friends, like we used to be,” Roi said.

“We were slaves together, then, instead of slave and owner,” Timi replied. “Maybe when I'm free”

Roi nodded. “Have a good walk, Timi,” he said as he turned back to his own packing.

Timi almost ran into Amber as he turned toward the corridor. She jumped back, laughing, and repeated Roi's question. "Got your packing done?"

"All but the last-minute stuff."

She tipped her blond head and looked hard at him. "You don't look very excited. I mean, how many slaves get to go on a trip like this? Even Derik said he wished he had the time for that kind of thing."

"A month on horseback? I can think of things I'd rather be doing."

She wrinkled her nose at him. "Well, the rest of us like riding. And we'll be sailing, too. You're good at that. I hope Flame and I don't get seasick."

Timi forced a laugh and headed on down the corridor. They weren't really corridors, of course, but small rooms with jump-gates at each end. He had started early, afraid of interference, and he deliberately chose a long route to his destination, walking by windows that opened on late-evening scenes varying from seacoast to mountains. Most were too dark to see anything without pressing his face against the windows, and he strolled unseeing, trying to understand his own attraction to the R'il'noid he was going to see.

Zhaim was dangerous. He understood that, from what Roi had told him. Zhaim was Roi's half brother, but the two had as little as possible to do with each other. And Timi remembered all too clearly the time when Zhaim had tried to force Roi to sell him. Could he really believe Zhaim's more recent assurances that he had simply felt Timi was being wasted in Roi's hands? Zhaim *had* gotten Timi that desperately wanted conditional acceptance to the Space Academy, when Roi hadn't managed—or perhaps hadn't wanted—to do anything. Oh, Roi's tutoring had helped, but that same tutoring somehow left Timi feeling hopelessly stupid at times. Everything came so easily to Roi! And Roi was so complaisant. Even if Roi found out about this evening, Timi thought, the worst he would do was look hurt. If Zhaim cared about anyone, he would care enough to kill.

Timi turned into a side corridor that led directly to the guest garage, pushed open the door, and looked for Zhaim's silver and gray skimper. There was supposed to have been an Inner Council meeting tonight, though Roi had been let off his usual observer status, and Zhaim, who was blocked against teleporting into the Enclave complex, should have come by jump flyer. Sure enough, the skimper was in its usual place, with Zhaim swearing into an open access hatch.

Timi hesitated a moment, and Zhaim looked up. “Timi!” he said. “You know something about these things. Why won’t it start?”

Timi relaxed in a glow of pleasure as he walked over to peer into the opening. “It was all right on the way in?” he asked.

“Fine, but now it acts like someone else is trying to start it up.”

Timi moved around to where he could see the status panel of the little craft. “Try it again,” he suggested.

The status panel confirmed that the finger panel was recognizing Zhaim, but the start command was getting only about halfway through the system. Timi thought for a moment, mentally going over the starter circuit. There were a couple of places where something could have been jarred loose.

“Hey,” Zhaim said, “what’s this I hear about your getting a vacation?”

Timi grimaced. “We’re all going to Falaron for a couple of months. We’ll be traveling from the Spine Range down to Safeport along the Surprise River. Roi wants to make it a Challenge journey, so it’s not exactly going to be a vacation.” He opened a side access panel, finding and tightening a loose plug. “There’s the problem, I think. Try it now.”

The machine purred into life, and Zhaim swiveled sideways in the driver’s seat. “Good job, Timi. You’ve got a real talent with electronics.” His expression turned serious.

“You said a Challenge? That sounds a bit on the dangerous side.” Zhaim’s voice was concerned. “Timi, I worry about you. Roi’s just too reckless where his friends are concerned. I know it sounds silly, but will you accept a small gift from me? A luck piece? And keep it hidden. Roi’s still pretty prejudiced toward me.” He grimaced.

Timi hesitated. He knew perfectly well that Roi would not approve, but he was sick of looking for Roi’s approval. Zhaim might frighten him, but there was a thrill in defying that fear that Timi found increasingly difficult to resist. Then Zhaim reached into a pocket and pulled out a pendant carved of some translucent flame-orange material. A cat-like creature, with slanted slits of eyes and one paw lifted in warning. Not an expensive piece, he thought, but one that appealed greatly to him. Timi’s hand went out, almost of its own accord, and Zhaim smiled as he dropped the braided leather cord over Timi’s head.

“Matches your eyes,” the R’il’noid said with a smile as he turned in his seat. “Have a good trip, Timi.”

Zhaim

Not until he was back in his own home did Zhaim allow himself to gloat over his success. He now knew roughly where on Falaron Roi and his friends would be for the next couple of months—a piece of information he had been quite unable to worm out of his father or anyone else who knew. He had planted a locator beacon and control circuit in the party. That was certainly worth pulling a plug loose to put the brat in the right frame of mind to accept his “gift.”

And he hadn't expected a Challenge journey. He had assumed that Roi would be closely guarded during his vacation, but on a Challenge journey the group would be very much on their own. This could be an opportunity he would be a fool to miss. Zhaim owned a hunting lodge on Falaron, more as a matter of prestige than anything else. Officially, the place was closed for the season, but that would be easy enough to get around. And from the lodge, it shouldn't be too difficult to eavesdrop on the Company communications. Maybe he could even get a tap on the finders the party would be carrying, as a backup for the beacon on the slave.

Zhaim was not particularly good at long-range precognition. But over the last two years he had discovered that he could use his considerable short-range talent to affect the precognitive warnings of others. He had used this ability for over six months now to hide any precognitive warnings of danger to Roi. Evidently he had been doing a good enough job that Lai had been willing to accept the Challenge journey.

He still did not dare attack Roi directly while Lai or Marna were anywhere near. But if they were both called out of the Central system Could he arrange that, somehow, without attracting any suspicion to himself?

There was the situation in the Kablukolelli Cluster. He had been amusing himself for some time now by egging on the most extreme religious leaders of the four stellar systems that made up the cluster. It wouldn't take much to start a holy war by now, and since the four systems had entered the Confederation separately, any such war would require the immediate attention of a Confederation mediator. If he manipulated his puppets right, Zhaim thought, the situation could rapidly become so explosive that Lai would have to handle it personally.

Had he himself left any tracks? No, he had been very subtle in his manipulations. And he would continue to be just as careful that nothing pointed to any outside agitator.

Marna. He didn't understand Marna as well as he did his father, but he knew better than even to consider attacking Roi the way he wanted to if Marna were anywhere close enough that a mental scream from Roi could reach her. But how could he lure her far enough away that Roi could not reach her without the boosting he'd be unable to find on Falaron? The bastard had barely learned the basics of using his esper talents to protect himself, but Marna was so attuned to her apprentice's mind that Roi could probably reach her on Central from Falaron. The wilderness planet was only about ten light years away, after all.

He walked down the corridor to his bioengineering laboratory as he thought, planning to check his latest experiments with the virus he had been engineering. If he could manage the side effects, he thought, this would be his greatest triumph yet. A planet where no food animals could survive, and he had not only worked out the cause, he had found a solution. Of course the side effects of immediate application would result in killing most of the planet's population, but he was sure he could find a way of preventing that. And then—he half closed his eyes, seeing himself watched anxiously as he released the virus, and then the adulation, the population of the planet shouting his praise, even the Inner Council once again giving him his proper admiration!

The latest experiment only confirmed the others. If he released the virus now, the result might as well be a plague.

A plague.

Marna was a Healer. A planetary plague was one kind of bait Zhaim doubted she could resist.

Was it worth giving up his triumph for a chance to destroy his rival?
And if his father ever suspected

He shuddered a little, remembering a lecture delivered several centuries before, the first time he had tried to justify doing what he wanted by the fact that planetary laws did not apply to High R'il'noids. Zhaim considered that a minor recompense for his labors for the Confederation. His father

"They don't apply because there have been cases where we couldn't do our jobs without running afoul of some ridiculous local regulation," Lai had exploded. "It's been justified because we save millions of lives,

and we can't do that if we're dead. I don't ever again want to hear of your perverting that to suggest that you have a right to kill people at your pleasure because you've saved other lives!"

Plenty of others thought that way, Zhaim thought resentfully. After the lecture he'd kept his hobby well hidden from his father until the bastard's explorations had brought it to the old R'il'nian's attention. And if the old fool could get as upset as he had about the deaths of a few slaves, how would he react to the death of half the population of a planet?

They couldn't trace it to him, he thought. He hadn't even mentioned this particular research project to anyone, because if he failed, he didn't want it known. He'd leave it to Marna to handle the side effects. Once Roi was dead, he might even help handle the crisis. He'd be a hero—not as much of a hero as if he'd taken care of the side effects before he'd released the virus, but certainly not a plague spreader. He looked at the culture vat, considering the best way of getting the virus to its intended host.

And if it didn't work right away, a Challenge journey had all kinds of possibilities for accidents. Playing with the weather would be safest, he thought, if not nearly as much fun as actually getting his hands on the party. He looked at the culture tanks, seeing clouds swirling on a planet ten light years away, and smiled.

Roi

An interwoven knot of arms and legs, with the heads evenly spaced around it. Yes, that was what he would make of the three, with enough motility left that they could writhe a little. He'd have to nick the vocal chords, of course, to tone down any screaming, but he'd long since solved the problems involved in grafting the blood supplies together *What am I thinking? I'm not Zhaim!*

"Of course you're not," Flame's voice came from beside him, and Roi turned his head to find her across from him in the levitation bed. Nightmares again, strong enough that he must have cried out aloud in his sleep. He didn't usually have nightmares with Flame beside him, though.

"I must have rolled away from you," she said.

He went back over what he remembered of the dream. Timi's departure must have triggered it, he thought. His friend hadn't told him where he was going, but he was well aware of Timi's increasing fascination with the R'il'noid who'd once tried to kill him.

No, he wasn't Zhaim. But they were both R'il'noids. He could kill with his mind alone—he knew that, from early experience as a slave. He'd feel his victims' emotions—but one of the things he'd had to learn in studying Healing was how to control that. If he used that knowledge ... Just how much like Zhaim was he?