## Stand Pat, Ruby Stone

Roger Zelazny

I wrote this in a hurry for complicated reasons involving The llliisiraled Roger Zeiazny, and then the reasons evaporated and it got published in a different place than was originally intended, but everything worked out okay.

When it was agreed that we would marry, the three of us went to Old Voyet of the Long Legs to select a stone signifying the betrothal. This was to be our choice alone, as was the custom.

Kwib favored one the color of passion itself, bright blue, looking as if it were a solid drop of the great ocean. I preferred a jewel the color of fire, representing peace and stability in the home. Since our beloved agreed with me, the ruby stone, a more expensive gem, was selected and Old Voyet of the Long Legs made the incision in our beloved’s brow, set the stone there and bandaged it in place. Our beloved, thenceforth to be known as Ruby Stone, was very brave. He held us and stared at the ground, unmoving, throughout that terrible little ritual.

“Never hurts me a bit,” Old Voyet of the Long Legs remarked, “and I’ve done the Woods know how many over the returnings."We did not reply to the crude humor, but made arrangements to see her paid before the ceremony.

“Will there be a Bottom-Top settlement for all to see?” she asked.

“No, we believe in privacy in these matters,” I answered, perhaps too quickly, for the look I received in reply showed that it had been taken as a sign of weakness. No matter. The walker with the mitteltoth knows its wilpering best.

We bade one another farewell and departed in the three directions, to remain at station houses until Ruby Stone should heal sufficiently to be fit for the ceremony.

I rested and practiced thorn-throwing while I waited for the joggler. On the tenth day it came napping to my door. Before I slew it, I took its message and learned that we would be wed two days hence. The joggler’s innards augured a mixed destiny but its flesh was tender.

Alone at the station house, I bathed and flagellated myself in preparation for the rites. I slept beneath a sacred tree. I watched the stars through its branches. I made offering of the joggler’s bones at its mossy base. I listened to the singers who flew through the Wood— moist, coarse tongues hanging vinelike—collecting relatives, the little singers, to serve the belly-fillmg role in the great song-show of life.

One singer shrieked horribly in mid-swoop and was dragged downward by the tongue to disappear within the pot of a korkanus—a noisy piece of blackness torn from the night.

Before morning, I was at the plant’s side, waiting for it to evert its stomach. It made a gurgling, slopping noise just as light was beginning to come into the world, ridding itself of the previous day’s dross in a little steaming pool. I sprang back so as not to be splashed by the burning fluid. With a stick, I rummaged through the korkhanus’s wastes as it sucked itself back into shape, probing among the bones and scales it had dumped.

They were present, two sets of talons—six, altogether —amid the pulpy remains. I fished them out with my stick and bore them off to the river on a mat of leaves, where I would clean and polish them. I took this as a good omen.

That day I also sharpened the talons and mounted them along the lengths of two sticks I could hold, asthey were far better equipment than any I possessed. I wore them as part of a belt I then wove, looking much like hardroot rings to a wooden clasp.

The rest of the day I purified myself and thought often of my mates to be, and of our wedding. I ate the prescribed meal that evening and repaired early to the sacred tree, where I bad some difficulty in turning to sleep.

The following morning, I made my way back along the route I had taken to the station house. I met with Kv ib and Ruby Stone at the plac' where we had parted. We did not touch one another, but exchanged formal greetings:

“Root of life.”

“Guardian of the egg.”

“Bringer of sustenance,”

“Reaper of the Wood.”

“Walkers in the preiire.”

“Haii.”

“Hail.”

“Hail."'

“Are you ready to take your way to the Tree of Life?”

“I am ready to take my way to the Tree of Life.”

“Are you ready to hang the emblem of your troth upon it?”

“I am ready to hang the emblem of my troth upon it”

“I am ready to accept you both as mate.”

“I am ready to accept you both as mate.”

“I am ready to accept you both as mate.”

“Then let us go to the Tree of Life.”

We leaped into the air and danced and spun and darted, soaring high above the Wood in the sparkling light of day. We turned and curved and circled about one another until we could barely stay aloft. Then we made our way to the great Tree, hung with its countless emblems, there to add our own with the appropriate words and acts. When we touched the ground at its base, Kwib and I each seized one of Ruby Stone’s wings and tore it away.

Old Voyet of the Long Legs, Yglin the Purple-Streaked and Young Dendlit Lopleg were present, among others, to observe, congratulate and offer advice. We listened with some impatience, for we were anxious to be on our way. Observers take great delight in delaying newlyweds who wish to be about their business.

The three of us embraced in various ways and badethe others farewell. There was a murmur of disappointment that things would go no further at that point. But we raised Ruby Stone and together bore him back to the dwelling we had selected, bright nuptial stone glistening in his proud and polished brow. All of us made a fine appearance as we proceeded through the Wood to the Home. The others followed slowly behind us, humming.

When we reached the threshold we patted Ruby Stone’s wingstumps and placed him within but did not ourselves enter.

“Behold, you will wait,” we said together.

“I wiil wait, Beloveds.”

Kwib and I faced one another. The humming ceased. We ignored the onlookers.

“Beloved, let us walk together,” Kwib said.

“Yes, Beloved. We shall walk.”

We turned and made our way past those who had accompanied us, moving into the solitude of the Wood. For a long while we went in silence, taking care not to touch one another. We came at length upon a small glade, pleasantly shaded.

“Beloved, shall it be here?” Kwib asked me.

“No, Beloved,” I said.

“Very well. Dear One.”

We continued on, watching one another, moving in a leisurely fashion. The sun reached the overhead position and began its descent.

After a time, “Beloved, do you wish to rest?” Kwib asked.

“Not yet, Beloved. Thank you.”

“It occurs to me, Partner in Love, that we are heading toward the place of Trader Hawkins. Would you wish to stop by there?”

“For what purpose. Fire of my Life?”

“A drink of the heating beverage. Love.”

I thought about it. The effects of the heating beverage might well serve to hasten things.

“Yes, Co-Walker in the Path of Bliss,” I replied. “Let us visit Trader Hawkins first,”

We went on toward the foothills.

“Light of Love,” I asked, “is it true that there is a mate in a hole behind the Earthman’s dwelling?”

“I have heard this. Love, and I have seen the place, but I do not know. I have heard that the mate is dead.""Strange, Dearest.”

“Yes, Beloved.”

We sat across from one another when we finally rested, watching. Kwib’s dear form was sharp and supple is the deepening shadows, and larger than my own. A moon climbed into the sky. Another, far smaller, followed it later. I had grown hungry as the day progressed, but I said nothing. It is better not to eat, and so it is better not to speak of it.

We arrived at the foothills around dusk. Small lights from the trading post were visible among the trees. Night sounds had already begun about us. I smelled strange odors on the breeze that came down from the mountains.

As we passed through the brush, I said, “Dearest Kwib, I would like to see first the place where the dead mate is kept.”

“I will show it to you. Partner in Life.”

Kwib led me around to the rear of the building. As we went, it seemed that I caught a glimpse of Trader Hawkins sitting on the darkened front porch of the dwelling, gigantic in the moonlight, drinking.

Kwib led me to a huge plot of earth on which nothing grew. At one end of it was set a stone with peculiar markings. A bunch of dead flowers lay at its base.

“The dead mate is under the ground, dear Kwib, under the stone?”

“So I have heard. Light.”

“And why are there dead plants, Love?”

“I do not know. Life.”

“It is very strange. I do not understand. I—”

“Hey! What are you bugs doing out there?”

A light far greater than that of the moons had occurred atop a pole near the dwelling. The Earthman stood at the door, one of me long fire weapons in his hands. We turned toward him and advanced.

“We came to drink the heating beverage,” Kwib said in trader talk. “We stopped first to see the place of the mate who is under the ground.”

“I don’t like anyone back here when I’m not around.”

“We apologize. We did not know. You have the heating beverage?”

“Yes. Come on in.”

The Earthman held the giant door open and stoodbeside it. We entered and followed the hulking form through to the front of the dwelling.

“You have the metal?”

“Yes,” I said, taking a bar of it from my pouch and passing it over.

Two bowls of the beverage were prepared and I was given more than three smaller bits of the metal in return. I left them beside my bowl on the mat.

“I will buy the next one. Beloved,” Kwib said.

I did not reply but drank of the sweet-and-sour liquid which moved like fire through my limbs. The Earthman poured another beverage and perched with it atop a wooden tower. The room smelled strongly though not unpleasantly of odors which I could not identify. Tiny fragments of wood were strewn upon the floor. The chamber was illuminated by a glowing jewel set high on the wall.

“You bugs hunting, or’d you just come up this way to get drunk?\*' ..

“Neither,” Kwib said. “We were married this morning.”

“Oh,” Trader Hawkins’s eyes widened, then narrowed. “I have heard of your ceremony. Only two go forth, and one remains behind....”

“Yes.”

“... And you have stopped here on your way, for a few drinks before continuing on?”

“Yes.”

“I am more than a little interested in this. None of my people ever witnessed your nuptials.”

“We know this.”

“I would like to see the fulfillment of this part of the ceremony.”

“No.”

“No.”

“It is forbidden?”

“No. It is simply that we consider it a private matter.”

“Well, with all respect for your feelings, there are many people where I come from who would give a lot to see such a thing. Since you say it is not forbidden, but rather a matter of personal decision on your part, I wonder whether I might persuade you to let me film it?”

“No.”

“No, it is private.”

“But hear me out. First, let me refill those bowls, though.—No, I don’t want any more metal. If—now,just supposing—you were to let me film it, I would stand to make considerable money. I could reward you with many gifts—anything you want from the post here—and all the heating beverage you care to drink, whenever you want it.”

Kwib looked at me strangely.

“No,” I said. “It is private and personal. I do not want you to capture it in your picture box.”

I began to rise from my bowl.

“We had best be going.”

“Sit down. Don’t go. I apologize. I’d have been a fool not to ask, though. I did not take offense at your looking at my wife’s grave, did I? Don’t be so touchy.”

“That is true, Beloved,” Kwib said in our own tongue. “We may have done offense in viewing the mate’s grave. Let us not take offense ourselves from this request now that we have answered it, and so do ourselves shame.”

“Soundly said, Beloved,” I replied, and I returned to my beating beverage. “This drink is good.”

“Yes.”

“I love you.”

“I love you.”

“Consider the ways of our dear Ruby Stone. How delicate he is!”

“Yes. And how graceful his movements ...”

“How proud I was when we bore him to the Home,”

“I, too. And the sky-dance was so fine.... You were right about the stone. It shone gloriously in the sunlight.”

“And in the evening its pale fires will be soft and subtle.”

“True. It will be good.”

“Yes.”

We finished our drinks and were preparing to depart when the Earthman refilled the bowls.

“On the house- A wedding present.”

I looked at Kwib. Kwib looked at Trader Hawkins and then looked at me. We returned to the mats to sip the fine drinks.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Yes, thank you,” said Kwib.

When we had finished, we again rose to go. My movements were unsteady.

“Let me freshen your drinks.”

“No, that would be too much. We must be on our way now.""Would you wish to spend the night here? You may.”

“No. We may not sleep until it is over.”

We headed toward the front door. The floor seemed to be moving beneath me, but I plodded across it and out onto the porch. The cool night air felt good after the closeness of the trading post. I stumbled on the stair. Kwib reached to assist me but quickly drew back.

“Sorry, Beloved.”

“It is all right, Love.”

“Good night to both of you—and good luck.”

“Thank you.”

“Good night.”

We moved off through the hills, striking downward once again. After a time, I smelled fresh water and we “came to a Wood through which a stream flowed. The moons were falling out of the sky, and there was a heaviness of stars within it. The smaller moon seemed to double itself as I watched, and I realized that this must be something of the heating beverage’s doing. When I turned away, I saw that Kwib had moved nearer and was regarding me closely.

“Let us rest here for a time,” I said. “I choose that spot.” I indicated a place beneath a small tree,

“And I will rest here,” Kwib said, moving to a position across from me beside a large rock.

“I miss my Ruby Stone, Dear One,” I said.

“As do I, Love.”

“I wish to bear the eggs that he will tend. Love.”

“As do I, Slim One.”

“What was that noise?”

“I heard nothing.”

I listened again, but there were no sounds.

“It is said that one who is larger—such as myself— can drink more of the heating beverage with less effect,” Kwib said, after staring into the shadows for a long while and nodding suddenly.

“I have heard this, also. Are you choosing this place, Dear One?”

Kwib rose-

“I would be a fool not to, Beloved. May there always be peace between our spirits.”

I remained where I was.

“Could it ever be otherwise, my Kwib?"I sought the two sticks at my belt, where the talons resembled hardroot rings.

“Truly you are the kindest, the finest ...” Kwib began.

... And then she lunged, her mandibles wide for the major cut.

I struck low on her thorax with one set of talons, rolling to the side as I did so. Recovering, I raked the other across the great facets of her eyes in which images of the moons and stars had glittered and danced. She whistled and drew back. I brought both sets of talons around and across and down, driving them with all of my strength behind the high chitin plate below her dear head. Her whistling grew more shrill and the talons were torn from my grasp as she fell back. The odor of body fluid came to me, and the odor of fear....

I struck her with my full weight. I extended my mandibles and seized her head. She struggled for but a moment, then lay still.

“Be kind to our Ruby Stone,” she told me. “He is so gentle, so fragile....”

“Always, Beloved,” I told her, and then I completed the stroke.

I lay there atop her hard and supple form, covering her body with warm leptors.

“Farewell, Reaper of the Wood. Dear One ...” I said.

Finally, I rose and used my mandibles to cut through the hard corners of her armor. She was so soft inside. I had to bear all of her back within me to our Ruby Stone. I began the Feast of Love.

It was full daylight when I had cleaned Kwib’s armor to a slick, shining hardness and assembled it carefully, working with the toughest grass fibers. When I hung her on the tree she made gentle clicking noises in the passing air.

From somewhere, I heard another sound—steady, buzzing, unnatural. No! It could not be that the Earthman would have dared to follow us and use his capturing box—

I looked about. Was that a giant shadow retreating beyond the hill? My movements were sluggish. I could not pursue. I could not have certainty, knew that I could never have it. I had to have rest, now....

Heavily, slowly, I moved to a place near the rock andsettled there. I listened to the spirit voice of my darling, borne by the wind from her shell....

...- Sleep, she was saying, sleep. 1 am with you, now and ever. Yours is the privilege and the pleasure. Love. May there always be peace between our spirits....

... And sleep I must before I take feet to the trail. Ruby, Ruby Stone, my Ruby Stone, waiting with the color of fire on your brow, glorious in the sunlight, soft and subtle in the evening.... Your waiting is almost ended. It is only yours to wait, to stand and to witness our returning. But now we have finished the trial of love and are coming back to you.... I can see the Home, so clearly, where we placed you.... Soon you will bring your brightness near to us. We will give you eggs. We will feed you. Soon, soon ... The shadow is there again, but I cannot tell ... This part does not concern you. I bury the shame within me—if shame it should be—and I will never speak of it. ... Our beloved Kwib is still singing, on the tree and within me. The poem is peace; peace, troth, and the eternal return of the egg. What else can matter, my Dear One? What else can temper the flight or star the brow of solitude but the jeweled badge of our love. Ruby Stone?

Sleep, sings Kwib. Wait, sings Kwib. Soon, sings Kwib. Our parts in the great song-show of life, Love.