

The Top Hat and the Ginger Man

It was past dark when the Ginger Man arrived at the Detiran outpost, the wagon train full of fruits and spices rolling to a halt just outside the main gates. He stood on the front of the wagon and raised the torches high on either side to signal his presence.

Nothing

He stepped down and approached the gate, looking up at the massive stone walls, the last time that the lights had been down, there'd been another change at the top of the council. "Ho the Wall," He called upwards, "Anyone there?" "Who goes?" The call drifted back down

Not the usual guard...

"The Ginger Man," he called back, "Bringing Gorlands Spice Shipment." "Hold on." There was a ragged commotion of voices from over the wall and the gates cracked open. The Ginger Man turned back to his wagons as Emehan jumped down from the wagon and looked up at the gate. "It doesn't feel right, *Jefe*," Emehan gestured to the gates, "The last time this happened we ended up fighting our way out of here." "You, *Mi Primera*, you fought our way out of here," The Ginger Man nodded to Emehan as he stepped back up onto the wagon, "Keep a close eye, things were a little hostile in here the last time we came through, I think that maybe Steniland has the position he always wanted." "Steniland?" Emehan shook his head, "That dog has no place at any table other than at the bottom of it to lick the scraps of better men." "The difficulty of better men is that they need strong men around them," The Ginger Man looked down to Emehan, "As I need you and yours, walk carefully here, there is something afoot."

The wagon moved forwards, the lights in the city dull except in the centre where the whole temple was ringed with fire. The guard moved into view on the platform above the wagon, his head covered in a thin cloth of black through which only his eyes could be seen. There was a grinding noise as the gate closed behind the wagons.

"You go to the temple," He called down, "Steniland will be waiting for you?"

"My deal is with Golren," The Ginger man called upwards, "Steniland has no stock with me."

"Golren lost all his stock to Steniland last week," the guard shrugged, "Steniland is Top Hat now."

"I see..." The Ginger man looked at the gate, "Then I will be on my way..."

"Steniland insists..." The guard looked down, "He said that if you resisted, we were to find a way to convince you."

"I wish you well in that endeavour," The Ginger Man looked up, "You have not men enough to stop me leaving this place."

"Maybe not..." The guard looked down, "But if you do not continue onwards, we will burn your wagons to the ground and let you walk back through the desert."

"And all of you will find yourselves on the pyre," The Ginger Man gestured to the wagons, "Is your loyalty to the Hat such that you would risk that?"

“We understand that whatever you do to us would be nothing compared to what the Hat would do to us if we let you out.”

Fear is a powerful ally...

The Ginger Man nodded, “Onwards then...”

Emehan climbed up on the wagon and stood by his side, “This has the scent of a Trap, *Jefe*.” “You know as well as I that we would not make it all the way back to the lands of our fathers without the supplies that this load will provide for us.” The Ginger Man adjusted his sand scarf up across his mouth and rolled back both sleeves twice.

“You have me to fight for you,” Emehan looked down, “I have not seen you prepare your arms in many years.”

“This is not a fight that you can make for me,” The Ginger Man looked up at the temple, “If you cut him down, the other hats will see us as weak and that cannot be seen to pass.”

“I have never understood their obsession with headwear,” Emehan sighed, “There is no sense in it.”

“They would say the same of our scars,” The Ginger Man nodded, “And in the same way that we bleed for those scars that we earn, so they hold pride in the hats that they wear.”

“But such Hats are of no use to any person, *Jefe*,” Emehan rolled his sleeve back to show the lines on his arm, “Each of these is a man I have killed for you, I do not need fancy clothes to proclaim my accomplishments, it is all I can do not to laugh at the Hats when I see them.”

“On this day, *Mi Primera*, You will have to keep a close rein on your tongue.”

The wagon rolled onwards to the centre of town, the lights from the temple getting brighter the closer they got. The square was filled with people, the segregation clear by the different hats being worn.

“Those are the Widebrims,” The Ginger Man looked down at the first group they passed, “They sew a band of steel into the edge of their hats, their fighters can kill a man before he realises that the thing on their head was lethal.”

The Wagon rolled on, the sea of people parting before them.

“There the Round tops,” The Ginger Man pointed down, “With heads made of cold Iron, there the Beanies, lowest of all the hats, the sign of those without a clan. No one here would travel bare headed, to do so would be an insult to all those who’ve worked for their affiliation.”

“And this is why you have us travel with full scarf here?”

“There is no better way to show them that you are with me.” The Ginger Man nodded towards the back of the truck, taking two keys from his neck, “Keep the other wagons back, go to the others, let them know that if something happens to me, the goods within the wagons are theirs to do with as they please.”

“I will not leave you, *Jefe*,” Emehan took the keys and waved to the wagons at the rear.

“This is a fight you cannot help me with,” The Ginger Man looked down at him, “It has been my honour to have you at my side these years.”

“The honour is mine, *Jefe*,” Emehan nodded, “What would you have me tell *her*?”

“You tell her that I will see her again, you tell her that I took the first step on the path of the brave for both of us.” The Ginger man looked down for a second, “and for me, *Mi Primera*, keep her safe in the dark places of the world.”

“As you ask,” Emehan nodded, “So will it be.”

The lead wagon pulled up to the front of the temple, the massive stone steps cut hundreds of years ago, when there were no Hats on heads, only slaves working at the behest of their

masters. The Ginger Man looked up to the top of the temple, where a massive man sat upon the throne. Above him, suspended by stone pillars at each corner, was the Top Hat. Originally a normal hat made of felt, now the size of a house, added to by everyone who had ever worn it, now so large that it couldn't be worn by anyone, but remained the standard by which every other Hat was judged. Surrounding him were twenty people, each of them wearing a large hat made of metal and wood, standing more than four feet over each of their heads. These were the praetorians whose job it was to safeguard the Top Hat.

The Ginger Man stepped down from his Wagon and looked up as the Praetorian stepped aside and he looked beyond them to Steniland, resting back on the throne.

"We meet again," Steniland shouted down from the throne, "And this time you bring me gifts to celebrate my coronation."

"I bring trade," the Ginger Man looked up, "If you have things to trade for them, then we have something to talk about."

"You bring no gift for my coronation?" Steniland stood up and walked to the front of the temple, his bare head the sign that he was the only one excluded from the wearing of a Hat.

"What makes you think I will allow you to leave here?"

"What makes you think you can stop me?"

"You will give me what I want," Steniland looked down, "or feel the wrath of the Top Hat."

"I do not recognise your Hat..." The Ginger Man looked up, "I do not recognise your claim to that throne and I certainly do not recognise your petty threats as currency that I would trade with."

"Is that your final answer?"

"It is my answer, do as you will with it."

"Then I demand that you surrender everything you own to me," Steniland looked down, "I can brook no dissent from my orders."

"I had a deal with Golren, if you give me what is owed, then you may have the spices that I have brought, I am the Ginger Man, these is my livelihood. I'm not looking for a special deal, only what is owed."

"Everything Golren had passed to me when I finished him."

"Then you have what he owed me, and you know that my prices are fair."

"I know that you are an outsider, *Ginger Man*, and that you only trade here because the Top Hat wants what you have."

"As you do," The Ginger Man nodded, "You would do well to honour our agreement, my people do not hold betrayal well."

"Then I will take the Hats across the sea to your homeland and I'll take all of them by force."

And he would too...

The Ginger Man looked around and sighed, unwinding the lower part of his scarf and letting it hang loose. The cool night breeze refreshing against his dark skin, feeling colder against the scars down his cheeks, reminders of a time when he fought with weapons and not wages.

"Then I must declare that you are not worthy of the Top Hat," The Ginger Man looked up and continued to unwind his scarf, revealing the lower part of his head.

"You have not earned that right," Steniland started down the stairs, "And now you must pay for your transgressions."

"Do you think that you have the strength to stop me?" The Ginger Man dropped down to the floor and wrapped his scarf around his left arm, tying it off at the elbow.

"I stopped Golren," Steniland spread his arms wide, "Cut him down with a hundred witnesses watching to ensure that there was no doubt of my superiority."

“And nothing to do with the things you bought from me the last time I was here?”

“Now you compound your crimes by accusing me of cheating my way to the Top Hat?”

“I make no accusation,” The Ginger Man looked upwards, “But I challenge you for the Hat, in memory of my friend Golren.”

“You have not earned the right to challenge for the Hat.”

“Nor had you.” The Ginger Man removed his head scarf and placed it upon the wagon, “And this will prove the matter...”

Stenisland reached the bottom of the stairs and spread his arms wide again, his thick arms ridged with muscle as he got closer. “Who here will accept the challenge on behalf of their King, to earn a place upon my council?”

Many in the crowd removed their hats to show their willingness to fight...

“If you are choosing a champion,” Emehans voice came from behind them, “Then it is my lords privilege to choose a champion of his own.”

The Ginger Man looked back as the crowd parted before Emehan and the other members of his caravan, each of them bare headed and carrying their weapons before them.

“He speaks the truth,” The Ginger Man looked around, “Who here would choose to chance their arm again Isim Emehan, first sword of Tanvari?”

The hats went back on without another noise and Stenisland looked around as his support faded.

“I do not recognise your right to challenge me.” He nodded, taking a step back.

“And nor did I have one,” The Ginger Man smiled, “But by asking for a champion to face me, it was you that challenged me, and I accept. Either name your champion or draw your sword and pray that it is sharper than your wits.”

Stenisland frowned as the crowd backed out on all sides to form a circle around them.

“Of course,” The Ginger Man waved Emehan back and passed him his sword, pinning the bottom of his cloak to his wrists. “You could walk away from this and leave me the Hat...”

Stenisland flexed backwards for a second, then drew his swords and began to warm up, the blades cutting through the air faster and faster till they were all but a blur. The Ginger Man stood calmly by until Stenisland was finished, his skin now covered in a light sheen of sweat. He raised his swords in a salute, announcing himself to the crowd as was the custom in challenges.

“I am Stenisland Mora, Top Hat of Detira, first of my people, beaten only by time.”

The Ginger Man opened his arms wide and turned to face the crowd.

“I am Doroteo de la Vega,” he grinned, “Master of Tanvari and Undefeated lord of war.”

“Doroteo...” Stenisland looked up in shock as the Ginger Man turned back to him, “You cannot be Doroteo, he has not come out of his palace in twenty years.”

“No one has seen me leave my palace in twenty years because I have not *been* in my palace for twenty years, I found there was more interest in the world than there was waiting for the world to come to me.”

Stenisland took a step forwards, striking fast with both swords as Doroteo stepped back, the folds of his cloak swirling around him, making him seem further away than he was.

Stenisland struggled against the material swirling up around him for a second and then watched in bemusement as Doroteo spun again, the cloak swirling around him to form a low barrier of fabric between them. Stenisland charged forward and watched as Doroteo spun on his heel, travelling out to the side and letting his cloak out behind him, the edge of it passing around Stenislands face and then back out to wrap around his shoulders. Stenisland took a

step, then coughed, then again as he brought his hands up, the palms slick with red as he coughed again.

“What...?” Steniland turned to face his opponent

“It is what you bought from me last time...” Doroteo smiled, “A warning that you have one chance to live, and that is to yield to me now.”

“Never...” Steniland lunged and found himself striking empty air as his opponent spun out of the way, his cloak flowing around him like water.

“I have allowed you to come at me too long, my honour demands that I fight back.” Doroteo nodded, “Your next attack, will be your last...”

“You...” Steniland lunged and Doroteo spun again, the cloak flowing out in a straight line and passing over the front of his face again.

He watched as Doroteo spun to a halt more than ten feet away with a look of sorrow on his face, the hem of his cloak rimmed in a deep black. A feeling of wetness covered his front and he reached up, his hand coming away covered in dark blood as he clutched at his throat, the blood pumping out as the cut made by the cloak let his life run into the sands. He took a single step and fell to his knees, his vision clouding as he looked up to the Hat far above.

Doroteo walked up the temple steps to stand beneath the Hat, dismissing the praetorian from around him. He waited till he was alone at the top before looking down at the assembled crowds.

“Are there any here who would challenge my right as Top Hat?” He shouted down.

“NO...” The shout resounded from below

“And you agree to follow my commands?”

“YES...”

“Then,” He reached for one of the torches, placing it to the original felt of the Hat as the crowd looked on, watching as the old material caught instantly and within seconds was an inferno beside him. He looked down as the crowd surged up towards him and tossed the torch back on to the fire behind him.

“Now there is no Top Hat,” He shouted, “Now each of you must do what is right for yourselves, not look to one man to provide you with the example of what is best in life.”

“And what of you?” a woman wearing a tall hat stood forth from the crowd. “What are your intentions now you have given up the Top Hat?”

“My intentions?” He looked down with a smile, “You all know me, I am just *the Ginger Man*, I just came here to trade,”

“Are there any here who want what I have to offer?”