

“Forever” is a relative concept. Sometimes knowing an ending will come can create a special kind of eternity.

KI'RIN AND THE BLUE AND WHITE TIGER

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THEY MEET ONCE EVERY ONE HUNDRED YEARS. ONE COMES from the sea, churning white foam and salt water, parting both with his terrible head and fang-heavy jaws, raising sleek striped flanks and iridescent claws.

The other comes running through the sky cloaked in storm cloud and sheeting rain, her spiraling horn parting mist and ringing thunder. Her head is dragonlike, horselike, her silver and onyx coat neither silken fur nor shimmering scales but something impossibly both.

On delicate polished hooves that chime against the rocks, she lands before the other, from whose coat seawater still runs in quantities enough to feed rivers.

They study each other, sea creature, sky creature, and, as one, in mutual deference, they bow. The spiral horn of the ki'rin cuts a crescent in the sand. The curling whiskers of the blue and white tiger sweep a dozen dozen delicate swaths across the crescent, completing rather than obliterating.

“Come and ran with me through the meadows beneath the sea,” the blue and white tiger says.

“Come and romp with me over moon-kissed mountains of cloud and mist,” the ki'rin responds.

“Wait!” The third voice is shrill, breaking and quaking in fear. “Wait, noble kami, I have a boon to beg of you.”

They turn and look then, bright, unblinking eyes the only thing alike about them, though those of the tiger are blue and those of the ki'rin pearl.

The woman who staggers out to meet them prostrates herself before

the look in those eyes. She is young, barely more than a girl. Her shining black hair is loose like a girl's, but she is a woman and a mother and her baby waves tiny fists in protest from the cradle-board on her back. His feeble whimper gives her courage and she raises herself, folding her hands respectfully before her face, her eyes still downcast.

The ki'rin and the blue and white tiger wait patiently, for though they have only this one day every one hundred years, each one has forever and that does make a difference.

Voice still trembling, the woman addresses her words to the shadows the rising sun casts before the ki'rin and the blue and white tiger.

"My baby is ill with a wasting sickness that turns his bowels to water and turns my milk sour in his belly so that what he does not spit out makes him even more ill."

There is no answer, but the single-horned shadow of the ki'rin turns and the heavy jowled head of the blue and white tiger meets its gaze. Encouraged, if not emboldened, the woman continues.

"My great-grandmother, who is the wisest person in all our valley, says that the forces of the ki'rin and the blue and white tiger, when met in the shrine at the heart of this island, can defeat any ill. She says that her mother brought her before you a century ago and that you healed her so that even today she is hale and strong beyond her years."

"Child," says the rain-shower voice of the ki'rin, her accents rich with pity, "your great-grandmother recalls well but not entirely correctly."

"No, daughter," comes the wave rumble voice of the blue and white tiger. "The force of either the ki'rin or the blue and white tiger can defeat any ill. The other may be bane not blessing."

"Oh!" the woman sobs, the little storm of her tears making streamlets in the sand. "Oh, my baby! Oh, my soul! O-sensei, great kami, I beg you, teach me what I must do!"

"You must choose," the rain-voice, wave-voice say as one. "You must choose and that one will be your cham-pion. The other will oppose."

"But how will I know to choose rightly?" the woman cries, forgetting, in her fear for her baby, to look down and facing the creatures before her.

“That we cannot tell,” the blue and white tiger says. “Nor can you hurry home to ask your great-grandmother what to do,” the ki’rin says, “for only one day in every one hundred years do we meet.”

The woman slides the cradle-board from her back and stares with desperate love at her baby boy. How can she decide and how can she not decide? To decide wrong will be inviting agony. To refuse to choose and thus know that her fear of choosing wrong has failed her boy would be more than she can bear.

But which could she choose? One would be champion and companion—the other enemy and opponent. The tiger’s fur seems thick and soft. His blue eyes hold the ocean’s depths. Is he the healer? She looks at the curving white fangs in his heavy jaws, at the iridescent claws that peek from his paws, and feels doubt.

As the rising sun touches her with wings of flame, the ki’rin’s pearly eyes offer no answer. The single horn on her broad brow is formidable, but her cloven hooves are not weighted with claws, nor her jaws with fangs. She would be the more comfortable companion, but is she the healer? Can she oppose the might of the blue and white tiger?

As the woman stares and studies, Baby opens his rheumy eyes and holds out hands that should be plump, but are shriveled and yellowing. Impulsively, she snatches him from the cradle-board and holds him before the waiting kami.

“Choose your champion, my baby!” she cries, feeling how frail he is, silently praying for mercy and justice to guide him.

The baby’s hands wave wildly. Then, with a chortle of amusement, he reaches for the glint of sunlight imprisoned within the ki’rin’s horn. For a moment he is suffused with a ruddy glow—purification or fever?—the mother does not know. Gently, the ki’rin dips the horn’s needle-point away from the baby’s hands.

“Champion, I,” says the storm voice.

“And enemy, I,” says the wave roar. “I give you an hour. The game ends at sunset.”

With a bound of great paws and a lashing of his tail, the tiger is gone, the forest swallowing his blue and white into green and shadow. The ki’rin raises her head to watch him depart and her flanks shudder with a sigh. Her

pearl eyes are without an expression the woman can read as she lowers her head again.

“Since we are to be companions,” the ki’rin asks, “what shall I call you, woman?”

“Yuki,” she says and the ki’rin bobs her head and Yuki feels that the kami is smiling behind her eyes of pearl.

“Come then, Yuki. Take your baby and climb upon my back. The forest is deep and the shrine is far and I can run more swiftly than you.”

Yuki carefully straps Baby onto his cradle-board and then mounts the ki’rin. Where the ki’rin’s mane is fullest, she grasps a double handful and wraps it about her fists.

Even as Yuki decides that she is secure, the ki’rin begins to run. The gait is so smooth that Yuki can hardly believe that they are moving, but the pace is so great that roses blossom on her cheeks. For the first time since Baby fell ill, she actually smiles.

Beneath fruiting cherry and ripening plum, through solemn avenues of bamboo so tall that the rising sun does not penetrate, the ki’rin carries Yuki and her son. Though Yuki was born on this island and believed that she knew all of its haunts, she does not know these forests and realizes that they run in realms apart from those of humankind, where kami, kappa, and oni are the inhabitants. She shudders then and the ki’rin answers without slowing.

“Listen carefully, Yuki. Right or wrong, I am your champion and if you and your baby hope to return to your home, you must trust and obey me.”

“I hear you, Ki’rin.”

“The blue and white tiger will seek to keep us from the shrine, but do not mistake yourself about him. He may seem all fang and claw and terrible strength, but he is a creature of ancient guile and older magic.”

Yuki wonders, unjustly perhaps, if she has chosen the wrong champion, for the ki’rin seems much in awe of the blue and white tiger. Still, she holds her tongue.

“You must obey me in all things,” the ki’rin continues, “and, if you do, I will not fail to get you and the baby to the shrine before the day’s end.”

“I hear you,” Yuki says, “and I will obey you.”

But she continues to wonder, for the ki’rin has only promised to carry them to the shrine, not to heal the baby.

They run on and the running is like flying, the cloven hooves of the ki’rin never marking the earth over which she speeds.

After a time, Yuki hears a new sound, the heavy thud-ding of feet. The sounds come from two feet, not four. Nor could such slapping come from the velvety paws of the blue and white tiger, but nevertheless, Yuki is afraid. The ki’rin increases her pace, but their pursuer is not slowed by the weight of a mother and child. Soon Yuki sees what follows.

“An oni!” she shrieks.

The ki’rin nods, her horn slicing clear the path for them.

“Describe it for me,” she says, and Yuki hears her panting beneath the words.

“He is so tall that he seems to brush the sky, and his skin is muddy blue,” Yuki says. “His body is tufted with coarse hair but his head is bald as an egg—though not as shapely. Terribly, he has three eyes and tusks that twist out from his lower jaw. He wears little but a rag about his hips, but the mallet in his hand is spiked with iron.”

“Ah,” pants the ki’rin, “I know him. He is strong but foolish. Hold on.”

Yuki does so, glancing fearfully over her shoulder as the oni grows closer. He begins to bellow threats that are lewd and mocking. Yuki’s ears burn with shame, but the ki’rin does not pause.

And then it seems that disaster must come, for glancing ahead Yuki sees before them a lake of deep blue water interrupted only by lily pads, each bedecked with yellow or pink or white lilies. Horribly, the ki’rin is slowing, turning, facing the oni at last. Her flanks are heaving and her shimmering fur is dewed with sweat.

“Back away, oni!” she challenges. “Back or I will gore you!”

“Hah!” the oni guffaws. “Gore me? You would never get by my hammer!”

“You could never get close enough to use it!” the ki’rin taunts in return.

His answer is an angry bellow. Waving his hammer, the oni runs faster. Not panting now, the ki’rin spins and runs, her cloven hooves barely grazing the lily pads as she races across the lake. Yuki looks back in terror and sees the oni make a tremendous leap onto a lily pad. There is a terrific splash and he sinks in an upwelling of mud and water.

Laughter shakes the ki’rin’s flanks. “May all of the blue and white tiger’s allies be so foolish! I fear that they will not be, and the way is yet long.”

She runs on then, through fields of golden daisies and purple asters, and over rising hills. The day is clear but not hot. Yuki is grateful. Baby sleeps, but his sleep is restless and punctuated with little cries. His wrappings smell foul and feel damp.

On a hillcrest, beneath a ruined arch, ghosts cry out to them—promising miracles. Yuki longs to turn, but the ki’rin runs on.

From a swampy pool beneath a weeping willow tree, a kappa wrinkles its green monkey-face and begs them to pause for a game of finger-pull. Yuki brightens, for kappa give magical gifts to those who defeat them, but the ki’rin runs on.

In a valley ringed with bamboo, the ki’rin finally pauses.

“I wish to rest,” she says. “Watch until the sun touches the tip of the lone pine on that ridge. Wake me then or sooner if anything troubles you.”

Yuki nods and dismounts. The ki’rin kneels then and folds her legs beneath her. Horn resting on the ground, she falls quickly to sleep.

Washing baby with water from a spring and freshening his reeking wraps keeps Yuki busy. Repeatedly, she checks the sun in relation to the pine. She rinses her own face and combs her wind-tangled hair with the tortoise-shell comb of her grandmother. When she finishes plaiting her hair, she checks the sun again.

Surely it should have moved further by now. Is this a trick of the spirit land—that the sun moves more slowly?

She glances at the ki’rin, then again at the sun. This time she sees

something, a trembling in the bamboo and a faint flash of blue and white. She checks again. The pine tree has moved!

Anxiously, she shakes the ki'rin awake.

"Oh, Ki'rin!" she cries, "I have been fooled!"

Quickly, she explains. The ki'rin snorts in anger and admiration.

"He is clever, the blue and white tiger is. He must have heard my instructions to you. Climb on my back and we will run again. This time, your sharp eyes have saved us!"

If Yuki believed they flew before, now she learns what flying is. The ki'rin leaps on the wind. The speed of her passage scorches the air and tiny flames lick her coat. Yuki unwraps one hand from her grip on the ki'rin's mane and pats out the flames that threaten her and Baby.

Thunder rumbles from behind them and lightning flashes.

"As I feared," the ki'rin calls, "the blue and white tiger has set storm spirits after us. They could not find us on the ground, but here I am too visible. We must descend and go more slowly or they may harm you and Baby."

Yuki pats the silken neck in understanding. She begrudges the loss of speed, but the storm spirits are close now. She can see their gaping mouths and the clapping hands from which lightning spurts.

"How much further must we go, ki'rin?" she asks when again they are traveling over the earth.

"A far distance," the ki'rin replies. "The shrine is atop that snow-peaked crest. Were we to fly, we could be there swiftly, but the ground between is craggy and bad-tempered."

Yuki studies the snowy crest as the ki'rin runs. Is that a splash of blue and white on the slope? She keeps her fears to herself. Then the rain begins.

It is a slick rain, icy rain, rain that tastes of salt and sea. She does not need to be a ki'rin to know that this is more of the blue and white tiger's magic. Taking Baby from her back, she cradles him in her arms and bears the storm's fury on her bowed back and head. In time, her tears add to the

salt storm's force.

Despite the rain, they continue on and then, unbelievably, the ki'rin stumbles, tries to recover, then falls, her horn plowing through the mud. Her knees smash into the wet earth and she lets out a tiny wail of pain.

Jolted, Yuki is thrown forward, only her arms entangled in the ki'rin's mane saving her from falling to the ground. From the cradle-board, Baby shrills more in anger than in fear.

Yuki slides to the muddy ground and strokes the ki'r-in's head.

"O-sensei, how badly are you hurt?"

The ki'rin blinks, her pearl eyes washed with red. She weeps tears that look like blood.

"I hurt terribly, Yuki. My front legs ache like fire in the bones."

"Will you . . . will you die?"

"I cannot die. I am immortal." The ki'rin staggers to her cloven hooves. "But I cannot run. Certainly, I cannot run with a burden."

"Then we will walk," Yuki says bravely.

"That we must," the ki'rin agrees. "Perhaps we can outwalk this storm."

They struggle on. The ki'rin limps, favoring her fore-legs, right over left. Yuki holds Baby, who grows increasingly still as he becomes colder and wetter.

Then, like a beacon through the rain, they see a cottage. It is small with a thatched roof, and mud and daub walls. A thin but steady stream of smoke comes from the cobble-stone chimney.

Ahead the cloud cover is thinning and the sun can be seen, past apex now.

"Let us rest here," Yuki begs, when the ki'rin would have limped onward. "Baby is cold and miserable. So am I."

"And so am I," the ki'rin admits, "but Baby will stay ill if we do not get

to the shrine before sunset.”

Yuki brightens. “Does that mean that you are the Healer?”

The ki’rin shakes the rain from her mane. “I cannot say, Yuki. All I am saying is that there is no chance for Baby to be healed if we do not reach the shrine.”

Baby sneezes.

“Please, o-sensei. Let us rest, just for a short time!”

“As you wish, Yuki,” the ki’rin sighs.

Yuki hurries forward and raps on the door. It opens almost as soon as the sound dies off. A monk stands there, dressed in a robe of white belted with blue. He steps back and bows deeply.

“Come to my fire, travelers. I have tea, seaweed cakes, and rice to warm you.”

Yuki bows as deeply as she can with the baby in her arms. The ki’rin also bows, although more slowly, tracing a crescent on the floor with her horn. Then she limps into the cottage.

“Tea, ladies?”

“Thank you,” Yuki says, “and may I have some hot water for the baby?”

“Of course.”

The monk busies himself serving tea, pouring a deep, shallow bowl for the ki’rin and heaping seaweed cakes on a flat tray that he sets by her head.

“You appear to be wounded,” he says softly, “ki’rin.”

“I am,” she glances down to her bruised legs.

“I have a salve. Let me anoint your wounds.”

She looks into the monk’s eyes. They are blue.

“Very well. I would be appreciative.”

The monk fetches a carved soapstone jar filled with a sweet-scented unguent. Dipping two fingers into the un-quent he rubs it into the ki’rin’s bruises. Her eyes lose their pinkness; then her eyelids grow heavy and she drifts to sleep.

Yuki watches with a mixture of fear and relief. Baby drowns now, his wet clothing steaming in front of the fire.

“The rainstorm is moving on,” the monk says, standing at the window and looking out.

“How long until the ki’rin awakes?”

“You can awaken her now,” the monk replies, “but let her sleep. She is in pain.”

“But I need her to take me to the shrine at the mountain’s crest before sunset,” Yuki says, “and the sun is setting.”

“Why do you need to go there?”

“Baby is ill and the ki’rin is helping me take her to the shrine—she is my champion against his illness.”

“Have you chosen the correct champion?”

“I hope so,” Yuki says softly. “It is too late to change.”

“Is it?” the monk asks. “As you can see, I have the gift of healing. Why risk your son further? And can you trust the ki’rin? Hasn’t her behavior been peculiar at times?”

“Peculiar?”

“The ki’rin can fly. Why didn’t she simply fly you to the shrine? You could have been there in minutes.”

Yuki frowns. “Ki’rin seemed to fear the storm spirits.”

“She is a storm spirit—among other things. Why would she fear storm spirits?” The monk’s voice is gently persuasive.

Yuki reaches for Baby's clothing and begins to dress him.

"The ki'rin is my champion. I will stay with her for the rest of the journey if she is strong enough to go on." She touches the ki'rin on one shoulder. "Wake, Ki'rin. Wake."

The pearl eyes blink open and the ki'rin staggers to her trembling legs. Shaking out her mane of black iron and silver, she bows to the monk.

"Thank you for the tea."

Outside the cottage, the ki'rin leads the way up the path to the shrine. The rain has stopped, but the trail is still slick with salty mud. Above, the sun is nearing a reddening horizon.

"How are your legs, Ki'rin?" Yuki asks timidly. "Did the monk's salve heal them?"

"It did not heal them, but the pain is somewhat numbed."

Yuki struggles on for a few more steps. "The monk—he was the blue and white tiger, was he not?"

"He was." The ki'rin's reply is a whisper.

"He helped us," Yuki says. "He gave us rest and medicine and made the rain stop. Why did he help if he is your enemy?"

"Perhaps he meant to delay us," the ki'rin says. "Even with rest and medicine, I cannot run for more than a short distance. I doubt that we will reach the shrine. Perhaps his charity was in reality the last move in a battle."

Yuki reflects, remembering what the monk had said, the temptations he had offered.

"No," she says at last. "He was worried about you. What is there between you? Why do you meet once every one hundred years? The blue and white tiger may be your opponent in this game, but he is not your enemy."

The ki'rin stops then and her eyes of pearl meet the dark brown eyes of the young woman. Carefully, she touches her with the tip of her spiraling horn. Yuki feels the tiny crescent caress before the ki'rin sighs and begins to climb again. As she climbs, she hesitantly speaks, choosing the words

with as much care as she chooses where to place her injured hooves.

“Long ago, before even the gods had names, long before Amaterasu retreated into her cave or Susano slew the eight-headed dragon of Isumo, long ago when Izanagi and Izanami were populating the islands, both the blue and white tiger and I were born.

“We fell in love in those long ago days when all was new. Together we ran beneath the sea and through the clouds. We loved each other until the day that we learned that all who love must fade and die.”

“Is that so terrible?” Yuki asks. “No one wishes to die, but death is a part of living—the fit end to a good life. Death is only terrible when it comes for one who has not yet lived.”

Here she hugs Baby to her breasts.

“Maybe,” the ki’rin says, “but I could not bear that because of my love someday the world would no longer know the terrible beauty of the blue and white tiger, that someday the waves would no longer resound with his roar or carry in their tossing the blue and white of his coat. And he . . .”

The ki’rin’s voice becomes zephyr soft. “And he could not bear that the storm clouds would not flash with my passing or the cloud mountains part at my flight. So we resolved to part from each other and meet on one day each one hundred years. On that day, we would seek to learn if we still loved and try to learn to be enemies. In that way, each would live forever.”

“So my boon and the cure for Baby’s illness—is this nothing more than a game for you?” Yuki’s voice cracks in anger.

“Oh, no, little human,” the ki’rin says. “We care, for only a competition for life and death could drive us apart, only that reminds us why we have forsaken our love.”

She pauses and in the setting sun Yuki sees that the ki’rin’s eyes are red with tears.

“Can we reach the shrine before sunset?” Yuki asks.

The ki’rin sags, beaten.

“No, Yuki. My legs are so sore I could only bear you twenty paces at a run. I cannot run to the mountain crest.”

Yuki remembers the words of the monk who was the blue and white tiger. "But you can fly, Ki'rin. Fly us to the shrine!"

The ki'rin straightens, raising her horned head high. She studies Yuki and the tears are vanished from her pearly eyes.

"I would need to leap off the mountain to gain the air. I cannot run to embrace the wind as I did before. Can you trust me?"

"I can."

"I would need to fly so fast that my fur would be fringed with flames and even the scales below would be burning hot. Can you brave that?"

"I can!"

"We will be pursued by oni of the air, far more terrible than the ones of the land. If they catch us, they will eat Baby as a treat and drink sake from his skull. You they will dismember, feasting on your limbs as they rape your body. Can you dare this?"

"I can!" Yuki cries, but she shudders as she promises.

"Then climb on my back and hold Baby tightly. We run for the wind and fly for the shrine!"

Then the ki'rin, stumbling some on limbs still numb, charges for the mountain edge. She leaps into the emptiness and Yuki's screams tear her throat raw as they plummet toward the jagged rocks below.

She can see the rocks' polished points and scent the dirt before the ki'rin paws the heating air with her cloven hooves and turns them upward.

"We are flying!" Yuki cheers.

"We are," the ki'rin gasps, "but if I am to reach the top before the sun sets, I must burn the air. Hold fast, for if you let go, I will never be able to catch you!"

And she flies, and if before the air had burned hot, now it burns hotter, singeing Yuki's hair, even her brows, and scorching her throat and eyes. She bends over Baby to save him from the worst, but she knows she offers scant protection.

Then from behind she hears the threats of the oni of the air. Their voices grow louder and their lewd words more distinct until Yuki cannot tell if she burns from shame or from heat.

The ki'rin flies on unfaltering, but Yuki can feel her heart pounding beneath the scales and hear the rasp of breath that tears from the ki'rin's dilated nostrils.

Suddenly, there is a jolt. Motion ceases and Yuki fears that the oni have grabbed the ki'rin by her tail and even now are pulling them toward them. She struggles not to scream.

Then, wonderfully, the harsh voices wail in defeat and fade into the distance. Coolness soothes her burning skin and the wind voice of the ki'rin speaks.

"Brave Yuki, we are here. Open your eyes and look about. The shrine is before you and the sun is only touch-ing her rest."

Yuki sits upright, then slides to the ground, Baby blink-ing sleepily in her arms. The shrine lies ahead, a simple place with a curving roof, fronted by a deep pool of dark water. Pine needles carpet the ground and snow nestles in the trees above and ices the curl of the pagoda roof.

"Are you the Healer?" Yuki asks, her voice soft with dread that his last challenge will mean her loss.

"For you, I am," the ki'rin says, "but so is the blue and white tiger, for without him I would not make this run nor be on the shore to hear your boon."

The blue and white tiger rises from the pool then and pads over to join them. Nose to nose, he greets the ki'rin and laps her legs with his coarse blue tongue. Instantly, the bruises vanish, her exhaustion fades, and she is again filled with the power of the wind, the power of the storm and the clouds.

"Hold out your baby," the blue and white tiger rumbles.

The young mother trembles at placing her son before the heavy jaws, but she obeys. The tiger rasps out with his tongue and Yuki can see the illness scoured away in one stroke. A second lick gives back flesh and color, and a third gives humor and health.

Baby chortles as she hugs him to her. The ki'rin and the blue and white tiger laugh their storm cloud, sea wind laughs with him. In perfect certainty, Yuki knows that baby will live and be strong. With luck he will go on to his hundredth year and in turn tell the tale of the ki'rin and the blue and white tiger to his descendants as her great-grandmother had to her.

"And what will you do?" Yuki asks the kami. "The sun is nearly set and your one day of every one hundred years is nearly gone,"

The blue and white tiger bows before the ki'rin.

"Come and run with me through the meadows beneath the sea."

The ki'rin studies first him, then Yuki, and bows in turn.

"Come and romp with me over moon-kissed mountains of cloud and mist."

"I would," the blue and white tiger growls, "but all things that love must die and I could not be your death."

"Perhaps there is more to life than merely not dying," the ki'rin responds. "I would not rob the world of your glory, but ..."

"Oh, do it!" Yuki cries. "Run and romp—you're dead alive now, living only to preserve what you are. I promise that the sea and sky will always hold your memories. I will keep them and give them to Baby and he will pass them on to his children."

There is silence then, broken only by the waiting of the drifting snow in the pines. Then the ki'rin bows and etches a crescent in the snow with her horn. The blue and white tiger embellishes her mark with a dozen dozen delicate whisker swaths.

"We should take Yuki and the baby home before the night comes on," the ki'rin says. "Their family will miss them."

"Yes," growls the blue and white tiger, "and then?"

"I will come and run with you through meadows beneath the sea."

"And I will come and romp with you over moon-kissed mountains of cloud and mist."

“Forever?”

“Forever.”

* * * *

AFTERWORD

Unlike some of the authors in this anthology, I didn't meet Roger Zelazny until the final stage of his life. So, I never really knew the shy poet or the man awkwardly dealing with the acclaim that accompanied even his earliest efforts. (Everyone knows that Roger won a Hugo and two Nebulas in 1966. Did you know that in 1966 and 1967 his own novelettes competed against each other on the Hugo ballot?)

The Roger I met was the multiple award-winner, the man secure in his fame, content with his profession, and anticipating years of writing to come. He was still shy, but he had learned how to compensate for that shyness by becoming a polished public speaker, a man gently patient with his fans.

With people like me.

We met first through a letter I wrote, kept in touch with six months of brief notes, and finally met in person at Lunacon in New York in 1989. It was the beginning of a friendship that would grow stronger and more important to us both. In a strange way, even though he is gone, our friendship continues because of the impact he had on so many areas of my life.

The most obvious area was in writing. When we met, I was just finishing a Ph.D. in English Literature and planning to turn some of the mad energy I had focused on graduate work to writing fiction. Roger read my early efforts, provided gentle criticism, and, most importantly, introduced me to the intricacies of the business. He let me make my own mistakes, never strove to turn me into a carbon copy of himself (even when that might have meant I would have published more quickly), and rejoiced with me over my little successes.

He lived to see his belief in my abilities confirmed. We celebrated the acceptance for publication of my first four novels, collaborated on several projects, and discovered in each other the friend and playmate we'd been missing.

“Ki'rin and the Blue and White Tiger” was written before Roger's

death. It was his favorite of my short pieces. (We even had a bet about it; he lost—twice.) For me, it was one of those stories written in a flurry of inspiration. The title came one day; the rest was written in the two days that followed.

Not until after Roger's death did I realize that I had written the story in response to my own awareness that, no matter how hard both of us were trying to prevent it, the cancer was probably going to kill him. It's a story that confronts the reality that when you love someone, you accept along with the joy the eventual sorrow—the pain, the loss, the incredible loneliness. It's a rare couple that faces death together. Usually, someone is left behind.

I think Roger knew what I was facing before I did and I suspect that's why he loved the story. I don't have the chance to ask him if I'm right or to ask any of the other questions I've wanted to ask since June 14, 1995. Still, I'm glad for the questions I did get to ask, for the answers that I have.

It's worth it all, even in the end, even for the one left behind.