

Tipping the Hand  
by Nathaniel Marshall

nine

“...oh, man... *thank you*.” Ron sighed, rubbing his shoulder softly. “That’s... you have no idea how much better that feels.”

“Ah, don’t you worry about it. A new friend of Kali’s is an old friend of mine,” The old man said with a toothy grin. “You are lucky, young one. The Gamr didn’t like you.”

“It didn’t like how I tasted,” Ron echoed what Kali said ten minutes earlier. He shrugged and mopped his face again with a towel, then looked at his healed arm. The gashes had closed up completely, without the irritating little line that the Gel-Aide back home leaves even. “I have *got* to stop complaining about good things.” The old man laughed again as he grabbed a kettle off of the wood-stove.

“Better?” Garvan asked from his chair. He had a few scuffs and scrapes, all healing rapidly from the salve on them. His voice was horse and exhausted, but his eyes were still shining slightly.

“Like you wouldn’t believe,” Ron looked back to the old man. “That’s... some powerful stuff you have there. ...and is that coffee?”

“Bah, you only used that cheap stuff, haven’t you?” The old man said in disgust, but set down a mug for Ron. Ron seemed to melt in his chair from smelling it. “Can barely heal a paper cut, that *medicine*. Pah! No!” The old man sat down and leaned across the table. “My salve is an oooold family recipe; something my grandson sells in his shop. Lucky you that I made my weekly batch yesterday... or two days ago rather.” He laughed again. “You’d be surprised that a few Sphinx Feathers in the mix lets—” He paused with a grin on his face as Ron slammed his cup down on the table, coughing. “...ah, sorry. Secret recipe.”

“No-no,” Ron said quickly, patting the table with his towel. “That’s *perfectly* okay. I understand. Completely.” He coughed.

The old man laughed again. Garvan quickly joined in. Ron frowned, slowly draining the rest of the cup.

The old man slowly stopped, “But... the thing is,” His face fell, “...I was talking about the coffee! *HA!*” he snickered as Ron choked and glared at his mug, setting it down in front of him. Then he pushed it away slightly. Then a little more. He rubbed his throat. “But really, it’s much better for you than all that processed stuff. Both the coffee *and* the salve. All natural, no preservatives, nothing over four syllables... no, that’s *eight* syllables. Nine, actually.” Ron slumped. The old man cackled with laughter again.

“...so Kali,” Ron started, rubbing his eyes. “She grew up here? In Palmyra?”

“Leaf?” Garvan asked.

*Leaf?* Ron mouthed at his friend with a raised eyebrow, but Garvan was looking the other way.

“Why, yes. Yes she did. Poor little girl, such tragedy.... But she was so eager to help me in gather materials. It’s been hard finding someone reliable to get them for me after she decided to go he own way. They don’t usually last too long—it’s almost like they don’t like being put in mortal danger for coffee ingredients! The youth today. It’s not like the Sphinx doesn’t have feathers lying around, but they never get her riddles right and so on and so forth.... But I think I’ve finally found someone who can finally replace her.... By which he remembers that the answer is always either ‘Man,’ or, ‘That thing over there.’”

Garvan jumped in his seat, “Four in morning, two in afternoon, three in evening.”

“Aha! Yes!” the man clapped, eyes beaming. “Yes! That thing over there.”

Garvan tilted his head, eyes frowning as he looked around.

Ron silently sighed. “...she left the town? Kali, I mean.”

“Years and years ago.” The old man sighed, breathing in the fumes from his coffee. “It warms my heart to see her again and how much she’s grown. Still knows the recipe.” He waved a finger at Garvan, “And thank *you* for helping me making some for her. I haven’t had a batch this good in ages.”

Garvan smiled, “Cockatrice droppings.”

“*Cockatrice dr—*“

Two knocks rapped on the door. Pause. One knock. Pause. Four taps.

“Ah, she’s back!” The old man hopped off his chair and shuffled over to the door.

“Garvan, *please* tell me you’re joking.”

“Olitiau—”

“Don’t finish that. I don’t even *know* what that is but I don’t care. Don’t. ...don’t!”

“Ah, Kali.”

“Shalom again, Amid,” the Kirata greeted as she stepped into the small home, pulling down her hood and letting her ears stretch out sideways. “Here to pick up Garvan and one stupid Drocal.”

“Not a Drocal!”

“How’d the treatment go?” She ignored Ron and followed Amid back to the table. Kali had her hair bunched together into a shoulder-length braid, striped sand-orange and black, secured by a palm leaf. In a glint of light, Ron noticed that she also had a hair clip next to her right ear with a small emerald carved to look like a rather circular leaf. ...leaf?

“The wounds have closed but won’t fully heal for a few hours,” Amid started, motioning for Kali to sit but stayed standing himself. Kali shook her head. “I recommend keeping him away from whatever’s

eating him until noon before trying to feed them again. If that doesn't work, I suggest serving a side of Cactus Cat with him, sear the spines and they won't taste anything else. And if *that* doesn't work, just hit him with the cat's tail and let the vultures have him. Let me get some for you." Amid waddled back to his alchemist lab. "Vultures, I mean!"

"Amid..."

"I won't take no for an answer, Kali," Amid called out. "If you're dealing with some crazy sand tribe, you're going to need the best salve I've got!" He waddled back out with a large pouch, more like a small backpack. "Over the years, I've formulated something a bit different for those going out into the desert. This," he held out the pouch, "might not be as powerful as the usual stuff, but it's good for a month in whatever weather so long as the light doesn't get to it." He huffed at Kali's hesitation, "Kali... you've grown into a beautiful young woman—if I heard the talk amongst the Kirata townspeople right— and I'd feel terrible if those looks are lost by some carelessness." He leaned in close and whispered loudly, "Truth be told, it's him I'm worried about. We both know the genius Drocal over there—

"Notta Drocal."

"—is going to lose an arm by the time this is over. I know they can't touch you."

Kali laughed and rolled her eyes, "You haven't changed a bit, Amid. Thank you." She took the pouch and slung it over her shoulder, putting it under her cloak. Her smile faded slightly, "...I'm sorry to hear about—"

"Now, Kali, the stars know how much I've grieved over her, but she would be proud of you, you know that. It soon will be my time as well and I don't want you crying over me. I'll just be singing karaoke at that big party in the sky," he jabbed her arm. "Now! You've got a nice boy and a noble—but *stupid*—Drocal here." He paused and they both looked over at Ron.

He smiled and waved, then returned to eating his invisible popcorn.

"He's caught on, that's no fun," Amid scoffed, "But you get them to where they need to be, you hear me? I've already sent word along, so let this old man get some sleep!"

"Alright, Amid. Thank you for looking after these two, and for the salve."

"Yes, yes. Get going already!" He waved them away, "I want to get some sleep before I'm awake."

Kali shook her head, smiling, then turned to the two at the table. "Ya heard him. Out. Now."

Ron exchanged glances with Garvan and, with a quick thank-you to Amid, slipped past Kali and through the door, glaring at her tail as it tried to trip him.

She scoffed, then sighed. "It was great seeing you, grandfather."

"And it was great for you to be home, if only for a moment. Be safe, my child."