

The Innkeeper

by

Vincent Lakes

The wooden boxes kept swaying as the wagon's wheels rolled over endless bumps and cracks of the forest trail. Twenty boxes altogether, packed full of the clearest firewater coin could get, on their way to quench the thirsty mouths in the city.

Darkness was nearly impervious. Together with the drumming rain, the driver could barely see the ever alert ears of his horses despite having a lantern lit on each side of the seat. Occasionally, a lightning cracked the sky, revealing the oppressive scenery in a momentary flash. Pine trees on both sides covered the hills, drowning the vale in deep shadows, emphasizing the solitude of the region.

Holding the reins tightly in one hand, the driver reached down to a bottle leaning safely against his boot. It was a part of his personal share from the cargo, and during these late fall trips he used all he could get. The liquid burned his throat, bringing forth a wave of comforting warmth that ingressed his entire body. Leering about nervously, he listened to the restless hum of wind in the trees, flinching at every loud noise that pierced through the roar of the rain. There were wolves, cougars and, assumably, silverback coyotes in these lands, all hungry, rivaling over the same territory, always willing to take their chance against helpless prey. Worst, however, were the stories.

The driver had never taken this route before and cursed the day he had agreed to do this. Aware of the stories, aware of the season— and the weather it would inevitably bring forth, he had accepted. The sweet shine of coin had been too much to resist.

Those stories, spreading across a decade into the past, growing wilder with each telling, came to haunt him now. Wagons and their drivers, disappearing, never to be seen again, and they all shared one common feature that was the trail. Feeding off his fears like parasites that gnawed away the last tatters of courage, they gained traction from his crumbling confidence. Some of them told about bands of cutthroats, some spoke of a cult seeking blood sacrifice, and some even mentioned the undead, looking for victims along the lonely road. But, in the end, they were all just that— tales, meant to entertain during long winter nights.

Wiping the lashing water from his eyes, the driver squinted. Something had caught his attention in the dark. Scanning the downward slope with keen eyes, fairly sure he had spotted a faint flicker of light somewhere amid the pine trees, but it was gone before he could verify. Perhaps it was just his mind playing tricks, his flaring imagination testing the edges of his sanity.

Feeling the wheels slipping on the flooded clay, he pulled the reins, attempting to slow down the horses. While desperately seeking shelter, any suitable location to stop and spend the night, crashing into the woods would likely make him nothing but another vague subject in the stories.

*There it was again!*

A distant sparkle was indeed shining somewhere along the road, and this time a blink did not kill the glint. Growing stronger with each passing moment, the now persistent light triggered hope that joyfully washed aside his distressed anxiety.

"Finally," he grunted to himself, reaching for the bottle of firewater to reward himself with a lengthy moment of quiet celebration.

Distracted by the well deserved swig, he missed the large rock sticking out from the road like a sore on leper's skin. The horses passed it without problems; therefore, they never bothered to swerve. The wheel hit the granite, slid to the side, and the muddy clay created enough suction to pull it over the edge, causing the entire wagon to tilt dangerously.

The sudden, resisting drag made the horses to slow down until they stopped despite the driver's hasty lashes and stern yelling, wishing their sheer strength could straighten the wagon and pull it back on the road, but his efforts were in vain.

"Damn it all!" he cried in frustration, then leered around quietly. This was not the time or place to cause such racket. Looking down at the wheel now tightly stuck, he sighed. "At least it didn't break," he muttered to himself.

If the flickering ahead was a house, then perhaps he could get some help to bring the wagon out of the trench unharmed. As a safety measure, he released the horses and ushered them to follow,

trudging toward the light like moth drawn to a fire. Fear and hope mingled together, forming a murky pool of ambivalence. It could be a house; it could be a bandit camp— or something worse.

#

*My poor eyes must be failing!*

It was an inn— a real inn in the middle of nowhere. Despite the rotting exterior, partially broken stairs or the porch that looked like it wanted to give in at any moment, the bright lantern above the door looked warm and inviting. The yard was full of shrubbery, thriving unattended. Not one but two other wagons were parked near the stable that seemed empty and dark. The separate building was in equally bad shape with the main structure, and the wagons, upon closer glance, seemed like they had been there for ages— metal rusted, wood decayed.

The driver shrugged at the dreary view. "It's a shelter for all I care," he grunted, tied his horses to the porch fence and headed for the weathered door.

Blinking twice to make sure his eyes were not failing again, genuinely surprised to find that he was not the only customer. There were two men hanging their heads above their mugs in silence as if fate had not been kind to either of them, and a lady who sat by herself close to the fireplace. Before he could pay further attention to the strange details, he spotted the innkeeper and approached a massive desk that separated kitchen area from the lounge. A big fire blazed in the hearth, radiating comfortable warmth for the entire room, bringing a faint smile upon the driver's weary face.

"Greetings, traveler," a sturdy man with bushy moustache said from behind the counter.

"Looking for a place to spend the night?"

"With the weather being what it is, that's exactly what I'm after," the driver answered tiredly.

"I also require some help if possible."

The innkeeper smiled, pointing at a chair in front of the desk. "Have a seat and we can talk. I'm Telrad, the keeper of this humble house. Something to eat? A drink, perhaps?"

The driver sat down and nodded firmly. "I could use some mead, wine, anything you have, and a plate of whatever you have cooking over there," he said, pointing at the large pot hanging above the fire.

"Certainly," Telrad promised. "Let me get you some soup and a mug of our finest mead, and perhaps we can discuss about this problem you're having, master—" he left the sentence hanging, waiting for the driver's response with raised eyebrows.

"Garner," he grunted, "I'm Garner Oaks."

"Very well, Master Garner," Telrad smiled and rushed to fulfill the order.

While waiting, Garner allowed his eyes to wander around the lounge area. He could have sworn that any of the customers had not moved an inch since the moment he stepped through the door. Those two men, far apart from each other, kept staring at their drinks as if frozen in place and time, and the lady, dressed in a rather ragged gown, remained by the fire, similarly gazing into the dancing flames like a statue.

*What an odd bunch of people.*

Before Garner could make any acquaintances, the innkeeper returned with a meal he could not resist. The soup was thick and clumpy, and smelled like it had been slowly simmering in the pot the whole day, but Garner was too hungry to care.

Scooping up the soup with a stained, slightly warped spoon, Garner kept glancing at the woman. After all, it had been a long time on the road, but again, Telrad came to break the rather entertaining trail of thought.

"So, tell me about your problem. Did your wagon break?" he inquired with a worried frown.

Garner nodded. "Clay and water are a treacherous combination," he uttered.

Telrad chuckled warmly, "Add the darkness, and you have a potentially deadly bundle."

Pouring himself a mug too, Telrad took a sip and then said, "I'll come with you tomorrow and we can see about getting that beast back on the road. Right now, however, it's best if we wait out the storm."

"I'll drink to that," Garner raised his mug, satisfied with the progress of his situation. The wagon should be rolling toward the city before noon, and he was about to get some well earned rest. "Tell me, Telrad, are you the owner of this inn?" he then asked, wondering why would anyone build an inn so far from all the busy routes.

The innkeeper smiled lightly, took another sip of his drink and burped loudly. "I'm not the owner," he said, giving a quick glance at the frozen lady. A small gesture, but Garner picked it easily from the corner of his eye. "It's an interesting story," Telrad continued, his eyes now firmly fixed on the driver, "if you care to listen."

Garner glanced around and shrugged indifferently. "The fellows here don't seem too chatty, so I might as well," he grunted, offering his empty mug for a refill.

While his tone was insulting, indicating he was not really interested to hear a lengthy story, it did not seem to bother the innkeeper at all. With a pale smile upon his suddenly sorrow-stricken face, he filled the mug and handed it back. After spending a brief moment looking for words, he finally commenced his tale.

#

I was a driver once, much like you, hauling weapons and armor from the north—the best pieces those crafty Darfins could create. I had the choice to take a longer route through the mountains, but in my rush and greed to pocket my earnings, I took the forest road. Less traveled, less thugs to worry about. It seemed like the perfect option for me.

The weather was much like it is now, and I knew the stories all too well. Disappearing wagons and drivers that never returned; they had all taken the same road. You know, as well as I do, that it is not a long way— mere couple of days to the next city— mere couple of days to safety. I figured that if I did not stop for more than a few hours at a time, just enough to allow the horses and myself a brief moment of rest, I would travel fast enough to avoid any trouble.

My assumptions were proven false.

The fall was far along, slowly giving way for the winter. The rain had ice in it, visibility close to none, and the accident was only a question of when. A cursed rock, that I failed to see in my blind rush, shattered the wheel, tossing the wagon to the side, and for a moment I was sure it would fall off the road. As a small miracle, I was able to straighten it out by slowing down, but I knew right there and then that my fate would be a woeful one if I did not find help. With all that steel piled up behind my back, the wagon was heavy, and could not go for long with a severely damaged wheel.

The fear was mind-numbing, darkness outside the range of my lanterns was like a wall with an army of murderous beasts ready to break through. I could feel my heart racing, the blood throbbing on the sides of my head as the horses were moving about restlessly. They sensed the monsters waiting in the night.

The light in the distance— I was sure it was a trick played by my overwhelmed mind, hopelessly trying to find anything to avoid the creeping panic. But as it turned out, for my great relief, the light endured a second and a third glance, so I took my horses, my precious cargo, and slowly guided them through the remaining quarter of a mile to what seemed like the most welcome answer to my silent prayer.

The lantern of the inn was like a rising sun after the longest night of my life. I could easily repair the wheel in daylight, so I decided to take this unexpected chance to rest, perhaps something warm to eat too. By now, my friend, this story probably sounds very familiar to you.

The innkeeper, a younger lad, who looked like he was about to starve with bones sticking out from every part of his withered body, greeted me with a forced smile. I would not normally buy a meal from someone like him. You do know what they say, my friend, never trust a skinny chef. But I was hungry, and too tired to really care. I ordered some soup and a mug of mead, and asked for a room, planning to retire for the day as soon as I finished the meal. I did not pay much attention to the customers, one staring silently at his drink, the other one, a lady, staring at the fire. In hindsight, I probably should have, but I doubt it would have made a difference. For some unknown reason, the lady gave me an uneasy feeling I could not explain to myself, almost as if she reeked plain fear around her slim figure. I'm sure you have noticed the same unsettling detail by now, but do not worry, everything will become clear in time.

While I was eating, the skinny innkeeper began to share his story. I never asked for it, and I certainly was not listening too heedfully— not until he got to this part.

#

Garner had stopped eating. Staring blankly at the innkeeper, he was waiting for more, but Telrad was only staring back, smiling sadly.

"Why are you telling me this?" Garner asked with a thin voice, breathing overwrought, sudden fear strangling his pounding heart.

"I'm telling you my story like the previous innkeeper told me before moving on, and now I can finally move on," Telrad said, visibly relieved.

Abandoning his meal, Garner rushed up and stumbled toward the door. He would rather try his luck outside in the dark than tolerating this creepy shack any longer.

The laughter of the innkeeper followed him. "You can run, but you may never leave!" Unable to fully comprehend the meaning of those words, their tone sent chills crawling up his spine.

The lonely porch lantern barely lit the very front of the house, flickering its alluring light into the night. Rain hit on Garner's face like thousand tiny icicles, the road loomed a few yards away. The next town was not too far away. He was certain he could make the miles on foot despite the fact that it might take him a day or two. Shaken by the innkeeper's tale, it suddenly felt like a much better idea than staying. Something was so terribly wrong with this place. There was something sinister about it, and Garner was not going to stick around long enough to discover whatever secrets were hidden within those decaying walls.

Mud splashing, clothes rustling, panting heavily, Garner ran toward the road, muscles protesting such sudden rush. But no matter how fast or how far he ran, somehow the road remained elusive and distant. Eventually, too exhausted to keep running, he collapsed to the filthy ground. Staring into the darkness, confused, he heard someone coming out of the inn, lightly stepping upon the muddy yard. Garner did not want to, but he had to turn around and see. His hazy mind was demanding answers.

The lady he had seen sitting by the fireplace was now standing before him, curiously tilting her head. "It is true what Telrad told you. You can run, but you may never leave, not until you have fulfilled the contract," she explained like explaining the difference of night and day to a simpleton, slowly and emphasizing each word.

Telrad appeared behind her, carrying a large backbag. "Good luck, Garner," he wished. "I'll be on my way, isn't that right, Alyshra?"

The lady glanced at him and smiled, yet there was no emotion in her gesture. "You've completed your contract, Telrad. You're free to wander," she said, waving her shriveled hand at the former innkeeper, who wasted no time.

Starting to sing an old traveling rhyme, Telrad walked out to the road, turned to the same direction Garner was riding his wagon earlier and disappeared. His voice carried from the darkness for a while before gradually fading away.

Garner's mind was trying to make sense of it all. "The stories—" he muttered unclearly. "The stories never talk of a driver who returned..."

Alyshra smacked her lips, slowly approaching the flabbergasted driver. "Dear Garner," she whispered to his ear, spreading an unpleasant odour of decay. "Telrad will not return to the world of the living despite him being released from the chains of this place. He will roam the land, looking for a way to break through into the immortal gardens. He will run, just like you did, but he can never truly leave. He is free from my service, but not from this realm. We will probably see him again one day."

"So I will die here," Garner uttered hopelessly.

"Eventually, yes," Alyshra verified. "But I must feed on fresh, living host. It is the way of my kind," she added, wantingly sniffing her new prey.

"What exactly is your kind?" Garner asked, unsure if he really wanted to know. His voice shivered, terrified by the premise of torment that could continue for years with death as the sole reward. "And what is the contract?"

Instead of answering, Alyshra placed her finger upon his lips as a gesture for him to stop talking, the coldness of her skin striking Garner like a knife. "I need to feed now," she uttered eagerly, scrabbling the skin beneath his shirt. "We will have plenty of time for questions later."

Garner tried to resist, but then a sudden pain sent flashes of heat all over his shocked body, leaving him breathless. He looked down to find out what was the source of such immense anguish and saw her nails that had grown into lengthy claws puncturing his stomach, twisting slightly to open more precious veins.

Compared to the woman, Garner was not, by any means, a small man, yet Alyshra held him tightly against the cold ground. "Stay still," she demanded, bending down to enjoy the flooding delicacy.

A helpless scream sounded in the empty yard. The shredding pain was too much to bear, yet he was unable to move, unable to stop this monster from devouring him. Clinging to his slipping sanity, Garner called out her name, for he knew what she was now. The creeping madness allowed him to see past reason and freed him from the chains of denial.

"Wendhel— a shadow of the Netherworld," he wheezed, "b—but I'm not dead!" his shriek broke the unnatural silence of the yard again as the creature kept digging deeper into his stomach, but the shock, and her iron grip, effectively prevented all resistance.

Finally, Alyshra, satisfied with her portion, stood up and smirked, her claws returning to their original form. "An educated fool," she laughed. "Very good. We will have an interesting age before us, for not many dare to wander down this road."

Nauseous and weak, Garner forced his wildly shivering limbs into action and pushed himself up, ignoring the flaring pain in his stomach. "Answer the question, wench, am I dead or not?" he growled, fear slowly blending with rage, but the increasing weakness chewed off the sharpest edge.

Alyshra gazed at Garner, and for a second there was crackling tension building between them, but then the woman laughed impishly. "You will fade," she revealed, "but not for a long time, my dear innkeeper." Finished with the discussion, fully satiated, Alyshra returned to the door. Pausing for a while, she glanced over her shoulder and said, "Come inside, Garner, the soup won't cook itself."

Trapped in this strange, malicious illusion, his fate crystal clear, Garner's shoulders slumped as a sign of surrender. There was no way to fight, no way to escape. All he could do was to hope for some unsuspecting driver to come down that road with his wagon and see another fly getting caught in the alluring light of the lantern.

"Cursed be the stars," he hissed, shambling back toward the building.

#

Keeping his eyes on the road, the driver pushed his horses for higher speed. Wanting to reach the town before nightfall, he maintained a delicate balance between staying firmly away from the treacherous ledges and keeping up the highest possible haste. The sun was beginning to set, but it would be at least another couple of hours before darkness claimed the land.

Suddenly, he pulled the reins hard to bring the horses to a full halt. An unexpected sight ignited his curiosity that quickly overcame his rush. Jumping off the wagon, unconcerned over his cargo that consisted of expensive pelts from the northern forests, he approached the wrecked wagon, partially fallen off the road.

The driver had little interest for the wagon itself, or the owner, but if there was anything valuable inside, he would make nice additional profit on top of his regular earning. Rummaging through the boxes, his eyes lit up in sheer excitement. Each box seemed to hold ten large bottles of Darfin firewater, and the boxes stacked up to twenty altogether.

"Looks like Immortals are smiling upon me today," he muttered contently, checking all the boxes carefully before moving them.

Sweating, hands shivering from the effort, he carried every box and loaded them to his own wagon. Worried over the overall weight at first, he was glad to discover that the pelts he already had packed in his wagon did not add enough for the firewater to cause a problem. When everything was ready, the sun was hanging low, but there would be time to cover quite a few miles before dark. The driver hopped back on his wagon and took off, barely noticing the abandoned building standing by the road.

When the lonely glimmer appeared in the night, alluring distressed travelers toward the ominous inn in the middle of nowhere, the driver was too far to see or care. Garner watched through the bleary window, tears gleaming in his eyes. He had been standing there ever since he saw the

driver coming down the road, watched him looting the precious cargo, watched as the bastard ran off unharmed, leaving him linger in this void for another night.

Sensing movement behind him, knowing who was coming, he closed his eyes as a voice spoke softly. "Others will come, my dear, but right now I must feed."

#

Years later, the stars finally aligned. A stormy, dark night with yet another fool trying to make it through the ruthless forest trail. Another broken wagon, and a willing fly who could not resist the light of the lantern.

Smiling widely, Garner welcomed the shaky guest to the house that would claim another soul.

"Good evening to you, traveler," he greeted enthusiastically. "We have a few customers tonight, but there's still plenty of room for one more," he said, pointing out to the people sitting around their tables.

Three men and a lady by the fireplace, all quiet and seemingly frozen in place. Reduced to a shadow like the rest of them, the inn had gained a new regular, never speaking, never raising his eyes from the table, suffering his fate in silence. While understanding what it meant, Garner was in a joyful mood, for he would break the chains and find a way. Confidently, he offered the guest some mead and clumpy soup, preparing to tell the story that would set him free.

The same sentence haunted all these men, yet every innkeeper that had served there maintained the same hope. This time things would be different— this time the announcement that shackled their souls could not hold them bound. And so the cycle began anew.

*You can run, but you may never leave.*

The End