

The Two Doctors **by Mohammad Khan**

They spoke of two doctors. One for life and one for death, Abner and Marat. Twins born from the same mother, the only doctor in the remote village of Gaia. She passed her knowledge onto them.

Their mother's death from Imperious separated the two. Abner could not accept Marat's passivity to medicine. They lived in different parts of the village. Abner, at top a hill in a cabin, and Marat at the bottom among the muck.

They rejoined when a sudden illness fell upon their village.

People died without symptom, without cause, without warning. A few suffered coughs, chills, and strokes, most simply died. The disease has been ravaging the village for months.

Abner is walking up the hill to his cabin. He passes by a few village folk with bright smiles on their face as he walks by as if his presence is the cure.

In the tidy cabin atop a hill, Abner works in his lab concocting potions for the adaptive disease he calls, Imperium. His short and stout lab hand, Gorgo works nearby.

"Got it", says Abner holding a vial for a new formula. "Gorgo, send for Marat. He'll want this. This should work this time."

Gorgo writes the note and ties it to the pigeon.

It flies downhill toward Marat's lodge. The pigeon weaves past the gravestones lining the streets. People limp in agony and cower in fear from the paranoid of getting Imperium.

The pigeon lands in a dark, broke, wooden shack. A young boy emerges from the darkness seeing the pigeon.

He reads the letter and takes off for the fields.

The boy passes outside the bounds of the village to a field of graves. The grave field reaches beyond edge of the earth and deeper than the roots of trees. A small group of people stand around a grave as a body is being placed.

"Marat", shouts the boy. "Letter."

A head pops up from a man standing in the grave holding the body. "What?". His eyes sullen with sadness and his face marked with weariness. Marat pulls himself out of the grave after laying the body to rest. He walks to the boy.

Marat towers over the boy. "What is it Blake?"

"Your brother. He says he's done it." Blake hands him the letter.

"He said that plenty." Marat grabs the letter. "Alright, can you attend to Longjoy's burial? While I meet with Abner?"

"Of course sir." Blake walks towards the group and jumps into the grave to assist with the burial.

Marat begins the trudge up to Abner's cabin. The folk avoid him as if he carries the Imperium. He passes

folk pulling muddy water from the well and houses made of rotting wood where people lay their heads.

An elderly couple, the Abernathy family, come running towards Marat. A woman and her half-blind husband.

The woman wrapped in worn fabric sash pleads to Marat. “Marat, you must attend to Lorain. She’s ill once again.”

“What troubles her”, asks Marat.

“She’s shaking violently. Regurgitating white fluids”, says the Mr. Abernathy. “She couldn’t see us neither.”

“Blood letting as Abner said”, weeps Mrs. Abernathy. “But nothing’s working.”

“Take me to her.”

They guide Marat to their small one room home. The cold fire smolders beside Lorain as she shivers silently beneath elk fur lying on the damp wooden floor. Marat sits with her and places a gentle comforting hand on her forehead. Her icy skin trembled at the warmth of Marat’s hand.

“Is there anything you can do”, asks Mr. Abernathy.

“No, but Abner might. He sent for me for a possible potion. I’ll bring him here.”

Marat quickly leaves and jogs up the hill to Abner’s pristine cabin.

“Abner” shouts Marat from the outside. No response. He rushes to the door as Gorgo opens the door.

“Please Marat, he’s in the lab.”

“Gorgo, Lorain is need for Abner’s concoction.” Marat pushes past Gorgo and heads for the lab.

“He has not tested it properly yet.” Gorgo follows quickly behind.

Marat finds Abner behind a door injecting a tired villager with his new concoction. A small group of weary and frail villagers sit in darkness waiting for the potion.

“Marat”, says Abner. “I’ve extinguished imperium with this potion.”

“No time for that brother”, says Marat grabbing his hand. “Lorain needs us.”

“Lorain?” Abner quickly stands. He grabs the vial of the potions and follows Marat to Lorain’s home.

Abner sits beside Lorain as he pours some of the potion down her throat. Lorain stops shivering and her skin warms.

“It works”, says Abner amazed. He stands with a prideful grin. Her parents breathe a sigh of relief as the color returns to Lorain’s face. Marat stands behind carefully watching Lorain.

Suddenly, she convulses violently. Spewing white foam from her mouth as black spots grow on her finger tips. Marat dives to Lorain holding her steady in one place.

Abner steps back confused. “Black bile? But I had previously cured it.” He fumes at his mistake as Marat

controls Lorain's violent seizure.

"Abner, is there nothing we can do", pleads Mrs. Abernathy. "Surely we can save her."

"I-I don't know", stammers Abner.

Lorain stops convulsing. Marat stands. "She's gone", he says quietly.

The mother breaks down into her husbands arms. Marat comforts them. "It's ok, she's not in any pain now."

Abner storms out.

Back in his lab, Abner sits alone at his lab table with open notebooks of different formulae. After administering the final potion to the test subjects, Gorgo sits with Abner.

"Sir what is wrong? We will start again. We must", says Gorgo.

"Again and again. There's no end. I can cure the black bile, yellow bile, and even Typhus."

"We will find a cure if it takes the entire life time."

"I don't have the capability to heal anymore."

Marat enters the lab.

"How are they", asks Abner.

"Mourning" says Marat pulling up a seat. "I'll be burying her tomorrow at twilight. They want you to come."

"I can't", says Abner flustered. "I-I have much work to accomplish. New potions to manufacture."

"Gorgo can manage lab. Surely he's grown accustomed to your methods."

"That's quite right sirs." Gorgo turns to Abner. "I am capable of working the lab while you mourn."

Abner hits the table. "I don't need to mourn. I need to work." He turns to Marat. "Will you please go? Alert me if any other cases appear."

"Of course." Marat stands. "I'll be back at twilight." He heads back to his broken lodge at the foot of valley leaving Gorgo and Abner alone in the lab.

The small candlelight flickers. "It needs more oil", says Gorgo standing to pick up whale oil.

Gorgo picks a pail of whale oil for the candle but Abner stops him. "It doesn't need oil", says Abner. "It needs air."

At twilight, Marat knocks on lab's door.

Gorgo opens. "He's not moving. Says he is unwell."

Marat moves Gorgo aside. "Abner", shouts Marat as he walks. "The funeral is waiting on you." He finds

Abner toiling away at his desk. Abner scribbles furiously in his notebook. “Abner, She’d want you there.”

“I told you. I don’t want to go.”

“The family insists.”

“I insist back.”

“Abner”, says Marat stepping closer. “You will want to be there. And you’ll regret it if you are not.”

“I haven’t been there since.” Abner’s voice trails off. “Anyway, I can’t be there. Not this time. Not hers.”

“Ok...ok. I understand.” Marat pats him on the back. He leaves them in the laboratory.

The sun’s red rays color the sky as Marat helps dig Loraine’s grave. He and Mr. Abernathy shovel the last piece of dirt out of the grave.

“She always loved the sunset”, says Mr. Abernathy.

“From here”, says Marat. “The sun will set on her.”

Marat climbs out of the grave and helps Mr. Abernathy out.

Marat wipes the dirt off him. “Alright, you grab her legs and I’ll carry her shoulders.”

Lorain is mummified in a white cloth. Marat and Mr. Abernathy prepare to lift Lorain before a voice calls out for them to stop.

“I’ll carry her”, says Abner. Marat moves aside and allows Abner to carry her by the shoulders.

Abner and Abernathy lift Lorain and gently place her inside.

Marat shovels the dirt into the grave. Mr. Abernathy wipes off the dirt after he gets out of the grave. Abner wipes the dirt on himself.

Abner and Marat stand at Loraine’s grave after the Abernathy’s leave.

“I didn’t think you’d show”, says Marat. “But I know they appreciate you being here.”

“I- how do you do it”, says Abner. “We heal wounds. It’s black and white. Live or die.”

“The job may be black and white. But how we feel is not. It doesn’t get any easier. You are not losing just another person. You’re losing mom all over again.”

“How do you face that? Lorain was young, she—she had her whole life in front of her. If we lose people like this, we are fighting a war with no reason..”

“It’s ok. You won’t be able to save everyone. But that doesn’t mean do you don’t try.”

Abner looks at the graves behind them and the field stretching far in front. “From my lab, I would watch the burials and the field grow. A measure of my failure. Cursing at you for not burying it out of my sight and far from the village. How do you deal with it? Burying-losing people you love? ”

“I don’t know-it changes over time, doesn’t leave. Like an anchor of ship. The weight keeps the ship steady

and in times of storm, you rely on the anchor to strength.”

“in times of storm”, says Abner to himself. With one last look at the graveyard around him, he walks back to the village.

“Where are you going”, asks Marat. He stays by Loraine’s grave.

“Back to work.”