

## *Kytun Iye*

### False Tribute

by Tony Graham

“The Stranger earns his keep,” Roisin thought, watching the play of muscles in his forearms. The stack of split wood along the wall of her cottage was nearing the roof.

The other folk of the village had avoided the Stranger when he appeared on the dirt path at the edge of the wood the previous day. He had stood in plain sight for near half an hour, letting the folk see him, before walking into their village. Such consideration was rarely practiced or needed in the days of her youth, but now folk were more suspicious of strangers. Rightly so. Strangers had used their village hard in recent years. The villagers had learned caution. Her husband had not.

The Stranger had walked to the small square and asked to work in return for food and drink. He was bigger than any man in the village, even their blacksmith, with a hard, almost cruel set to his features. That look, combined with the sword and heavy pack he carried so casually over one shoulder, had frightened the folk. Roisin was beyond fright.

Roisin took the Stranger at his word, putting him to work on the barn. No one had paid it much mind since her husband, Osgar, had been killed by the Imperial Guard. The village headman, Osgar had objected to the new tribute when the Guardsmen had returned. Their officer, a nobleman called Colm, had made an example of her husband. The village had no headman now, none willing to accept the responsibility. The villagers also lacked all their horses, more than half their cattle, and a significant share of their pigs, chickens and winter harvest.

The Stranger worked long into the night, mucking the empty stalls, cleaning and





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repairing the rotted loft. He did good work, though he was slow to start. Roisin guessed he had no experience with such things. She had shown him what to do in detail. When she returned, he had done all that she had asked, as she had asked. He ate everything she gave him without complaint. He did not ask for more.

This morning, Roisin had given the Stranger more than his share of breakfast. She was startled when he declared himself full, giving near half his meal to her son and youngest daughter. Such kindness made her suspicious. If he sought to find favor with her heart by such gestures, he would discover nothing but barren stone. Roisin endured. For her children, she would still work, still live, but it was only that duty which bound her.

She had caught the Stranger watching the village children drive most of the pigs and chickens into the wood soon after sunrise. They would wander back in the evening. A daily precaution. No one spoke of it, but all did it. Tribute that did not exist could not be claimed. The Stranger had turned to her, perhaps a question in his eyes, but she gave him nothing.

The village had been rich in Roisin's younger years. Her husband had been strong, intelligent and kind. The harvests were always good. The spirits of wood and field, rain and wind, had always looked upon them with favor.

The wandering tinkers spoke of changes in the Empire before they stopped coming. The distant Imperial Administrator, little though they heard of him, disappeared altogether. Bandits began attacking the village. Then the Scourge came, driving off the bandits. For two years the Scourge passed back and forth on the road past the village, preaching their hatred; claiming Gallidon the Emperor was dead, betrayed and murdered by the Noble Houses. It had been a relief when a new Imperial Administrator had appeared with a warband of Guardsmen. Folk cheered them when they drove the Scourge away. Then came the demand of a new tribute, far heavier than anyone could have imagined. Heavier than Roisin had thought possible: a home, a husband, self-respect.

Several of the villagers paused during the morning to watch the Stranger chopping wood. Roisin thought nothing of it until she saw the stack of wood against her cottage. He had worked through the hours without pause save to put an edge back on the axe.

“That’s enough.” The Stranger turned to look at Roisin. His breathing was slow and even. “Time for mid-meal. If you’ve still the stomach for more work after, I’ll feed you supper. You’re welcome to another night in the barn either way.”





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The flat look he gave her, no reaction to see, almost made her regret the offer. She had no idea yet of what else she would have him do the rest of the day. He nodded to her, stacked the last of the split logs and headed to the barn. She paused in the door of the cottage to watch him spin the stone on the wheel, again putting a fresh edge on the axe. Taking care of the tool, a habit her husband always followed.

Roisin felt a brief moment of alarm as she turned back to see the Imperial Guard riding out of the wood, into the village. Colm, the Noble, led them. As always, the fierce Bear-Killer at his side. The alarm died as quickly as it appeared. Roisin was beyond fear. The Guardsmen were a known evil. They could no longer touch her heart.

Near seven feet tall, Bear-Killer was all warrior: strong, fast and unforgiving. The bearskin cloak, complete with hood, gave him his name. If he had another, Roisin did not know it. No one did. The day her husband died, had been killed with sorcery, Bear-Killer had claimed her. When the Guardsmen came on patrol or for the tribute, Bear-Killer would renew his claim. If any other man hereabouts had an interest in a widow with three children and a farm, Bear-Killer stopped them from expressing that interest.

Each of the five armed and armored Guardsmen with Colm had taken a woman of the village, married or no. After the second death, none complained to Colm. While his men took their leisure, the Noble would sit in the small square, surrounding himself with the village children. Giving them sweets, telling stories, listening to their chatter. If they stayed the night, he would demand a large bonfire be lit.

The villagers all bowed as Colm passed. Few would even look directly at the Guardsmen. Colm led his men through the village to her house, no longer a home, not without Osgar, it was now simply a place she lived.

Roisin suddenly recalled the Stranger working before the barn. She no longer heard the sound of the axe blade on the wheel. She looked to see the Stranger watching Colm and his men. The Stranger, moving only his head, turning his flat gaze her way. Roisin was not afraid. Not for the Stranger, not for herself. But she had no wish for her children to see more of death. She walked to the barn, relieved the Stranger was making no move towards his sword that lay inside.

Colm and his men adjusted their path to meet her.

“Roisin.”



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“My lord.” Roisin lowered her eyes and bowed to Colm. He expected it. Looking up, she saw Bear-Killer smiling at her like a hungry dog.

Colm only had eyes for the Stranger. “Whose man are you?”

“He is working for me,” Roisin answered. “Making repairs to my barn. Chopping wood.”

Colm turned to Bear-Killer. “He has the look of a warrior, not a farmer.”

The guardsmen eased their horses apart to better look at the Stranger.

The Stranger, in his sweat-stained shirt, stood relaxed, axe loose in his hand as he faced the armored guardsmen.

Colm stared down at him. “We are always looking for warriors. Good warriors. Tell me, have you ever killed anyone with that axe?” The Stranger slowly shook his head, no. Roisin realized the Stranger had no fear of these men.

Colm regarded the Stranger with an easy smile. “No fear. Yes, I believe you are a warrior.” The guardsmen looked on, hoping for sport. Bear-Killer frowned, suspicious.

“My name is Lord Colm. Captain Colm. These are my men. We’re Imperial Guard.”

“No.”

The Stranger’s single word stopped everyone for a moment.

Colm looked down on him, puzzled. “No?”

The Stranger did not move, his expression did not change.

Colm looked around, realizing the villagers, and the children, were watching the exchange. He straightened in the saddle, looking sternly down at the Stranger. He raised his voice.

“I am Lord Colm, Captain of the Imperial Guard.”

“No.” Without lifting his voice, the Stranger’s simple denial carried.





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The guardsmen's hands shifted to weapons. Bear-Killer stared intently at the Stranger, but Colm looked down at him with pity. Roisin wasn't fooled. She knew the nobleman had no pity. She wished she had not offered the Stranger work. Wished he had not stopped in their village.

"I see a demonstration is in order." Colm looked around at the villagers. "The Imperial Administrator rules here in the name of the Emperor Gallidon."

Colm turned his gaze down upon the Stranger. "Behold the might of the Empire..."

Colm's eyes grew wide; he thrust his right hand towards the Stranger's heart.

Roisin stepped back, fighting memory. A year ago, a different life. Colm holding his hand out so to Osgar, her husband, the village headman. Osgar staggering, falling to his knees, pain and fear clearly written upon his face. Colm clutching his extended fist. Blood erupting from Osgar's mouth. Osgar falling. Roisin shook her head free of the past. Her heart was dead. She was not afraid. This man was only a Stranger.

Colm clenched his fist. The Stranger remained standing.

Roisin saw Colm's face turn from confidence to confusion, and dawning fear.

She saw a savage joy light the Stranger's eyes. Roisin rediscovered fear.

The Stranger flowed forward, axe no longer loose in his hand. The swing struck Colm's arm near the elbow, severing it.

Bear-Killer fell backwards off his horse, only the awkward fall saving him from the Stranger's second swing.

Colm slid from his saddle, staring at his arm lying in the dirt.

The archer in the group of guardsmen kicked his horse away, opening distance from the fight as he rolled the bow from his shoulder into his hand.

A guardsman with a spear lunged his horse forward, attempting to lance the Stranger. The Stranger struck the spear aside with his left forearm, striking it just past the head. The axe lodged in the spearman's side, knocking him to the ground. The Stranger swept up the spear from the dead guardsman's hand.

The archer, twenty feet away, turned in the saddle, nocking arrow to his bow.

The Stranger's smooth cast launched the captured spear; it buried its head in the archer's chest, toppling him off the horse.

Roisin found herself sitting on the ground, watching as Bear-Killer, his heavy



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broadsword in hand, charged the empty-handed Stranger.

The Stranger ducked Bear-Killer's first killing blow. Low, the Stranger pulled the dead spearman's short sword from its sheath. Bear-Killer swung again, a blow that would fell an ox.

The Stranger, his short sword half the size of Bear-Killer's weapon, seemed to flow away from the blow, then move in, almost faster than the eye could follow.

Bear-Killer stared into the eyes of the Stranger. They almost seemed to embrace. The Stranger stepped back, twisting the blade of the short sword as he pulled it from Bear-Killer's belly; as Roisin would core an apple.

The remaining two guardsmen turned their horses, one falling from the saddle in his haste. The mounted guardsman fled through the village. The one on foot ran into the fields towards the wood.

The Stranger ran at the dying archer, hardly pausing to scoop up his bow and a handful of arrows from his quiver.

Bear-Killer fell forward onto his face.

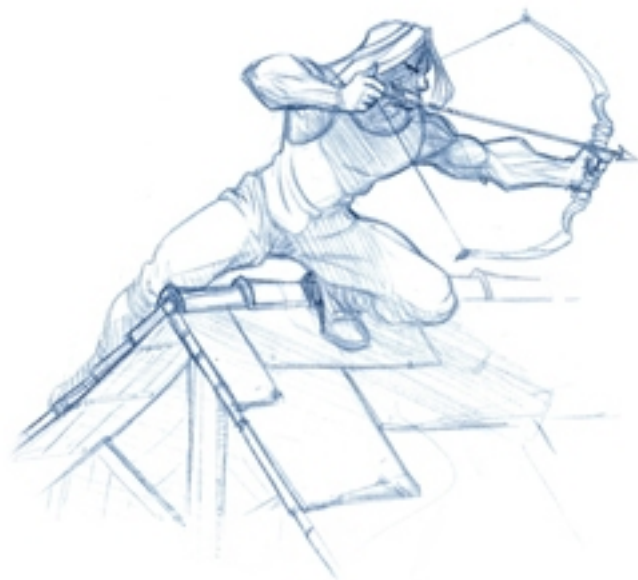
The Stranger sprang up the woodpile onto the roof of her house, his head swiveling. He knelt, nocked an arrow. His first shot missed the guardsman on horseback. His second struck the guardsman square in the back. The guardsman slid from his horse to lay in the village square.

The Stranger twisted; his third arrow took the last guardsman just before he reached the cover of the trees.

A low, pain-filled moan caught Roisin's attention. A few feet away from her, Colm lurched to his feet, pale from shock and loss of blood. Colm the sorcerer. Colm the nobleman. Colm, the murderer of her husband. Roisin was terrified.

Shrieking filled her ears.

Roisin returned to herself, confused





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and frightened, unsure of what had happened. She clutched a blood-drench hoe with such force her hands hurt.

“Roisin.” The gentle voice encouraged her to raise her eyes. The Stranger. He gently took the hoe from her.

Roisin looked down at the bloody remains of the man at her feet. Across the village, out to the field, the folk were beating the bodies of the fallen guardsmen with farming tools. She again looked down at the blood on her dress, the body at her feet. Colm.

“Roisin. Your children.” The gentle voice - how had she thought it flat? - turned her eyes to her children. The girls, older holding the youngest. Her son, Bear-Killer’s clean broadsword in both hands, stood next to them. Roisin went to them. Knelt and gathered them to her as she wept.

Night was falling. The village was quiet. Peaceful. The bodies had been hidden, buried in the wood. The folk stayed in their homes. There was no celebration.

Roisin followed the Stranger into the barn. Her son, still carrying the broadsword, trailed her. Roisin was afraid. She realized it was not the death of Bear-Killer or the Noble that brought it. Fear returned because she had found hope.

The Stranger stood within, his sword hanging in its scabbard on a post as he shrugged a shirt of black mail over his head. He, too, had changed in a subtle way. He seemed purposeful. Like a man with a task ahead. She watched him buckle his heavy sword-belt around his waist, clearly shifting some of the armor’s weight from his shoulders to his hips. He moved his arms, settling the armor on like a favored coat.

The Stranger looked at her son. Picking up the bow and quiver taken from the guardsman, he stood before the boy. He took Bear-Killer’s broadsword from her son’s hand and gave him the bow in its place.

“There is not time to teach you the sword. Learn the bow. Kill from a distance. Your mother needs you.” He turned, tossed the heavy broadsword up into the loft.

“They will come back,” Roisin gave voice to her fear.

The Stranger turned to face her.

“The Imperial Guard.” Roisin stepped closer to him. “There will be more.”

“They are not Imperial Guard. The village must learn to defend itself from bandits.”

“The Administrator will send more men.”



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“No.” It was not denial, not this time. More a gentle reassurance.

Roisin trailed the Stranger out of the barn, her son followed.

“You should take one of the horses. Our village doesn’t need them all.”

“I prefer walking,” the Stranger smiled at her. His was not a cruel face.

In the dying light of the day,

Roisin noticed a small golden rune  
worked into the throat of the Stranger’s

black mail. The Emperor’s rune.

Gallidon. She recalled childhood tales of  
the Emperor's Guard in their black  
armor.

The Stranger began walking  
towards the road.

“Will you come back?” she called  
after him.

He turned back to face her. “I do  
not know.”

“Where will you go?”

“To see this man who claims to be  
an Imperial Administrator.”



Illustration *Kytun Iye with Axe* by Andy Underwood.

Illustration *Kytun Iye: Encounter* by Andy Underwood.

Illustration *Kytun Iye Takes Aim* by Andy Underwood.

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First Published January, 2009.

