

He had now been walking for hours along the side of a highway. Scorching wind blew in gusts, filling his suit with sand. Although he could not see it, each step he took, like a condemned man, left behind a rune on the road. He had been condemned, certainly, long before this journey had even begun.

Darkness had fallen by the time he arrived at the roadside hostel. A “VACANCY” sign blinked lazily in the window, but inside, the only light came from flickering candles and a torch mounted on the wall. He went in. He could barely make out the walls, decorated with medals from old regimes, moth-eaten photo albums, an ancient sword. He had unquestionably arrived at the right place.

The innkeeper appeared out of the shadows behind the counter. He looked unfathomably old. “Welcome, young man. Come in. We are always open to new guests. What can I do you for?”

“I’ve come looking for the owner,” said the traveler grimly.

“Ah, but the owner isn’t here. Frankly, it seems he hasn’t come in hundreds of years,” he said with a chuckle. “I trust I’ll do. Just passing through, or seeking a stay? I’m sure we can offer suitable accommodations.”

“I’ve come for a contract.”

“But of course. And you know, naturally, that this unbreakable contract is, shall we say... of long duration?”

The traveler nodded.

The innkeeper produced a small stack of papers from under the counter and carefully grabbed one of the wall ornaments—the old sword. “What is your token?” The way the candle lights danced on his weathered face made the traveler shiver: the wrinkles and folds appeared deeper, bottomless, infinite.

The traveler took a folded picture out of his pocket and put it next to the papers. It showed a woman and a child embracing.

“Very well. And your sigil?”

The traveler opened his shirt to reveal a sunken, deformed chest.

“Hmm, I see,” murmured the innkeeper, absorbed. “Perfect. The contract is only valid if it’s voluntary. We will spare them one hundred years, then your contract will expire.” With a practiced, swift motion, he brought the sword down on the traveler’s neck. The stack of papers and, regrettably, the family picture, were splattered with blood. The innkeeper grabbed the stained

picture and cleaned it on his shirt as best he could, then added it to the pictures on the shelf; the stains would fade away with time.

He debated whether to clean now or later; the boss surely would not come and it seemed unlikely there would be any other guest coming in today. Still, he bent down and started cleaning. It was part of his contract, after all.