

Double Play

By Richard Tornello

I'm a Ronin. I have no rank except that given to me by my employer. By definition, I will serve any employer. And by definition, my name has been effaced. I am known and addressed as Ronin. For honorable service, a name may be given back to me.

I wasn't always in such straights. My clan the E'Tivels, guardians of the center, had been eliminated in the great wars. I was the leader of one family group. I survived through skill and luck. As we were allied to the Consul and his armies, I was granted a temporary assignment as a bodyguard for the Consul's family, in particular Ka'Trink, his wife. She acts as his eyes, ears, and roving ambassador. The Consul is a warrior of great strength and of evil repute. I am to protect and serve her, at her will. The Consul brooks no disobedience.

Ka'Trink is the daughter of a great wizard. She has emerald cat like scleras. Her pupils are as white as alabaster. Her hair is long, thick, which she wears intermixed with pearls, and is a deep burgundy color. She is known for her white magic strength, and her beauty. Her magic, if you are fortunate to experience it, is unforgettable. And she has a mute pet sphinx.

I was also stuck with one wife, Sa'Cixa, who despised my very existence. She holds a name from her family. I was clan-less, nameless, no familial relationships, and nothing to relate back to. I was an exile in my own land. An underworld spirit would have been more acceptable as a husband. I was nothing. But I was alive.

Still, as I was duty bound, I sent the money home every lunar rotation.

Ka'Trink's job as her husband's eyes has her traveling from one planet to another. She addresses me, "Ronin, is my ship made ready?" This boarding formality begins before each flight.

"Your ladyship let me insure the systems are up and prepared before you board." There was no reason to move. The checks are made before her arrival.

I looked straight at her even though that was forbidden. I couldn't help it. No being from any planet could resist her beauty and charms.

Her husband executed many for so as much as a glance. It was rumored he was strict and beat her for any infraction, real or imagined. It was also said he once made her parade naked in front

of his troops to see if any, against orders, would lift their heads or glance and venture to spy her beauty. She stopped in front of each soldier. Many lost their heads that day.

But she was The Ambassador. She was the Consul's wife. It was none of my business what and how her family conducted themselves, or why she wore what she did. I observed all and had to wonder about how these people lived in the fashion they did. Speaking of fashion, her uniform was doughty, and down right ugly. I assume it was ordered so. No other planet permitted ambassadors or people of rank be so dressed down. In some locations, the uniforms may have looked the same among all the staff. Upon closer observation the cut and quality were evidence of rank, along with deferential treatment. Clothes couldn't hide the magic and pupils of her eyes.

Ka'Trink turned toward me. Her alabaster pupils narrow as she delves. Her scleras glow deep emerald.

I feel it, the delving and this one time I utter, "I beg forgiveness. I should not stare." Still, I didn't turn away. We are not on our home planet. I will take my chances. I have not been punished yet.

"You always do," she laughs.

Chimes? What, where was that music coming from? Yes that was it, chimes. And that was the first time I had heard her laugh.

I was about to make the perfunctory scan of the ship when she swept past me. Her sword of rank swayed with the movement of her hips. I noticed the slight bulge of a weapon under her flowing skirts strapped what must be legs of ...I could just imagine. Her perfume was a match to her blood type. The effect it created was undeniable.

Get a grip, I laughed to myself. These two missions lasted nine months each. Any fool knew there could be no games between us. My lost rank, not to mention my short physical stature were guaranteed degrees of separation. So was my love of my own life.

On our third mission, as she was boarding, she turned to me as said, "Ronin, you WILL join me for midmeal today. I have made the arrangements."

"Yes, your ladyship." What to do? She commanded it. No matter what my orders are, once we were space bound, she is in total control. I would suffer the consequences.

Midmeal was awkward.

She began, "You are an E'Tivel and one of those who stood up to the Dariates." It wasn't a question. "You fought bravely. That's one reason you were chosen for my guard."

I knew the others: a ronin, married, short and all the qualities her kind looked down upon.

"Your ladyship, if your husband learns of this conversation, I am not ..."

"You are here to protect me. I feel your presence is necessary. We both have to eat. I am in command.
Enough."

I shut up, looked down, and ate.

The next few meetings were not much better for me. Thankfully, Ka'Trink did all the talking.

Out of the blue she confided, "Yes, he is cruel for no reason. He doesn't care. He will be ruler someday. I can't stand him." She hesitated and then stared at me, "or his touch."

"This is not what I should be privy to," I declared standing up.

"Oh, and why not? This is my ship. I am in command. Anything I want, is mine. Is it not? And, I... desire someone to confide in. I have watched you. I know you. I trust you.
Now Sit."

I stared into those eyes. I don't have to answer. She read me. I can feel her delving. The first experiences of her probes were unnerving. Now, I almost welcome them.

She smiled. I heard chimes.

At a meal Ka'Trink said something that was news to me. "Sa'Cixa, your wife, has legally terminated your relationship. She claims long separations are beyond what any marriage can endure. It was granted."

I knew it was coming, but still.

Was there a slight hint of a smirk on her face?

I heard chimes, if only distant. I heard them just the same.

The next meeting she was wearing something new.

"My lady I know it's not my place but that's a new uniform, and if I may say." I am so out of line.

"Yes you may." She hesitated, "please do."

"You look radiant."

She touched my hand. The delving is deeper than ever, the electricity, the connections that passes between us... I fainted.

Her white witch cat eyes stared into mine. She was inches from my face and said, "I knew that would happen. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have."

She is no one to play with, the Consul's...I'm-so-going-to-die-do-I-dare?

I hesitated,

I reached out,

I touched her hand.

Chimes.

The room was empty. Usually there are others in attendance. That had to be her doing.

Her pupils, the color of alabaster, were wide. Her emerald colored sclera's had a radiance she had never shown me. She looked into me. Her long red hair, loose, fell into my face as she kissed me.

She said, "My name is Ka'Trink. Use it Ronin!" She kissed me again.

From that day I could no longer be with another. And That was so NOT me. I never experienced that! I didn't know what to call it. I had been with many. I had been married and even then, when on leave I'd screw around. If the other party were female, alive, human or related alien genetic type, and willing, then I was too. But this, say no and walk away from the other opportunities as they arose? I never, ever experienced anything like that.

Ka'Trink arranged all the assignments. With time, we opened up to each other as neither had done with any other. We were familiar to a degree I relished. Once over a meal we were taking together, she said, "You, dear ronin, are not performing your guardian duties as I desire." She laughed. It was almost a giggle. A giggle, really now. That was new. And yes, the chimes were there too.

I hadn't been available an evening or two for reasons I can't even remember.

"Ka'Trink," I whispered with a grin. "I am at your service. Please forgive my dereliction of my duties. This will not occur again." She looked at me as if to say it had better not, and then ran her hands on my leg and kissed me. That was bold.

I looked forward to the diplomatic missions hoping I wouldn't be transferred. No one knew, or ever let on. If the Consul had spies among us, they were ineffective or doubles. I was never questioned.

Her husband ignored me as if I didn't exist.

Her reasons, why me, and those experiences are still beyond me 20 sidereal periods later.

The Consul died in a shakedown test. The craft held a new drive system designed to contain subatomic black holes as a source of energy. The flight was supposed to demonstrate the coupling of technology with theory. Success would have insured his rise to the top of the political heap. It should have worked. It exploded.

These things can happen.

And after the proper period of mourning, which for the two of us, was that evening of the Consul's death, we made love as never before. For the first time in our assignments, she came to my suite. The sphinx slept outside the door. We would not be interrupted. We had no concerns that evening. We could abandon the past. We did not sleep.

Ka'Trink still had official roles to play. She left me before the morning sun. Her tired eyes were viewed and interpreted as grief by others.

Ka'Trink became the Consul of his sector. No one questioned her elevation.

And I... within time, I became her consort.

I wake to those chimes every morning.

The sphinx opens one eye. Being Ka'Trink's familiar, she knows all. She looks at me, and returns to sleep on Ka'Trink's corner of our ancient wooden bed.

The End

This story is dedicated to Lady Yamayoshi.