

Tax Collector

The sun beat on the dusty town. Not much ever happened in the quiet hamlet. It was dry, hot, and oppressively run by the Tax Collector. The citizens were in line and under the Tax Collector's thumb.

Until *he* came into town. Tough, tanned, and grizzled, he hooked his horse to the rail in front of the town's ye old drinking hole.

A new man in town always drew eyes and whispers. No doubt someone had already told the Tax Collector he was here. The new guy's frame filled the saloon doors as he walked through them. He took off his worn hat as he sauntered to the bar. He ordered a whiskey, and didn't even flinch as the barkeep spit-polished the glasses.

In an instant, the sky seemed to darken. The wind picked up and the temperature dropped a degree or two. The new man heard the shuttering of the saloon doors. Silence crashed into the establishment.

"I'm told there is a stranger in my town," the Tax Collector's voice boomed. The new man felt the air leave the room as the space darkened. The Tax Collector's presence was larger than anyone he had come across before.

"Just passin' through, friend," the new man said as he turned to face his opposition. Very rarely did the stranger have to look up to another man. The intimidation was palpable. The Tax Collector's spurs clanged with a musical beat. His movements were smoother than one would think his size would allow. Their eyes locked; neither of them blinked.

The Tax Collector's next step was an unfortunate one. The toe of his black boot hit a raised floorboard. It happened in a second, yet in slow motion. The new man watched the Tax Collector's face change, his eyebrows raised, eyes so wide the stranger thought he could see his reflection. Arms flailed, long fingers grabbed at thin air. Nothing could help him. He hit the floor, and hit it hard.

The collective gasp was the solitary sound after the Tax Collector fell. No one moved. The new man released a giggle. It puffed up his cheeks. That was all it took for the rest of the patrons to break out into laughter.

The Tax Collector wasted no time getting back up, placing his hat on his head and high-tailing it out of the saloon. It only takes a moment, one second, one misplaced step to lose your status.

The new man gulped down one more drink then walked out into the sunshine, mounted his horse, and completed his pass through town.



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