

The background of the cover is a misty, golden-hour landscape. A large, dark rock formation stands in the center, partially obscured by a thick mist. To the right, there are several trees, including a prominent evergreen. The overall color palette is warm, dominated by oranges, yellows, and browns. The sun is visible in the upper center, creating a bright glow and lens flare effects.

# RONIN

A CONQUERORS OF K'TARA  
SHORT STORY

L.A. DI PAOLO

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## RONIN – A Conquerors of K'Tara Short Story

by L.A. Di Paolo

**R**onin had decided to go down into the plains today, and to go there on his own, ignoring everyone's advice, including that of his digimate and generelations, and that of his friend Canyon, though the former and the latter had different reasons for trying to dissuade him from his plan. He would go to the old—or, as many might say, decrepit—city of Boulder, where he had heard he could find two things he had been wanting for a long time: try some *realmeat*, and perhaps befriend a fullhuman female—though he had no idea how he might do that. And coming down had been exactly as they had told him it would be: stressful. First the security checks, then the health checks—which were meant not to protect the Downsiders, but to have a baseline to compare him against when he came back, to protect the people from Upside—and finally the briefing checks where he was forced to waste fifteen minutes listening to a paranoid government official telling him and the other travelers what to do and not to do once Downside, including serious warnings against prolonged physical proximity with the locals and emphatic prohibitions against physical contact with them, especially for Upsiders like him with mostly organic bodies.

The actual trip from Upside to the plains had only taken ten minutes, but he would not have minded it if had taken longer because the view had been absolutely transfixing. Seeing with his own eyes the dropping ridges, the vast expanse of arid land with its amazing reds and tans, and that ancient city at the bottom, seeing all that with his own eyes was so much more exhilarating than anything he had seen in the virtuals.

At destination though—as he came out of the transporter—his guts had tied themselves into worse knots than he had

expected. The unfamiliar sounds and unfamiliar faces, the strange heat and sights—it was all a little overwhelming. Only the faces of the few Control cops—as strange as that was—in their synthetic coverings, and recognizable forms and faces gave him some measure of comfort. But he had *wanted* to come, had decided to come despite the warnings, and so—after a brief hesitation—he called-up his mind map, searched for the directions to the main market his friend Canyon had told him about, and started walking. He also turned off all private communications so that he would not be disturbed by any friend or generelation wishing to pry on him during his visit.

Thirty minutes later, he stood in front of a ricemeat vendor's booth. The male's skin, like every other fullhuman's, was the color of dirt, scarred and blemished.

After finishing with another customer, the male approached and spoke. Ronin wondered what he was saying; he knew these people still used their voices to communicate, but he should still be able to understand them, shouldn't he?

Ronin made a sign to slow the male down and forced a whisper out of his voicebox, hoping he would be understood. He said, "A juicy one?"

The male shook his head and uttered more unintelligible words to his female partner. But she looked Ronin up-and-down warmly, and went in. Did *she* understand him? And was she going to bring him some realmeat? He hoped so.

Ronin waited patiently, although he felt uncomfortable under the male's scornful smile. How dare he look at him so? But it was his own fault, after all. What Upsiders ever came down here to ask for realmeat? Certainly not the proper, law-abiding ones. Only wild ones like his friend Canyon who came to have a blast exploring and enjoying things which weren't available Upside ever did so. Canyon had told him you had to know where

to go and how to ask for the *realmeat* because the food *was* illegal, and even if one wouldn't be *jailed* for being found in possession of it, one could still be fined and shamed for it. This ricemeat vendor was one of them that would sell you the realmeat if you knew the code. Had Ronin asked for it incorrectly? He hoped not.

Ronin had come down to the plains for two things: to try real meatflesh, for which he had always had an unexplainable fantasy, and to meet a fullhuman female because he was tired of virtual relationships and visiloves, and he yearned for the type of companionship and love he saw in very old movies, though everyone he knew Upside thought him queer for it. And although Canyon thought him just as queer, he had accepted Ronin's strangeness and had shown him digirecordings of fullhumans females he had met while on his multiple trips Downside, and had even told Ronin that he would introduce him to a few if he came along with them on their next visit. But Ronin was not the social type, and so, after much time spent motivating and encouraging himself, he had finally decided to do this on his own that very morning.

After about ten minutes, the female vendor came back. She had an eager smile on her pocked, chubby face, and she looked at him with curious eyes. Ronin assumed it was because she had never before seen a smooth-skinned, blond, six-foot tall human. He blushed. *Why did I do that?* There were also three other females standing behind her, one of whom—the younger one—was in fact really beautiful, and all three were looking at him with hands on their mouths, covering their giggles. Ronin's eyebrows knitted in a frown; he couldn't tell if they were laughing at him or trying to hide their blushes at seeing a male from Upside. If because of the former, it was his own fault for looking so out-of-place; he should have come with more appropriate clothing. But the possibility that their reactions were due to the latter cause gave him shivers. Indeed, two were not pretty at all, with skin

blemished and scarred from the conditions on the planet and the continued degeneration of the fullhuman genome due to some viral disease that had infected Downsiders a few centuries back. This was one of the reasons Upsiders were prohibited from physical contact with the locals, even though he'd seen an official recording stating that the disease was not contagious.

Ronin's eyes lit up when the younger female, perhaps eighteen, twenty-two, or twenty-six—he could not tell the ages of people down here—moved her hand and gave him a smile which troubled him deeply. The fact was, he had only seen such smiles in the movies, and never on the faces of any Upsider, whether male, female or neutral.

Just now, the female vendor said to the male something that sounded like, "Hereyago, luv. Tsforthesider." He wasn't certain what those words meant, but he could tell from her glances she had come back with what he was looking for. Since his arrival, he had felt out-of-place and uncomfortable interacting with the locals, such as with the child who came to touch him on his way here, and the fullhuman female who then came to retrieve the child with diffident looks and apologetic words. But now, seeing that little illicit package in the female's hand, he felt a secret excitement and ached to be given it, and he looked at the vendors eagerly, and forced a croaky "please" out of his mouth.

The male replied to the female, who must be his *wife*, and said something that sounded like "Thanks, cotcake!" He then took the package carefully, turned toward Ronin and handed it to him, saying, "Your *juicy one*."

Ronin took the package with an almost reverent motion. When his friends and generelations found out about this, they would be whizzed. Just now, an unbelievable smell reached his nostrils through the wrapping, and—unable to resist it—he moved to open the package, just enough, to peek inside.

As he did, the ricemeat vendor turned from a darkish tan to a furious red, and he put his hand on Ronin's who froze. When he realized what he had been about to do, he looked around, expecting a squad of cops to assault him. But there were none, and his heart slowed. He then made careful motions to re-wrap his sandwich properly and completely, and then moved it away from his face to lessen the inviting smell.

Ronin looked back at the vendor with an apologetic smile. The male said, "Forget it, fourinhundred."

With another look of confusion in his expression, Ronin asked the man to repeat himself.

With an annoyed look, the male did so, enunciating each word, "Four. Hundred."

*Four hundred?! I knew this would be expensive, but four hundred?* Ronin put his finger on the scanner, paid for his "ricemeat" and made to leave, but something held him back—the girl. He wanted to know her. But, how would he know her? He wished he could invite her to follow him. But what would they do? He couldn't even speak properly. Cursing himself, he gave her a hurried glance and went. Not a moment later, he heard the *husband* grumble and then his female make some soothing sounds. Ronin smacked his head, realizing that he had been rude, and he turned around to say 'thank you' to the couple. He then gave the *oh-so beautiful* fullhuman female a final yearning look and left.

Presently, Ronin paused and thought, *Damn! I wish there were a way to know that young female. Perhaps I can come back later...but what would I say to her?* And he berated himself for thinking he could come here and meet a girl, not knowing anything about Downside society, nor even anything about initiating a conversation with an unconnected person. When he started again, he threw all frustrating thoughts aside and walked

with his mind totally focused on the package, which he continued to hold with growing eagerness.

He *knew* no one would believe him when he told them what he had done during their next diginection. Ronin? Go Downside? And with courage enough to ask for realmeat? But he had done it! He had done it and done it *all* on his own! Except—but he stopped that thought before it discombobulated him again.

Now, he needed to find a quiet place where he could sit and savor his food. He had no idea what animal had been sacrificed to provide the substance for the sandwich, but it must be from one of the few large animal species that still existed on the planet. His friend had told him that it was probably raven meat.

Ronin searched for a while to find a spot away from anyone, because his mind map did not indicate the density of people in various locations, as it did Upside. He finally spied a bench set in the middle of a small clearing, which stood in the center of the large park on the south side of Boulder. He walked to it, speeding-up his step a little, so eager he was to get his teeth into the sandwich.

Ronin sat himself down and looked around to make certain no one was close enough to see him unwrap his food. As the strange fiber wrapping came off, he sensed his mouth starting to salivate. He also felt nervous and anxious, afraid that anyone who saw him would immediately recognize him for an Upsider and know what he was doing. He berated himself for it, but what could he do? This place was as foreign to him as Keppler or Enceladus given that he had only ever been Upside, even when he travelled.

The sandwich that he saw under the wrapping looked simply marvelous, mouthwateringly marvelous. People of the past would have said ‘divine,’ but using such ancient terms was frowned upon Upside, and a person could only read them in

antique digirecords, or in books—if one let themselves give-in to a sudden desire to visit the *library*, a facility in New Rome that kept records from before the chip age.

The smell now overwhelmed Ronin thoroughly, and he closed his eyes while he breathed it in. He let himself feel the shivers that ran through him. Nothing he knew Upside compared to this; nothing he had ever tasted, smelled, or looked at. The food there was as synthetic as their bodies, their speech, their relations, and everything else. Only the organic parts on a shrinking portion of Upsiders still had anything in common with people down here.

After one more suspicious look around, Ronin brought the sandwich to his mouth and bit into it. His entire body exploded with an onrush of sensations he had never felt before, not even during his visiloves. Some people said fleshlove was better, the best thing a human being could experience. But how would he know? Even though he still had a mostly organic body—including his head, torso, abdomen, *and* his reproductive organs—copulation was frowned upon Upside. Perhaps, he thought, if he could meet a fullhuman female Downside, he'd be able to know the truth of it since people down here came together as nature had originally intended it—through copulation. He thought of the young female he'd seen at the ricemeat vendor's booth, and sighed just as the taste and smell of the food in his mouth called his attention back with a bang, and he savored the realmeat, proud of himself for having had the courage to come down, purchase it, and eat it.

After Ronin finished swallowing his first bite and had licked his lips completely, he brought up his hands to get a new bite, all the while enjoying the smell of it. But the sound of a male came from behind and he froze.

“What'you downing there?”

Ronin started, and quickly rewrapped his sandwich. He then looked-up with what he hoped was a “stay-away-from-me” look on his face and inadvertently sent a reply via his brainchip. The male, of course, didn’t receive him.

*Damn! Did I just do that?* Ronin sighed, thought of a simple reply, and forced words through his voicebox again, “I’m down here...enjoying sun. Please, move along.” Ronin didn’t hate Downsidiers—he just didn’t know them—but not being able to properly converse with them made him extremely uncomfortable even though they should be looking down when addressing him.

As it happened, *this* Downsider looked at him straight in the eye and asked again his question. Ronin forced himself to relax his jaw and said, “Please move along. I—just go.” *Damn! That’s not what I wanted to say. It’s so frustrating! How do the others do it that come down here?*

The male, who must be very poor if his tattered clothes and dirty face and hands were any indication, looked at Ronin as if Ronin had said something funny. Ronin tried to shoo him away again, but the male must have completely misunderstood him because he came to sit next to him instead.

He said, “I cn tell you ain’t from downere.”

When Ronin blinked, the male repeated himself, but tried to speak more clearly and slowly this time, “I can tell you ain’t not from Downside. I’nt asked what’ure doing here, but what’ure eatin’ there.”

Ronin cringed as he realized that the conversation with this vagrant was not going to end soon, and that he was going to be forced to struggle to understand and to speak. He took another moment to think about a reply that might end the conversation

and said, “I...right. I am not...I am from Upside. But, I have to go, and I need to finish this before I do. Please go.”

Ronin was surprised to understand the first part of the stranger’s reply, but he did not understand the second. The male said, “Well, if you’re gonna be a jerk, then I *will* go. Buhaps you can give abit what’you got ‘fore.”

When Ronin stared at him blankly, the male sighed and left, making obscene motions, grumbling and cursing. Ronin didn’t know *what* the obscenities might be, but he knew their intent. He felt bad for the male, and if he hadn’t been so anxious to be done with the conversation, he might have given him some credits. But who knew if the male even had a fingerchip.

Ronin waited a while before returning his attention to his sandwich. By then, it had grown a little cold, and he was no longer overpowered by its smell, though it still looked deliciously appetizing. *I need to learn to use my voice if I want to come back. In fact, I want to come back! But who can I even practice with? They will all think me weird, and it’s not like any of my friends or generelations are any better at it than I am. Except for Canyon, but he wouldn’t care to teach me. Or maybe I should just put money aside, so I can have an electronic voicebox implanted in me—that way it won’t be so hard speaking my thoughts. But it’ll take me months to have enough money for that!*

Ronin sighed, looked down at his hand, gave a look around to be sure the poor male had left and that no one else was coming this way, and finally unwrapped the sandwich again, hoping to finish it quickly.

It did not take Ronin long to realize that realmeat could not be swallowed so fast when he almost chocked on a bite. At that moment, a sound came from behind and he turned his head nervously. What he saw caused him to accidentally swallow a

large chunk and he chocked again, this time badly, and he felt like he was going to die.

It was the young Downsider female! What was she doing here?! She approached him, and he turned away, embarrassed, all the while hacking furiously. Irritatingly, she moved to his other side to face him. Ronin would have shoed her away if he could have, but when he saw a bottle of water in front of his eyes, he took it without a second thought. After several small gulps of water, the bolus finally passed into his stomach, and Ronin breathed with relief. He thanked the young female with a smile still shy, but honestly grateful. He said, “Did–Why–I mean–”

The female said, “I’ve seen it happen before to other Upsiders. Maybe you’re not habituated to very chewy foods anymore.”

Ronin raised a questioning eyebrow, and the girl continued, “Anyways, I told my pa you’d probably need water, and he let me come bring you a bottle.”

“Your...pa?”

“Yes, my father.”

Ronin nodded and with a voice still raspy said, “You’re not as...difficult to understand.”

The girl smiled and said, “I found books, and then I found more, and I studied. And then my uncle let me use his visiontab to learn while listening.”

“An....uncle? You mean–”

“My pa’s brother.”

“Right.”

The girl did not say anything and waited instead for Ronin to speak again. But Ronin watched the girl for a moment, enraptured by her strange beauty and awed by her simplicity. Then, he said, "You...don't...distrust me."

The girl gave him a gentle smile, said, "No, I know Upsiders are not all jerks."

"Jerks?"

"Mean."

Ronin nodded.

The girl said, "You're not used to talking."

"No...I'm not. It is...it's difficult for me. We don't use our voices Upside."

The girl smiled again, while shaking her head in disbelief. She then looked up at him and said, timidly, "I wish I can visit Upside someday. But it'd probably be worse for me. But, perhaps you could...think the words for me."

Ronin made a small frown at that. He was truly enjoying the girl's spoken words; they were soothing, the only things he received from her, as opposed to the invasive thoughts people sent each other Upside. He wondered—

A challenge suddenly invaded Ronin's mind. "*Ronin Clareborn. Do you need assistance?*"

It was the sending of a Control cop. Ronin started. Seeing this, the girl turned and almost jumped out of her skin when her eyes landed on the cop.

Ronin turned toward the cop as well and said aloud, "Yes, officer?"

The cop, a nongendered human, said in a slightly irritating metallic voice, “Mr. Ronin Clareborn, Upsiders may explore, but they may not fraternize with plains people. I assume the fullhuman female is here to assist you with something.”

The cop appeared to want to be lenient with Ronin and was suggesting to him a way out of the bind he might find himself in if he gave the wrong answer. But he also seemed to want to give the Downsider a warning by speaking aloud. Ronin sent his reply, *“I am sorry, officer. I chocked on a piece of the wrapping, and the female, who was passing by, gave me the bottle of water.”*

The girl watched anxiously, wondering what the boy, whose name she now knew was Ronin, was saying to the cop. The cop now narrowed the fleshy lids around his synthetic eyes. He looked suspiciously at the wrapping Ronin held. Ronin controlled his heart rate, to keep it even. If he let it speed up, the cop would know he was hiding something. Ronin might not have many special skills, but he did know how to control his reactions—most of the time. The cop seemed satisfied that the wrapping held nothing illicit and said, looking at the female, “Was the bottle previously opened?”

The girl replied at once, “No! It’s a clean, new bottle. I saw the man in trouble, and I came to give it to him, officer.”

Forcing words out of his still unpracticed throat, Ronin said, “That is the truth, officer. She was only here to help.” Then, turning to the girl, he said, “You can go now. I am fine.” Ronin felt an immediate pang of guilt and saw such a sadness in the female’s eyes, as she moved to go, that he couldn’t help adding, “Thank you,” even if it made the cop frown.

The girl gave him a sad smile back and left at once. Ronin wondered if she would look back, but she did not, though she did pause a moment before engaging on the park’s trail and disappearing under the trees.

The cop, too, left after making certain that Ronin had understood he was not to fraternize with the locals anymore.

Ronin put a hand to his forehead and took a deep breath. As he did, thoughts of the girl invaded his mind. And he let them run freely for a while, even knowing that his musings were now an impossibility. He found the thoughts of seeing the girl again, spending more time with her...exciting, in a way he had never felt before. Her voice, her smile. The quietness of it. Were all fullhuman females like that? But his excitement was invariably diminished when he reminded himself that he could barely string two spoken words together. Sure, Canyon would say, 'So what?' You don't need words to enjoy fleshlove.' The thing was, that was *not at all* what he wanted right now, and in any case, he hated the thought of sharing his body with a fullhuman female as if with a synthetic.

No, what he desired was her...her company, her presence. But now that the Control cop suspected him, he knew he couldn't be found with the girl again, and he sighed deeply and cursed in his mind for a long while as he summoned various scenarios that would enable him to return here and get to know the girl. In the end, he concluded frustratingly that there *was* nothing he could do, *except to get away from effin! Earth; from its unnatural ways and illogical injunctions against the true human nature.* As he thought about it more, he realized that Earth's leaders could not know any better, given that the majority of them had mostly synthetic bodies.

His only option was to leave, but how? Without an electronic voice box. His chest fluttered with apprehension when he realized that the only quick way out was with the Empress's Army. But hope returned when he remembered something. *I can join as an Ordnance officer! I have the required education after all, and they'll outfit me with all the latest communications technology.* Indeed, through one of his friends who had joined

the army the year before, he had learned that all officers whose function required interaction with the inhabitants of the Empire's colonies were 'equipped' with electronic voice boxes. *Yes, I'd then be able to meet, and actually converse, with a fullhuman girl like the brown-eyed girl who saved me...and whose name I don't even know.*

To be Continued