

Tipping the Hand

by Nathaniel Marshall

one

With how frayed Ron's nerves were, the coffee was actually relaxing; taking his mind off of the events that ultimately led to him sitting in the break room of the Sherriff's Office.

The night watchman sat across the table, watching him sip, grimace, breathe in the fumes for a minute, then repeat. Like this, a cup would last him a half hour. Ron was on his third.

"Ya know," Kolroy said finally, breaking constant drums of the heavy rain outside. "It *is* one in the morning..." He droned off as Ron ignored him, looking at his reflection in his cup.

A pair of tired amber eyes dimly looked back up at him, fogged over by the long day. The rest of the face in the pool of black matched the eyes—sharp, but fatigued. His hat and raincoat hung on the coat rack somewhere behind them, leaving him sitting in his short-sleeved shirt and khaki's, soaked to the bone despite the slop of used towels next to him in a bucket on the floor.

Kolroy sighed, taking off his glasses and rubbed the circles under his own eyes before wiping his face. "So where's the dig site this time?" He asked. "Ilucharred Ruins? The Blue Pyramid? Silversand Ravine...?" No answer, Ron sipped again, and grimaced again. Kolroy sighed. "...I'm going back to the front desk. If you need anything, just holler. I don't think any tips'll come in tonight."

Ron nodded slightly as he looked up from his coffee and out the window, through the security bars, and to the blurry flames of the kerosene streetlights outside.

Kolroy got up and refilled his thermos from the ancient coffee pot and set it up to brew another round as he wound the hand-crank generator next to it. He glanced over the room, making sure each of the windows were down and latched and Ron was safe from whatever was going on outside before heading through the door. Back to the main hall of the Sherriff's Office, back to his chair at the desk, back to glowering out the door as the town flooded in the deluge.

"If it's raining, we should have four officers in here, not just me," He mumbled, taking a swig from his thermos. "Hell, if it's raining, the entire city should be locked down. The last thing we need..."

Kolroy's hand dropped to his hip as a void in the rain lumbered towards the station. He undid the clasp on his pistol and stood up from his chair. The form tilted and teetered, the rain wearing it down as it stumbled through it and into the light.

"...hey, heeeeeeeey! ...are you guys open?"

"...are drunks showing up in the middle of the night," Kolroy sighed, rubbing his face.

“Are you open? ...or is it just the cleaning guys going around and around...?”

Honest question for a drunk. Then again, with the hood over his eyes, Kolroy wasn't sure that he could actually see anything. Then again....

After a second, Kolroy ultimately moved from his desk and opened the door, hand at his hip.

“We're open,” He said, keeping the tiredness out of his voice. “Always are, come on in before the wind changes.”

The man slowly came in, sure on his feet, just slow. Kolroy quickly glanced him over— almost six-foot four if he stood straight, possibly in his thirties, the man was shrouded in a grey rain cloak with some sort of pack under it on his back. The cloak covered most of him, save for a pair of cargo pants and steel toed boots. His face was covered by the hood, but Kolroy could make out a sharp, long nose, and a narrow, pointed chin with a dropping wet goatee with a drunken grin somewhere in there as well. There was already a large puddle on the floor.

Between the man's height, what Kolroy could see of his face, and his orange-ish skin color, Kolroy figured he was a Drocak, probably a Lesser. Even then... a drunk with dragon blood in him... this guy might be a problem.

The man dimly smiled at Kolroy, “Thanks, Mr. Janitor-dude.”

“Officer Kolroy.”

The man straightened up slightly, “Oh, sorry. Cap'n Kilroy. I didn't realize it was you... I... I think someone spiked my soda.” He leaned his head down and squinted, “Or do they make blurry police badges?” He blinked a few times, his whole head bobbing with the effort. “Ah. Better.”

“Must have been some soda,” Kolroy said carefully, slowly allowing himself to ease up on his pistol to fold his arms.

“Well, soda from the Union's always good, ya know—it has this little sugar *rush* to it that the local stuff doesn't... since, ya know, no sugar here... But! ...it's *especially* good if you put a *little* bit of homemade brew in. ...or maybe a whole lot...! ...oh, that's why....”

Kolroy wasn't sure if he should laugh or take something for the headache he'll be having dealing with finding the paperwork to deal with an unlicensed brewer. It's in the records room downstairs... somewhere... maybe.... If the place hadn't flooded like it did the last time it rained. He really didn't want to have to rewrite the forms from scratch again.... “Can I help you with anything tonight?”

“Help?” The Drocak blinked, or at least his entire head bobbed with the tell. “Oh. Yeah. Yeah. Yeeeah... that's right. I'm....”

“...drunk.”

“Yes, I'm drunk,” He said proudly. “But that's isn't why I'm here.”

Kolroy watched him tilt his head left and right in thought. "...do you have any information concerning the murder that took place a few days ago?"

The man flinched, hood flopping over his nose, "Murder?! Some's been killed?"

"Nevermind."

"Wait. I 'member—I'm lookin' for sumbuddy. ...was they the victim?"

"I really don't think so."

"Phew!" The man wiped his forehead, resettling the hood back where it was before. "...well, still lookin' for sumbuddy."

"...possibly your drinking friends?"

"Naw, they're back home." He waved outside. "Back home... out there... dry."

"Somehow, I doubt that," Kolroy sighed, reaching under his glasses to rub the bridge of his nose. "...can I have the name of the person you are looking for?"

"Name? ...oh! Sure..." His face fell. "Well... that's just plain stupid."

"Sir, it's one in the morning," Kolroy said as patiently as possible. "You've been drinking. Are you sure you are here to file a missing Person's Notice or—"

"Missing Persons! Yes! That's *exactly* where I need t'go, Cap'n! Missin' Persons for..." The man's face fell again with his shoulders and he stumbled from the movement.

"...sir, I have a nice, warm, *dry* bed available here. Why don't you sleep this off and we'll get to it first thing in the morning?"

"Well... I guess with all your subordinates off in the field you've gotta lotta beds open... but I'd feel mighty terrible for taking a fella's cot when they get back."

"I assure you, this bed is free."

"Nope, that's alright. I'll be taking mine back home."

"...if you don't mind me asking, sir... exactly how far away do you live?"

"Weeeell.... I got here by marchin' straight up that street," the man waved toward the main road. "I got woke up by some big door closing and I remembered I needed to get here so I decided to head down here and here I am!"

Kolroy blinked, "That's halfway across town—the gate's close at ten. You've been walking—drunk—for three hours! Three hours in the *rain*!" Kolroy didn't know whether the drunk was lucky or too inebriated to be bothered with or by anything.

“I did have this nice bottle of soda with me... I’m not too sure *where* it we—“ His head snapped up, “Often University.”

“Sorry?”

“I just remembered’d. I’m lookin’ for a Often—Leftian—whateveran Universitee arch-olojest. Name... name....” He shook his head, a hand reaching under the hood to scratch it. “I-I’m sorry, Cap’n. I... I might need that nap after all.”

Kolroy glanced back to the break room, “...is his name Ron?”

“...yes! ...maybe. Wait...”

“Ron Piran?” Kolroy said carefully. The drunk blinked and flinched in realization. “Sir, he’s been here since nine.”

“What!? Why... why is he here?”

Kolroy shook his head, “He... just came running in—literally burst through the door, face completely white. Something really spooked him, maybe he got held up but he isn’t saying anything. We were planning on keeping him here until the rain blows over so we can move him to the clinic without getting pneumonia.”

“What? Is anything—is he okay?”

“Physically, he’s fine,” Kolroy shrugged. “A few scratches. Whatever he got caught up in, he got away from but he just won’t say what.” Kolroy glanced out into the rain, “We’ve talked with a few of his classmates and they said the last time they saw him, he was playing tourist in one of the shops, about an hour before he came here. We’ve been unable to contact the professor and the clinic only has a watch with not much experience beyond first aid so... we’ve been keeping him here. ...what’s your relationship to Ron?”

“I’m his uncle,” the Drocail said sternly with little slurring, this clearly a slap in the face for him. Kolroy arched an eyebrow, he didn’t see the family resemblance. “Uncle Nick. I was supposed to meet up with him and show him around town, ya know, but I had to work late and forgot and wanted to forget and I am *never* spiking the soda again and what kind of uncle am I to get drunk and completely forget about his nephew and let him wind up here completely terrified and—”

“Okay, sir,” Kolroy sighed, “How’s this, we have Ron over in our break room—”

“Why not have him in one of those nice comfy beds?”

“Err... in case he got hungry—we got donuts there. Anyway, why don’t we head in there and I’ll bring in a cot or two. That way you don’t have to walk halfway across town again tonight an—”

“I like it, lets-a go,” Nick started down the hall, then promptly stopped, spinning around on his heel.

“Lead the way, Cap’n.”

Kolroy sighed and shook his head slightly, glaring at the puddle Nick had brought in with him.

Nick slowly fell after Kolroy as they headed back to the break room. Ron looked up from the coffee pot as the door opened, acknowledging Kolroy with an absent stare, but blinked to as the officer let Nick through first.

“Ron,” Kolroy said, stepping in behind Nick, “Your Uncle Nick is here.”

What followed wasn’t exactly a teary reunion. Nick and Ron stood still, looking at each other, almost like they didn’t recognize each other. Meanwhile, Kolroy felt more and more awkward, but just as he was about to speak up, Ron cut him off.

“Heya, Unc,” He said a little shakily. “Get me outta here, I’ve had a crazy day.”

“Same here!” Nick laughed, walking to and wrapping an arm around Ron’s shoulder. Ron slightly grimaced from his uncle’s breath. “Same here. Come’on, let’s go home.”

“Uh, sir,” Kolroy stopped them, “The *rain*.”

Nick’s enthusiasm deflated and he nodded grimly, “You’re right. You’re right. Ron...” He said solemnly, giving his nephew a grim stare. “...don’t forget your hat. It’s a nice hat.”

They both laughed and walked around tired officer, Nick passing Ron his stuff with a little fumbling. Sighing, Kolroy threw his hands up into the air and followed them back through the door, listening as Nick spun his track across town into something out of the Odyssey.

“...and I was almost here when a foul shriek rang through the air—you might have heard it. I knew what it was so I ran and I ran but I was ultimately cut off by a sea monster! I know what you’re thinking, a *humongous* saltwater creature living in fresh rainwater, but it’s *raining so shellshocked much* that it didn’t care! I mean, this place is practically underwater right now, isn’t it. But anyway, that’s when I knew that—Cap’n Kilroy!” Nick spun around, a grin plastered on his face under his hood. He quickly grabbed the officer’s hand with both of his and flailed it enthusiastically.

“Thanks Cap’n! Thanks for everything, putting up with mean and all and looking after Ron too. I knew there was a reason the Cap’n himself was manning the station throughout the night. Whuzzat reason? It’s the one where he’s committed so much to his work and the people he swore to protect that’s what. I mean, it’s times like this that ya gotta be here all night—what, with that murder and all? Something might crop up that could lead you to anything and you have to be there to get it!

“And even if there’s not! When your men get back and they’re all depressed and all, you can rally them with all your tales of hope and commitment and you can do that because you’re the Cap’n! Cap’n Kilroy.” He let go. “Carry on, Sir. Carry on...” And then he started walking again, not really realizing that Ron had stopped. “Where was I... rightrightright. Huge, massive monster destroying the town and....”

“No offense,” Kolroy muttered to Ron, rubbing his shoulder. “but I think your uncle’s a little... off.”

“It’s Uncle Nick,” Ron scoffed. “It figures he’s drunk, but com’on. He’s hilarious.”

“Oi! Ronny! I’m about to go on *how* I defeated the giant monster from space that threatened to eat the world,” Nick called back as he leaned on the doorframe. “You need to know this—we might run into another one on the way back and I don’t have the Space Monkey backing me up this time!”

Ron thumbed at Nick over his shoulder, “And *that* is why he’s amazing at family reunions. Anyway... thanks... and all that.”

Kolroy nodded professionally, “All in a day’s work....” He glanced up to Ron’s hat. “...sorry to say your hat isn’t going to last the night, Dr. Jones.”

Ron scoffed, smirking, “It’s hydra leather, it’ll be fine.”

“Didn’t know they were still making those.”

“It’s an old—”

“Oi! I’m not waiting all night!”

Kolroy sighed, “...just be careful out there.”

“Like you wouldn’t believe....” Ron faded off and jogged back to Nick. The drunk launched back into his epic space battle with the giant space monster from space with space ships, space monkeys, and space bananas.

Kolroy shook his head at them as they walked out the door and disappeared into the rain.

Groaning to himself, he walked back to his desk and pulled out his thermos. Sitting on the desk, he rubbed his face before taking a drink. He sighed, then looked down at the giant puddle and the trail leading all the way down to the break room and back.

He drained the rest of the thermos and grabbed a mop and bucket from a closet.

“...Captain Kolroy,” He mused as he mopped. “Captain Kolroy, manning the office during the late hours of the night. Duties include, but are not limited to: Janitor, managing tips, information, and dealing with drunken mad poets.... Chaos help us.”

He laughed.