

# The Stranger\*

He emerged from the woods upon a black mare, following the narrow road that divided the trees from a field of wheat that stretched into the far distance. Two sheathed swords were strapped between his saddlebags and every step brought the faint scraping of metal. Slight bulges under his tattered green cloak hinted at armor beneath. Such an armed and armored man would have been suspicious on these roads in better days, but if any passersby had noticed his garb, they thought little of it. His type was common in times of war.

The stranger came to a fork in the road marked with a signpost, the right fork leading back into the woods and the left farther into the endless grain, flanked on both sides by a low wooden fence. Both roads were narrower and rockier than their parent, though still large enough for three men to walk abreast. He studied the sign for a moment before nudging his horse to the left. She stepped gingerly, the man's grip on her reins tight to better control her movements. Should she slip on the rough terrain and break an ankle, it could be fatal.

Another mile onward, he came upon a small house. Wooden and aged with a thatched roof that was the same straw-yellow of the wheat that surrounded it, it would have looked comfortable had it not been gutted. The door hung loosely on its hinges, its center caved in by an axe. The pigpen along the side stood empty, something that might once have been a dog decaying in the slime. The stranger clicked at his horse to stop. He dismounted fluidly, despite the weight of his armor, and lightly patted the mare's neck with a gloved hand, whispering something in her ear. She started to graze on a thick clump of brown weeds, snorting contently. Assured

she was too distracted to wander off, he set to work exploring the grounds.

Finding nothing of use outside, the stranger looked in through an unshuttered window. Empty cupboards hung open and a fine layer of flour coated the floor, having spewed from slashes in a hemp bag that lay in a dusty pile. The remains of a down mattress lay shredded in the center of the room, the frame upon which it once sat upended and scorched, as though someone had tried to burn the place down before thinking better of it. Ducking through the ruined door for a better look, an odd stain under the window caught the stranger's eye. Stepping over the mattress, he heard a resounding crunch: the remains of a hand mirror with a burnt wooden handle fitted for a small hand. The stain under the window was blood, streaked on the wall and pooled where it met the floor. Thoroughly looted as the house was, the stranger left, mounted his horse, and continued on.

The path narrowed further, wheat stalks brushing against the mare's legs, before opening again, the thickly-planted grain thinning to be replaced with bare earth. Here the ground was muddy from recent rainfall. No formal path was in sight. Groups of wooden structures dotted the landscape: solitary grain sheds, grist mills, or smokehouses, as well as a cluster of hovels like the one they had passed amid the fields. In several places, mounds of ash stood where there had once been buildings, skeletal forms visible among them, and the stranger grimaced under his hood. The war had taken its toll, one way or another, and the village was no longer inhabited. The sky darkened rapidly as the sun sank behind the fields, and he rode on.

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Dark had fallen before the stranger began to see nightfires in the distance, bright against a backdrop of forest. He brought his mare to a canter as he approached the town he had ridden so far to find, slowing only as he drew alongside the first of the pyres, great flaming pyramids of wood built to keep at bay the creatures that lurked in the night. He rode between them and over a sturdy stone bridge, the brook beneath seeming to whisper at him as he passed. He stopped outside a large tavern at the edge of town. A scrawny man, young but nearly bald, leaned on the wall of the adjoining stable and suspiciously eyed the newcomer as he dismounted. The stranger tied his mare to the hitching post, whispering quietly to her and glancing about as he did so. Small groves of gooseberries grew along the river, which bent away in the darkness. An adjacent row of wood sheds was piled high with logs to keep the fires burning throughout the night. Boys scattered amongst them in play, every so often crossing the bridge to throw fresh logs into the infernos, making a game of their work. Looking toward town, he could see more wooden hovels. Their windows were dark and empty. Only the tavern felt alive, radiating from within with warm, flickering light.

Leaving his horse tethered to the pole, the stranger entered the tavern, brushing aside a clinging child before she could make off with his coin purse. The tavern was divided into two rooms, kitchen and dining space, by a thick wooden barrier that served as a counter. More than half of the long tables were occupied, mostly by peasants of varying age and gender. A few men in scale mail lounged in the back corner, drinking and guffawing as one of their number made a series of loud and crude jokes. The table opposite them was taken by two weather-beaten field hands playing dice, who frequently

paused their game to throw annoyed looks at their drunk neighbors. It was noisy, warm, and comfortable.

The stranger approached the counter and rapped his knuckles on the wood. The innkeeper shuffled over from the stove where he had been turning a plump pheasant. He was plump himself and much shorter than the stranger. His shirt hung open to reveal a series of swirling tattoos, dark on his flabby, pale skin. He asked the stranger if he wanted a beer, and the stranger nodded. It soon arrived, warm and frothy. It spilled over the sides of the mug as he took a long drink. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "It's good," he said, his voice low but not unpleasant, and the innkeeper smiled. "But it's not why I'm here. I'm looking for a woman."

The innkeeper interjected with a good-natured laugh. "Aye, ain't we all?" He clapped the tall man on the shoulder, withdrawing with a wince when his hand met metal. The stranger stared at him, his expression neutral.

"Damn, that's solid. Well, I can't say we offer services of that kind, lad. You'll havta try your luck, same as anyone. Unless you're looking for someone in particular?" The stranger nodded. "Well then, a man who knows what he's after! She got a name, yer lass?"

The stranger downed the remaining contents of his mug to stifle a dry chuckle. "She's not mine, I'm afraid," he said. "Her name is Elaine, and I have a message for her."

"A strong name!" the innkeeper declared, thumping the counter for emphasis. "We had one o' them here in the kitchens once. Before my time. I ain't that old, mind you."

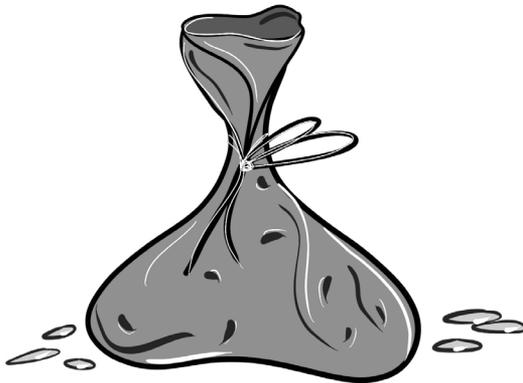
"Is she still around?"

“Aye, I think so. That Elaine out the other side o’ town might be the woman you want. Lives by the stream. Not the one you crossed coming in, that’s Miller’s Creek. Can’t right say the other one has a name. She weaves now, Elaine does, and right well.”

“Thank you.” The stranger rose, reached for his coin purse, and placed two coins on the counter-top, which the innkeeper deftly swept into his palm.

“Say,” the innkeeper said, his look suddenly cautious. “What would you be wanting with our old Elaine? She isn’t much one for visitors. Her son Roderick rode off to the war years ago. He never came back, and then her old man passed last winter. Her family was everythin’, and she’s got nothin’ left. Don’t go tryin’ to bother the poor woman.”

The stranger offered a mock bow. “I can promise to do nothing of the sort. I bring good news.”



The innkeeper brightened. “Say, if you ever be needing a job out this way, come on in and let ol’ Jack Kegbelly here know you could use some work. You look strong enough. We don’t get many travelers out this way, but often as not we feed the town, and that more’n keeps us on our feet. People here don’t much like leavin’, ‘specially during these times.”

The stranger nodded and turned to depart, only to find himself face to face with the scrawny man he had seen outside. “New in town, eh?” His voice was deliberate and dripping with malice, his rheumy eyes glinting dangerously in the firelight. He reminded the stranger of the carcass in the pigpen, decrepit and slimy. “I can’t say we much like your sort here, big fella. And there be a tax for travelers.”

The stranger stopped and drew back his hood, allowing his challenger a good look at his visage. He was young but hard, face prematurely lined, his once flaxen hair darkened and cut short. His eyes shone with a similar danger, but the



scrawny man was brave, drawing a knife and pointing it at the other man's throat. "I said there be a tax, stranger. Take that purse back outta your britches and pay up!"

Silence fell in the tavern. Even the drunkards stopped their joking, their attention focused on the bloodletting that was sure to come. The stranger relented, making a show of rummaging for his coin purse.

It was over in the space of two heartbeats. The stranger fainted quickly backwards, his free hand shoving the knife away while the hand with the purse lashed out, connecting under the scrawny man's chin. He went down like a sack of flour, and the knife skittered away beneath one of the tables.

With the violence ended, the patrons returned to their separate pursuits. Kegbelly let out a bellow of laughter. "Oi, you put ol' Patty in his place, that you did. Yer next drink is on the house!"

The stranger returned to the counter, where a second mug was already awaiting him. "You friends?" he asked.

Kegbelly snorted. "Hardly," he said. "Pat and his boys like extortin' my customers too much for that. They showed up outta the blue one night to drink themselves stupid, and now I can't get rid of 'em! All o' your type rode off to fight the usurpers, and not nearly enough came back. Those that did, well." He nodded toward the armored drunks as one tottered and fell over, eliciting raucous laughter from his friends. "They ain't exactly keepin' the peace either. And there's nothing I can do about pests of Patty's ilk all on me own! They're not like to give you more trouble, though. Dogs, but they're all bark."

Patty crawled away, blubbing through bloody lips, while the stranger drank with Kegbel-

ly. He accepted pheasant when it was offered. It was warm and juicy, the best meal he had eaten in weeks. Kegbelly wouldn't let him pay for it, try as he might to slip him an extra coin. His horse was stabled for the night, too, free of charge. Payment for services rendered, Kegbelly called it. Free from any debt, the stranger did the rounds that night: playing with the children, dicing with the field hands, even joking with the men in the corner. This dark newcomer became part of the party, yet he seemed distant, distracted, and none of the other patrons saw him smile.

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Exiting the tavern before sun-up, the stranger found himself surrounded. Two men stepped behind him from either side of the door, short swords strapped to their hips that the stranger recognized as his own. A hulking brute stood before him. They were all dressed in rags that may once have been the king's colors. The brute leered down at his victim and snorted. "This him?"

"Yeah, he's the one." Patty stood by the stable door with the stranger's horse. His split lip was red and swollen. The horse's saddlebags were ripped open at his feet. In lieu of his lost knife, he was brandishing a heavy club. "Caught me by surprise, you did, but you don't look like much, and we got you outnumbered. Take 'im, boys!"

The stranger heard the grating of steel from behind him as swords left sheathes, and the brute swung a ham-sized fist intended for his head. He dodged and kicked at the brute's knees. The larger man went down, toppling face-first into the mud behind the mare. Startled, she kicked backwards, hooves felling him again before he could rejoin the fight. Patty leapt forward, swinging his club wildly. "Wally, George, get 'im!

One of the swords nicked the stranger's shoulder, further shredding his old cloak and glancing off the armor beneath. Shrugging off the green rags to reveal chainmail, he ran a metal-plated elbow into his attacker's chest, knocking him dazed to the ground. His remaining two opponents swung wildly, determined to keep him off balance. The club narrowly missed the stranger's head, and the sword bit into the armor of his chest. He leapt back, chest stinging where the point of the sword had pushed through the rings of his mail. He gritted his teeth and wrenched a knife from his boot. This time he caught the sword on the flat of his knife, his other arm shooting out like a snake to grab his opponent's wrist. He twisted and squeezed until the sword fell away, then scraped the point of his knife hard down exposed skin. The disarmed man screamed and fell to the ground, clutching his bloody wrist, and the victor let slip a smile.

Patty, the last man standing, went on the defensive, holding his club like a sword to keep his face guarded. The stranger had picked up one of the fallen swords and was smiling in earnest now, lazily circling his opponent. The other men had fled. "You're not making a very good impression for king's men," he said, twirling his sword as adrenaline coursed through him. "Did you ever see combat?"

"In this rat hole?" Patty answered. "We got shipped off to the edge of the earth! Ain't nobody come out here. We had to find other ways of entertaining ourselves."

Images of the burnt and raided homes flashed through the stranger's head, the child's mirror and the blood and the scorched bones peeking from ash. He struck. Knocking the club aside with a flick, his sword parted flesh, scraped bone, and

erupted between Patty's shoulder blades in a scarlet fountain. The stranger let Patty's corpse, heavy now in death, slip from the blade and collapse in a spreading puddle of blood. "I didn't want to do this," he said to himself, but he knew he was lying.

The stranger wiped his sword clean on the dead man's rags, moved the body into the stables, and collected the other weapons, strapping them to his mare's saddle as he cooed at her gently. He had just mounted her again when he heard a sullen voice behind him. "People aren't gonna like ya for that." Kegbelly had appeared at the door and was eyeing the scene with distaste. "Patty was a swine, aye, but people don't take kindly to butchery."

"They butchered. They robbed. They burnt down homes. They were bandits, nothing more."

"Aye lad, but these people don't see their victims dead in the street," Kegbelly said. "They don't see anything but what's in front of 'em. Not what happened in some distant field, not what happened the next town over. An' you enjoyed that, plain as day. I can't say I have any work for ya now. Just ain't civil." He retreated back behind the door.

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The sky grew paler as the stranger rode on. The town was beginning to stir, women emerging to check their laundry and start cooking. Billowing smoke from the recently extinguished nightfires lent an eerie quality to the scene, and the women became ghosts lost in fog. The stranger felt like a ghost himself, out of place and time.

The noise of Miller's Creek was replaced by a quieter rippling from ahead. Another house took shape through the film of smoke, a small dock to one side. Slim poles protruded at odd angles, fishing lines dangling into the water. Rows of wildflowers, carefully cultivated, lined the road leading to the

house, their aroma homey and welcoming. The stranger tied his mare to a young tree and made for the front door, but was stopped by a shout before he could reach it. “I don’t know you! What do you want?” The new arrival was a short, wiry man with an angry face, his arms full of fish. “We don’t want no trouble, so how’s about you just leave? Back up on your horse and go!”

“I’ve come to see Elaine.”

The newcomer let his catch fall to the ground and advanced on the stranger. “Who the hell is she to you?”

“Who the hell are you to her?”

“Get back on your horse and leave or else I’ll—”

“You’ll what, small man? Who are you to keep me from—”

The door opened with a bang. “Enough!”

Both men froze as Elaine emerged. Her hair was long, greyer than the stranger remembered it, violet bags under her eyes showing the count of years, but he recognized her still. The years fell away from her face, softening in his eyes, becoming smooth and soothing, taking him back to days spent frolicking in the creek, nights curled next to the fire with his—

“Mum?”

Elaine faced him, confusion on her face and pity in her eyes, taking in his hard features and the blood staining his mail. “Who are you? I don’t know you.”

“Mum, it’s me. It’s Roderick.” Roderick’s eyes welled with unbidden tears, and he extended a hand, mentally urging her to take it, to pull him to her. “It’s your son.”

Her head tilted like a dog’s, looking at the gloved hand but not going to him, not taking it.

Her eyes were wet but betrayed no recognition. “My son died. Years ago. His father, too. They smelled of home and you stink of death. I don’t know you.”

“Mother.” Roderick started towards her. “I’ve come home now and—”

“Mother?” She looked him up and down, her wet eyes turning cold. “No son of mine would look as you do. Roderick was proud. Fair. Weak. He died in the war.”

“Mother, I lived. I’m here. You—”

“No. You’re not him!” She advanced on him then, finally, but stopped short of an embrace, head turned sharply upward to lock eyes with him at last. When she spoke, it was an icy whisper. “I know your type. You’ve done things... unspeakable! I can see it in your eyes.”

Roderick recoiled as though she had struck him. When he spoke, it was little more than a murmur. “All I did, I did so I could be here. I fought for you. I fought to come home!”

“I don’t care! I don’t know you.” She turned, hiding her face, and spoke to the other man. “Pick up those fish and clean them, Gregor; we don’t live in a barn.”

Roderick stood stock-still. “But Mum—”

“No,” she said, still not facing him. Her voice was stern and hard as stone. “My son is dead. I don’t know you. Go back to where you came from, killer.”

The years fell back into place as she departed. Gregor stooped to collect the fish, and the stranger returned to his horse and his weapons and his life. Roderick, it seemed, was dead, but the stranger remained. He came from nowhere now, born amidst the heat of battle to strike Elaine’s boy down and take his place in the world. To there he

was bid to return.

The stranger left town the same way Roderick had years before: atop a black horse, short swords rubbing together where they hung from the mare's saddle. Where Roderick had been proud and enthusiastic, newly forged armor gleaming in the sunlight, the stranger sat hunched in his saddle, face set, armor dinged and dirty. Blood still dripped slowly down his chest, but he paid it no mind. He passed the tavern, where a crowd of children had gathered. One of the braver boys had a long stick and was poking at a stiff form in the stables. A little girl was crying. The air smelled hot and metallic.

The stranger knew he was welcome here no longer. He crossed the bridge over Miller's Creek, passed the scorched earth where the nightfires had stood. The king was dead, and the war was coming to a close: he was no longer needed as a soldier. But mercenaries always found good work protecting aristocrats or riding with caravans, even in the best of times, and these were not the best of times. Even riding from town to town, ridding the world of the likes of Patty, would earn him enough to make a living. But he would never again call a place home. He had seen too much for that, but he could survive.

Fresh tracks marred the once-smooth mud outside of town: three sets, one much larger than the others, accompanied by a faint trickle of blood. They led away toward the distant deserted village. The stranger clicked at his mare and squeezed her with his thighs. She took off at a gallop, adding their own deep prints in the mud, rapidly overtaking those of the bandits. He had a horse, and they were on foot. They had no weapons. They wouldn't get far.

*by Ryan Murphy*

*\*Content Warning: Descriptions of Violence*