

Two Days of Solitude

He held his hat to his head, and looked up into the sun. The dark clothing was not the best for this kind of weather, but it was resilient, and so would he have to be. The sun's glare was heavy on his back. He had walked through another few homes, and some shops. From their state he gathered the town had to have been left by all living over a month ago. He was nearing the town center, and closed to a manor of considerable size. It would have to be the last one for the day, for he knew it did not bode well to sleep in infected areas.

The door was locked, but a lockpick made quick work of it. The foyer was elaborately decorated, and with chandelier hung high on the ceiling. Definitely built to impress, and impress it did. As he looked up, he saw the ceiling to be painted, in what he perceived to be a typical scene of Paradise. As he looked down, he saw that while everything was covered in dust, there were tracks in it, going from door to door. Someone has been here in more recent times.

The footprints seemed to go in and out of the front door, so it had to be someone with the key. It also looked as if whoever went through here, went in and out several times. Either that, or there were multiple people going passing through, which he didn't think probable.

He chose one of those tracks, and followed it upstairs, through a stairway of portraits of men in military garment and women in lavish dresses. They went through a hallway, stopping at a picture of a younger woman inscribed as "Mathilda of Berrynlake", into a room full of hunting trophies. He saw the footprints made a wide circle around the lion's head, mounted on the wall, and although he thought it only to have been fear, he followed them step by step out of precaution.

The room he entered next was certainly that of an experienced individual. There was a map of the world painted on the wall, and strings connecting places were tacked here and there. There were pieces of paper strewn about, some attached to the map, some wildly lying around either on the desk, or the floor. Most were filled with writing, in an awful handwriting he could not decipher at glance, others were sketches of animals, or animal parts. He even found some that must have been human parts.

The rest of the room, not covered in paper, the map or the desk, was filled with shelves of books and dried animal parts. Insects on display, teeth and skulls of varying animals, a stuffed catlike creature. However, there was one curious wardrobe, the surroundings of which were devoid of paper. He tried to open it, but the doors wouldn't budge in the conventional way. What it did, was start tipping. He quickly supported it, slowly setting it upright. Then he tried it again, carefully setting it down. It was a bed, and now that he looked at it, the curiously shaped ornament on the wardrobe's corners did seem like they could hold considerable weight.

What was on the bed itself opened more questions than it answered. There had been a body on it, at some point in the past, of someone stricken. He could clearly see the thin, blackish pieces of flesh sticking to the sheets, of which he took a bit, labeled, and stashed away. The body also was here no more, which meant, someone had to move it. Another doctor must have went through these parts. If he could ascertain this, he could move on, to regions that needed him more.

Unfortunately, the tracks ended at the entrance. The light breeze that came from time to time to bring relief, and the warm winds that amplified the stiffness of the dry air, both worked their way on the hard ground, leaving no trace of even his movements. The buildings, however, were another thing altogether. The visibility of the footprints there were a good measure of how long ago the person went by. It took some stumbling about, but he found a crescent of homes with fresh tracks. He had a rough estimate of where the visitor came from.

As he neared the edge of the other side of town, he found where the bodies have been moved to. As the buildings grew rarer, the field behind them became visible. And as details became clearer, he found that what he had assumed to be a field of white flowers, in fact were gravestones, rows upon rows, packed tightly together.

This was not the work of a doctor. They had too little time for the living, let alone the dead. The graves were well crafted, and tended to, up until lately. He looked around, until he found a fence. The graveyard proper. Overfilled.

There was a house there, on the edge of the graveyard, small, but sturdy. Even though it was isolated and distinct, it was still clearly part of the town. The gravedigger's home. The lights were off, and so was the lantern on the porch. He entered the shady building.

The sickly sweet of the herbs in his mask hit his nostrils once again, but prepared, he only stopped for a second to getting used to the sensation. He took a box of matches out of his pocket, and lit one. At one of the sides of the room that composed this house, he found a desk, and on it, a candle. He lit it, and found an open book, with a quill and an inkwell

sitting next to it. Upon closer inspection, it seemed to be a diary. It was also late, and he would not stay here for the night. He had to leave.

Finally out of town, he took off his mask, and breathed in heavily. It was a relief to take it off from time to time, just to make sure he was actually still human. He knew well that others shunned those like him, but it was a price he was willing to pay, for safety, and to help others.

In the darkness, he looked at the book he took with himself. It would have to wait until there was enough light. For now, he needed sleep. He found himself a spot under a tree, and dozed off, from a world of nightmares into a world of nightmares.

He was long awake, by the time the sun started showing its sphere from behind the horizon. He knew he should have slept longer. He knew it too well. Bad things happened, when he found someone when tired. But at least he had slept. It was better than nothing.

While he waited for the morning to lighten some more, he put a pot onto the fire he had started earlier. He rummaged through his backpack, in search of some dried meat. He still had most of his water bags full, but food was running low. He had at most a week of rations. He had to find some source of uncontaminated foodstuff, and better sooner than later.

By the time he had finished eating, both the sun was high enough for him to be able to read, and his kettle signaled that tea was incoming. He stood up to stretch, and sat down by the ember, opening the book.

... I knew there was something wrong with Master Berrynlake. News like that spreads like wildfire in our community. But I didn't think it was that bad. Up until today. They asked me to prepare a coffin. ... The Gumbennies' daughter, who worked as one of the maids at the Mansion fell ill. She's bound to the bed, and cared for, but she doesn't seem to be showing any signs of bettering. Hopefully it's not what the late Master had contracted. The body was in a terrible shape when it came to me, and I'd hate to have another suffer this fate. ... I buried the young Benedicta Gumberry yesterday. I think about ten more people fell sick, but I'm not sure. It's getting increasingly hard to get information, as people

seem to be avoiding me. I guess it is sensible, as I'm the one person in this town working with bodies. Still, it's worsening. ... Meriam screamed and ran off, when she saw me going for my groceries. Meriam of all people. I knew her since she was a wee lass. ... It's depressing. The only times I'm called into town now are when I'm to take someone. I wish there was someone else I could give this mantle to, but there's only me. ... Today, the Mansion's medicus died. The priest is in bed, too weak to stand. ... I haven't heard from the town in two days. I'm going to investigate. ... I've managed to get through some homes. Dead. All were dead. ... Going through the Primmans' home, I've found that George was still alive. He's weak, but holds on. I wish I could do more to help him, but i'm praying for him as strong as I can. I wanted to move him, closer to my home, but touch seems to pain him. I'll be checking on him regularly. ... I've been through all homes. Some people died in my arms. George is the last one that's holding on. I started digging graves, and making gravestones. It's the only thing, and the least, I can do. ... I'm starting to feel weak, but there is not so much work left. I can finish my job. I'm afraid, I'll not be able to check on George. ... This is probably the last I'll write. Yesterday, with the last of my strength, I've put up the last gravestone. I feel weak. I think I'm going to sleep. I'm sorry George, for leaving you alone for those two days.

The sun was high in the sky, when he finished reading. Two more homes to check. He put on his mask and hat. Looking to the cloudless sky, he thought: Someday, this will have to end.

Going into the gravedigger's home with the benefit of daylight was helpful. He immediately found the figure on the chair, in the room's corner. Were it not for the darkened skin, the gravedigger would seem as if he was just nodding off, ready to wake up at any time. Alas, his pulse was gone. He took the body out, grabbing a spade on the way, and dug a grave, for the gravedigger. Not as well done as he had made them. With a prayer, the body was being covered in earth.

Then there was George. He had a rough estimate, of where he would find him, from the dates in the diary, and so he set out. Fortunately, he knew it was to be a house with relatively new footprints.

His estimate was a little off, and it took quite some time, before he found the house with fresh tracks. It was a rather ordinary home, with no qualities distinguishing it from its neighbours. The front door had been unlocked. He entered.

The tracks were leading him upstairs, into a small room.

There were some shelves with books, and some wooden toys strewn about the floor. There were some sticks, with carvings in them, next to a knife on the floor by the window. And a bed.

Wer war der Tor, wer war der Weise,
Wer war der Bettler oder Keiser?
Ob arm, ob reich, im Tode gleich.

The words echoed through his head. He looked down, upon the child, at most ten years old, blackened, in the bed. It's not the first time, it's not the youngest he had seen. It's not the easiest either. He checked the pulse, and found nothing. He was unsure whether to sigh with relief, or cramp up in sorrow. Not saved, but no longer in pain. The gods are his doctors now.

He took George into his arms, and down the stairs. Through the empty, soulless town, with the sun still bearing down on all, purging it from the waters of life. To the graveyard, where so many already lie. Primman. That was the name he was looking for now.

There were many, but ultimately, he found them. He gently set the child on the ground, and put the spade to work. The hole was dug. With a prayer, the child was united with his parents. He set up a grave marker, and looked into the sky. Then he looked back down. And then he went on, on his way towards the next settlement.