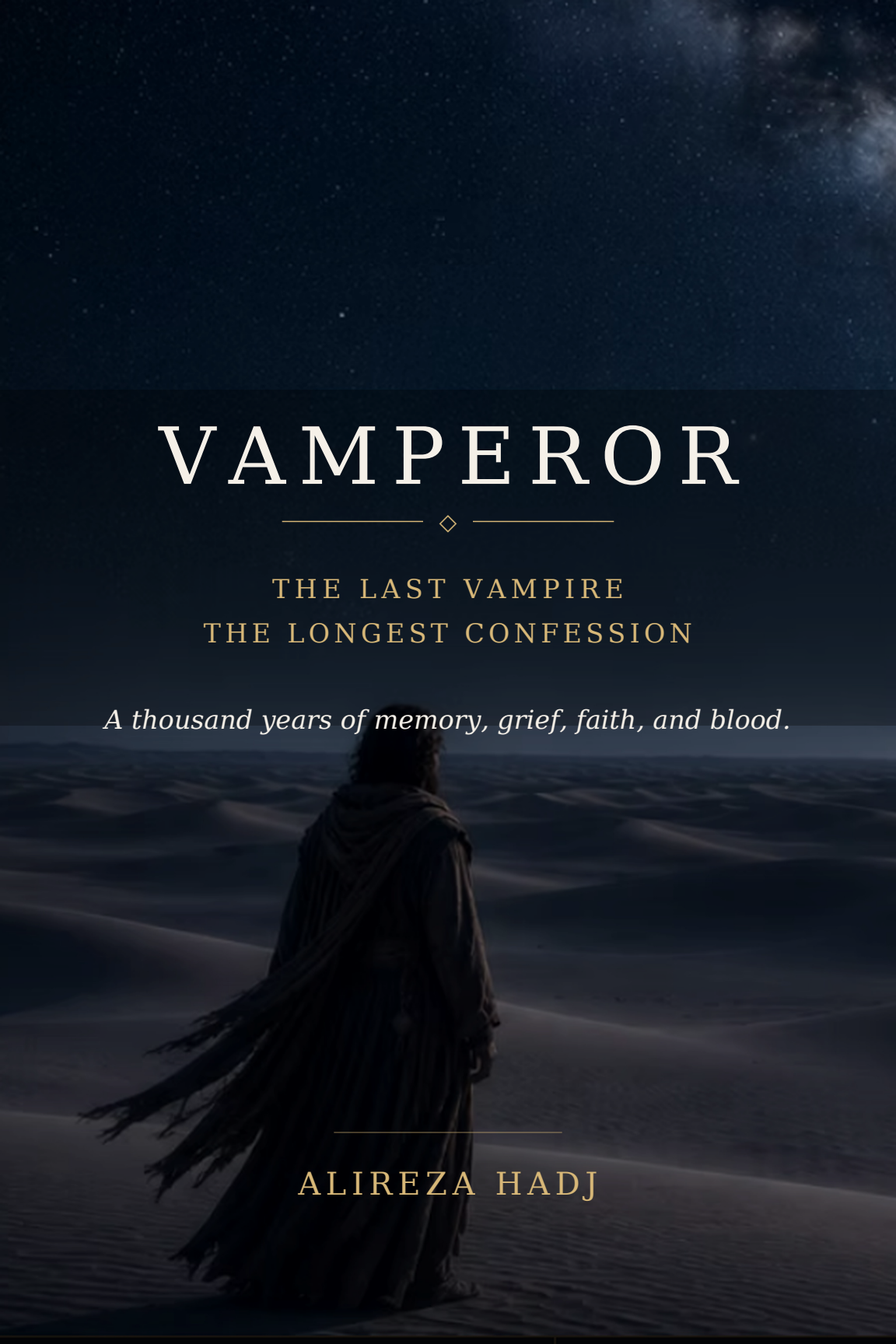


VAMPEROR



THE LAST VAMPIRE
THE LONGEST CONFESSION

A thousand years of memory, grief, faith, and blood.

A person with long dark hair, wearing a dark, flowing robe with a hood, stands with their back to the camera in a vast, dark desert. The desert is filled with rolling sand dunes under a deep blue night sky filled with stars and a faint nebula. The person's robe is dark and appears to have some frayed edges. The overall mood is mysterious and somber.

ALIREZA HADJ

PART 1.

Chapter 1. Fraunces Tavern

By the middle of the twenty-third century, New York no longer fought the water. It had yielded to it, then learned how to live above it. The old avenues of lower Manhattan lay submerged beneath dark tidal currents, their traffic lights, tunnel mouths, and buried storefronts below the surface like relics in a drowned cathedral. Above them rose a new stratified city of elevated walkways, seawall terraces, and towers retrofitted into vertical neighborhoods. Between these towers stretched a vast network of bridge-roads—broad, illuminated spans connecting one residential giant to another, forming a second city in the air. From a distance, they looked like threads of light suspended over black water, carrying the slow, steady movement of a population that no longer needed the ground.

This was true not only of New York, but of many other cities in the world. Rising seas had redrawn every coast, while declining birthrates and aging populations had altered the texture of daily life more subtly and more completely. Cities had become older, slower, less chaotic. There were fewer

children, fewer crowds, fewer reasons for strangers to gather without purpose. At the same time, artificial intelligence had absorbed so much of human interaction—work, companionship, entertainment, even consolation—that solitude no longer felt like an absence to most people. It had become infrastructure. Life was more efficient, more curated, less communal. The world had not exactly grown lonely; it had grown used to distance.

And yet some places survived by resisting that drift.

One of them was The Fraunces Tavern, the oldest pub in Manhattan. It had once stood on a narrow street in the old city two hundred years earlier, back when the neighborhood was above water and winter rain meant only rain. The original ground floor now sat below the tide line, sealed behind pressure glass and marine reinforcement, its first level preserved in the dark like a sacred ruin. Guests entered from the elevated replacement structure built above it, descending only visually through transparent sections of floor and wall where the sunken bones of the original pub could still be seen beneath the water: the old oak bar, warped but intact; brass foot rails dimly glinting in filtered light; rows of bottles long emptied and left in place like offerings to the past.

The upper pub had been rebuilt to match the old one with almost obsessive devotion. Low amber lamps glowed against dark wood paneling. Heavy beams crossed the ceiling. Mirrors behind the bar held a softened, age-stained shimmer. The air carried notes of whiskey, citrus peel, polish, and salt faintly rising from the drowned level below.

It was not merely a business. It was an act of memory. People came there not just to drink, but to sit inside the illusion that some human things—warmth, nearness, conversation, the soft clink of glass in a dim room—had once been ordinary, and might briefly be again.

Emma sat at the bar with her hand loosely wrapped around a glass she had not lifted in some time. She was twenty-seven, thin and quietly striking, with soft black hair that fell around her pale, flawless skin like spilled ink over milk. Her bright eyes gave her stillness an unsettling intensity, as if part of her was always watching from somewhere far away.

The amber light softened everything—the wood, the bottles, the quiet reflections in the mirror—but it did nothing for her. Her gaze rested somewhere just beyond the surface of the bar, unfocused, as if her thoughts were happening at a distance she could not quite return from.

A thin trail of ink climbed the side of her neck and disappeared beneath her ear, delicate and deliberate. Woven into the dark lines were distinct red petals, small but vivid against her skin, like fragments of a flower preserved in motion. In the low light they caught the eye only in pieces—first the curve of black, then the sudden muted red, then nothing again. The tattoo gave her an air of careful concealment, as though something beneath its beauty had been intentionally buried.

It had been like this for a while now.

Not sadness in any nameable form. Not even grief in the way people liked to describe it. What she carried was quieter, heavier. A kind of inward pressure. It pulled her attention away from the present, bent it inward, slowed it down until even simple moments arrived dulled.

“You look like you could use better company than that.”

The voice came from her right, smooth, practiced. A man had taken the empty stool beside her without asking. He leaned just enough to signal confidence, not enough to seem intrusive. The kind of approach that usually worked.

Emma didn't turn.

“I'm not interested.”

She said it calmly.

The man paused, as if the conversation had skipped a step he had expected.

He gave a small amused smile. “Come on. You don't even know what you're missing out on.”

“I'm not interested.”

Same tone. Same distance. No acknowledgment of him beyond the words themselves.

That was the end of it.

He gave a small, awkward nod she didn't see, then slipped off the stool and disappeared back into the room, already dissolving into other conversations, other attempts.

Emma remained exactly as she had been.

Above the bar, the television shifted again. The sound was low, nearly absorbed by the room, but the captions moved with steady urgency.

—escalation continues—civilian zones compromised—no confirmed ceasefire—

A city burned somewhere on the screen. Smoke rose in slow, deliberate columns. Figures moved below it, reduced by distance into shapes rather than people. The camera cut to another angle. Another flare of light. Another collapse.

No one watched.

A man further down the bar lifted his drink and continued talking about supply chains. The group in the corner leaned closer together, arguing over something that seemed, to them, far more immediate. Someone laughed again—short, reflexive, already fading before it finished.

The images continued to change.

War, somewhere.

Always somewhere.

In the mirror behind the bar, the drowned lower level shimmered faintly beneath them—dark water pressing silently against old wood, against a space that had once held voices and warmth and ordinary life.

Emma stared downward, her thoughts folding back into themselves, the weight inside her undisturbed.

Above the bar, the ordinary stream of distant catastrophe continued—fire somewhere, soldiers somewhere else, another panel of experts explaining failure in measured tones.

Then the screen abruptly changed.

The footage cut to black for half a second before returning with the seal of the International Bioethics Tribunal rotating slowly against a dark field. A red band flashed across the bottom of the screen.

BREAKING NEWS

The room shifted almost imperceptibly. Conversations thinned. Heads turned in small increments. Even people pretending not to care glanced upward.

The anchor appeared, composed but sharpened by urgency.

“We interrupt regular programming for a historic ruling issued moments ago. The International Bioethics Tribunal, in coordination with the Atlantic Federal Court, has granted the petition of Adam Z. Walker, known globally as the Vamperor, recognizing his legal right to voluntary termination.”

A pause.

As if even the anchor understood the weight of saying it aloud.

“The last vampire on Earth has been granted permission to end his life.”

The announcement tore through the pub, and every table broke into argument.

“No chance.”

“They actually did it?”

“That’s insane.”

“Good for him.”

“Good for him?”

Emma’s fingers tightened around her glass. Her eyes did not leave the screen.

The screen changed again, transitioning to a live split-screen debate already in progress. Two men faced one another across a polished studio frame. Between them sat a moderator whose expression suggested calm built through training rather than temperament.

LIVE: THE WALKER DECISION

“We’re joined tonight by Dr. Elias Renaud, senior member of the International Bioethics Tribunal and one of the officials who approved today’s ruling.”

The man on the left gave a slight nod. Silver-haired, late sixties, elegant in the understated manner of someone long accustomed to authority. His face revealed little.

“And by Lucien Hale, executive chairman of Helix Dominion, whose family trust has overseen the containment estate where Adam Walker has resided for the past century and half.”

The younger man on the right did not nod. Early forties, severe, immaculately dressed. His gaze remained fixed ahead with the disciplined irritation of a man already certain he was surrounded by fools.

A murmur moved through the room.

“Helix Dominion.”

“Of course it’s Hale.”

“They’ve made trillions off him.”

The moderator turned to Renaud first.

“Doctor, why grant this request now?”

Renaud folded his hands.

“Because no sentient being can be held in perpetuity for the convenience of others,” he said. “Mr. Walker has existed under confinement for over a century years. Whatever his history, whatever the public fascination surrounding him, he retains the right to refuse continued existence.”

Lucien Hale gave a faint, humorless smile.

“That sounds noble,” he said. “It is also catastrophically shortsighted.”

The moderator pivoted smoothly.

“Mr. Hale?”

“Adam Walker is not a private citizen choosing retirement,” Hale said. “He is the final surviving member of a biologically distinct species, a living historical archive, and the source of medical breakthroughs that continue to save millions. My family has preserved the conditions under which those contributions remained possible.”

From somewhere down the bar:

“Preserved?”

“Is that what they call it now?”

Renaud did not look at Hale.

“You mean imprisoned.”

Hale’s jaw moved once.

“I mean protected. Without my grandfather’s intervention, Walker would have perished with the rest.”

Renaud turned then.

“And without your grandfather’s political intervention, many of the rest might not have.”

The room reacted audibly to that.

“Oh damn.”

“He said it.”

Hale's expression hardened but did not crack.

"Conspiracy rhetoric makes excellent television," he said.
"History is more complex."

"History often becomes complex," Renaud replied, "when guilt purchases editors."

A few people laughed. Others groaned.

The moderator stepped in quickly.

"Gentlemen. Let's remain with the ruling itself. Mr. Hale, are you arguing that Adam Walker should be compelled to continue living?"

"I am arguing that Walker is no longer immortal," said Hale. "His condition has been deteriorating for decades. He is aging—slowly, yes, but measurably. At minimum, this should be treated as a human being attempting to end his life without any medically justifiable reason. Besides", he continues, "Some lives carry obligations beyond personal preference."

"And I am arguing," said Renaud, "that this reasoning has justified every elegant form of slavery humanity ever invented."

The captions raced beneath them.

**LAST VAMPIRE CASE DIVIDES WORLD
MARKETS RESPOND TO HELIX SHARES**

Emma's eyes remained on the screen.

She had not moved.

Only the smallest changes betrayed her: the tightening of her throat, the careful stillness of someone holding something in place by force alone. Moisture gathered at the edge of one eye. She blinked it back immediately.

Around her, the pub came alive.

"He's too important to die."

"You don't own people because they are useful."

"He's not people."

"That's exactly the problem."

"Imagine choosing sunlight after all this time."

"I'd choose it after one week with that family."

Onscreen, Hale leaned forward.

"You are not granting freedom," he said. "You are authorizing the destruction of the last irreplaceable witness to an era."

Renaud met him without expression.

"No," he said. "We are ending the fiction that witness must remain chained."

Emma lowered her gaze.

The room blurred for a moment.

She placed the glass down, reached for her coat, and stood with more speed than grace. The stool legs scraped softly against the floor.

No one noticed.

No one was looking at her.

They were all watching the screen, where Adam Walker did not appear—only his name, his case, his value, his death discussed by men who spoke of him as territory.

Emma turned and walked toward the door.

Her eyes were wet now.

She kept her head down and pushed out into the cold night before anyone could see her break.

PART 1.

Chapter 2. The Invitation

Emma stepped out into the Manhattan night as if the world had changed shape while she was inside the pub.

The city rose around her in tiers of steel, glass, and suspended roads, luminous bridges stretched between towers like veins of light above the black water. Far below, the drowned streets of old Manhattan slept beneath the tide, their names preserved only in maps and memory. Transit rails glided overhead in near silence. Wind moved through the vertical canyons carrying salt and rain.

She barely saw any of it.

Her hands were shaking.

She stopped beneath a column of pale light and pressed both palms against the cold rail beside the walkway. People passed around her in coats and muted conversation, their faces lit by screens carrying the same headline that now burned across half the city.

ADAM ANNOUNCES FINAL DEPARTURE

THE VAMPEROR TO END HIS LIFE
STATEMENT EXPECTED WITHIN DAYS

She looked away.

For years she had imagined countless endings for him.
Vanishing into the sea. Retreating into another century.
Walking into sunlight. None of them had prepared her for
the bluntness of hearing he had chosen death.

Adam.

The last living vampire.

The oldest known being on earth.

A man who had crossed empires like weather and wars like
roads.

A man whose breakthrough treatments had saved millions,
who had spoken to governments, moved markets, and led
the last vampire society—yet never once granted the world
what it wanted most.

Himself.

No interviews.

No memoir.

No explanation.

No life story.

Only appearances. Statements. Rumors. The occasional sighting from a distance that would dominate every network on earth for weeks.

And now he was going to die.

Emma swallowed hard.

She had spent most of her life feeling slightly displaced inside the world around her. Even as a child there had been a distance between herself and other people that she never learned how to cross naturally. Other children moved through friendships with an ease she could only observe from afar. They formed loud temporary loyalties in classrooms and playgrounds while Emma lingered quietly at the edges of conversations, watching more than speaking. Teachers described her as intelligent, mature, reserved. Adults appreciated how little trouble she caused.

By middle school she had already learned how to make herself smaller in crowded rooms. She sat near windows, avoided eye contact during class discussions, and mastered the art of eating lunch quickly before anyone could turn her solitude into entertainment. The isolation rarely arrived in dramatic moments. It accumulated slowly, year after year, through small exclusions that eventually hardened into expectation.

Then her parents divorced.

Emma was fifteen when her father left their apartment carrying two suitcases and never truly returned. She still remembered standing in the hallway while her parents

argued in exhausted voices behind the kitchen door. Afterward her mother cried quietly at night when she thought Emma was asleep. Within a year her father had moved across the country with another woman, and his calls became infrequent enough that Emma began forgetting the sound of his voice between conversations.

The apartment changed after that.

Rooms stayed dark longer. Meals became irregular. Silence settled into corners like dust.

Her mother disappeared into work, often returning home late too tired to speak about anything beyond practical necessities. Emma stopped trying to talk about school. Evenings dissolved into long solitary hours inside her room while rain tapped against the apartment windows and the glow of her monitor illuminated scattered notes across the floor.

That was when the vampires entered her life.

At first it began as curiosity. A documentary clip. An old article buried inside a historical archive. A leaked photograph debated endlessly online. Then curiosity deepened into obsession. Emma drifted through academic databases, forgotten message boards, witness accounts, government leaks, Vatican references, conspiracy forums, and centuries-old journals digitized by obscure libraries.

She was drawn to vampire stories before she understood why.

Civilizations changed. Languages vanished. Empires collapsed. Yet accounts of vampires endured through every century like embers refusing to die.

And at the center of nearly all of them stood Adam.

The last vampire.

By then Adam had already become one of the most recognizable figures on earth. He had become part of public reality, while the truth of him remained hidden.

The mystery surrounding him only deepened his presence.

Emma watched every appearance obsessively.

A recording from Geneva where he addressed the World Health Assembly.

Footage from a diplomatic summit where presidents and ministers fell silent the moment he entered the room.

People spoke about him constantly. Fear, fascination, admiration, resentment—all of it tangled together.

Emma saw something else in him.

A solitude so deep it seemed to follow him everywhere.

She recognized it instinctively.

Her obsession gradually followed her into school. A classmate discovered vampire research open on one of the library terminals Emma had forgotten to close. Someone connected her anonymous online essays to her real identity.

Rumors spread through the halls with astonishing speed.

The bullying sharpened afterward.

Students hissed when she walked past. Someone left plastic fangs inside her backpack. Girls laughed at the dark clothes she wore and the sleepless shadows beneath her eyes after nights spent reading until dawn. Boys called her Bloodgirl whenever teachers were out of earshot.

One morning she arrived at school and found her locker covered in red paint. Thick streams dripped down the metal door onto the hallway floor. Across the front someone had written MONSTER LOVER in black marker large enough for half the corridor to see.

Students gathered nearby pretending not to stare directly at her.

A teacher eventually walked her to the office while maintenance workers cleaned the paint.

The vice principal called it adolescent cruelty and promised to investigate.

Nothing changed.

Over time isolation ceased feeling temporary and became part of her identity. While other teenagers built themselves through parties, relationships, and social rituals, Emma built herself through archives, unanswered questions, and long nights spent tracing fragments of Adam's existence across centuries.

Her blog began during her final year of high school almost by accident. At first it was anonymous, a small site where she cataloged historical references connected to Adam and compared contradictory accounts of vampire history. She wrote carefully researched essays arguing that vampires had been treated throughout history with the same fear society reserved for anything it could not control or understand.

The audience grew faster than she expected.

By twenty-five, millions of people read her work.

Some admired her. Many mocked her. News commentators referred to her as “the vampire advocate” with thinly disguised amusement. Religious groups condemned her openly. Anti-vampire activists flooded her inbox with threats often graphic enough to force her to change addresses twice.

Still she continued writing.

Because somewhere beneath the mythology, beneath the fear, beneath centuries of rumor and projection, Emma believed there had always been a person trapped inside the legend.

Her phone vibrated in her coat pocket.

She ignored it.

Then it rang.

A full tone this time, sharp in the wind.

She pulled it out absently, expecting messages, media requests, friends who knew what tonight meant to her.

The screen showed no contact.

No number.

Only three red digits.

666

Emma knew at once what they meant.

Her breath stopped.

On the fourth ring, she answered.

“Hello?”

Silence.

Then a voice entered the line.

“Emma Ridge.”

Low. Deep. Unhurried.

A voice carrying old distances and older sorrows. Emma’s breath caught.

Every instinct in her knew.

“Yes?”

“I hope I have not chosen an unkind hour.”

Her throat tightened.

“Adam?” she whispered.

A brief silence followed.

Then, with something almost like warmth:

“I am glad you called me Adam.”

She closed her eyes as tears rose.

“The other title was given to me by frightened men who mistook survival for a throne.”

His voice deepened slightly.

“I have never ruled anything except my own loneliness.”

Emma pressed a hand over her mouth.

For years she had imagined him majestic, unreachable.

She had not imagined truth spoken so simply.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“That is often the best beginning.”

A broken laugh escaped her.

He continued.

“I have read your work, Emma.”

The use of her name sent a shock through her.

“My work?”

"Your essays. Your reconstructions. Your refusal to let certainty bully memory."

She leaned against the rail, trembling.

"You know who I am."

"I know who you have tried to be."

The words struck deeper than praise.

"You searched for me with care," Adam said. "Not to possess, not to expose, not to profit. Only to understand. Such motives are becoming rare."

Emma looked out at the blurred city lights through tears.

"I never thought you would see any of it."

"I have lived long enough to learn that those who speak quietly often say the most."

A silence settled between them.

Then the headlines returned to her mind like a wound.

"Is it true?"

"Yes."

Her voice shook.

"You truly mean to end your life?"

"I do."

“Why?”

He was silent for several moments.

When he spoke again, his voice had darkened.

“Because even immortality is only time wearing a mask.”

Emma could not answer.

He continued softly.

“And masks grow heavy.”

She wiped tears from her face.

“Why are you calling me?”

“Because tomorrow night, I would like to meet you.”

She went still.

“Meet me?”

“Yes.”

“I...”

Words abandoned her.

“You have wanted the story of my life,” he said. “I find, at last, that I am willing to tell it.”

Her knees weakened.

No ruler, no historian, no church, no nation had been given what he was offering now.

"Why me?" she whispered.

"Because you wanted the man, not the myth."

He let the words rest.

"And because among the living, few have followed my footsteps with such patience."

"That cannot be true."

"But it is, believe it or not."

Emma talked through tears.

"What would you ask of me?"

"To listen."

The word entered her like a bell struck in a cathedral.

"And then decide what you want to do with it."

A chime sounded.

Coordinates appeared on her screen. Departure time.
Harbor access.

"A vessel will wait for you tomorrow night," Adam said. "It will bring you to my residence."

Emma stared at the message, hands shaking.

"This feels impossible."

"Most doors do, before they open."

She drew a slow breath.

Alternative:

“I’ll be there,” she whispered.

“I know.”

The certainty in his voice was gentle.

She found herself smiling through tears.

Neither spoke for a moment.

Then his voice softened further.

“Rest tonight, Emma.”

“Tomorrow, bring your questions.”

The line went silent.

Emma remained motionless, phone pressed to her ear, tears on her face, while above her the city continued shining as though nothing in the world had changed.

PART 1.

Chapter 3. The Crossing

The next evening arrived without ever feeling as though morning had truly come.

Emma had not slept so much as lain awake in her bed through a long sequence of shallow, fractured hours. Each time she closed her eyes, her mind surged again—too crowded, too restless, too alive with questions to surrender to sleep.

Adam had called her.

Even in memory it felt absurd.

She had replayed every word until language itself began to lose meaning. His voice remained the clearest part of it—deep and calm, yet strangely penetrating, as if it had passed through the receiver and settled somewhere inside her chest.

Tomorrow night, he had said.

Now it was tonight.

The city beyond her apartment windows moved through its ordinary rhythms. Commuter lanes glowed across

suspended bridge-roads. Delivery drones passed in disciplined streams. Far below, black water shifted over the drowned bones of old streets. Somewhere people argued, laughed, ate dinner, ignored messages, planned weekends.

The world had continued.

Her own life had not.

She stood by the glass in loose clothes she had changed three times, then changed back. A notebook lay on the table beside her, still blank. She had meant to prepare questions. Instead she had filled pages in her head and trusted none of them enough to write.

What do you ask a man who has lived a thousand years?

What do you ask someone who has chosen to die?

And beneath both questions waited the one she could not shake.

Why me?

Emma pressed her palm lightly against the cool window.

She had imagined for years what meeting him might feel like—wonder, vindication, triumph, terror.

She had not imagined this strange grief.

As though something immense had already ended, and she had only been invited to witness the remains.

At precisely eight o'clock, the lights in her apartment dimmed for half a second.

Then her wall display came alive.

Transport has arrived. Proceed to the south landing platform.

Emma stood motionless for a moment, though she had been waiting for this summons all day. When she finally moved, it felt less like a choice than compliance with something already set in motion.

The elevator carried her down in silence.

When the doors opened, cold night air swept through the corridor. Beyond the glass security gates, the private landing platform extended over the dark water between towers, its perimeter traced in narrow white light.

Waiting there was the drone.

It rested on four articulated landing struts, sleek and black, large enough to carry a small group in enclosed comfort. Its surface was seamless and reflective, absorbing the city around it.

Two guards stood beside it, dressed in dark tactical coats with no visible badges. Their faces were calm, their posture disciplined.

One guard stepped forward with a handheld scanner.

"Emma Ridge?"

Emma nodded.

“Please extend your hand.”

Emma did.

A thin blue light passed over her palm, then briefly over her eyes. The device gave a soft tone.

“Confirmed. Emma Ridge.”

The guards scanned themselves as well. No one entered without being known.

The hatch opened upward in complete silence, revealing a softly lit cabin within.

“We’ll accompany you to the island,” one of them said.

“Estimated flight time is one hour.”

Emma looked past them into the cabin, then back at the black water below the platform.

One hour.

One hour between the world she knew and whatever waited for her there.

She stepped inside.

The guards followed. The hatch sealed shut.

A moment later the drone rose smoothly into the night and turned east, carrying them out over the dark Atlantic waters.

The last of New York's lights faded behind them.

For a time, distant towers still glimmered through the haze like stars near the horizon. Then those too disappeared, and there was only ocean.

Black Atlantic water moved beneath the drone in vast, restless sheets, broken now and then by pale streaks of foam. Above, the sky was clouded and moonless. Between sea and sky, the aircraft seemed to travel through a world made only of shadow.

Inside the cabin, no one spoke.

The guards sat motionless across from her, their presence fading into the silence until they felt less like companions than fixtures of the journey. Emma turned back to the glass and let the darkness take the room.

With nothing left to look at, her thoughts returned to him.

Adam was last seen publicly nearly two centuries ago. No confirmed image of him has been released since; by all accounts, he had insisted on it, choosing to remain hidden from the world, and lost within it.

He had lived for more than a thousand years.

Empires had risen while he existed in secrecy. Religions had spread. Languages had been born, fractured, and forgotten. Entire nations had vanished into history while he remained.

Then there were the disappearances.

He would surface in one century under one name, then vanish again for decades, sometimes longer. Rumors placed him in wars, courts, laboratories, monasteries, prisons, palaces. Some stories contradicted each other completely. Others aligned in ways too precise to dismiss.

Governments had denied him publicly and negotiated with him privately.

Corporations had profited from discoveries attributed to him while refusing to explain how they acquired them.

And yet for all the records, debates, and myths, no one truly knew who he had been before becoming what he was.

No one knew what he had lost.

No one knew what had made a man live this long.

Emma kept her eyes on the dark water below.

Somewhere ahead, hidden beyond the night, waited the answer—or something sharp enough to wound.

Nearly an hour had passed when the darkness ahead began to change.

At first it was only a faint glow suspended in the fog, too steady to be moonlight and too distant to judge. Then lines emerged within it—sharp, geometric bands of white and gold cutting through the mist.

The island revealed itself slowly.

Dark cliffs rose from the water like the walls of some ancient fortress, their edges lit by concealed beacons. Above them, terraces climbed in deliberate layers—gardens, stone paths, glass structures, and elevated courtyards arranged with almost unnatural precision.

At the island's highest point stood the main estate.

It stretched across the ridge in long wings of steel, glass, and pale stone, elegant enough to belong in an architectural journal, severe enough to belong in a military archive. Light shone warmly through vast windows, yet every approach to it was controlled.

Emma could now see the rest.

Perimeter towers stood at measured intervals along the cliffs. Sensor masts rose between groves of trees. Landing platforms projected from lower terraces. Patrol drones moved in silent arcs above the grounds like slow metallic birds.

Nothing about it was accidental.

Nothing about it invited trespass.

It was beautiful in the way power often was—expensively, carefully, and without apology.

Emma felt a tightening in her chest as the drone descended.

This was not a private residence.

It was something closer to a sovereign compound, built to protect secrets the outside world was never meant to reach.

Emma knew whose island this was.

Helix Dominion Biotech—the family empire that had shaped modern medicine for generations and accumulated wealth so vast it often seemed detached from numbers. Their name was attached to longevity therapies, neural repair, synthetic organs, and diseases once thought incurable.

And always, somewhere beneath the public story, there was Adam.

Not openly. Never directly.

But across two centuries, too many breakthroughs had emerged after periods of his confinement, too many patents had followed private meetings, too many scientific leaps had arrived wrapped in silence. Official histories credited visionary researchers, proprietary methods, or anonymous internal programs.

Emma had never believed that version.

The pattern was too consistent. The gratitude too absent.

The world praised the family as benefactors. Yet their rise had always carried the scent of something taken rather than given.

What had Adam offered willingly?

What had been extracted from him?

What bargains had been made with a being who could outlive everyone who signed them?

She looked again at the illuminated estate above the cliffs.

If Adam truly wished to die, why was he still here?

Why in their custody, on their island, behind their walls?

The question settled coldly inside her.

She knew that this was not hospitality at all. It was ownership dressed in elegance.

When the invitation had first come, Emma had imagined many versions of this arrival.

Awe.

Vindication.

The exhilaration of being chosen where greater names had been overlooked. The professional triumph of stepping into a story no journalist, historian, or scholar had ever been granted.

Even curiosity had seemed certain.

But as the drone descended toward the island, none of those feelings remained.

In their place came something heavier.

A pressure in her chest. A quiet fear with no clear object. The instinctive sense that she was moving toward

something already burdened with grief.

She understood then that she was not arriving for an interview.

Interviews belonged to the living, to reputations, to carefully managed truths.

Whatever waited for her here belonged to none of those things.

The drone banked once over the cliffs and lowered toward a landing platform cut into the stone below the main estate. Floodlights rose softly from the perimeter, illuminating mist and polished black surface.

The landing struts touched down without a sound.

For a moment no one moved.

Then the hatch unlocked.

Cold sea air entered first.

Beyond it stood a line of waiting figures in dark formal coats, motionless beneath the lights. Behind them, a glass lift rose through the cliff toward the estate above.

Emma remained seated for one breath too long.

Somewhere beyond those walls, after centuries of silence, Adam was waiting to tell the world who he had been.

And she had the sudden, terrible feeling that once she heard it, nothing would remain as it was.

One of the guards turned to her.

“We’ve arrived.”

PART 1.

Chapter 4. The Man Behind The Glass

Emma stepped off the drone into the cold breath of the sea.

The landing pad stretched beneath her in a perfect black circle, slick with mist and bordered by thin strips of white light. Beyond it, the island rose in darkness, its cliffs carved from shadow, its upper grounds marked by a few pale, deliberate lights.

There were no city lights nearby. No neighboring shore. No passing traffic in the sky.

Only the ocean, the island, and the soft fading hum of the drone behind her.

The two escorts who had accompanied her from Manhattan stepped down after her and guided her toward the residence without a word.

A glass corridor led from the landing pad to the estate. Its transparent walls should have offered a view of the island, but Emma felt less as if she were looking out than being observed from every side. Small black sensors lined the

ceiling. Cameras turned almost silently above the doors. The floor lights brightened as she passed, then dimmed behind her.

As the long glass lift rose toward the main level, Emma began to grasp the scale of the estate.

The cliff fell away beneath her. Terraces appeared from the rock, then glass corridors, sealed wings, gardens under domes, and lower levels carved deep into the island. What she had taken for a mansion was something far larger—a private world hidden inside stone.

By the time they reached the entrance of the main residence, Emma felt less as if she had crossed a distance than been passed through a system.

The doors ahead were tall, dark, and seamless, set into a wall of pale stone that reflected the floodlights without warmth. Two guards waited there.

One of them extended a hand toward her bag.

Emma glanced down at it. "I only have a notepad in it."

"A notepad will be provided for you inside."

Emma nodded and handed the bag over.

The handbag was placed into a sealed compartment built into the wall. The compartment closed with a soft mechanical click.

Then another guard stepped forward with a slim matte-black device.

“Communication implant.”

Emma’s fingers touched the place behind her ear.

It was a small communication device beneath the skin behind her ear. It carried her calls, messages, identity confirmation, location access, emergency contact, and private network connection, all stored in a piece of hardware so ordinary she rarely thought about it.

“It has to be disabled?” she asked.

“Before entry.”

Emma turned slightly and lifted her hair.

The guard pointed the device behind her ear.

A soft tone sounded.

Then another.

The familiar quiet presence of connection disappeared.

“Confirmed.”

The entrance unlocked.

She stepped inside.

Behind her, the doors sealed with a heavy internal sound.

By the time she entered Adam's residence, she understood that she had not simply arrived at a house.

She had been absorbed into it.

The island knew she was there.

And the outside world no longer did.

The escorts led Emma deeper into the estate, through corridors so quiet and immaculate they barely felt inhabited. Every surface seemed designed to erase noise: pale stone, seamless glass, brushed metal, controlled light. At the end of one final hallway, a set of doors opened, and she was brought into the interview room.

It was vast.

For a moment, the scale of it disoriented her. The chamber was enormous, yet stripped of any ornament that might have softened it. The lines were clean, the air cool, the light even and shadowless. Everything about the room was pristine, deliberate, controlled. And running through its center—dividing it into two equal worlds—stood a wall of thick crystal-clear glass.

Emma stopped without meaning to.

It was so transparent that it took her a second to understand what she was seeing. The barrier rose from floor to ceiling, flawless and thick enough to catch the light along its edges. Through it, she could see the other side of the room in perfect detail: another chair, another table, the

exact mirror of the space where she now stood. The arrangement was intimate in its symmetry. Two people could sit across from each other, study each other's faces, hear each other's voices, and yet never occupy the same air.

The effect unsettled her more than any cage or obvious security measure could have.

It did not feel like a wall built out of fear alone. If the purpose had only been to protect her, the room would have felt clinical, defensive, maybe even accusatory. But this was something stranger. The glass did not merely separate danger from safety. It preserved distance with almost ceremonial care, as if the world and Adam could meet only under these exact conditions—close enough to see, too far to touch.

Emma set her new notepad on the table and looked again at the barrier.

She had assumed the glass was there to protect her from him—from the oldest living vampire on earth, from whatever instinct or hunger still lived beneath the legend.

But in that immaculate divided chamber, another thought came to her.

Perhaps it also protected Adam from the world.

The far door opened without ceremony.

Emma turned toward it.

Adam stood in the threshold, framed by the clean white light of the chamber beyond. Then he stepped inside, and the room seemed to change around him.

He was tall. Taller than she had expected, though not in any exaggerated or monstrous way. His body carried the solid balance of a man who had once been powerful and had never surrendered that power entirely to age. He was neither thin nor thick, neither fragile nor imposing by size alone. There was a strange perfection to his proportions, not youthful, not artificial, but complete—as if time had weathered everything unnecessary from him and left only what endured.

His hair was silver, falling neatly back from a face that looked to belong to a man in his mid-sixties. Yet age sat on him differently than it did on ordinary men. It had not bent him. His posture was straight, sturdy, and effortless, his shoulders relaxed but unbowed. There was no tremor in him, no hesitation, no theatrical menace. He did not glide like a ghost or stalk like a predator. He moved with the ease of a man and the weight of an era.

Emma had seen endless images made in his name: cathedral murals, forbidden sketches, military reconstructions, grotesque propaganda posters, devotional icons painted by those who believed he had been either demon or savior. None of them resembled the man before her. Those versions had all tried to make him larger than human, or less than human.

He was human enough to wound her imagination.

His presence came from the quiet authority of someone who had survived empires, languages, plagues, wars, betrayals, and every form of human certainty. He did not need to announce himself. The room seemed to know him.

He moved to the chair on the far side of the glass and stopped before sitting.

For a moment, he simply looked at her.

Emma forgot what she had planned to say.

It was not fear that struck her silent. Fear would have given her something simple to hold on to. But what rose inside her was too tangled for that: fascination, anger, grief, admiration, suspicion, disbelief. Years of research, years of defending his humanity in essays and lectures, years of criticizing the myths that had turned him into a monster, years of wondering whether she had been wrong about him after all—all of it collided at once.

She had written about Adam.

She had argued about Adam.

She had built a career around the question of Adam.

And none of it had prepared her for the unbearable fact of him standing ten feet away, separated from her only by a wall of crystal-clear glass.

Her mouth opened, but no words came.

Adam noticed.

His expression softened. There was no triumph in his face. No pleasure in overwhelming her. If anything, his gentleness unsettled her more than darkness would have.

Emma lowered her eyes to the notepad in front of her, then realized her hand was shaking.

She pressed it flat against the table.

Adam's eyes moved from Emma's face to her trembling hand.

Then, with a faint smile, he said, "You look disappointed."

Emma blinked. "Disappointed?"

"I imagine you were promised fangs and shadows."

Emma smiled nervously

"I did not mean to frighten you," Adam said.

"No," Emma said quickly. "Not frightened. Not exactly. I'm just a bit..."

"There is no need to be nervous," he said gently. "You and I have a lot more in common than you think."

A chill ran down Emma's spine.

The words moved through her before she could understand them, stirring something deep and unguarded. Her throat tightened. Heat gathered behind her eyes, and for a moment the chamber blurred around him.

She looked at him through the glass, unable to answer.

"I hope the path here did not tire you," he tried to soften the mood. "I know how cumbersome the security can be."

"It's fine," Emma said, forcing herself back into the room. "I barely noticed how I got here. My mind was going in a thousand other directions."

"Yes," Adam said, with a faint smile. "I imagine you have a thousand questions."

"More like millions."

"Then I suppose we better begin soon."

Emma let out a small, unsteady breath. "I still feel like I'm in a dream."

Adam waited.

"You don't understand how much of my short life you have consumed."

His expression softened. "In a good way, I hope."

"In the best possible way," she said.

Adam's gaze lowered to the notebook in front of her.

"I do not think that notebook is thick enough to enclose what I am about to say," he said. "But I trust your soul is large enough to embrace it."

Emma's fingers tightened around the pen.

“Why did you wait so long?” she asked. “To tell the truth beneath the fangs?”

“For a long time, it did not matter,” Adam said. “And when it began to matter, I tried to let them judge me by my actions.”

His eyes remained on hers.

“Where actions failed,” he said, “no words could have succeeded.”

Emma swallowed. “Why now, then?”

Adam was quiet for a moment.

“I did not call you here so the world could hear my story,” he said. “I called you here so you could.”

Emma stared at him.

The words opened something beneath her, vast and terrifying. She did not understand. She could not understand. Of all the journalists, historians, scientists, priests, and scholars who had begged for one hour with him, why her?

The question rose to her lips.

She did not dare ask it.

“I don’t know what to say,” Emma said, her voice thick with emotion.

Adam looked at her with that same quiet, patience.

"You do not have to say anything," he said. "Only listen."

Emma lowered her eyes to the blank page, then back to him.

"I'm all ears," she whispered.

Adam eased back in his chair.

For a moment, the chamber held its breath.

Then he began.

"I was born in Zaragoza in the year 1082, when the city still answered to many names."

PART 2.

Chapter 5. The House of Healing

I was born in Zaragoza in the year 1082, when the city still answered to many names.

The Arabs called it Saraqusta. Latin priests wrote Caesaraugusta when they wished to remind themselves of older empires. Traders from the north twisted both names into sounds that pleased their own tongues. To me, as a child, it was simply the place where the river moved broad and brown beneath stone bridges, where bells and the call to prayer crossed the same morning air, and where men argued over God in markets while buying onions.

I was born into a Christian household, though not one of rank. We were among those who kept the old faith beneath Muslim rule, paid our taxes, spoke more than one tongue when needed, and learned the useful art of being noticed only when advantageous. Some called people like us Mozarabs. We did not think of ourselves in such names. We were simply Christians trying to endure.

My father was known as Pedro, son of Esteban, though in the Arabic quarter he was sometimes called Butrus. He

treated the sick. Not as the great physicians of Córdoba or Baghdad were said to do, with libraries and salaried assistants and halls of students, but in the older manner: by practice, memory, reputation, and labor.

My mother, Inés, would have said he was a gatherer of complaints and a washer of filth. She was not wrong.

I had two younger brothers, Mateo and Diego, and a little sister named María, who followed my mother through the house like a second shadow. The boys filled the courtyard with noise and bruises, while María watched the world quietly, as if trying to understand it before speaking to it.

Our house stood near the outskirts of the city, but not so far from the center that herbs, oils, and other necessities could not be obtained without difficulty. The lower room served as kitchen, workshop, and place of treatment. Behind it was a small courtyard where jars were set in the sun and plants were coaxed from reluctant soil. Above were sleeping rooms no larger than a generous stable.

The house smelled always of vinegar, smoke, wax, damp wool, rosemary, and sickness.

People imagine medicine as noble because they know little of it.

It is not noble to clean the bowels from a fevered man who can no longer rise. It is not noble to lance an abscess and endure the smell. It is not noble to wash linens stiff with blood, to boil instruments blackened by prior use, to hold down a child while a splinter is cut from infected flesh.

My father possessed a chest of tools wrapped in cloth: bronze probes, forceps of uneven quality, needles, thread of linen and gut, small knives that must be sharpened more often than one wished, cups for drawing blood, spoons for measuring powders, and a balance scale delicate enough to anger him whenever dust settled on it.

He also possessed books, which I loved more than toys.

There were Latin prayer books, of course, and a Psalter copied badly enough to make the priest wince. There were older remedy collections written in hands so cramped they resembled spider legs. There was a fragment in Arabic purchased from a bankrupt scribe, containing lists of simples and observations on fevers. There was a translated portion of Galen so incomplete that one could learn as much from its omissions as its claims.

My father guarded these books from damp, mice, and fools in equal measure.

He could read Latin passably, Arabic slowly, and Greek not at all despite occasional boasts. My mother read less but remembered more. If my father forgot the proportion of vinegar to honey in a dressing, she knew it. If he misremembered which merchant adulterated saffron, she knew that also.

Patients came from every quarter.

Christians crossed themselves before entering. Muslims removed sandals if the floor was newly washed. Jews often brought better questions than the rest and expected honest

answers. Laborers came with torn hands, mule drivers with bad backs, women with burns from ovens, children with worms, old men with coughing lungs, girls pale from blood loss, soldiers with knife cuts they claimed were accidents.

My father treated what he could according to the learning available to our place and time. Fevers were cooled with water cloths, willow bark, and shade. Wounds were cleaned with wine or vinegar, packed with honey when we had it, bound with linen, and reopened if corruption formed beneath. Broken bones were set with splints of wood and wrapped firm. Constipation was purged, looseness checked, sleeplessness soothed with poppy when necessary and prayer when poppy was too dear.

He bled some patients, as nearly every healer did. Sometimes it helped. Sometimes it merely made weak men weaker. I learned early that tradition and truth are not always friends.

When plague rumors traveled from distant towns, people burned herbs indoors and wore amulets. When children convulsed, saints were invoked. When a woman could not conceive, neighbors recommended charms no physician had prescribed. My father mocked none of this openly. A wise healer does not insult hope unless he can replace it.

I was not an easy child.

Other boys loved noise, dogs, stones, and each other's bruises. I preferred shelves, remedies, and watching faces when pain arrived. I followed my father from room to room

until he threatened to apprentice me to a cooper simply for peace.

Yet he allowed me to remain.

I learned to distinguish dried mint from pennyroyal by scent while I was still a child. I learned which merchants lied by the shine of their oil. I learned that the pulse speaks if fingers are patient. I learned that shame kills almost as often as sickness, because many seek help too late rather than be seen weak.

By ten I could wash wounds without faintness. By eleven I could prepare infusions and poultices. By twelve I copied prescriptions in a cleaner hand than my father's, a fact that offended him enough to boast of it publicly.

But what seized me most was not skill. It was the possibility of greater skill.

Caravans brought stories more valuable than silk. In the baths, men spoke of physicians in Córdoba who debated causes of disease as lawyers debate property. Travelers praised libraries where shelves outnumbered houses in our lane. One merchant, eager to seem important, swore that in the East there were hospitals where the sick were separated by ailment, students trained at bedsides, and records kept of symptoms and outcomes.

My father earned little from tending the sick—rarely more than enough to keep bread on the table, oil in the lamp, and wood by the hearth. Many paid in onions, wool, jars of olives, or promises that never ripened into coin. Yet he gave

himself to the work with a devotion I did not then understand. When a fever broke beneath his care, or a wound closed cleanly, or a man thought lost rose again to stand on his own legs, a light came into him that no money could have purchased.

But when he failed, the whole house felt it.

He became sharp in speech, restless in movement, unable to sit or eat in peace. He would reexamine his jars, mutter over proportions, turn pages he already knew by heart, as if somewhere a missed detail hid like a thief. My mother understood these moods and let them pass through him like storms.

I did not notice the moment I surpassed my father.

Such things rarely announce themselves. There was no single morning when I woke and found his knowledge behind me, no clear border between the boy who carried his bag and the man who began to reach for answers his father had never taught him. It happened quietly, over years, in the space between one patient and the next.

At first, I was only useful.

I knew where he kept the clean linen, which jars held the bitter herbs for fever, which oils eased stiffness in old joints, which knife was sharp enough for a wound and which had grown dull from too much use. I could grind dried leaves without spilling half of them. I could hold a lamp steady while he examined a throat or stitched a cut. I could boil water, wash instruments, change dressings, and

keep children distracted while their mothers wept.

For years, I believed healing was mostly memory. Remember which plant cooled the body, which warmed it, which purged, which soothed. Remember which fevers came after childbirth, which after bad water, which after a wound had turned foul. Remember how the old physicians spoke of blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile, and how every illness, in their telling, was a disturbance in balance.

My father taught me all of that.

But eventually I began to see beyond what he showed me.

I would notice some small sign before he did: the color of a patient's lips, the rhythm of a breath, the faint sweetness of a wound beginning to rot, the hidden weakness behind a fever that others mistook for heat alone. Sometimes I was wrong, and my father corrected me with patience. But more and more often, I was right.

A mother survived because I asked the question no one in the room wanted to ask. A boy lived because I saw that his throat was closing before the medicine could take effect. A farmer kept his leg because I refused to surrender it too quickly to the knife. These were not miracles. They were moments of attention, courage, and mercy. But stories grow faster than truth, and soon people repeated them as if I had wrestled death itself and won.

My father never encouraged such talk.

When patients praised me, he lowered his eyes. When neighbors called me gifted, he reminded me to clean my tools. When someone said I had hands blessed by God, he told me to wash them before supper.

Yet I saw pride in him.

I saw it in the way his face softened when someone asked for me by name. I saw it in the quiet space he gave me beside a patient's bed.

But with pride came worry.

One evening, after a long day, he asked me to sit with him in the courtyard. His hands rested in his lap, scarred and tired from years of work.

"You are becoming very good," he said.

I smiled, because I was young enough to enjoy hearing it.

Then he said, "That is dangerous."

My smile faded.

"Dangerous?"

"Yes. To you first."

I did not understand.

"When people believe you can save them," he said, "you may begin to believe it too."

"I only want to help."

"I know. That is why I worry."

He looked older to me that night than he had the day before.

"A healer is not the master of life, Adam. We serve life. We defend it when we can. We ease suffering when we cannot. But we do not command it."

I had heard him say such things before, but that night the words felt directed not at my ears, but at the hidden place in me where ambition had begun to grow.

"I know," I said.

"No," he answered gently. "You know it with your tongue. One day you must know it with your bones."

By then, my name had begun to move beyond our street. People came from nearby villages, then from farther farms and small towns. They brought coins when they had them, eggs when they did not, cloth, oil, dried fruit, prayers, and sometimes nothing at all.

My father still treated many, but more and more often, he let me step forward first.

Not because his knowledge had vanished.

But because he had given me everything he could, and whatever remained in me had begun to grow from some source neither of us could name.

I was young then, and the world still seemed like something
that might be mended if only one had enough patience,
enough courage, enough learning, and enough love.

For a while, I believed that.

PART 2.

Chapter 6. A Gentle Life.

If healing was the labor of my youth, then love was its secret reward.

My father had long purchased herbs and oils from a merchant named Yaqub, whose shop stood near one of the busier market streets of Zaragoza. It was a narrow place, crowded with jars, bundles, hanging roots, wax-sealed bottles, and the layered fragrance of earth and sunlight made captive in glass. Even before I understood what drew me there, I loved that shop. It smelled of distant hills, warm groves, rain-soaked fields, and remedies not yet named.

Yaqub was a careful man, sharp in trade and sparing in speech. His goods were honest, his measures exact, and his eyes missed very little.

But my eagerness to accompany my father had little to do with oil or herbs.

It was because of Miriam, Yaqub's daughter.

I cannot tell you the first moment I fell for her.

Love rarely enters with trumpets. It gathers itself quietly, like dawn at the edge of a shutter. It begins in things so small that pride refuses to notice them: the wish to hear one voice again, the memory of a glance held longer than chance requires, the strange happiness of walking a familiar street because another soul may be standing at its end.

She moved among shelves and jars with the certainty of someone born into their order. She knew every leaf by scent, every oil by color, every customer by habit. When she tied bundles with twine, her fingers were swift and graceful. When she laughed, the room changed shape around the sound.

She had dark hair usually covered, though unruly strands would escape near her temples by midday. Her eyes were warm brown, yet carried a brightness that made one feel gently examined.

I noticed the smallest things first: the way her head tilted when a question puzzled her, the way amusement reached her eyes before it touched her lips, the way a loose strand of hair always escaped when she worked too quickly. She had a quiet brightness about her, as if the room became more awake whenever she entered it.

I began finding reasons to visit.

We needed rosemary.

We needed lamp oil.

We needed vinegar.

We needed things we did not need at all.

My father endured this deception for a short while before exposing it with the cruelty unique to loving fathers.

"We still have enough oil," he said one morning as I reached for the empty vessel.

"Not enough for the week," I answered.

"For a difficult week, perhaps."

"We may have a difficult week."

He did not look up from his work. "Then may God protect us all. Go."

When I arrived, Miriam was measuring dried chamomile into a cloth packet. She glanced up, saw me, and smiled in a way that made my prepared words useless.

"Oil again?" she asked.

"Only following my father's orders," I said, with all the innocence I could gather.

"Your household must glow like a palace."

"He says patients complain less when they can see the healer."

She laughed, and I forgot why I had come.

That became the rhythm of us.

I would arrive carrying excuses. She would untie them with a sentence. I would try to appear composed. She would disturb that ambition merely by looking at me. Sometimes she teased me. Sometimes she helped me choose herbs and spoke seriously of trade routes, harvest quality, and dishonest suppliers. Sometimes our hands touched over a jar or folded cloth, and for the rest of the day I would move through the world as if music had been hidden beneath ordinary sounds.

Then one spring evening, as the market emptied and long shadows crossed the street, I arrived to find the shutters half-drawn. Yaqub had gone to settle accounts with another merchant. Miriam was alone, tying bundles for the morning trade.

"You are late," she said.

"I did not know I was expected."

"You were not. But you are still late."

I stepped inside. The shop smelled of mint, warm wood, and the last heat of the day.

She handed me a packet of rosemary.

"I did not ask for this."

"No," she said. "But your household lives in constant shortage."

I laughed, then fell quiet. There are moments when laughter ends and something more dangerous begins.

The street outside had grown still. Through the open upper lattice, the evening breeze stirred the hanging herbs so that they brushed softly against one another like whispered speech.

"Miriam," I said, and then no more.

She looked at me fully.

I remember everything: the amber light on her cheek, the loose strand of hair beside her temple, the calm in her face hiding whatever storm may have matched my own.

She stepped closer.

"So many visits," she said softly. "So much oil."

"I would have bought the whole shop if needed."

"That would have been expensive."

"It has already cost me dearly."

"And what have you paid?"

"Sleep. Peace. Pride. Reason."

At that, her eyes smiled before her mouth did.

Then she lifted her hand and touched my sleeve, lightly, as if asking permission of the cloth before the man.

"You bargain badly," she whispered.

"I learned from the wrong merchant."

For one suspended breath neither of us moved.

Then she rose onto her toes, and I bent toward her as though drawn by tide rather than will.

Then our lips touched.

Our first kiss began gently, as though both of us feared waking from it too soon. Her lips were warm and soft with the faint taste of mint. One hand came to rest against my chest, where my heart beat so violently I thought she must feel it through bone and cloth.

I closed my eyes and let my hand slip into her hair, my fingers resting gently behind her head, drawing her closer with a tenderness my heart seemed to have known long before my mind did.

And then the world vanished.

For one breath, there was no shop, no street, no distant voices, no life before that moment. There was only Miriam, the warmth of her lips, and the sudden certainty that something in me had crossed a threshold from which it would never return unchanged.

She lowered her eyes, smiling.

I knew then that there are medicines for pain, and medicines for fever, and medicines for corrupted blood.

And there are also kisses, for which no physician can improve upon love's design.

Love has never obeyed the laws men make for it, but in our time those laws still mattered. We lived in Zaragoza in the late eleventh century, a city of mingled tongues and divided loyalties, where Christians, Jews, and Muslims traded in the same markets, borrowed one another's knowledge, quarreled under the same sun, and yet guarded the boundaries of blood and faith with stubborn care. A Christian man and a Jewish woman might speak kindly, trade honestly, even trust one another in illness or debt—but marriage invited scrutiny from every side.

Neither the church nor the synagogue would bless such a union without sacrifice. The priests expected conversion. The rabbis expected the same. Communities that tolerated daily closeness often recoiled at shared households. What people permitted in the marketplace, they condemned at the marriage table.

Yet our families stood with us.

My father, who had watched suffering make fools of prejudice many times, cared more for Miriam's character than the prayers of gossiping neighbors. Yaqub loved his daughter too deeply to surrender her happiness to fearful custom. He did not pretend the path would be easy, but neither would he let custom rule where conscience should.

So we married humbly.

There was no grand procession, no bells, no crowded feast hall, no priest proclaiming triumph, no rabbi chanting beneath a canopy. Instead, in the courtyard behind my

father's house, beneath a fig tree older than either family, we gathered those who truly loved us. A few lamps were hung from the wall. Simple cloth was spread over rough tables. Bread, olives, roasted lamb, figs, wine, and sweet cakes were set out with more sincerity than abundance.

The evening air was warm, carrying the scent of rosemary and dust. My father wore the best tunic he owned and pretended not to weep. Yaqub, stern-faced from habit, kept smoothing his beard whenever emotion threatened to expose him. Neighbors watched from rooftops and windows, some curious, some scandalized, some secretly delighted by the boldness of it.

Miriam came into the courtyard dressed not like a queen, but like something dearer—a woman loved. White linen, modest and graceful, her dark hair partly veiled, her eyes brighter than all the lamps we had hung.

When she took my hand, every whisper beyond those walls lost its power.

There were blessings spoken in more than one tongue. My father prayed in the manner of his fathers. Yaqub offered words from the faith of his own ancestors. Bread was broken. Wine was shared. Promises were made not before institutions, but before those who knew us best and before God, who needs no building to witness truth.

That night Miriam entered my modest home, which I had built with the help of my father and brothers on our family lot, and turned it into a true home.

The days that followed were simple and radiant. We began with little: narrow rooms, worn furniture, uncertain accounts, and more hope than wisdom. Rain found its way through the roof in spring. Smoke lingered too long in winter. Money came unevenly and left promptly. Yet I remember those years as rich beyond measure.

She brought order where I brought chaos. I would have given medicine freely until we starved; she made certain the wealthy paid enough that the poor still could be treated. I lost coins, forgot debts, and traded skills for manuscripts no sensible husband would accept. She recovered what could be recovered and laughed at what could not.

Not long after we were married, Miriam told me she was with child.

There are moments in a man's life when joy arrives so suddenly that he becomes foolish beneath it. I remember smiling at strangers for no reason, giving discounts to patients who did not deserve them, buying fruits out of season, and speaking to Miriam as though she were made of blown glass and moonlight. She bore my attention with patience and occasional mockery.

"You are not the one carrying the child," she reminded me more than once.

"No," I said, "but I am carrying the worry."

"And badly."

Those months passed in hope. Miriam grew more radiant even as she grew more tired. My father offered advice no one asked for. Yaqub pretended calm while hovering like a nervous steward over every meal she ate. Between our two families, the child was loved before she had drawn breath.

When the time came, the labor began at night.

At first there was nothing alarming in it. Women came to assist as women always had—experienced hands, steady voices, linen, warm water, prayers, old wisdom older than books. I was ordered out of the room almost immediately, which I obeyed only in body. I paced outside the door like a condemned man.

Hours passed.

Then more.

The voices inside changed. They grew quieter, then sharper. A messenger was sent for an older midwife known for difficult births. My father emerged once, his face composed too carefully.

“The child is turned poorly,” he said.

Even now, after all I have witnessed in this long existence, few memories wound me more than that helplessness.

I, who had treated wounds, fevers, swellings, fractures, and dying men, could do nothing. My knowledge ended at the threshold. Inside that room, women wrestled with pain, blood, and fate while I stood useless in the courtyard

begging God with every prayer I knew.

The child had come feet first.

In our time, such births were feared, and rightly so. Many mothers died of them. Many children did not survive the passage. The old midwife worked for hours to turn what could be turned, guide what could be guided, and spare what could still be spared.

Just before dawn, I heard it—

the cry of a child.

I do not believe any music has equaled it.

I entered only when summoned. Miriam lay pale with sweat and exhaustion, her hair damp across her brow, looking more beautiful to me than she had on our wedding day because now she had crossed pain and returned carrying life.

In her arms was our daughter.

Small, furious, red-faced, and perfect.

We named her Isabel.

When I touched her cheek with one finger, she turned toward it blindly, searching for warmth. Something happened inside me then for which no language is sufficient. It was not merely love. It was surrender.

I belonged to her at once.

Yet joy did not come untouched.

Miriam had bled heavily after the birth. The midwives and my father worked quickly to stop it with pressure, cloths, infusions, and every measure known to us. She lived, but her recovery was long and shadowed by pain. In the months that followed, it became clear that the difficult breech labor had injured her deeply within. She suffered recurring fevers, weakness, and pains that worsened whenever her courses returned.

No physician named it plainly then, but I knew enough to understand: the birth had damaged the womb and passages so severely that another pregnancy was not possible.

When I finally spoke this truth aloud, Miriam was silent for a long while.

Then she looked at Isabel sleeping beside her and said, "Then we were wise to make the first one so beautiful."

We never had another child.

Isabel became the sun around which our days arranged themselves.

My father, who had faced plague with steadier nerves than most soldiers faced battle, trembled the first time he held her. Yaqub brought gifts so constantly that Miriam accused him of trying to purchase the child outright. Patients endured longer waits because I found reasons to step home between visits simply because I had missed her.

As she grew, so did my undoing.

I was powerless before her.

If she wanted figs, I found figs.

If she wanted ribbons, I found ribbons.

If she wanted a wooden horse, she received two in case one was lonely.

When she learned that tears could move me faster than reason, she employed the discovery shamelessly.

Miriam would stand with folded arms and pretend outrage.

"You are making her impossible."

"I am making her happy."

"You are making her spoiled."

"She deserves it all."

"She is three years old."

"And I would do the same if she were thirty."

Miriam would try to remain stern, then laugh despite herself.

Isabel had her mother's eyes and something of my stubbornness, which was a dangerous combination for the peace of any household. She followed me everywhere once she could walk—into the courtyard, into the workroom, into my study where she would rearrange manuscripts

according to laws known only to children and God.

When I returned from treating patients, she ran to meet me as though I had returned from war.

Nothing in my life equaled that welcome.

She would climb into my lap while I read, demand stories while I ate, ask questions while I prayed, and fall asleep against my shoulder before the lamp burned low. Her hand, small and warm, often remained curled in my sleeve as though even in sleep she meant to keep possession of me.

And she did.

I taught many people in those years, but none so eagerly as my daughter. I taught her letters by tracing them in flour. I taught her the names of herbs by scent. I taught her how to listen to birds before dawn, how to greet her elders properly, and how to be patient in the face of frustration.

She taught me greater things.

How laughter can heal fatigue.

How wonder renews a tired soul.

How a small hand in yours can make every road home sacred.

Our life, which had already been good, became complete.

I did not know then how dangerous happiness can be.

Only later did I learn that when heaven gives generously, the world often takes notice.

As my father grew older, the practice passed into my hands not by ceremony, but by the slow and natural surrender with which time claims all things.

He stood less often. Sat more often. Where once he would rise first when a patient knocked, now he would look to me before moving. At first he still corrected me, then advised me, then merely listened while I spoke of symptoms and remedies. My younger brother, Mateo, came often to help once the burden grew too large for one man.

He had not inherited my hunger for medicine, but he possessed strong hands, a patient temper, and a loyalty that made him invaluable. He prepared dressings, carried messages, fetched supplies, assisted with patients, and kept order when the courtyard filled with the sick before dawn.

Between us, the work prospered.

What began as my father's modest household practice became something larger than any of us had imagined. Word traveled first through Zaragoza, then to nearby villages, then beyond Aragón itself. Men arrived from distant farms, merchants from other cities, noble households with discreet requests, mothers carrying fevered children wrapped in blankets, laborers with crushed limbs, and old women who had outlived every physician in their own town.

People said many foolish things about me in those years. That I could smell illness in the dark. That my hands never trembled. That I had learned secret cures from eastern sages. That I could argue with death and sometimes persuade it.

The truth was less grand.

I listened carefully. I studied constantly. I feared failure enough never to grow lazy. And when I did not know, I sought to know.

Fame brought wealth, and much of that wealth I turned toward knowledge. Merchants arriving from the east—through Córdoba, Valencia, Toledo, or by longer roads through Muslim lands—sometimes carried manuscripts and copied treatises among their goods. Medical writings from Baghdad, philosophical works preserved in Arabic, herbals from Persia, commentaries on Galen and Hippocrates, observations on fevers, pulse, surgery, anatomy, digestion, melancholy, the eye, and countless other matters.

I bought what I could. When I could not afford a full manuscript, I paid for copied sections. When even that was too costly, I bargained for a few pages, a summary, a formula, a fragment of thought preserved by a careful hand. Our shelves filled slowly with the labor of distant minds. The house came to smell not only of herbs and oil, but of parchment, leather, ink, and dust from roads I had never walked.

Miriam understood the hunger in me, even when she feared its cost. She kept the household steady while I chased knowledge beyond the walls of Zaragoza. She protected the manuscripts from damp, wrapped them in cloth, and learned which merchants could be trusted when they claimed a text had come from the east. In this, as in all things, she became the quiet wisdom beneath my ambition.

Many nights the lamp burned late while I copied passages in my own hand. I studied the works of physicians whose bones had long turned to dust, men who had lived in cities I knew only by rumor—Baghdad, Damascus, Nishapur, Cairo, Córdoba. Across language, empire, and centuries, they became my silent teachers.

And when dawn came, I put their lessons to trial beside the beds of living men and women.

While my name traveled outward, my heart remained centered within the walls of my own house.

Isabel grew like a tree favored by good soil and steady sun.

She had Miriam's eyes, quick and bright, and a manner of looking at the world as if everything in it had been placed there for her examination. Her favorite thing was to sit in my study with a manuscript open before her, pretending to read while filling scraps of parchment with her own inventions. Sometimes I found notes tucked into my books: crooked letters, circles pretending to be flowers, or stern drawings of me with a beard much larger than reality required.

Laughter lived easily in our house.

Work had meaning.

Study had purpose.

Love had become ordinary enough to be taken for granted,
which is perhaps the highest form of blessing.

Those were the perfect years.

I believed then that knowledge would continue to grow, that
my hands would continue to heal, that my daughter would
continue to bloom beneath our care, and that the happiness
within our walls had some right to endure.

Youth always mistakes the kindness of the present for a
promise from the future.

PART 2.

Chapter 7. The Pestilence

It began beyond the walls.

Not with bells. Not with proclamation. Not with a corpse in the street. Zaragoza did not wake one morning and know that death had entered its gates.

At first, there were only rumors.

A muleteer from Huesca had arrived feverish and half-blind, his face wrapped in cloth though the day was warm. A child in the potters' quarter had broken out in a rash after three nights of burning heat. Two soldiers lodged near the northern gate had taken to their bedding, shaking so violently that the floorboards trembled beneath them. A washerwoman claimed she had seen red marks on the arms of a boy drawing water from the river. A merchant swore the sickness had come from Frankish lands. Another said it had come from the south. Another said the Jews had known of it first. Another said the Muslims had brought it with their caravans. Fear has always been a poor physician and a faithful liar.

By the second week, no one spoke of rumors.

They spoke of houses.

The house where the youngest son had gone blind before dying.

The house where a mother and infant had been carried out beneath the same sheet.

The house where no one answered the door though smoke still rose from the roof-hole.

Zaragoza had endured sickness before. All cities did. Fever in summer. Cough in winter. Flux after foul water. Swellings after wounds. The slow wasting illnesses that hollowed men from within and the sudden ones that struck children down between one sunrise and the next.

But this was different.

So different.

It crossed thresholds. It passed from one bed to another. It followed breath, touch, cloth, cup, kiss. It left marks upon the skin like a second, terrible script laid over the first.

The first patient brought to me was a boy of perhaps twelve.

His father carried him through our courtyard before dawn, wrapped in a wool blanket despite the warmth. Mateo opened the gate and called for me before the man had even spoken. I came from the workroom with my sleeves rolled and found the father on his knees. He had carried the boy

across half the city.

“Master Adam,” he said. “Please.”

In those years people had begun calling me master with a seriousness I never trusted. Fame had grown around me like ivy around an old wall—green, flattering, and dangerous if allowed to root too deeply. Men said I had learned medicine from eastern books, that I could read the pulse like scripture, that my hands knew which patient's death had been chosen and which could still be stolen back.

I knelt beside the boy.

His face was flushed dark with fever. His lips were dry and cracked. When I pulled back the blanket, he whimpered without waking. Small red spots covered his neck and chest. Some had begun to rise. Others were still flat, angry seeds beneath the skin.

My father, who had come slowly from the inner room, stopped behind me.

I felt him grow still.

That was the first thing that frightened me.

My father had seen everything. He had held men whose bellies were opened by blades. He had watched children drown in their own phlegm. He had amputated fingers blackened by rot and comforted mothers whose milk had come in for infants already buried. His face did not easily change before illness.

But when he saw the boy's skin, something in his breathing altered.

"Who else in the house?" I asked.

The father swallowed. "His sister has fever. My wife says it is only heat."

"It is not only heat."

I placed two fingers against the boy's throat. The pulse beat fast and thin beneath hot skin.

"Has he vomited?"

"Yes."

"Pain in the back?"

"He cried when we lifted him."

"Eyes?"

"He says the room hurts to look at."

My father crossed himself.

I saw it from the corner of my eye.

I had read of such illnesses. Not in one book, but in pieces scattered across many: descriptions from physicians who wrote of fevers that erupted through the skin; of children whose faces swelled until their own mothers hardly knew them; of pustules that filled, darkened, burst, and left the living scarred as if burned by invisible flame.

Words came to me from the manuscripts I had purchased at such cost.

Fever first.

Pain.

Vomiting.

Eruption.

Danger to the young.

Danger to the household.

Danger to those who came near.

Knowledge rose within me, ordered and useless.

“Take him to the outer room,” I said.

Mateo looked at me.

I never used the outer room for children unless I feared contagion.

“Now,” I said.

The boy’s father tightened his arms around him. “Will he live?”

I hated that question.

Every family asked it. Every family believed that if I paused long enough before answering, I must be weighing hope against truth with God’s own scale. They did not understand

that sometimes I paused because I knew nothing.
Sometimes because I knew too much.

"We will do what can be done," I said.

By midday, there were six more.

By sunset, twelve.

The courtyard filled with the sick and those who feared they were becoming sick. Mothers held children away from one another and still pressed shoulder to shoulder beneath the fig tree. Men argued over who had arrived first. A girl fainted near the water jar. An old woman sat against the wall muttering prayers in a language I did not know. The air smelled of sweat, vinegar, dust, fear, and the bitter smoke of herbs Mateo had thrown on the brazier because someone insisted foul air must be driven away by fouler smoke.

I moved among them as if through a battlefield before the battle had declared its victor.

"Not inside," I told Mateo. "No one with rash or fever beyond the outer room."

"We do not have space."

"Then make space."

"With what walls?"

"With rope. Benches. Cloth. Anything."

He stared at me, then obeyed.

He dragged benches into lines, tied cords between posts, hung old sheets to divide the courtyard, and shouted at men twice his size until they stood where he put them. My father sat beneath the shade, examining those too weak to stand, his hands slow but still sure. Miriam came and went from the doorway, carrying boiled water and clean cloths.

I told her to stay inside.

She ignored me.

“Miriam.”

She set a bundle of linen on the table and did not look at me. “You need hands.”

“I need you away from this.”

“You need hands,” she repeated.

“Where is Isabel?” I said quietly.

At our daughter’s name, Miriam’s face changed.

Then she looked toward the inner rooms, where Isabel remained with Mariam’s mother, who had come that morning to help. Isabel, who had never obeyed a closed door in her life, had already tried twice to peer into the courtyard. The second time, I had shouted so harshly that her eyes filled with tears before she disappeared.

Miriam lowered her voice.

“All the more reason to help contain it before it reaches every house in the city.”

I wanted to argue.

Instead, a woman screamed.

Her son had begun convulsing near the gate.

The day swallowed us.

We washed hands in vinegar until our skin reddened, and we covered our mouths with cloth whenever we came near the sick, as if a thin barrier might hold death at bay. We burned bedding when families allowed it and argued when they did not. We told people not to share cups, not to crowd around the sick, not to carry children from house to house in search of better air, not to sleep beside those whose skin had begun to bloom with the red marks. Some listened. Most listened only until fear gave them another instruction.

A man whose daughter had fever tried to bring her into our inner rooms because he believed cleaner walls might save her. Mateo blocked him. The man struck Mateo across the mouth. Mateo struck him back and knocked him into the dust. For one suspended instant the courtyard went silent.

Then my father rose.

"No one crosses that threshold," he shouted.

The man on the ground began to sob.

"My daughter," he said. "She is all I have."

My father's face softened, and that softness hurt more than anger.

“Then do not carry death into another man’s house with her.”

By nightfall, we had separated the visibly ill from the merely frightened. We had sent families home with instructions, though I knew many would fail to follow them. We had marked houses where fever had appeared. We had asked neighbors to leave food at doors instead of entering. We had advised that clothing and bedding be boiled where possible, burned where necessary, and handled by as few hands as possible.

That evening, Zaragoza changed its sound.

The market bells still rang, but fewer voices answered them. Shutters closed before sunset. The taverns thinned. At the wells, women stood farther apart than custom required, their jars between them like small fortresses. Men who had laughed together the week before now watched one another’s faces for heat, rash, omen. Mothers dragged children away from neighbors’ hands. Priests moved quickly through alleys, carrying oil and prayer. At the mosque, men washed more carefully before entering. In Jewish courtyards, psalms rose behind closed doors. The whole city seemed to be holding its breath, as if silence might make it less visible to the thing moving through it.

From our rooftop that night, I saw smoke lifting in thin columns from many quarters.

Some burned herbs.

Some burned bedding.

Some burned the clothes of the dead.

The smell lay over Zaragoza like a dark cloth.

Miriam found me there.

For a while, she said nothing. She stood beside me, her shoulder close enough to touch mine. Below us, the city flickered with lamps and burning flames.

"How bad?" she asked.

I did not answer at once.

I searched for a gentler word, some softer shape to give the truth, but every mercy I reached for felt like a lie.

"Bad," I said.

"How bad?"

"I do not know yet."

"Worse than fever?"

"Yes."

"Worse than the flux?"

"For children, perhaps."

Her breath caught, almost too softly to hear.

I looked at her then.

In the moonlight she seemed younger than she was, and more tired. A loose strand of hair had escaped near her temple. Once, years before, that small disorder had undone me in her father's shop.

"Isabel must not come near the courtyard," I said.

"She is angry with you."

"She may remain angry and alive."

Miriam gave me a tired smile. "She grows bored sitting with my mother."

"She is a child," I said. "I cannot expect her to love waiting inside."

"She asked if she could go outside and play with the children."

I closed my eyes.

From somewhere in the distance came the cry of a woman.

Miriam's face tightened.

I reached for her hand.

"We will keep it outside," I said.

Even as I said it, I knew the arrogance in the words.

Outside.

As if illness respected doors because men built them. As if life itself did not cross thresholds a hundred times a day in

bowls, cloths, kisses, sleeves, breath.

But I needed the sentence.

Miriam knew this, and because she loved me, she did not take it away.

“Yes,” she said. “We will try.”

The next morning, Isabel escaped the inner rooms.

She had heard a child crying in the courtyard.

A little girl, younger than herself, had been brought in by an aunt because both parents were already fevered. The child’s face was swollen, her eyes nearly closed, her lips cracked from thirst. She cried steadily, with the exhausted rhythm of one who no longer expects comfort and cannot stop asking for it.

Isabel heard her.

That was enough.

She slipped away while Miriam’s mother was helping her carry water. I found her at the edge of the courtyard curtain, holding one of her own carved wooden horses through the gap.

The girl on the other side had stopped crying.

For one heartbeat, I could not move.

The image was too tender for fear to enter it quickly: my daughter standing barefoot in the morning light, arm

outstretched, offering her toy to a child whose world had narrowed to pain.

Then terror arrived.

“Isabel!”

She turned.

The force of my voice struck her before I reached her.

I seized her by the shoulders and pulled her back from the curtain so roughly that she stumbled.

Her face went white.

“Papa—”

“What did I tell you?”

“I only—”

“What did I tell you?”

Her mouth trembled.

“She was crying.”

“You disobeyed!”, I shouted.

Everyone in the courtyard had turned toward us. Mateo stood frozen with a water bucket in his hand. My father watched from beside a patient. Miriam appeared in the doorway, saw my hands on Isabel’s shoulders, and came toward us at once.

Isabel's eyes filled.

"I wanted her to have the horse."

I looked at the curtain.

The blue horse lay on the ground on the other side, between safety and sickness.

A stupid small thing.

A painted scrap of wood.

I wanted to burn it.

I wanted to snatch it back.

I wanted time to reverse itself by ten breaths.

Miriam reached us. "Adam."

I released Isabel. My hands had left a mark on her arm.

She ran to her mother and buried her face in Miriam's dress.

I stood there, unable to comprehend what had happened.

No one moved to pick up the horse.

Finally Mateo crossed the courtyard, lifted it with a cloth, and carried it to the brazier.

Isabel watched.

When he dropped it into the fire, she made a sound I had never heard from her before.

The painted wood blackened, curled, and vanished.

That was the first offering our house made to the pestilence.

It would not be the last.

After the morning in the courtyard, something in me loosened from its place, as if the world had shifted and everything I trusted now sat out of alignment.

I could not leave Isabel.

I tried.

Patients still came. The courtyard still filled. Mateo called for me more than once, his voice edged with urgency, but I moved through those hours like a man walking in shallow water, every step delayed, every thought pulled backward.

Toward the house.

Toward her.

I would examine a patient, ask a question, reach for a cloth—and then stop, seized by a sudden certainty that I had been away too long.

Too long.

Always too long.

I would turn without finishing, leaving my father or Mateo to complete what I had begun, and walk—then hurry—then nearly run back through the doorway.

Each time, I expected to find it.

The fever.

The marks.

The beginning of a nightmare.

But Isabel would be there, as I had left her.

Sitting.

Reading.

Playing.

Looking up at me with that open, unguarded expression that made all my fear seem like a private madness.

“You forgot something?” she would ask.

“Yes,” I would say.

I began to watch her as I watched the sick.

Not as a father.

As a physician.

I listened to her breathing when she spoke.

I watched the color of her cheeks in different light.

I noted how often she swallowed, whether her voice caught, whether her step slowed even for a moment.

Every small change became a sign.

Every sign became a warning.

Every warning became a sentence already half-spoken.

She rubbed her eye once—I felt my heart seize.

She paused before answering a question—I felt the ground shift beneath me.

She coughed after drinking water—only once—and I could not think straight until an hour had passed without a second.

I washed my hands until they bled.

Vinegar.

Water.

Again.

Again.

Again.

Each time I came from the courtyard, I stopped at the basin before crossing the threshold. At first I washed carefully. Then thoroughly. Then obsessively.

The smell of vinegar followed me everywhere.

My hands reddened, cracked, split along the knuckles.

Still I washed.

Still I was not clean enough.

Miriam remained inside with Isabel, as if instinct had already drawn a line she would not cross. Where I moved between worlds—sick and well, danger and home—she chose one.

She chose Isabel.

She kept her close.

Closer than ever.

The house fell into a heavy silence.

At the table, we spoke little.

Mateo would begin a sentence, then abandon it halfway. My father would eat without comment, his gaze lowered, his thoughts turned inward. Miriam sat with Isabel beside her, one arm always touching her.

At night, we lay beside her.

Not because she asked.

Because we could not do otherwise.

Isabel would fall asleep between us, one hand in mine, the other resting against Miriam's arm, her breathing slow and even in the darkness.

And we would lie there.

Awake.

Listening.

Counting each breath without admitting we were counting.

Sometimes Miriam would turn toward me, and in the dim light I would see the question in her eyes.

This went on for a day.

Then another.

A long day stretched thin by fear, followed by a night that never truly ended.

I did not remember sleeping.

Only closing my eyes and opening them again, uncertain how much time had passed.

At some point near dawn on the second morning, exhaustion claimed me.

I collapse.

The world slipped away from me without warning.

I woke to Miriam's voice.

Sharp.

Broken.

“Adam.”

Her hand was on my shoulder, shaking me.

“Adam—wake up.”

I opened my eyes slowly, the room still dim with early light.

For a moment, I did not understand.

Then I saw Isabel.

And everything returned at once.

She was flushed.

Not the gentle warmth I had feared and dismissed a hundred times before.

Fever.

True fever.

Her cheeks burned with it.

Her lips parted, her breath coming fast—too fast—each inhale shallow, each exhale strained.

I was on my feet before I knew I had moved.

“Since when?” I asked.

“I don’t know—she woke like this—Adam—”

I pressed my hand to Isabel’s forehead.

Heat.

Deep.

Unmistakable.

My stomach turned to stone.

No.

No.

Not this.

Not her.

Isabel stirred beneath my touch, her eyes half-opening.

“Papa?”

“I am here,” I said, though my voice did not sound like mine.

Her breathing quickened.

“It hurts,” she whispered.

“Where?”

“Everywhere.”

Miriam made a small sound behind me, quickly swallowed.

I did not turn.

I could not.

I forced myself into motion.

Cloths.

Water.

Cooling.

Observation.

The ritual of action, the illusion of control.

But my hands were no longer steady.

They knew what this meant.

Even as I tried to deny it.

By midday, the second signs came.

The fatigue settled over her like a weight she could not lift. She tried to sit and failed. Tried to speak and stopped halfway, her strength abandoning her mid-sentence. Her eyes grew heavy, not with sleep, but with the effort of remaining present.

Then the rash.

A scattering of red marks along her neck.

I stared at them.

Too long.

As if they might vanish if I refused to name them.

More appeared.

Across her chest.

Her arms.

Rising slowly.

I felt something inside me begin to give way.

And I knew—with a certainty deeper than thought—
that what I had feared had already entered our house.

Isabel worsened.

The fever did not break.

It deepened.

Her small body, once restless with life, grew heavy beneath the blankets. She drifted in and out of waking, her words thinning, her strength slipping away until he could barely lift her head.

We did everything.

Everything.

Cloths cooled and replaced again and again. Infusions measured and given. Water brought to her lips, coaxed, pleaded. We watched her breathing, counted her pulse, tracked every change as if understanding it might still grant us power over it.

It did not.

The rash spread.

Across her chest.

Her arms.

Her face.

Each mark a quiet declaration of defeat.

I turned to my books.

All of them.

Every manuscript I had purchased, copied, bartered for, guarded like treasure. I opened them with shaking hands, searching—not reading, not studying—searching as a drowning man searches for anything that might float.

Pages turned too quickly.

Words blurred.

Fragments caught my eye—descriptions of fevers, of eruptions, of treatments attempted by men long dead. I read the same passage three times and could not recall what it said. I moved from one book to another, from Latin to Arabic to notes of my own hand, as if somewhere, hidden between lines I had already read a hundred times, there might be a sentence I had missed.

Something.

Anything.

A remedy overlooked.

A method forgotten.

A mistake I could still correct.

My hands left stains on the pages—vinegar, sweat, blood from the cracks in my skin.

I pulled one manuscript down, then another, then another, until the table was covered, the floor scattered, the order of years undone in a single night.

I spoke aloud without realizing it.

“No... no... this will not help... this is for another fever... this is too late...”

In the next room, Isabel lay fighting for her life, and I stood apart from her—helpless, with nothing left but the knowledge of how little I could do.

Morning arrived, though I could not feel its light.

I woke in my study among open books and scattered manuscripts,
my mind still tangled with fevers, remedies, and useless fragments of hope.

For a moment, I did not know where I was.

Then I remembered.

Isabel.

I rose unsteadily and went toward her room.

The house was too quiet.

As I passed the kitchen, I stopped.

Miriam stood at the table with her back to me, utterly still.

“Miriam?”

She did not turn.

Then I saw her shoulders tremble.

On the table lay Isabel’s favorite food, half-prepared,
abandoned mid-gesture—

love interrupted by grief.

I crossed the room and put my arms around her.

The moment I held her, she broke.

Her body folded into mine, and the tears she had been
holding back came all at once.

“We are losing her,” she cried against my chest.

I couldn’t find words that would comfort her so I closed my
eyes and held her tighter.

Then I felt the heat of her body through her clothes.

I pulled back.

Her face was pale beneath the flush, her eyes heavy and
tired.

I touched her cheek.

She was burning.

For a moment I could not breathe.

“No,” I said.

But Miriam only looked at me, she knew too well what I had just found out.

The sickness had gotten her too.

PART 2.

Chapter 8. The Ashes of Zaragoza

I laid them to rest beneath the fig tree.

In summer, Miriam used to sit there when the house grew too warm, her sewing gathered in her lap, one foot tucked beneath her dress. Isabel would run circles around the trunk, chasing fallen figs across the courtyard stones, laughing whenever one split open beneath her heel.

By evening, the leaves always held the last of the light.

That was where I chose to bury them.

Not in the crowded churchyard, where the dead had begun to lie too close together and the earth was turned so often it no longer looked like earth. Not among strangers. Not where hurried men with tired faces lowered bodies as if stacking wood for winter.

I wanted them close to home.

I wanted Miriam beneath the shade she had loved.

I wanted Isabel where the sunlight still reached in the afternoon.

The plague had made death common in Zaragoza. Every street had its shuttered houses. Every morning, carts passed with their wheels groaning under the weight of someone's mother, someone's son, someone's beloved. People had learned to lower their voices when speaking of the dead, not from reverence, but from exhaustion.

But when they carried Miriam and Isabel into the courtyard, the world did not feel tired.

It felt impossible.

My father stood beside me. My brother held the spade. The priest murmured prayers in a voice made thin by too many funerals.

I heard the fig leaves moving above us.

I heard the first shovelful of earth strike the coffin of my daughter.

Then the next.

Then the next.

As the dirt covered their coffins, the last moments of their lives played again and again in my mind.

Miriam's breaths came shallow, each one thinner than the last.

She turned her head toward me, her voice barely more than air. "Isabel... bring her to me."

A moment before, Isabel had gone still in my arms.

The room had not changed. The light had not shifted. Only the world had ended.

I stood there, caught between two silences, and knew that to speak the truth would be a cruelty I could not bear to give her. No pain cuts deeper than a mother knowing her child is gone while she still breathes.

So I said nothing.

I carried Isabel from the next room, her weight already strange, already wrong, but even with the fever's marks scattered across her skin, her face was still the most beautiful thing this world had ever given me.

I laid her gently beside Miriam. I arranged the blanket around her as if she might wake and complain of the cold.

Miriam lifted a trembling hand and let it rest over Isabel's hair.

"How is she?" she whispered.

I swallowed what remained of my voice. "She is sleeping," I said. "Peacefully."

Miriam closed her eyes, her hand still upon our daughter.

For a few breaths, the room held them both.

Then one of those breaths did not return.

The first days passed without shape.

I moved through the house as though I had forgotten how it worked. Doors stood open where I did not remember opening them. A cup would be in my hand, though I had no memory of filling it. I would sit, then find myself standing again, as if some part of me refused to remain still long enough to understand what had happened.

At times, I heard them.

Isabel's laughter in the courtyard—quick, bright, unmistakable. I would turn before I could stop myself, already knowing what I would find.

Nothing.

Miriam's voice, softer, calling my name from another room, just as she used to, as if she knew I would come.

I went to her more than once.

Each time, the room greeted me with silence so complete it felt like a mockery.

Nights were worse. Sleep came in fragments, shallow and broken. I would wake with the certainty that I had heard Isabel stir beside her mother, that Miriam had turned in the bed, that something—anything—had returned to me.

But morning always found the house unchanged.

I began to keep myself in the study.

I did not go to Isabel's room. I did not enter the bedroom. I did not step into the kitchen. Each doorway felt like a threshold I would not survive crossing. It was easier to remain where their absence had not yet taken full shape.

I refused to see patients.

By then, the plague had already done its work. It had burned through the city and left what it would leave. Some houses stood untouched. Others, like mine, had been emptied. Those who still came seeking help were few, and my father and brother received them without me.

Most days, I lay on the floor.

The weight of my body grew heavier with each passing day, though I could feel myself thinning. My clothes loosened. My hands lost their strength. When I tried to rise, the weight beneath me refused to release its hold.

I would stare at the ceiling for hours, watching the light shift across it, measuring time by shadows instead of life.

My mother came often.

She would bring a tray and set it beside me—food she knew I loved, prepared with a care that made it harder to look at. She would kneel, her hands trembling slightly, and pleaded with me to eat.

"Please," she would say softly. "Just a little."

Her eyes were red.

Not from one night of grief, but from many. The skin beneath them darkened, her voice worn thin.

I could not answer her.

I could not lift my hand.

At the next meal, she would return with a fresh tray, still warm, and quietly take the last one away, untouched.

Sometimes my brothers would enter.

Sometimes my sister.

They would sit near and try to draw a few words from me—about anything, it did not matter what. A question. A memory. A simple remark about the day.

I gave them nothing.

After a while, they would stand and leave, their footsteps quiet, their hope already fading before they reached the door.

The house moved on around me.

I remained where I had fallen.

One morning I woke from a nightmare I could not escape even in sleep.

I had failed them again. In the dream, their breaths had slowed while I stood beside them, knowing, watching, doing nothing. I woke with a jolt, my pillow damp with sweat, my breath fast and uneven. The room swam before me. My eyes

burned as if I had not closed them in days.

I forced myself to stand.

My legs gave way beneath me, and I fell hard against the floor. For a moment I remained there, my hands pressed into the cold stone, my breath coming in sharp bursts.

Then I rose again.

I turned toward the shelves.

The books stood where I had left them, untouched, patient, waiting for me to return to them.

Something inside me broke.

I lunged at them, pulling volumes free and throwing them to the ground. Pages scattered. Bindings split. I tore through them without care, the sound of ripping parchment filling the room. Years of study, of careful collection, of belief—reduced to fragments at my feet.

“Useless...” I heard myself say.

I reached for the jars.

Glass shattered against the wall, against the floor. Oils and tinctures spread across the stone, their sharp scents rising all at once. Another jar flew from my hand and broke, then another.

“Useless trash!” I shouted, my voice raw.

A shard cut into my palm.

I saw the blood but did not feel it. It ran down my hand, dark against the skin, and still I reached for whatever remained unbroken.

The noise drew him.

My father stood in the doorway.

“Enough, son,” he said, his voice firm, cutting through the chaos.

I did not stop.

“These are nothing!” I shouted. “All of it—nothing! I gave my life to this, and it did nothing for me!”

He crossed the room in a few strides and caught me, his arms closing around mine, holding me still.

I struggled once, twice—

Then the strength left me.

I collapsed against him, the fight gone as suddenly as it had come. The sound that followed was not anger.

“It is too much,” I said, my voice breaking. “I cannot bear it, father... I cannot...”

He held me there, one hand steady at the back of my head, pressing me gently against his chest.

“I know, son,” he said.

His voice was not steady.

When I lifted my face, I saw the tears in his eyes.

For a long time he said nothing more. He let me weep until the force of it passed, until my breath slowed and my body no longer shook.

Then he guided me to sit.

He remained beside me, close enough that I could feel the warmth of him.

“There is something you do not know,” he said quietly.

I looked at him, not yet understanding.

“You are not our first child.”

The words settled slowly, as if they belonged to someone else.

“We had a son before you,” he continued. “He lived two years.”

I said nothing.

“He fell ill,” my father said. “As your daughter did.”

His gaze drifted somewhere beyond the room, beyond the broken glass and torn pages.

“For a long time,” he went on, “I did not believe the pain would ever lessen. I thought it would remain as it was—burning, unending.”

He paused.

"It did not vanish," he said. "But it changed."

He looked at his hands for a moment, remembering what they had once held.

"I did not forget him. I remember his laughter. His first word. The way he walked—unsteady, the ground unsure beneath his small feet."

His voice softened.

"I remember everything."

He turned back to me.

"But there comes a time," he said, "when those memories change. When they no longer tear at you with every breath. They remain, but they bring something else with them."

He rested his hand over mine.

"A quiet longing," he said. "Not peace... not entirely. But something you can carry."

Mateo cleaned the cut on my hand.

I watched him as he worked. His movements were steady, careful. There was a confidence in the way he held the cloth, in the way he wrapped the bandage, that I did not remember seeing before.

That night, we sat together at the table.

It was the first time we all sat at the table together since Isabel and Miriam were gone.

My mother placed the bowls before us. My father sat at the head, as he always had. Mateo and Diego beside him. My sister across from me.

No one spoke.

The room held only the sound of spoons against clay, the soft scrape of utensils, the quiet rhythm of eating without hunger. The space where their voices had once lived remained empty, and none of us dared to reach into it.

A few days later, I returned to the study room.

The door stood as I had left it. Inside, the room still carried the scent of spilled oils and broken herbs. Glass lay scattered across the floor, catching what little light entered through the window. Pages were torn and strewn about, some crumpled, some stained.

For a long moment, I stood there.

Then I stepped inside.

I gathered the broken glass first, careful with my hands, though the cuts had not yet fully closed. The shards clicked against each other as I placed them aside. I swept what remained into a pile and carried it out.

After that, I turned to the books.

Some had lost their bindings. Others had been torn beyond saving. I collected what I could, stacking the pages together, smoothing them as best I was able. Manuscripts I had spent years acquiring lay reduced to fragments. I

handled them gently now, some part of me believed I could undo what I had done.

As I lifted one of the books, something slipped free and fell to the floor.

A single piece of paper.

I bent to pick it up.

It was a drawing. Isabel had drawn it.

She had drawn me as I had been in her eyes.

Standing. Certain. My hands steady over another's suffering. A man who knew what to do. A man who could ease pain, if not end it.

And she had placed herself beside me.

Watching.

Believing.

For a long time, I stood there, the room still broken around me, the scent of spilled medicine lingering in the air, and felt something stir where only emptiness had lived.

I closed my hand gently around the drawing.

If this was the last image she had carried of me—if this was the man she believed me to be—then I would not abandon him now.

PART 3.

Chapter 9. The Shape of Leaving

I had spent half my life listening to men describe roads I never thought I would take.

They came to my father's house with swollen joints, infected cuts, coughs that would not loosen, eyes reddened from dust and sea wind. They came with coins hidden in their belts and stories carried close to the chest. Merchants, muleteers, sailors, spice sellers, cloth traders, glass dealers, pilgrims, men who had crossed mountains in winter and deserts in summer, men who had slept under carts with one hand on a knife, men who had watched the Mediterranean rise like a living wall and strike a ship hard enough to make Christians pray beside Muslims and Jews without reservation.

While I cleaned wounds or ground remedies, they spoke.

I had heard of ships leaving Almería with bellies full of wool, oil, saffron, leather, silver, and men who believed themselves braver than the sea. I had heard of sailors tying charms to the mast before a storm and captains swearing by God they needed no charm until the first black cloud

rose over the water. I had heard of fish large enough to drag a man screaming from the side of a boat, of waves that carried blue fire at night, of islands where no one spoke a language known to any soul aboard, of pirates who flew no flag until they were close enough for arrows.

I had heard of Alexandria, where the harbor was said to swallow the world each morning and pour it back out by dusk. Of Fustat, where spices from India, ivory from Africa, glass from Syria, paper from the east, and books from dead Greeks passed through the same crowded markets. I had heard of caravans so long that the first camels reached a well while the last still stood in the previous day's dust. I had heard of guides who could find water by tasting wind, of desert stars bright enough to shame lamps, of wells guarded like fortresses, of men who wandered twenty steps from camp at night and were found at dawn facing the wrong horizon.

I learned which roads washed out in spring, which ports cheated strangers, which caravan masters paid guards properly and which saved coin by hiring boys with spears. I learned that a man traveling east should carry more patience than pride. I learned that names changed from mouth to mouth. Tortosa became Turtusha. Zaragoza became Saraqusta. Córdoba became Qurtuba. Baghdad, even before I saw it, became many things: city of books, city of dust, city of caliphs, city of physicians, city of arguments that began at dawn and lasted until lamps died.

So I knew, in the small way a man knows a place from the stories of others, what lay ahead of me.

I had never truly thought of leaving Zaragoza.

Home had been enough.

The narrow streets, my father's treatment room, the kitchen where Miriam hummed while grinding herbs, the courtyard where Isabel sat beneath the fig tree with ink on her fingers—these had been my whole world. Love makes a kingdom out of a few rooms.

Now that perfect world had gone dark. Everything that had given those rooms breath had been taken from them, and I felt the need to leave before the silence pulled me too deep—before grief ceased to be grief and became the shape of my mind.

Baghdad had lived in my imagination long before I turned my face toward it.

For years, travelers had brought stories of its hospitals, larger and better ordered than any house of healing I had known, where patients were examined, fed, washed, separated by illness, and studied with discipline rather than guesswork. They spoke of physicians teaching at the bedside, of libraries filled with Greek, Persian, Syriac, and Arabic texts, and of medicines prepared with a care that made our small shelves in Zaragoza seem humble.

Most of all, they spoke of al-Razi, whose name reached even us in the west like a lamp carried across a great distance. He was said to have chosen the site of a hospital by hanging pieces of meat in different parts of the city and watching where they spoiled the slowest. They said he had written on

smallpox and measles with a clarity that made other men seem half-blind.

Baghdad was where medicine was not merely practiced, but questioned, tested, and expanded. So when the thought of leaving finally took shape, it took the shape of Baghdad.

I knew where to begin.

Not with scholars.

With merchants.

They carried the world because the world paid them to. They knew which roads were open, which governors were hungry, which harbors were safe, which captains drank too much, which letters of introduction mattered, which coins would be accepted without weighing twice.

After speaking with merchants, traders, sailors, and men who had crossed more roads than they could name, the path to Baghdad began to take shape.

Tortosa first, where the Ebro gave itself to the sea.
Then Almería, with its ships and crowded harbor.
Mahdia, white-walled and bright against the African coast.
Alexandria, where the sea carried the world into one harbor.

Fustat, where the Nile fed markets of spice, paper, glass, and gold.

Ramla, a resting place between desert and holy cities.

Damascus, green with gardens and old waters.

Raqqa, where the Euphrates bent toward Iraq.

And at last, Baghdad.

The leaves of the fig tree had begun to fall, gathering softly over their graves as if the earth itself wished to cover them more gently than death had.

I knelt and cleared the leaves away with my hands, one grave and then the other, until the stones were visible again. From beneath my cloak I took the small wooden horse—the one of the pair the child’s sick hands had never touched, the one I had saved from the fire—and placed it beside her headstone. For Miriam, I laid a branch of rose, though the flowers had already begun to bend with autumn, because roses had always been her favorite. I stood there a long while, trying to find words large enough for farewell, and finding only their names.

At the gate, my family waited in silence. I placed the affairs of the healing house in Mateo’s hands, though his eyes were still young enough to make the responsibility seem cruel. My mother held my face between her palms and asked me to come back before sorrow made a stranger of me. I promised her I would return, that I would come home once I had learned enough to be of more use to the living than I had been to the dead. I made that promise because she needed to hear it, and because some part of me still believed the road could bend back toward what it had taken from me.

I did not know that when I next stepped onto those stones, my mother would be gone, and my father with her, and my

brothers and sisters too, and their children, and their children's children, and all who came after them, ten generations of love and dust between my leaving and return.

I left Zaragoza before the city had fully awakened.

The sky was pale, caught between night and morning, and the stones beneath my horse's hooves still held the coolness of the dark. Behind me, the city walls rose in silence. I did not turn back. I knew my mother would still be standing near the gate, his hand half-raised, trying to look strong for my sake. My father, brothers and sister would be beside her, smaller and quieter than they had ever seemed.

So I looked ahead.

The road east followed the Ebro through fields silvered with dew. Autumn had touched the land. The vines had begun to yellow. The orchards stood thinner than they had only weeks before, and the fig trees dropped their leaves one by one, the season mourning in its own quiet language.

By noon, I stopped beneath a line of poplars and watered my horse. He was a chestnut gelding, named Barq, though there was little lightning in him. He moved carefully, patiently, as if he understood that I was not ready to be hurried away from my dead.

By the second evening, the familiar fields gave way to rougher country. I slept in roadside inns where the walls smelled of smoke, wine, and mule sweat. Men spoke in low voices over their bowls. A trader told of ships lost in storms.

A soldier claimed pirates had taken a vessel near the islands and sold the survivors in markets far from home.

I listened and said little.

The sea had always belonged to stories for me. It came to Zaragoza in the mouths of merchants and in the margins of maps. I knew what men brought from it: salt, coral, ambergris, dried fish, strange medicines wrapped in cloth. I knew the sea by its gifts, not by its face.

On the third day, I reached Tortosa.

The city stood where the river widened toward the coast. Boats crowded the banks. Men shouted over sacks of grain and jars of oil. Gulls circled above the quay, crying with the sharp indignation of creatures who believed the world owed them something.

I sold Barq there. The man who bought him complained that he was too old, though his hands moved carefully over the horse's legs and his eyes had already decided. I did not argue.

I had raised Barq from a foal, had watched his thin legs learn the earth, had fed him from my palm before he knew the weight of a saddle. As the buyer led him away, I remembered the first time I lifted Isabel onto his back, how small her hands had been in his mane, how she laughed each time he took a careful step. Barq had carried us through spring fields, along the river, beneath the fig trees, and now even he was being taken from the life I had known. I turned before the buyer could see my face. The tears I had

held back since leaving home broke loose at last, and I walked toward the port half-blind, with the sound of Barq's hooves fading behind me.

From Tortosa I took passage downriver with a boatman named Musa. His boat carried wool, almonds, chickens, and four passengers. The river bore us slowly toward the coast, past reed beds and marshes where white birds stood motionless in the shallows. Each hour the air grew heavier with salt. Even before I saw the sea, I tasted it.

At night we tied the boat near the bank. Musa slept beneath the stern, wrapped in his cloak. I lay awake and watched the stars tremble in the river.

I thought of Isabel's wooden horse that I had placed beside her headstone with my own hands. I thought of Miriam and the rose branch I had left for her.

When the river finally opened into the sea, I stood and forgot to breathe.

The Mediterranean stretched before me beneath the morning sun, vast and restless. It had no wall, no road, no edge a man could trust. I had imagined it blue but it was silver, green, white, gray, and beneath all of it a darkness that seemed to remember storms.

The Ebro slipped into the Mediterranean, carrying with it the last dust of home.

The ship bell rang from the harbor, and I stood motionless, letting its sound pull me forward before memory could pull

me back.

PART 3.

Chapter 10. The Road by Water

We reached the coastal port by midday. Ships rested at anchor beyond the quay, their masts rising like a leafless forest. Sailors hauled ropes thick as wrists. Porters carried bales on their backs. Children ran barefoot between crates.

I asked after vessels bound east.

Some went south along the coast. Some crossed to Ifriqiya. Others sailed first to Almería, where larger ships could be found for the long journey by water. I had letters of introduction and notes I chose to bring in my satchel, coin sewn into my belt, my physician's tools wrapped in oiled cloth and two changes of clothes in a leather pack. These were the things I carried into the unknown: words, money, and knives.

A captain from Almería agreed to take me. His ship was broad and old, with patched sails and a painted eye near the prow. He asked if I had traveled by sea before.

"No," I said.

"Then eat little before we depart."

We left with the evening tide.

As the sailors pushed us from the quay, I stood near the rail. The port withdrew slowly. The shouting became a murmur. The figures onshore became shapes, then shadows. The land softened under the falling sun.

The wind caught the sail.

The ship leaned.

My stomach turned as if the earth had dropped away beneath me.

Somewhere behind me, the captain laughed. "Do not fight it, physician. The sea cures pride first."

Night came over the water.

No house stood near. No lamp burned in a familiar window. There was only the ship, the black sea, the groan of wood, and the stars scattered above us in such number that the sky seemed wounded with light.

I lay on the deck because I could not bear the closeness below. Around me, sailors slept on the boards beneath them. The waves struck the hull again and again, patient and enormous.

For the first time since leaving Zaragoza, I understood that there would be no quick return.

I reached into my satchel and touched my notes: copied passages, recipes, questions written in the margins until the margins vanished. Somewhere in the east, I believed, there were men who knew more than I did. Libraries larger than noble houses. Hospitals where scholars argued over fever, pulse, surgery, breath, pain.

The ship reached Almería near noon, when the sun had climbed high enough to make the sea almost white.

For a long while I saw only the coast: pale hills rising out of the water, dry and bare, without the orchards and river-green softness I had known all my life.

The first thing that caught my eye was the fortress.

High above the city, the Alcazaba stretched along the hill like a second city made for soldiers and watchmen. Its walls were broad and sun-baked, its towers fixed upon the harbor as if they had been staring at the sea for centuries and had never trusted it. Below it, the city spilled downward in white walls, flat roofs, narrow streets, and terraces that flashed under the sun.

The harbor was crowded with ships: small fishing boats with nets drying over their sides, coastal vessels dark with pitch, broad merchant ships heavy in the water, and leaner craft whose crews spoke in accents I did not recognize. Men shouted from deck to dock. Ropes groaned against wooden posts. Porters bent beneath sacks of grain, jars of oil, folded hides, bundles of wool, and bales wrapped so carefully that I knew they held something more precious than food.

I stepped onto the quay with my satchel against my side and my leather pack slung over one shoulder, my legs uncertain beneath me. After days on the water, the stone seemed too still.

The captain who had brought me from Tortosa clapped a hand on my shoulder before leaving me.

"If you mean to go east," he said, "ask for ships near the outer quay. Do not trust the small vessels unless you must. Look for captains who carry cloth or oil. They protect their cargo better than they protect their mothers."

"Where should I go from here?"

He squinted toward the harbor, then pointed with his chin. "If God favors you, you will find passage toward Ifriqiya. Mahdia, perhaps. Or farther, if the captain is bold and the sea is kind. But do not speak too quickly of Baghdad. Men charge more when they hear a dream."

Then he left me among the noise.

I walked the length of the port, asking questions, listening more than I spoke. One captain was bound only for Málaga. Another had no room for passengers. A third asked for so much coin that I nearly laughed in his face. Everywhere, men measured me before answering: my clothes, my satchel, the way I spoke Arabic, the way I held myself like a man who had money hidden but not enough experience to protect it.

Near the outer quay, I found the ship.

It was larger than the others I had approached, broad-bellied and dark, with a high stern and patched sails furled like sleeping wings. Men were loading amphorae into its hold. Others carried bales of cloth wrapped in heavy linen and sealed with wax. Its hull smelled of pitch and long water. Its prow curved upward in dark, salt-worn wood, and the heavy ropes along its side hung like scars from storms it had survived.

The captain was a square man with a trimmed beard and a voice that did not rise even when the men around him shouted. He listened while I spoke, his eyes moving from my face to my satchel, measuring what kind of passenger I might become once the land disappeared behind us.

"You are a physician?" he asked.

"Yes."

"That is better than a poet."

He almost smiled.

The ship was bound east, first along the coast and then, if the weather held, across toward Ifriqiya. From there, he said, I might find passage onward. He would take me, but not that day. The tide and loading would not be ready until morning.

"You sleep in the city tonight," he said. "Be here before dawn. If you are late, I will pray for your journey from the water."

So I entered Almería with the sun still high above me.

The road from the harbor climbed toward the city through a gate watched by Almoravid soldiers. They were darker-cloaked and sterner than the guards I knew in Zaragoza, their faces half-shadowed by wrapped cloth, their spears held upright, their eyes moving over the crowd without hurry. The men of the Maghreb had come across the sea years before as defenders, then as rulers. One could feel their presence not only in the soldiers, but in the restraint of the city: fewer open displays of luxury, fewer loud songs in the street, a sharper edge beneath the ordinary life of trade.

Yet Almería was too rich to become simple.

Even under watchful rulers, the heart of the city still shone from its doorways.

I passed stalls where cloth hung in the shade like pieces of captured sky: deep blue, pomegranate red, green as wet leaves, black threaded with gold. Men touched the fabric with reverence. Women bargained behind veils. A boy carried dyed thread in both arms, the colors spilling over him like water. Somewhere nearby, hidden behind a wall, looms beat steadily: wood against wood, rhythm against rhythm, as if the houses themselves had hearts.

The streets were narrower than they had looked from the harbor. White walls leaned close. Drain channels ran down the center of the lanes. Doorways opened into courtyards bright with tiles, then closed again before I could see too

much. From above came voices, a woman shaking dust from a rug, children arguing, the soft splash of water poured from a jar. The city seemed crowded but not chaotic. Everything moved around trade, prayer, heat, and the sea.

I found lodging in a small house used by travelers near the market.

The keeper was an old man with clouded eyes who asked no questions once he had seen my coin. His wife gave me bread, olives, and fish cooked with coriander. I ate in a courtyard where a thin lemon tree grew from a square of earth. Above me, laundry shifted in the hot wind. Somewhere beyond the walls, the harbor continued to shout.

I should have rested.

Instead, near sunset, I climbed toward the higher streets.

From there I could see the whole city falling toward the water: the white roofs, the market awnings, the ship masts gathered like a winter forest, the fortress above all of it, and beyond that, the sea stretching east until it swallowed the light.

I stood there until the sun lowered behind the hills and the sea turned from silver to iron.

That night, as the call to prayer rose over the rooftops and the first lamps appeared in the city below, I did not feel closer to healing. I felt only farther from home.

I reached the ship before dawn.

A sailor lowered a plank.

“Physician,” he called. “Come aboard before the captain decides your coin weighs less than your absence.”

The deck was crowded. Men sat among bundles and rolled sleeping mats, guarding their possessions with their knees and elbows. There were merchants traveling with cloth and dyed thread, two young men who spoke endlessly of Egypt as if it were a woman they hoped to marry, a gray-bearded pilgrim making his way east by stages, and a family from the Maghreb returning home with three children and a basket of caged birds. There were also men I could not name easily: wanderers, seekers, men with maps folded into leather cases, men who had left one place but had not yet earned another.

I found a place near the side and sat with my back against a coil of rope.

When the ship pulled away, Almería was only beginning to show itself in the first weak light. The Alcazaba appeared above the city, its walls turning from black to brown to gold. Below it, the roofs brightened one by one. The harbor widened. The voices on the quay thinned. Then the sail opened with a crack above us, and the wind took hold.

By midday, the captain sent for me. The sailor who came for me jerked his chin toward the forward part of the ship.

“One of ours took a fall.”

"I am a passenger," I said.

"You are a physician, aren't you?"

The words struck harder than they should have.

For a moment I did not move, but he did not intend to leave without me.

He led me to a young deckhand lying near the mast. The boy could not have been more than seventeen. Blood ran from his scalp into his hair, and one arm lay twisted under him. His face had gone gray beneath the sun-brown skin. Around him, the crew had gathered in a loose circle, trying not to look frightened in front of one another.

The captain stood over him. "He fell from the lower rigging."

I knelt beside the boy.

For one terrible instant I saw Isabel instead. Not the sailor, not the blood, not the deck beneath my knees. I saw her small face on the pillow, her breath shallow, her eyes searching mine for rescue.

My hands froze.

The captain said, quieter now, "Can you help him?"

I wanted no more hope laid in my hands, heavy as stone.

Then the boy groaned.

The sound was small, human, afraid.

My hands moved before my mind agreed.

“Water,” I said. “Clean cloth. Wine if you have it. And keep those men back. He needs air, not witnesses.”

The captain obeyed.

The cut on the boy’s head bled freely, but the skull beneath did not seem broken. His arm had not snapped, though the shoulder had been forced from its place. I spoke to him while I worked, though I was not sure he heard me. I told him my name. I told him not to sleep yet. I told him to curse me if he wished, but not to leave.

When I set the shoulder back, he screamed so loudly that several passengers crossed themselves or whispered the name of God. His body arched beneath my hands, then collapsed, trembling. I bound the arm tight against his chest, then turned again to the wound on his head. The bleeding had slowed, but the skin had opened deep enough that cloth alone would not hold it. I cleaned it with wine, threaded a curved needle with linen, and drew the torn edges together stitch by stitch while the boy breathed through his teeth. When I was done, I pressed a folded cloth over the sewn cut and tied it firm enough to hold.

Only after it was done did I notice my own hands shaking.

The captain noticed too, but said nothing of it.

“You have saved him?” he asked.

“For now.”

“For now is more than he had.”

He gave the order for the boy to be carried below.

I washed the blood from my hands at the side of the ship.

The water below swallowed it instantly.

That night, the injured boy lived. By morning, he asked for broth and cursed me in a cracked voice when I told him he would not climb again soon. The crew laughed, and the captain looked at me with a kind of approval I did not want and yet could not fully reject.

We reached Ifriqiya under a cool, windless sky.

The harbor rose out of the coast in pale walls and crowded masts, the air thick with salt, dust, and the cries of men unloading cargo. I did not stay long enough to know the city properly. To me, it became a place of transfer: one quay, one night in a room above a warehouse, one meal of bread, dates, and lamb too heavily spiced for my tired stomach. Yet even in passing, I felt I had entered another world.

Al-Andalus had begun to fall behind me. The accents had changed. The robes were different. The faces in the market carried other histories. The west was loosening its hand.

From Ifriqiya, I found passage to Alexandria.

The ship was smaller than the one from Almería, but its captain had crossed those waters many times and spoke of Egypt with the casual familiarity of a man describing his own courtyard. He said the voyage would be simple if the

weather remained kind.

The weather did not remain kind.

On the second evening, the wind changed.

At first it was only a restlessness in the sail, a snapping at the edges. Then the sailors began to move differently. Men who had joked through work now tightened ropes with grim faces. The captain watched a bank of clouds gathering in the west, low and dark, its underside bruised purple by the sinking sun.

"Will it pass?" a concerned passenger asked.

"Everything passes," he said. "The question is what it takes with it."

By nightfall, the sea had lost its shape, rising around us in black, furious walls of water.

Waves broke over the side, striking the ship like a living thing. Passengers screamed and clung to one another. The caged birds battered themselves against wicker. A merchant fell to his knees, and began to pray. The pilgrims recited verses in voices that rose and broke with the wind.

I had seen men face death in beds.

I had seen the stubbornness of the dying, the bargaining, the silence, the sudden childlike fear. But I had never seen so many living people understand at the same moment that their lives were small.

The storm stripped us quickly. The rich man clutched the same rope as the porter. The merchant who had guarded his chest of coin abandoned it when water swept across the deck and reached instead for a stranger's wrist. The young and old vomited side by side. The proud wept openly and the devout and the doubtful prayed together.

Near dawn, the storm began to pass.

The wind weakened first. Then the waves, though they continued to shove the ship like a drunkard refusing to release a friend. The sky paled slowly behind torn clouds and men emerged from wherever they had wedged themselves.

When Alexandria finally appeared, its walls and towers looked like proof that the sea had not taken us.

Low land first. Then walls. Then towers and masts and the pale shapes of buildings rising through morning haze. The harbor widened before us, crowded with ships from places I had only read about. Egypt lay ahead, immense and ancient, and beyond it the road would turn inland again.

I stood at the rail, exhausted, salt dried on my face, my hands raw from rope and work. The ship moved toward Egypt while the storm-dark sea fell slowly away behind us. From there the road would turn inland through deserts, rivers, and cities I did not know, until at last, if my strength held, it would bring me to Baghdad.

PART 3.

Chapter 11. Voyage Over the Desert

I first saw the river as a brightness beyond the low roofs of Alexandria, a pale band that belonged neither to sea nor sky.

I walked inland without asking where the path led.

The streets loosened around me, widening, thinning, until the city no longer enclosed itself. Alexandria did not feel like the places I had known. Languages moved around me that I could not follow. Faces carried features I could not place within a single memory of people. Nothing insisted on belonging, and yet everything did.

And then the ground opened, and I saw it. The Nile appeared before me, vast and luminous, spread across the earth like a silence too large to break. I stopped without meaning to. The step I had taken remained suspended in me as my eyes tried to take hold of what lay ahead.

The Nile River did not seem contained within its banks. It spread as if the land had given way to it, as if it had not been shaped by the earth but had shaped the earth in

return. The far shore lay distant, softened by light, not a boundary but a suggestion.

I stood there longer than I can measure.

The boats lay along the bank in quiet order, their forms grounded, familiar in a way the river was not. Men moved among them without urgency, their work measured, unbroken by the scale of what surrounded them.

I found a man near the boats who seemed to know which vessels were leaving and where they were bound. I told him I needed passage to Fustat. He looked me over once, then pointed toward a vessel larger than the others nearby. I gave the boatman what he asked. He gave me a place.

We pushed away before the sun had fully climbed.

The boat drifted at first, then turned as the sail took the wind. The shore began to recede slowly not with the force I had known at sea, but with a steadiness that made distance difficult to feel. Alexandria started thinning into the horizon until it no longer claimed any attention.

In its place came land that seemed to unfold without effort.

Fields stretched beside the water in long, patient lines. Trees stood in quiet clusters, their shapes untroubled by the passing of time. Men worked along the banks, their movements small, repeating, as though the rhythm of their labor had been set long before they were born.

Children appeared for a time, running along the edge of the river, keeping pace with the boat as far as they could. They fell behind eventually, one by one, until there was only the river and those who moved upon it.

Days began to lose their edges.

We rose with the light. The crew adjusted the sail with quiet certainty, speaking only when needed. The passengers settled into themselves, then slowly into one another's presence.

By the time Fustat began to gather ahead of us, the river had become part of my breathing.

The city rose from the banks slowly—first smoke, then rooftops, then the clustered shapes of markets, boats, animals, and men. The quiet of the river gave way to voices, to calls from the shore, to the heavy movement of goods being lifted from one vessel and carried toward another road.

I stepped onto the bank with my satchel and bag over my shoulder and the dust of Egypt waiting beyond the green edge of the water.

I found the caravan beyond the crowded heart of Fustat, where the green edge of the river began to surrender to dust.

At first it seemed less like a company of travelers than a small city preparing to remember its legs. Camels knelt in uneven rows, their loaded bodies rising above bundles of

cloth, leather skins, rolled carpets, copper vessels, sacks of grain, and crates tied with rope. Mules stamped beside them. Donkeys stood with lowered heads, patient beneath burdens too humble for the camels.

Not everyone rode.

Most walked.

Servants moved barefoot through the dust. Poor pilgrims stood with their bundles pressed to their chests. Young men hired for strength waited near the rear, where the extra animals and loose cargo would follow. Those with silver had animals of their own, or places secured upon them. A merchant sat beneath a small shade fixed above his saddle, already removed from the hardship that had not yet begun. Two women and a child were being settled into covered panniers on either side of a camel, their faces half-hidden behind cloth.

The caravan had an order before it had motion.

Guides and armed riders gathered near the front. The merchants and heavier cargo belonged to the middle. The walkers waited along the sides and behind, close enough to be counted, far enough to know their place. Men with swords watched the edges of the gathering, not speaking much.

The man I was sent to had a beard streaked with white and eyes that measured faster than his mouth spoke. He looked first at my face, then at the satchel hanging from my shoulder.

“What do you carry?”

“My tools.”

“What kind of tools?”

I tightened my hand around the strap.

“The kind used for treating the sick.”

He looked at my hands.

“You are a physician?”

“I have treated the sick,” I said.

His gaze stayed on me a moment longer. Then he named a price lower than I expected.

A physician was another kind of water on the road. You did not waste one.

By noon, my place had been decided. I would walk with the others, ride when there was room, sleep where the caravan stopped, and answer when I was called. Damascus, they told me, would not be the end of my road. From there, other roads ran east—toward the Euphrates, toward the cities that opened the way to Baghdad.

Not long after, the caravan master lifted his hand.

One by one, the camels rose. The movement passed through them like a wave—front legs folding upward, hind legs pushing, loads swaying, bells giving their first uneven music. Dust climbed around their bodies and turned gold in

the falling light.

I tightened the strap of my satchel across my shoulder, the bag tied to it and resting against my side, and stepped into the dust with the others.

Water became the measure of all things.

It was counted before the sun climbed high enough to flatten the horizon. Skins were opened with care, passed from hand to hand, closed again with the same quiet attention. No one drank freely. Even the animals were given their share in silence, as though the act required no witness. Water was not for the moment. It was for the distance.

The desert did not remain empty.

Tracks crossed our path—faint at first, then clearer where the ground allowed memory to hold. Lines drawn by other feet, other animals, other journeys that had passed before ours. At times we came upon what remained of them. A length of rope half-buried in sand. A broken crate, its contents long gone. Bones, bleached and light, scattered as though the earth had forgotten to take them back. The road remembered enough for all of us.

Wind came without warning.

It began as a shift, a pressure against the skin, a stillness that did not belong to calm. Then it rose, gathering itself from nothing, moving across the land with a force that needed no voice. Cloth was pulled over faces. Heads

lowered. The line tightened as though drawn by an unseen hand.

The world narrowed.

Sand moved along the ground like a living thing, then lifted, filling the space between one step and the next. The man ahead of me became a shadow, then less than that. I fixed my eyes on the shape of his shoulders and followed.

We did not stop.

When it passed, the desert stood as it had before. No mark. No trace. Only the sense that something immense had crossed our path and chosen not to remain.

Nights carried a different weight.

The heat withdrew quickly, leaving behind a cold that settled deep and without haste. Fires were lit in small circles, fed sparingly. Men spoke more then, though still in fragments. Names of cities. Names of roads. Names of men who had taken them and not returned.

I lay on the ground with my satchel beneath my head and looked upward.

The sky held nothing back.

Stars filled it from one end to the other, not scattered, but gathered, as if they had been waiting for the earth below to grow quiet enough to be seen. I had never known the night to be so complete.

The road did not pause.

Days loosened their hold.

They no longer began or ended. They continued. One step followed another until the body moved without asking the mind to agree. The rhythm settled into bone, into breath, into something deeper than thought.

At times I would lift my head and find that the land had changed without my noticing. The color of the ground shifting from pale to red, from red to something darker. The horizon rising, falling, drawing nearer without warning. Distance revealed itself slowly, then all at once.

From time to time the road gathered itself into small towns and way stations where wells were deep and guarded, and water was drawn with a care that reminded us how far we had come to reach it. There, the caravan loosened for a few hours: animals unburdened, skins refilled, bread exchanged, voices rising a little as though speech itself had been held back on the open road. Yet even in rest, no one settled fully; the desert lingered in our movements, and by morning we tightened our loads again and stepped back into its silence.

For near a month we walked, step after step across a land that offered no measure of its passing, until one day Damascus rose before us as if it had been waiting all along.

The caravan did not remain the same from its first step to its last. An old pilgrim, worn by years, lay down upon the sand and did not rise again; we buried him where the earth

would keep him, and his son spoke with a quiet pride, as though no greater honor could be given than to surrender one's breath while walking toward the sacred. To seek the divine upon the earth and meet it in heaven—this, he said, was a completion, not a loss. Days later, beneath a stretched cloth and a circle of waiting hands, a child entered the world, his cry carried into the same open sky. And so we moved on—younger, despite the days behind us—as if the road had turned upon itself and we had come closer to our end by beginning again.

I remained in Damascus for several days. The body knew the pause before the mind accepted it. My legs held the memory of the road even when I stood still. Sleep came heavily the first night, then lightly, as if some part of me feared being left behind.

On the second day, I went into the bazaar of the city.

It did not stand apart from Damascus. It flowed through it.

Streets narrowed and drew inward until they became something else—covered passages where the light filtered down in broken lines through wood and cloth stretched above.

The passages rose above me in long, arched vaults of bricks, higher than I expected, their curves repeating into the distance until the eye lost count. The air beneath them felt held, as though the city had drawn a roof over its own movement. Above, openings had been cut into the ceiling at intervals, narrow and deliberate, and through them the

light fell in white columns, clean and almost solid. Dust moved within those shafts, slow and constant, turning in the brightness like something alive.

The walls carried more than function. Tilework climbed along them in careful patterns—blue and green set into geometry that did not repeat as simply as it first appeared. Lines crossed, returned, extended, forming shapes that seemed to continue beyond what was visible. Even where the walls were plain, the stone held the mark of hands that had shaped it with intention. The ground below was worn smooth by passage, uneven in places where time had pressed itself into the stone.

The bazaar did not offer itself at once. It revealed in parts. A row of metalworkers shaping copper into bowls that caught the light in flashes. Next to them, cloth merchants with fabrics folded in deep colors—indigo, red, gold—stacked higher than a man's chest. Further along, the scent of spices thickened the air: cumin, coriander, dried herbs crushed between fingers to release their strength before being weighed and sold.

The apothecaries were not hidden. They stood among the others, their shops open to the passage, their goods arranged in small, careful order. Shelves held jars of dried leaves, roots twisted into shapes that seemed almost alive, powders ground fine and stored in cloth or ceramic. Some I recognized. Others I did not.

I stopped before one where the arrangement suggested a mind like my own.

The man inside was older, his beard thin. He watched me with a quiet curiosity, as one looks upon a man who has come from the far edge of the world. When I placed my satchel before him and opened it, he leaned forward slightly.

"You have traveled far," he said.

"Yes."

He reached into the satchel without asking and lifted one of my tools, turning it in his hand.

"What do you need?"

I named what I could.

Dried leaves for fever. Resin for wounds. Oils to ease pain. Clean cloth. Thread finer than what I had left. He moved through his shelves without hesitation, selecting, weighing, measuring. At times he would pause, holding something between his fingers as if considering whether it belonged with me or not.

"You go east,?" he said at one point.

"Yes."

"Then you will need more than what you know."

He added a small bundle I had not asked for. I did not question it.

When the exchange was done, I placed the coins in his hand.

“The road does not remember what you leave behind,” he said. “Only what you carry forward.”

I closed my satchel.

When I stepped back into the passage, the movement of the bazaar seemed to take me with it. For a moment, I felt the same pull I had felt on the Nile—not toward a place, but along a current I had chosen to enter.

I did not remain long after that. Finding another caravan did not take effort.

They gathered at the edges of the city, where the ordered life of Damascus began to loosen again into movement. This one was smaller than the last. Fewer animals. Fewer men. But the structure remained.

By the next morning, I stood again among the animals and men. Somewhere beyond the horizon lay Baghdad.

I walked toward it.

PART 3.

Chapter 12. The Desert Raid

Night settled slowly over the caravan.

The fires had burned low, their light no longer reaching beyond the nearest circle of men. Shapes faded quickly in the dark beyond them. Camels lay folded upon the ground, groaning softly now and then, their long silhouettes unmoving against the night. Somewhere nearby, a kettle hissed faintly above dying coals. Most had already wrapped themselves in cloth and blankets against the cold that arrived after sunset in the open land.

The desert at night carried a strange stillness vast enough to swallow smaller sounds within it.

I sat near one of the wagons. Sleep had not yet come. Across the fire, one of the guards sharpened his blade with slow strokes of stone against metal, the sound thin and steady.

Then the animals stirred.

A camel groaned and lifted its head sharply toward the dark. Then another shifted. Leather straps creaked. Somewhere behind us, a mule pulled against its tether.

The guard stopped sharpening.

More sounds followed.

Movement spread through the animals in sudden waves—uneasy stamping, snorting, ropes tightening. One of the camels gave a harsh cry and lurched upright. Men rose from sleep in confusion, turning toward the dark beyond the fires.

Then the ground began to tremble.

Hooves.

Many of them.

The sound circled us before the riders revealed themselves, as though the night itself had begun to move. Then they emerged from the darkness all at once—mounted figures wrapped in cloth, faces hidden, horses cutting through the edge of the firelight with terrifying speed.

Chaos erupted before thought could follow.

Guards drew swords and shouted commands that vanished beneath the thunder of hooves. One rider swept past so quickly I barely saw the curved blade before it struck a man from his feet. Another leaned low from his saddle, snatching a spear from one of the caravan guards before driving him into the dust beneath trampling horses.

The riders did not fight like desperate men.

They moved with precision.

Fast. Certain. Ruthless.

A guard beside me charged forward with his sword raised and disappeared beneath three riders before his second step. Another fled into the dark and was allowed to go. Around me came cries, steel against steel, animals screaming in terror as ropes snapped loose.

And then, almost as suddenly as it had begun, it ended.

The guards either lay dead or had vanished into the desert.

The riders circled once more before dismounting.

Up close, they appeared less like demons of the night and more like men hardened into something beyond ordinary mercy. Cloth covered the lower halves of their faces. Their clothing was practical, worn smooth by long use. Curved blades hung at their sides beside bows and daggers. Some moved immediately among the travelers, pulling men upright, searching clothing, cutting open bags.

They knew where to look.

The poor were ignored almost instantly. So were the elderly, the children and the women. The wealthy tried, as always, to disappear among ordinary men. But wealth left marks no robe could fully hide. Soft hands. Heavy faces. Bellies shaped by abundance rather than labor.

A rider stopped before me.

“What is in the bag?”

“My tools.”

He yanked the satchel from my shoulder before I could say more. He reached inside roughly, pulling out wrapped cloth, metal instruments, jars.

“What are these?” he demanded.

“I am a physician.”

He stared at me for a moment, then gathered the satchel and walked away without another word.

I thought he had simply taken it.

But moments later he returned beside another man.

The others parted slightly for him without being told. He wore no richer clothing than the rest, yet authority followed him naturally, settling around him like shadow. His face remained partly veiled, though streaks of gray showed in his beard.

“This man says you are a physician,” he said.

I nodded.

The leader studied me briefly, then turned his head.

“Bring him.”

A rider emerged from the darkness leading another horse beside his own. Across the second saddle hung the motionless body of a man, bound there to keep him from falling.

Even before they lowered him to the ground before me, I sensed death near him.

Two men carried him down carefully and laid him at my feet.

His right foot had been wrapped in filthy cloth darkened by old blood and rot.

The smell reached me before my hands touched it.

Rotten flesh.

Fever burned through him so fiercely I could feel its heat in the cold desert air. He moaned weakly as I unwrapped the cloth. The flesh beneath had blackened. Swollen veins climbed his leg like dark roots beneath the skin.

The infection had already begun claiming the rest of him.

"He will die soon," I said quietly. "Unless the foot is severed."

Several men cursed aloud.

The leader did not move.

"Then help him."

I looked up at him.

"I will help him but I have conditions."

The air changed immediately around us.

One of the men beside the leader stepped forward furiously, his hand already upon his blade.

"You bargain now?"

"The caravan has no guards left," I said. "You will spare these people, return what you have taken, and escort them safely to their destination."

The man drew halfway toward me.

"I will cut your fingers from your hands and make you save him anyway."

I held his gaze.

"How will I help him with no fingers?"

For a moment I thought he would strike me where I sat.

Then the leader raised one hand slightly.

The other man stopped.

The leader looked down at his wounded companion for a long moment before speaking.

"If he dies," he said calmly, "I will kill you and take everything from this caravan."

I nodded once.

"I understand."

The angry man turned toward him sharply.

"This is madness. One life is not worth the loss."

The leader's eyes never left me.

"I will repay every man from my own stores."

Silence followed that.

No one argued further.

They brought water. Fire. Cloth. Strong liquor.

The wounded man was laid upon a carpet pulled from one of the camels, his breathing shallow and uneven. Fever had hollowed him already. Sweat covered his face despite the cold of the desert night, and now and then a weak sound escaped him.

I opened my satchel.

Knife.

Needle.

Thread.

Cloth.

The small saw.

And the bundle the apothecary in Damascus had pressed into my hand.

For a moment, I saw the old man again beneath the arches of the bazaar, light falling around him in pale columns.

Then you will need more than what you know.

I untied the bundle.

Inside lay dried herbs wrapped carefully in thin cloth and a dark resin sealed in wax. I crushed part of the herbs into steaming water and forced the bitter mixture between the wounded man's lips while two riders held him still.

I cleaned the leg as best I could. The water darkened almost immediately. The flesh below the ankle had already begun to die. Blackened skin stretched tight above swelling. When I pressed near the wound, foul liquid seeped from beneath the torn flesh.

"Bring me a belt," I said.

A belt was brought and tied above the knee. I tightened it with a wooden rod until the flow of blood slowed.

I poured liquor over my knife.

Then held the blade over the fire.

"Hold him."

Four men moved at once.

The wounded man woke fully at the first cut.

His scream tore through the camp. Horses jerked against their reins. The riders holding him nearly lost their grip as

his body convulsed beneath them.

I worked quickly.

Skin first.

Then flesh.

Blood covered my hands despite the binding above the knee. The wounded man fought like an animal caught in iron.

One of the men pinning his shoulders began whispering prayers beneath his breath.

I reached the bone.

Then I took up the saw.

The sound it made was small and terrible, dull beneath the crackle of fire and the wounded man's weakening cries.

When the foot came free, someone carried it away into the dark beyond the fire.

The man had gone pale beneath the fever. His breathing fluttered.

Too much blood.

I pressed cloth hard against the wound while another rider heated an iron in the coals until its tip glowed orange.

"Now," I said, extending my hand without taking my eyes from the man's leg.

The smell of burned flesh rose sharply into the cold air as I sealed the vessels one by one. Smoke curled upward between us. The wounded man screamed again, weaker now, his voice breaking apart beneath exhaustion.

Men who had slaughtered guards without hesitation turned their faces away.

When it was done, I packed the wound with the crushed herbs from Damascus and bound it tightly in clean cloth. My hands trembled only after the final knot had been tied.

Then there was nothing left but waiting.

The fire burned lower.

One by one, the riders fell silent.

The leader remained awake beside his companion through the night, saying nothing, his eyes fixed upon the rise and fall of the wounded man's chest.

More than once I believed the breath had stopped.

But each time it returned.

Weak.

Shallow.

Still there.

And when dawn finally touched the horizon, the man was still breathing.

The next day, the fever started to break.

And true to his word, the leader returned what had been taken. The dead were buried. The wounded tended. Then the riders formed themselves around the caravan as its new escort, shadows moving at its edges as we continued eastward.

No one spoke openly of the strange peace that followed.

Near Baghdad, where the land had begun to show the signs of a great city drawing near, the riders finally stopped.

"This is as far as we go," the leader said.

Before us, though still distant, I could already sense Baghdad gathering upon the horizon.

"There is no danger now."

He held out a small pouch of coins toward me.

"For my friend."

I looked at it, then shook my head.

"I have enough to reach where I need to go."

He frowned slightly.

"And besides," I said, "this wealth was never yours to give away."

For a moment, neither of us spoke.

Something shifted in his face then. It was slight, almost hidden beneath the cloth and the hard years written into his features, but I saw it—a crack in the certainty he had carried like armor.

He studied me for a long moment before speaking.

“How did you trust me?” he asked. “How did you know I would keep my word and not kill you and rob the rest once my friend was healed?”

I looked at the riders gathered behind him, then back at the man himself.

“Because I saw decency in you.”

His eyes narrowed slightly, though not in anger.

“You spared the women, the children, and the poor,” I said. “And you were willing to lose your wealth to save your friend. A man without decency would not do either.”

Silence settled between us once more.

The leader held my gaze for another breath, as though weighing something I could not see. Then suddenly he turned his horse sharply and rode away without another word, dust rising behind him. His men hesitated a moment before following after him into the open land.

Years later, I learned that he had been the most feared thief of the Syrian Desert. Yet after that night, no caravan ever spoke of seeing him ride against the roads again.

PART 3.

Chapter 13. The Gates of al-‘Adudi

I entered Baghdad near noon, when the sun had burned the softness from the morning and left the city hard-edged and bright.

For months, the name had lived ahead of me like a promise. Baghdad. Men in the caravan spoke of it by the fire with the pride of those who had been born inside its noise. They told me where the westerners lodged, which markets cheated strangers, which bridge of boats to cross when the river ran low, and where to find the great hospital or as they named it bimaristan of al-‘Adudi. One old merchant from Karkh, whose cough I had eased during the last week of travel, had even given me the name of a physician there, a man called Ibn Salim, stern but fair, with no patience for vanity and a fondness for students who knew how to hold their tongues.

“Do not ask for work,” the merchant had told me. “Ask to watch.”

I remembered that when the city swallowed me.

The road widened, then broke into streets alive with a thousand crossings. Donkeys pushed through crowds with baskets hanging from their sides. Porters bent beneath bundles of cloth. A water seller struck his brass cups together. Boys ran barefoot between mule legs and curses. The air carried river mud, frying oil, sweat, ink, spices, dung, rosewater, and hot bread. Arabic came at me in many shapes—Baghdadi, Persian-thick, Turkic-sharpened, Syrian-soft, Maghribi echoes that made me turn my head for a face from the west. Men in white turbans argued beside men in black. Jews, Christians, Muslims, Persians, Arabs, Turks, Armenians, and men whose homelands I could not guess moved through one another as if the world had emptied its roads into this single place.

Baghdad gathered around me at once, filling the eye, crowding the ear, settling heavily in the chest. Every street seemed to lead to another more crowded than the last. Every gate opened into another market, every market into another courtyard. The city pressed itself into the mind and made room there.

I followed the directions I had been given, crossing through Karkh. Several times I stopped to ask for the way, and each man pointed without surprise, as though strangers came looking for that road every day.

At last the street opened toward the Tigris.

The river moved broad and brown beneath the light, crowded with boats, barges, floating reeds, and the shining backs of oars. Along its bank rose the building I had come

to find.

For a moment, I did not think it was a hospital.

It stood with the gravity of a palace, its walls high and pale above the river road, its great entrance set within a deep arch of carved stone. The doors rose high enough for horse and rider to pass beneath them together. Above them, bands of inscription ran like dark embroidery across the facade. Sunlight caught on blue-green tiles set around the arch, worn in places, repaired in others, so the building seemed both old and still attended to, like a nobleman with scars beneath clean robes.

Men came and went beneath the arch in ordered movement: porters carrying folded linen, servants with covered jars, students with writing boards held to their chests, physicians in clean robes, relatives supporting the weak. Near the entrance, a clerk sat beneath shade with a board across his knees, speaking to those who waited. No one hurried without purpose. No one lingered without being noticed.

The building carried the stillness of authority. Its windows were narrow and high, and beyond the outer wall I glimpsed palms rising above shaded courtyards. Somewhere within, water moved through hidden channels carved from stone, its quiet sound threading beneath the distant murmur of voices.

I stood outside the gates for a long time.

Dust covered my boots from the road. My cloak still smelled faintly of smoke from caravan fires. In my satchel were my father's instruments, his notes, a few copied pages, and the small certainty I had carried all the way from Zaragoza.

Before those gates, it all felt very small.

No one paid attention to me until a physician descending the outer steps slowed and glanced in my direction.

He was perhaps twenty years older than me, broad-shouldered, with thoughtful eyes and a trimmed gray beard beginning to overtake the black.

"You have stood here a long while," he said.

"I was told to ask for Ibn Salim."

His eyes moved over my face, then to the satchel at my side.

"As patient, student, or laborer?"

"As one who hopes to be allowed to watch."

He studied me more closely.

"Your accent, it's not from around here. Where is your home?"

"Zaragoza."

"A long road," he said. "What brings a man so far?"

"I came to learn from the best."

"Then you have come to the right gate." He looked toward the hospital. "What schooling have you had?"

"My father taught me. We kept a healing house in Zaragoza. I studied his notes, and whatever pages I could find from Al-Razi and other physicians. Nothing formal."

"That will not make your path easy," he said. "Many spend years seeking a place here."

"I understand."

"You may still speak with Ibn Salim." He stepped toward the gate and looked back at me. "Tell him the truth. Do not dress ignorance as learning."

Then he motioned for me to follow.

"My name is Farid," he said.

He led me through the entrance and across a shaded courtyard where the noise of Baghdad faded behind stone walls. Water flowed through narrow channels cut into the floor, weaving between palms and low shrubs. Students passed beneath the arcades carrying writing boards and loose pages stained with ink. Somewhere deeper inside the hospital, a patient cried out once, then fell silent.

Farid walked at an unhurried pace, allowing me time to look.

We climbed a staircase worn smooth at its center by generations of footsteps. At the top of the corridor, Farid paused beside a heavy curtain.

"Wait here," he said.

Then he disappeared inside.

A few moments later, he returned and pushed the curtain aside.

"Come," he said. "Ibn Salim will hear you."

The room beyond was larger than my father's entire house in Zaragoza.

Shelves climbed the walls from floor to ceiling, crowded with books, rolled manuscripts, jars of powders and dried herbs, glass vessels, bundles of reeds, folded papers, and instruments wrapped carefully in cloth. Light entered through high latticed windows and fell in pale strips across the room.

At the far end sat Ibn Salim.

He rested upon a deep Persian rug woven in dark reds and blues, his back supported by a long embroidered cushion against the wall. Before him stood a low study table scattered with papers, inkstones, and sharpened reed pens. He was writing when we entered, bent slightly forward, his hand moving steadily across the page without hesitation. His beard was streaked with gray, neatly kept, and his robe plain despite the richness around him.

Farid bowed his head slightly.

"This man has traveled from beyond the sea," he said.

Ibn Salim finished the line before lifting his eyes.

For a moment he simply studied me.

The road still clung to my clothes. Dust marked the hem of my cloak. My satchel hung tired at my side after months of travel. Against the order of the room, I felt like something carried in accidentally from outside.

"At least the sea had the decency not to keep you," he said at last.

Ibn Salim set down the pen.

"What is your name?"

"Adam ibn Butrus."

"And from where beyond the sea does Adam ibn Butrus come?"

"Zaragoza."

His eyes narrowed slightly with recognition.

"Al-Andalus." He gestured toward the rug before him. "Sit."

I lowered myself onto the carpet.

"What have you done there?"

"I studied and worked beside my father. He was a physician."

"Under whom did he train?"

"I do not know fully. He learned from another physician in Toledo and from books that passed through Zaragoza."

"That is not training," Ibn Salim said calmly. "That is inheritance."

The words stung.

"What school do you follow?"

I hesitated.

He noticed immediately.

"Galenic? The teachings of al-Razi? Ibn Sina? Empiricists? Dogmatists? What principles guide your treatment?"

I searched for an answer that would not sound foolish and found none.

"My father taught me what he had learned through years of practice," I said at last. "And I studied whatever scattered notes of scholars I could get my hands on — fragments of Al-Razi, copied pages on fevers and wounds, old remedies passed between physicians, anything that found its way to Zaragoza."

Ibn Salim leaned back slightly against the cushion.

Silence settled between us.

He then picked up another page from the table and glanced over it while speaking, as though my fate required little of his attention.

“You are not properly trained for this institution, Adam ibn Butrus. Men study for years before they are permitted responsibility here. If I accept every traveler who arrives with a satchel and a dead teacher, this place would collapse beneath good intentions.”

My chest tightened.

Months of road, sea, hunger, dust, and grief had brought me to this room. I saw again the gates of Zaragoza disappearing behind me, Miriam beneath the fig tree, Isabel’s small hands stained with charcoal from her drawings. For a moment I feared I had crossed the world only to discover that I had never truly belonged in medicine at all.

“I ask for nothing great,” I said carefully. “Only let me remain here. Give me the smallest work. Let me carry water, clean instruments, change linens—I do not care. Only allow me to observe.”

Ibn Salim watched me quietly.

“You would travel from the far west to become a servant?”

“I would travel farther than this.”

Something in his expression shifted then. He placed the paper aside.

“The lowest work is often the most useful,” he said. “You will help clean the treatment rooms. You will carry supplies where instructed. You will copy notes if your handwriting is

legible. You will prepare water, wash instruments, and assist the attendants when needed."

My relief came so suddenly I nearly lowered my head to the floor.

"You may observe when observation does not interfere with work," he continued. "You will speak little. You will not offer treatments. And if I discover that you pretend knowledge you do not possess, I will send you back across your sea."

"I understand.", I said

Ibn Salim studied me for another moment, then looked past me toward the man still standing quietly beside the doorway.

"You will be provided with food and have a place to sleep," he said. "Farid will show you."

Farid bowed his head lightly.

The thought of remaining within the walls of the hospital itself felt almost unreal.

"Thank you," I said.

"Do not thank me yet," he murmured. "Most men who come here dreaming of medicine discover they merely admired its shadow."

PART 3.

Chapter 14. A Place Among Them.

The days settled quickly into rhythm.

Before dawn, attendants moved through the halls lighting lamps and carrying fresh water drawn from the river. By sunrise, the outer courtyard had already begun to fill. The poor arrived first, wrapped in blankets against the morning chill, followed by merchants, laborers, soldiers, travelers, and mothers carrying fevered children against their chests. Some came walking. Others were carried through the gate on litters or across the backs of relatives. No one was turned away.

The hospital functioned less like a house of healing and more like a small city devoted to illness. Clerks recorded names and complaints near the entrance while attendants guided patients to different halls. Those with fevers were separated from the wounded. Diseases of the eyes were treated in their own rooms by physicians who worked with delicate silver instruments and tiny jars of salves. Men whose minds had broken beneath grief, age, or terror were kept in quieter chambers deeper within the complex, where

water and music softened the silence.

I spent my first weeks carrying water, washing blood from bronze bowls, cleaning instruments, changing linens, grinding herbs, and transporting supplies between the pharmacy and treatment rooms.

Farid made those first weeks bearable. He showed me which corridors led to the fever wards, where instruments were kept, how records were marked, and which physicians tolerated questions. When I made mistakes, he corrected me quietly without turning them into spectacle. When others dismissed me as a foreigner with village knowledge, he found small reasons to place me near the work I had come to learn.

The first thing I learned was the smell of the place: the sharp sting of alcohol and distilled spirits that masked the stench of sickness and death. In Zaragoza, vinegar had filled my father's workroom. Here the scent was stronger, colder, almost metallic beneath the smoke of lamps and crushed herbs.

The pharmacy itself astonished me. Shelves climbed the walls heavy with syrups, oils, powders, dried plants, resins, minerals, and compounds whose names I had never heard spoken in Zaragoza. Pharmacists measured ingredients with the precision of jewelers and guarded their formulas with the suspicion of kings.

Everywhere there were students.

They followed senior physicians through the wards carrying writing boards and loose pages, listening as diagnoses were argued beside the sick themselves. Medicine here was spoken aloud. Physicians debated pulse, urine, fever, temperament, and treatment openly at the bedside while students crowded close enough to smell infection and cautery smoke. Some copied every word with frantic devotion. Others pretended confidence they had not yet earned.

At midday, food was brought to the patients from the kitchens — bread, broth, lentils, boiled meat when available. The poor received medicine without payment. Linen was washed and reused. Floors were scrubbed daily. Water ran constantly through narrow channels cut into the courtyards, cooling the air and carrying away filth.

Often, after my work was done, I remained standing quietly at the back of the treatment rooms simply to watch.

Suffering arrived in waves. A man with a crushed hand from the docks. A child burning with fever. A scholar coughing blood into cloth. A woman unable to rise after childbirth. A soldier with an arrow wound already sour with infection. Before one patient was stabilized, another entered through the gate.

After the third week, the work had already begun to settle into my body. My hands smelled constantly of alcohol, herbs, and lamp smoke no matter how often I washed them. I had learned which attendants quarreled, which physicians demanded silence while they worked, and which students

copied notes they did not understand simply to appear diligent before others.

One afternoon, I was carrying fresh linens through one of the inner corridors when the halls around me grew strangely quiet.

I looked up.

Ibn Salim was approaching from the far end beside an older man I had never seen before.

The difference in their manner was immediate.

Ibn Salim, who spoke to nearly everyone with dry impatience and the calm authority of a man long accustomed to obedience, walked half a step behind him. His shoulders were lower, his voice quieter. Physicians, attendants, students, even the pharmacists near the open storeroom lowered their voices as the two men passed.

The older man came down the corridor with measured steps. His beard was white and carefully combed, his robe dark beneath a lighter outer cloak embroidered only at the sleeves. Age had thinned his face and sharpened his eyes. He carried no books, no instruments, no signs of office, yet the entire corridor seemed arranged around his presence.

I understood at once who he must be.

They stopped near me.

I lowered my gaze respectfully and stepped aside with the linens in my arms.

"This is the Andalusian?" the old man asked.

"Yes," Ibn Salim replied. "Adam ibn Butrus."

The man studied me for a moment.

"My name is Abu al-Faraj ibn al-Tilmidh," he said.

The name struck me immediately. I had heard it spoken only days earlier among students in the library halls, always with the careful tone reserved for men whose knowledge had become reputation.

"The chief physician of the hospital," Ibn Salim added.

I bowed my head quickly.

Ibn al-Tilmidh's eyes rested on the linens in my arms, then on the stains of alcohol and herbs that never fully left the sleeves of those who worked in the wards.

"I have heard a story," he said. "A caravan from the west arrived several weeks ago carrying tales of a physician who cut open a raider beneath the desert night to save a caravan from slaughter."

My chest tightened slightly.

Ibn Salim glanced toward me for the first time since entering the corridor.

"The wounded man was dying," Ibn al-Tilmidh continued.

"The raiders demanded treatment. No one in the caravan dared even look the raiders in the eye, yet this young man opened the wound and removed the corruption from within

while armed men stood around him waiting to see whether he would fail."

His gaze sharpened.

"Are you that physician?"

"I am," I answered quietly.

"And the man survived?"

"For a time after I left, yes."

Ibn al-Tilmidh nodded once, thoughtfully.

"Most men speak of courage after danger has passed," he said. "Very few practice it while their hands are shaking."

I did not know how to answer.

He turned slightly toward Ibn Salim.

"You told me he was untrained."

"He is," Ibn Salim said plainly.

"Yet not untalented."

"That remains to be seen," said Ibn al-Tilmidh.

Something close to amusement passed briefly across the old physician's face.

Then he looked back at me.

"You may stop carrying linens, Adam ibn Butrus."

For a moment I thought I had misunderstood him.

“You will be entered among the trainees of al-‘Adudi. You will have access to the library halls, lectures, bedside instruction, and disputations. You may observe physicians directly during treatment and attend the evening readings.”

The corridor around me seemed suddenly distant.

Ibn Salim folded his hands into his sleeves but said nothing.

“You will still work,” Ibn al-Tilmidh continued. “You will still clean when required. Knowledge does not make a man too noble for labor. But from this day, you will study as well.”

I lowered my head so quickly the linens nearly slipped from my arms.

“Thank you,” I said.

He regarded me carefully.

“This chance is given to very few who seek it,” he said. “Use it well.”

Then the two men continued down the corridor together, their robes disappearing beneath the shadowed arches while I remained standing motionless, unable to believe the road had truly carried me there.

That evening, Farid found me still wandering the library halls in disbelief.

“You look like a man who has accidentally entered paradise,” he said.

"I believed I might prove myself worthy one day," I admitted. "I simply did not expect it to happen so soon."

Farid smiled.

"I heard the story about the caravan," he said. "I am certain when you treated those poor travelers and the wounded raider, you did not expect anything in return."

"That was the least on my mind.", I said

"There is an old Persian saying," he continued. "'Do a good deed and throw it into the river. God will return it to you in the desert.'"

I remember laughing then, though exhaustion nearly swallowed the sound.

From that day forward, he helped me more than he should have.

Farid was among the senior physicians of the hospital, a man who had spent decades within those walls. Everyone seemed to know him. Clerks greeted him with quiet respect. Students straightened when he passed. Even physicians older than him listened when he spoke. Though Ibn Salim led the hospital, it often felt as though Farid was the one keeping its endless machinery in motion day after day.

Because of that, his words carried weight.

And slowly, over the months that followed, he began opening doors for me.

He allowed me into libraries usually reserved for senior students. Then lecture halls where I was not officially permitted to sit. Later, treatment rooms and private discussions meant only for advanced physicians. More than once, I caught him pretending not to notice my presence in places where I had no right to be.

He taught me how the hospital truly functioned beneath its order and ceremony — which physicians deserved admiration, which only desired reputation, which arguments mattered, and which existed merely to protect pride. He corrected my mistakes quietly and shielded me from others loudly.

Without Farid, I would not have survived those first years in Baghdad as I did.

At the time, I believed he saw greatness in me before anyone else.

Years later, remembering the man I became, that memory hurt more than almost any other.

PART 4.

Chapter 15. The Second Man

Seven years had passed since I first entered the hospital as a stable boy carrying water buckets through its courtyards.

By then, few within Baghdad still remembered that boy.

In my first years, I studied with a hunger that shocked even those who taught me. I read everything the libraries of the hospital allowed me to touch. The writings of Al-Razi, the Canon of Ibn Sina, Greek treatises translated generations earlier beneath Abbasid patronage, Indian works on pulse and surgery, commentaries copied and recopied by forgotten hands across centuries. I moved from one school of thought to another with restless obsession, sleeping little, often remaining awake until dawn while oil lamps trembled beside stacks of manuscripts.

By my fourth year, I no longer sat among the students.

I stood before them.

My lectures became crowded beyond capacity. Students lined the walls and filled the corridors outside the teaching

halls just to hear discussions on fever patterns, infections, surgical techniques, and the hidden structures of the body. Some copied my words as if they were scripture. Others followed me through the courtyards carrying ink and parchment, desperate not to lose a single thought.

By the seventh year, I had written my first medical volume, a collection of observations on wounds, inflammation, and surgical recovery drawn from years inside the wards of Baghdad. I developed new compounds for pain and infection from herbs most physicians ignored. I altered surgical methods older men considered untouchable because I found them inefficient.

Success gave me confidence.

Praise gave me something more dangerous.

There were physicians in Baghdad older than my father would have been, men who had practiced medicine before I was born, yet some now asked for my opinion before giving their own. Wealthy merchants requested my presence by name. Caravan masters arriving from Persia or Syria carried letters seeking consultation from the physician of the Adudi hospital.

I told myself I cared only for knowledge.

But knowledge itself had slowly become a kind of intoxication.

I wanted to understand everything. Every illness. Every weakness hidden beneath flesh. Every mystery buried

inside the body by God. The unanswered questions began pulling at me harder than sleep, food, prayer, or companionship. Even death itself became less frightening to me than ignorance.

And so I crossed boundaries others feared to approach.

At night, I began performing examinations upon the nameless dead brought into the hospital from the streets of Baghdad. Men without families. Travelers without identity. Bodies no one claimed before burial. I opened them beneath lamplight with only a handful of trusted students beside me, studying muscles, vessels, organs, and the silent architecture hidden beneath skin.

Whispers spread through the city.

Some called it brilliance.

Others called it desecration.

The anger deepened after the publication of my anatomy manuscript. The illustrations alone were enough to scandalize many scholars and jurists — detailed drawings of opened bodies, carefully labeled in black ink, copied by artists working under my direction. Conservative physicians denounced the work publicly. A few accused me of arrogance before God Himself. The accusations only hardened me further.

Scientific achievement was not the only way I distinguished myself. I had risen through the ranks of the hospital faster than anyone within its walls could remember.

My knowledge of the different schools of medicine, pharmacology, surgery, and diagnosis had earned the admiration of physicians who once dismissed me as a foreign laborer from the far west. My methods were considered bold, sometimes reckless, yet the results spoke loudly enough that even many who disliked me could not entirely ignore them.

With each passing year, more authority found its way into my hands.

I began overseeing the instruction of younger trainees, recommending which students should advance and which should be dismissed. My opinion carried weight in the assignment of duties within the wards, the selection of lecture topics, the organization of studies, and the supervision of treatments. Physicians sought my judgment during disputes. Students competed fiercely for positions under my instruction. More and more, the daily rhythm of the hospital bent itself around decisions in which my voice carried influence.

And the higher I climbed, the more natural it began to feel.

There had once been a time when simply being allowed to observe from the corner of a treatment room felt like mercy beyond measure.

Now I walked through the hospital with attendants stepping aside before I reached them.

At some point, ambition had stopped feeling like a guest within me.

It had become part of my blood.

Without noticing when it had happened, I had begun measuring my place within the hospital against the men above me.

There were not many left.

At the height of the hospital stood al-Tilmidh, though by then illness had already pulled him away from the wards and into the private rooms where only a few senior physicians were permitted to visit. Beneath him was Ibn Salim, who had quietly taken on more of the old man's duties with each passing month. And beneath Ibn Salim stood Farid.

Farid, who had found me at the gates.

Farid, who had guided me through those first bewildering months.

Farid, whose hand had opened doors I could never have opened alone.

Among the physicians, everyone assumed the line of succession was already settled. When al-Tilmidh died, Ibn Salim would become chief physician. When Ibn Salim rose, Farid would stand beside him as his second. It seemed natural. It seemed deserved.

And yet, once I saw the shape of that ladder, I could no longer stop seeing my own place upon it.

At first, it troubled me that Farid would stand beside Ibn Salim as second in command.

He was older, yes. More experienced. More beloved within the hospital. He had carried its burdens for decades, knew its every corridor, every clerk, every physician's weakness and pride. By all ordinary measures, the place was his to inherit.

And yet, somewhere inside me, I had begun to believe myself more capable.

More daring.

More deserving.

I told myself this was not arrogance, only truth. Farid was careful where I was bold. He preserved old methods where I broke them open. He understood the hospital as it was, but I believed I understood what it could become.

Still, the decision was not mine to make.

So I taught myself to accept it.

Until an opportunity presented itself.

It came in the fever ward.

An illness that appeared ordinary at first. Summer had begun pressing its heat against the city, and fevers always rose with it. Patients arrived flushed and trembling, their skin hot, their tongues dry, their breath sour with thirst. Farid ordered the usual separation of the fevered from the

wounded and had the attendants prepare cooling cloths, watered syrups, and the compounds he trusted from long experience.

Then I saw the boy.

He was perhaps twelve, lying near the end of the ward with his mother seated beside him, her fingers closed around his wrist. His fever was high, but that was not what held my eye. Beneath his jaw, the flesh had swollen into a hard knot. A dark stain had begun to gather beneath the skin near his ribs, faint but spreading.

I pulled back the linen from another patient nearby.

The same swelling.

The same shadow beneath the skin.

A cold certainty moved through me.

This was not ordinary fever.

The ward should have been emptied. The boy and every patient near him should have been moved to isolation. The bedding should have been burned, the attendants changed, the water jars removed, the doors sealed to all but those necessary for care.

Farid stood only a few paces away, speaking with an attendant over a list of new admissions.

I went to him at once.

“These patients must be isolated,” I said.

Farid looked up from the list.

“What patients?”

“The ones in the fever ward. This is not heat sickness. It is infection, and it is spreading.”

His eyes moved past me toward the hall, then returned to the page in his hand.

“Summer fever spreads every year,” he said. “We have already separated them from the wounded.”

“Not enough,” I said. “Their bedding must be removed. The water jars changed. Those who have touched them must not return to the other wards.”

Farid’s expression tightened slightly.

“You have seen swollen throats,” Farid said. “And already you speak as though God Himself whispered the diagnosis into your ear.”

“I have seen enough.”

“No,” he said. “You have seen enough to frighten yourself.”

The words struck me hard.

“I know what I saw,” I said, my voice rising. “If we leave them there, the whole ward may fall ill.”

Farid lowered the list.

Around us, the attendant had gone still.

"You are brilliant, Adam," Farid said quietly. "But brilliance is not the same as command."

"I am not asking for praise. I am telling you they must be moved."

"And I am telling you we do not have empty rooms waiting for every suspicion that enters your mind. New wards must be prepared. Bedding must be burned or boiled. Attendants reassigned. Patients already weak must be carried through the halls. Half the hospital will be disturbed because you found a pattern and decided it was certainty."

"It is certainty."

His eyes hardened then.

"There it is," he said. "That tone."

I said nothing.

"The tone of a man who believes every thought in his head is revelation."

Anger rose in me, hot and immediate.

"If I am right—"

"If you are right, we will act when there is more proof."

"By then many may be dead."

"People may die if we move them carelessly as well." Farid stepped closer, his voice still controlled, though I could hear the strain beneath it. "This hospital is not one body on

a table for you to open and examine. It is hundreds of lives moving at once. Every order pulls on another. Every action spends men, rooms, medicine, strength. You see the illness. I must see the whole place.”

“I see what you refuse to see.”

For a moment, hurt crossed his face.

“I have authority over the ward,” he said. “The patients remain where they are.”

I stared at him.

Farid looked back to the attendant.

“Prepare cooling cloths. Send for more barley water. I will examine the boy again before evening.”

The attendant nodded and left.

I remained where I was, my hands clenched inside my sleeves.

Farid did not look at me again.

I turned from him and walked quickly through the corridor toward Ibn Salim’s office.

Each step grew sharper beneath me.

I would tell Ibn Salim everything. I would explain the swelling, the darkening skin, the shared water jars, the beds placed too close together, the danger to the attendants moving between wards. I would make him understand

before Farid's caution cost lives.

By the time I reached the heavy curtain outside Ibn Salim's room, my breath had quickened.

I lifted my hand.

Then stopped.

From inside came the faint scratch of Ibn Salim's reed pen across parchment.

I stood there with my fingers inches from the curtain.

If I did not enter, the sickness would spread.

Everyone would see it. Everyone would know Farid had dismissed the warning. The blame would gather around him naturally, without a word from me. No accusation would be needed. The illness itself would testify.

And then Farid would no longer be the certain choice.

For a moment, I knew it was wrong.

Some last honest part of me rose against the thought, questioning the ugliness of what I was allowing. But another thought followed quickly — calm, reasonable, and dressed in the language of duty.

Yes, people might suffer. But if I stood beside Ibn Salim, the hospital would be stronger in the years to come. I would change the wards. I would enforce isolation sooner. I would build systems around mistakes like this so they could never happen again.

One failure now could prevent a hundred later.

That was how I dressed ambition in the clothes of duty.

I told myself I was thinking of future patients.

I told myself the hospital needed me.

Then, slowly, I lowered my hand from the curtain.

I did not enter.

Behind me, somewhere down the corridor, a child cried out from the fever ward.

I stood listening until the sound faded.

Then I walked away.

PART 4.

Chapter 16. The Man Who Saw

A few months after Ibn Salim appointed me as his second at the hospital, on a warm night in the early summer, I first met Saam.

By then, I had developed the habit of walking through the city after nightfall. The heat of Baghdad softened once the sun disappeared, and the streets filled again with life beneath hanging lamps and moonlight. Merchants reopened stalls to catch the cooler air. Tea houses overflowed into the alleys. The scent of roasted lamb, smoke, cardamom, and the river drifted together through the night.

After long hours inside the hospital, I walked to loosen the stiffness from my legs and clear my mind.

In the beginning, I walked alone.

Then people began recognizing me.

A student would approach to ask a question about fevers or surgery and continue beside me for several streets. Another would join. Then a merchant. Then a scholar. Within

months, my nightly walks had become small moving gatherings through the city. Men followed me discussing medicine, philosophy, astronomy, law, or whatever subject happened to arise. Some came to challenge me. Most came to admire me.

At first, the attention irritated me.

Eventually, I began to enjoy it.

On the night I met Saam, perhaps fifty men walked with me through the market roads near the western quarters of the city. Someone had been asking me about the circulation of blood after one of my lectures.

Then a merchant riding several paces ahead of us suddenly slipped from his camel and struck the ground with a heavy thud. He was a large man, and the sound of his fall cut through our conversation at once.

The camel cried out and staggered away.

People rushed toward the fallen man.

By the time I reached him, a crowd had already begun forming around us. A man in the crowd yelled.

“Let him through.”

“He is the great physician of Baghdad.”

The expectation in his voice was unmistakable.

I knelt beside the merchant.

His face had already darkened slightly beneath the beard. I grasped his wrist and searched for a pulse. Nothing. I lowered my ear against his chest. Silence. I asked for a mirror. A shopkeeper quickly handed me one from his stall, and I held it before the man's mouth and nose. The surface remained clear.

I rose slowly.

"He is dead," I announced as I rose to my feet. "Years of excess weakened his heart. Too much meat, too little movement. Men like him spend their lives seated — eating, trading, riding from one city to another while their bodies slowly decay beneath their wealth."

I explained it with the cold satisfaction of a scholar proving a theory, barely noticing that a man lay dead at my feet.

Several around me nodded in admiration as I spoke, listening with the fascination of students hearing a lesson rather than witnesses standing over a dead man.

Then a voice behind me asked calmly,

"Are you certain?"

I turned.

The man standing there appeared a few years older than me. He wore simple dark robes dusty from travel, and unlike the others surrounding us, he showed no urgency, no admiration, no anxiety. His face was lean and strangely smooth for a man his apparent age, untouched by the

harshness the desert sun usually carved into men. Yet it was his eyes that held me for a moment — calm, steady eyes carrying the unsettling stillness of someone who seemed older than the night around him.

Before I could answer, someone in the crowd snapped at him.

“Mind your tongue. He is the finest physician in Baghdad.”

“He knows the dead from the living.”

The stranger paid them no attention.

I answered evenly.

“I checked his pulse.”

“The fat around his wrist may hide it,” the man replied.

“He is not breathing.”

“Perhaps food obstructs his airway.”

“His heart is silent,” I said, unable to keep the annoyance from my voice.

“Perhaps,” the stranger said, “his heart lies on the other side.”

Laughter rose from parts of the crowd at the absurdity of it.

Then it died in their mouths.

Because I had already knelt again.

Slowly, I placed my ear against the right side of the merchant's chest.

And heard it.

Weak.

Faint.

But there.

For a moment, the entire world seemed to narrow into the sound of that heartbeat.

I jerked the man's mouth open and saw deep inside the throat the edge of something lodged there.

I drove my elbow hard into the soft weight of his upper belly.

Nothing.

Again.

A wet burst of air exploded from his throat, and a thick piece of meat flew onto the stones beside us. The merchant then suddenly dragged in a ragged breath.

The crowd gasped as one body.

Some shouted praises to God. Others shouted my name. Men surged toward me in excitement, voices rising all around the street.

But I was no longer listening.

I stood and searched the crowd for the stranger.

For several moments I caught only fragments of faces beneath torchlight, bodies pressing together, mouths speaking over one another.

But the man was already gone.

For several nights after that, I could not sleep.

The merchant lived, the city praised me, and those who had witnessed the event repeated the story until it no longer resembled the truth. In their telling, I had pulled a dead man back from the grave by force of genius alone. They forgot the stranger entirely.

I did not.

His question followed me into the dark.

How had he known?

From several paces away, before touching the man, before kneeling beside him, before hearing the faint heart hidden on the wrong side of the chest — how had he seen what I had missed?

The thought maddened me.

I returned to the same street the next night, and the night after that, walking slowly past the place where the merchant had fallen. I studied doorways, stalls, faces in lamplight, beggars sleeping against walls. Nothing. No smooth-faced stranger. No calm eyes. No man who looked

as if he had stepped into the world already knowing how it would end.

At last, I sent two of my students who had been present that night to ask after him.

A week passed before one returned with anything useful.

No one knew his name. No one knew where he had come from. He had appeared in Baghdad only a few months earlier, or so people said. Some thought him a poor traveler. Others called him a madman. He owned no house, taught in no school, belonged to no known circle of physicians, jurists, or philosophers.

But he had been seen more than once in a narrow lane near the river, entering a hidden wine house behind the shop of a Christian merchant.

That detail angered me more than all the rest.

The man who had seen what I could not see was no physician, no scholar, no master of any known discipline.

He was a wanderer who slept God knew where and spent his nights among drunkards.

The following night, I went searching for him.

I wrapped myself in plain traveling clothes and covered part of my face with a dark cloth so I would not be recognized in the streets.

The wine house stood hidden in a narrow alley near the river behind the shop of a Christian cloth merchant. From the outside, it appeared abandoned except for a dim lantern hanging above a warped wooden door. But beneath the smell of the river and mud, I caught the scent of spilled wine drifting through the cracks.

Inside, the room was low and filled with smoke.

Merchants, sailors, laborers, and wandering men sat beneath dark beams stained by years of lamp soot. Quiet music drifted somewhere in the back of the room. Cups knocked softly against wood. A pair of old men argued over poetry while a woman with tired eyes poured wine from clay jars blackened with age.

And there he was.

Saam sat alone near the far wall. A clay jar of wine rested beside him, untouched except for a single filled cup before his hand. The lamplight softened the sharpness of his face, though there remained something strangely untouched about him.

I approached his table.

Before I spoke, he lifted his eyes toward me.

"I knew you would find me," he said quietly.

I sat across from him.

For a moment, neither of us spoke.

Then he asked,

“How many nights did you lose sleep over it?”

I answered more sharply than I intended.

“Where did you study medicine?”

A faint smile touched the corner of his mouth.

“Everywhere,” he said. “And nowhere.”

The answer irritated me instantly.

“You knew the merchant still lived. You knew his heart was on the right side. How?”

He studied me for a long moment before speaking.

“Why do you wish to know?”

“So I may improve myself,” I answered. “So I may better help people.”

Saam looked at me with the calm certainty of someone who had already seen through me.

“Is that truly why you seek knowledge?” he asked. “Or is it simply that the thought of another man knowing something you do not has left you unable to rest?”

I felt something tighten inside me.

He continued softly,

"If I told you the reason I knew would not help you heal a single patient better than before, would you still wish to hear it?"

I opened my mouth but the words didn't come out.

"Then ask yourself what this knowledge will do to you," he said. "Will it cleanse you like rain, or cling to you like seawater? Will it give your spirit wings, Adam, or build a prison around it and teach you to call the walls wisdom?"

I did not answer.

The sounds of the wine house faded strangely around us. I became aware only of his eyes resting on me with unbearable calm.

A strange stillness settled over me.

His words moved through me like cool water through a house abandoned for years, touching places inside me I had sealed beneath study, ambition, and endless pursuit. And with them came memories I had not allowed myself to approach in a very long time.

Miriam beneath the fig tree.

Isabel laughing as she ran through fallen leaves.

The smell of wet earth after rain in Zaragoza.

For years, those memories had lived somewhere deep beneath me like buried embers. Yet sitting there across from Saam, I felt them glow faintly again, carrying with

them an ache so gentle and familiar that I did not wish it to leave.

Saam rose slowly from his seat.

“You were not always this man,” he said.

Then he left.

The next morning, I locked myself inside my office at the hospital and did not emerge for the entire day.

Students gathered outside expecting lectures that never came. Patients waited for consultations I did not attend. Several physicians knocked on my door at different hours, yet I answered none of them.

For years, my days had moved with relentless order. Study. Teaching. Patients. Manuscripts. Debate. Observation. Every hour measured and consumed with purpose.

Now, for the first time in years, I sat still.

Sometimes at the desk. Sometimes by the window overlooking the courtyards below. I remember hearing the distant movement of the hospital continuing without me — footsteps, voices, the carrying of water buckets, the cries of patients somewhere far down the halls.

And through all of it, my thoughts returned only to Saam.

Not to the strange knowledge he possessed.

To the feeling he had awakened inside me.

When night came, I returned to the wine house.

Saam was not there.

I returned again the next evening.

And the evening after that.

Ten nights passed in this way.

By then, complaints had begun spreading openly through the hospital. Senior physicians whispered that I had become unstable, distracted, unreliable. Some saw opportunity in it. Others genuine concern. My absence from lectures and duties grew impossible to ignore.

Only Ibn Salim remained silent.

When others pressed him to intervene, he dismissed them with a patience that only deepened their frustration.

“He will return when he is ready,” was all he said.

On the tenth night, I found Saam once more sitting alone near the back wall of the wine house with the same untouched calm around him.

I stood before him in silence.

Something in me had already broken open by then. All the certainty, the pride, the endless hunger that had driven me through the halls of the hospital no longer felt solid inside me. I only stood there looking at him with the lost expression of a man who has wandered too far from himself and suddenly realized he no longer knows the road back.

Saam studied my face quietly.

After a long silence, he rose from his seat.

“Come,” he said.

He led me out of the wine house and through narrow streets lit only by scattered lamps and moonlight. We crossed deeper into older quarters of Baghdad where the noise of the city slowly faded behind us. At last, we entered a worn courtyard hidden behind high clay walls.

Music drifted through the air before I understood what I was hearing.

A reed flute.

A drum beating slowly like a distant heart.

Men sat in circles beneath hanging lanterns while others moved barefoot across the courtyard in long flowing robes, turning slowly beneath the night sky. Their movements seemed almost dreamlike — spinning, swaying, heads tilted upward as though listening to something beyond the world itself.

Some recited poetry softly between breaths.

Others wept openly without shame.

I remember how strange they appeared to me then.

Not mad.

Not intoxicated.

Free.

A gray-haired man sat beside a fountain reciting verses while the dancers turned around him:

“What you seek is seeking you.”

The words settled somewhere deep inside me.

Saam watched the gathering quietly before speaking.

“These men have abandoned all that have tied them down,” he said. “Titles. Reputation. Hunger to be remembered. They move through the world lightly, and so the world cannot chain them.”

I watched the spinning figures beneath the lantern light.

“They have abandoned ambition?” I said.

“No,” Saam replied softly. “Only the ambitions that make men prisoners.”

The flute continued singing through the courtyard.

For nearly a month, that became my life.

Each night, after darkness settled over Baghdad, I followed Saam through narrow alleys and sleeping markets to a small Sufi khanqah hidden near the eastern quarters of the city. The building itself was modest — old stone walls, low arches blackened by years of oil smoke, a quiet inner courtyard with a shallow fountain murmuring beneath fig branches. Dervishes, travelers, poets, and wandering souls gathered there after midnight to speak softly of God, grief,

love, death, and the strange burdens carried by the human heart.

And during the days, I disappeared.

The hospital searched for me constantly. Students waited outside my chambers. Messengers carried requests from wealthy families and officials demanding my presence. Ibn Salim himself sent men looking for me through the teaching halls and libraries.

Sometimes I hid in forgotten storage rooms beneath the hospital. Sometimes among shelves of manuscripts no one visited anymore. Once, I spent nearly an entire afternoon seated silently inside the morgue among the dead while footsteps and voices searched the corridors above me.

Night after night, Saam and I spoke.

Saam rarely spoke of his own life, yet small fragments emerged over those weeks like pieces of something ancient buried beneath sand. One night he told me he came from Nishapur.

The name alone carried weight. Nishapur was legendary among scholars and mystics, a city of poets, astronomers, philosophers, and wandering dervishes.

There was no discipline I could bring before him that felt unfamiliar to him. Medicine, astronomy, mathematics, theology, philosophy, poetry, mysticism — Saam moved through them all with the same quiet ease. He did not display knowledge the way scholars did, arranging it before

others like jewels on a cloth. He carried it more like a man carrying weather inside him, allowing it to appear only when the moment called for it.

And still, he appeared no older than forty.

He knew more than any man I had ever met, yet he seemed less possessed by knowing than anyone I had known.

It was then I began to understand that Saam's true mystery was not the knowledge he carried, but the freedom with which he carried it.

PART 4.

Chapter 17. The Ashes of Baghdad

My long absence from the hospital had begun to poison the air I had left behind.

At first, they forgave me. Then they explained me. Ibn Salim told the students I was unwell. The chief told the senior physicians I had been given permission to continue private study. Those who loved me most defended me with the greatest effort, and for that reason they were the first to tire.

A hospital is not built on brilliance alone. It requires presence. Hands must be there when fever rises, when blood will not stop, when a young student hesitates over a wound and needs a steadier voice beside him. Lectures must be given. Notes must be reviewed. Patients must be seen again after the first treatment, and again after the second, and again when hope begins to leave their faces.

I had been made second in charge, and then I had vanished into shadows.

Even those who wished me no harm began to speak differently. They feared for the hospital. They feared for its reputation, its order, its fragile peace. A place of healing cannot afford a ghost in authority.

The students who had once followed me from ward to ward felt the wound most sharply. They had copied my words onto tablets and scraps of paper. They had waited outside my office with questions about pulse, fever, bone, breath. Some had come to Baghdad from distant towns because they had heard of the young physician from Zaragoza whom the chief favored.

Now they found my office empty.

They found my lectures canceled.

They found Ibn Salim standing in my place, kind and competent, yet unable to answer the one question that sat inside them all.

Where is he?

Their admiration soured into embarrassment, then resentment. No one likes to feel abandoned by the person they had chosen to revere. Love, when neglected, becomes a quiet form of anger.

The senior physicians saw this before I did.

The same men who had smiled at my appointment with thin lips and folded hands now moved carefully through the damage I had made for them. They did not need to invent

all the accusations. I had given them enough truth to sharpen.

I had neglected my duties.

I had kept irregular hours.

I had spent too much time among the dead.

From there, they only had to guide the fear.

They gathered my manuscripts first. A page copied by a student. A drawing taken from my office. A description of the opened chest. A sketch of the heart, the liver, the vessels running like dark rivers through the body. Notes I had written with reverence were carried out like proof of a crime.

They sent them where anger would grow fastest.

To mosques.

To churches.

To men who had never seen the inside of a body except through injury and decay. To preachers whose voices could turn unease into duty. To clerics who looked upon my careful drawings and saw desecration, arrogance, blasphemy, a blade raised against the mystery of God.

By the time I heard the first rumors, the story had already left my hands.

They said I cut the dead for pleasure.

They said I stole bodies before burial.

They said I taught young men to mock the soul by weighing the organs.

They said the foreign physician had brought a corruption from al-Andalus and hidden it beneath the language of knowledge.

Then one night, as I was leaving the hospital to meet Saam, I heard a commotion beyond the eastern corridor.

At first, it was only a low disturbance in the dark: hurried feet, a murmur of voices, the rough scrape of something dragged against stone. I stopped beneath an archway and listened.

The lamps in the corridor had been lowered for the night. Most of the patients slept. The fountains whispered in the courtyards. Somewhere, a man coughed behind a curtain.

Then I saw the light.

The restless, orange flicker of torches moving along the outer passage. The flames came before the men, trembling against the walls, stretching their shadows tall and broken across the plaster.

I stepped back into the darkness.

They passed close enough for me to hear their whispers. Cloth covered their faces, tied high across the bridge of the nose and pulled low beneath the chin. Only their gazes moved in the torchlight, narrowed and restless, while their

voices scraped against the silence of the corridor. Men of the city moving through the hospital as if entering an enemy house.

They were heading toward my office.

I waited until the last of them disappeared around the corner, then ran.

I crossed the narrow passage, slipped through the side arcade, and reached the courtyard just as their voices rose from inside the eastern wing.

“He is not here!”

Then another voice, louder, thick with triumph.

“Burn it.”

For one breath, the hospital held still.

Then fire answered.

It began as a sudden brightening behind my office window, a small red pulse in the dark. Then the shutters burst outward, and flame leaned into the night as if the room itself had opened its mouth to scream.

The papers went first.

I knew that even from where I stood. Dry pages. Inked drawings. Notes copied in long nights while the dead lay beneath linen and the living slept around me. Fire climbed them hungrily, taking years in moments.

Then the shelves caught.

Then the curtains.

Then the ceiling beams.

Smoke rolled into the courtyard and swallowed the open sky.

For a moment, I could not move. I saw my work burning, but I saw more than that. I saw the hands of the dead erased. The lessons they had given me turned to ash before they could heal anyone.

Then the heat struck my face, and I ran for the gate.

The main gate did not move.

I threw my shoulder against it. Wood groaned, iron held.

I tried the smaller door near the supply yard. Barred.

The rear passage by the kitchens. Barred.

The side entrance near the old lecture room. Barred from outside.

Only then did I understand the shape of the night.

They had not come to frighten me.

They had not come only to burn my office.

They had sealed the hospital like a tomb.

Behind me, the flames had spread beyond my rooms. Fire crawled along the roofline of the eastern wing, licking through dry wood, taking old screens, old benches, old linen. Windows glowed from within. Smoke pressed low across the courtyard. Patients began to cry out. Students shouted from the wards. Somewhere, a basin shattered.

I turned back.

The men emerged from the building, smoke billowing from the corridor door behind them. One of them turned toward the far end of the courtyard just as a torch near the column lit my face.

“There!” he shouted. “He is in the courtyard!”

The cry tore through the hospital.

I ran beneath the colonnade, past the lecture hall and the herb room, while smoke clawed at my throat and fire shook the walls with orange light.

They came after me from both directions.

Their footsteps struck the stones in a broken rhythm, closing from the burning corridor, from the kitchen passage, from the shadowed arcade. I turned once, then again, and each turn showed me another face, another torch, another lifted hand.

They drove me toward the middle of the courtyard.

Near the fountain, they circled me.

The ring tightened slowly. Some still kept cloth tied across their faces, but most had torn it down as they came out of the burning corridor, desperate for the open air. Their mouths were open. Their eyes watered. The torches in their hands threw restless light across their cheeks, making each face appear and vanish, appear and vanish.

For a moment, no one moved.

Then I recognized him.

A young student stood near the front of the circle, his hair damp with sweat, his lips parted as if he had been running for miles. He had always sat in the first row of my lectures. He had followed me through the wards with constant questions, first to walk beside me in the street, last to leave my door at night.

I remembered the sound of his knuckles against my unanswered door. The long pauses between each knock. The disappointment in his voice when he called my name, and beneath it, the bewilderment of someone who had trusted me and did not understand why I had vanished.

Now he held a torch in his hand and could not look away from me.

No one dared to finish what they had come to do.

The fire roared behind them. The fountain whispered beside me. Outside the barred gates, fists began to pound against the wood.

Then a man stepped out of the circle.

He came close enough for me to see the soot on his forehead, the tremor in his jaw, the madness in his eyes. He raised his hand, and in one breath the blade entered beneath my ribs.

It went in quietly.

Deeply.

The man leaned his weight into it, as if opening a stubborn door.

My breath left me.

The courtyard, the fire, the faces, the fountain—all of it drew back into a single point of pain.

When he pulled the knife free, warmth spilled down my side and over my hand.

The circle broke.

They had wanted fire. They had wanted punishment. They had wanted to shout holy words at a man they hated. But death, when it steps close enough to touch, has a way of silencing even the righteous.

I tried to call out.

Only blood came.

The first gate burst open with a sound like thunder. Men from the streets rushed in carrying buckets, blankets,

ropes, axes. Others poured in behind them. The hospital, which a moment before had been sealed against me, opened to all of Baghdad.

They ran past me.

Not cruelly. They simply did not see me.

Smoke hid the stones where I had fallen. Flame pulled every eye upward. Patients cried from the wards. Students called names. Servants dragged mattresses through the corridors. The living demanded the world's attention, and I lay among their feet, bleeding quietly into the dust.

I pressed one hand to my side.

It came away dark.

The sky above the courtyard had disappeared behind smoke. Sparks rose into it like souls leaving bodies. The heat moved over me in waves. Somewhere beyond the broken gate, more people were shouting. Somewhere within the hospital, Ibn Salim's voice called for water.

I wanted to answer him.

I wanted to tell him I was there.

But my breath had become shallow and small. The stones beneath my cheek were cool where the blood had not reached them. My fingers opened and closed once, searching for something to hold.

No hand found mine.

The hospital burned above me.

And beneath its smoke, unseen by the men who had come to
save it, I began to die.

PART 4.

Chapter 18.

Transformation into darkness

I woke beneath the earth.

For a long time, I did not know that. I believed I was still inside the fire.

The heat remained around me, thick and suffocating, carrying the taste of ash deep into my throat. Every breath scraped like broken pottery inside my chest. I heard distant screams somewhere in the darkness, though whether they belonged to memory or madness, I could not tell.

Sometimes the voices sounded near enough to touch. Sometimes they stretched far away, echoing through endless stone corridors that could not possibly exist.

I tried to move and pain flooded through my body so violently that darkness swallowed me again.

When I woke the second time, the world had narrowed to small sounds.

Water dripped somewhere in the distance. Tiny scratching noises moved through the ruins around me. Rats perhaps. Or insects. Now and then, the earth groaned above my head, as though the city rested upon old bones.

I opened my eyes slowly.

The chamber was nearly dark. Thin blades of pale light slipped through cracks in the ceiling far above, revealing the ruin in fragments.

Broken kilns.

Collapsed brick furnaces.

Shattered jars half buried in dust.

I lay inside the ruins of what had once been a pottery factory, hidden beneath the city. The air smelled of clay, ash, wet earth, and something older beneath all of it. Something sealed away for centuries.

For several moments, I lay still, staring at the cracks of light in the ceiling above me.

Then memory returned.

The hospital.

The smoke.

The screams.

The men storming through the halls.

I remembered blood spreading beneath me while the flames climbed the wooden beams overhead. I remembered my hands losing strength. I remembered the cold entering my body inch by inch while death waited patiently beside me.

And Saam.

His face above mine.

Then nothing.

I forced myself upright.

The movement sent dizziness crashing through me. My vision twisted. The walls bent like soft wax before slowly returning to shape. I pressed a hand against the ground until the spinning eased.

My clothes were stiff with dried blood.

The front of my shirt had been torn open where the knife entered. Dark stains covered the fabric from chest to waist. I touched the wound carefully, expecting torn flesh beneath my fingers.

There was almost nothing there.

Only a thin raised line remained across my skin, pale and fresh, as though the injury had healed months ago instead of hours.

I stared at it without breathing.

My fingers moved over my chest again and again, searching for the wound, for the split ribs, for the wet warmth of blood

pouring between my hands.

Nothing.

The flesh was closed.

A coldness deeper than fear began spreading through me.

I looked around wildly, searching for someone hidden within the ruins.

“Saam?”

My voice emerged cracked and weak.

No answer came.

Suddenly, something tore through my head.

I cried out and collapsed against the broken kiln, both hands gripping my skull as pain exploded behind my eyes. It spread downward almost instantly, pouring through my neck, my chest, my limbs, until every part of me burned.

Heat flooded my body.

Sweat soaked through my clothes.

My heart began hammering so violently it felt ready to tear itself free from my chest.

The chamber twisted around me.

Then the hallucinations came.

Zaragoza.

Sunlight spilling through the windows of my father's house
while dried herbs hung from the ceiling beams.

Miriam beside the fig tree, laughing softly as wind moved
through her dark hair.

Isabel running through the courtyard with bare feet.

Then fever.

Bodies stacked in narrow rooms.

Miriam's trembling hands.

Isabel coughing blood into cloth.

Their deaths.

Then Baghdad.

The hospital corridors drowned in smoke.

Patients screaming.

Fire climbing the walls.

Men cutting down physicians where they stood.

I saw myself again on the courtyard stones, blood spreading
beneath me while the flames reflected in the night sky
above.

The visions came faster and faster until they no longer
separated from one another. Faces melted into fire. Fire
became blood. Blood became shadows moving through
endless corridors beneath the earth.

My heart pounded harder.

Harder.

Harder.

Each beat struck with such force that I thought my ribs would crack apart around it.

Then suddenly—

Silence.

Everything vanished.

And I collapsed.

The next time I opened my eyes, Saam was leaning over me.

At first, I thought the fever had returned and created him from memory. His face emerged from darkness like something half imagined, motionless and calm while shadows trembled across the ruined chamber behind him.

For several moments, neither of us spoke.

Then I whispered,

“Am I dead?”

Saam’s eyes remained fixed on me.

“Not exactly.”

My throat tightened.

"You are neither alive nor dead," he said quietly.

The word settled into the darkness between us.

I stared at him without understanding.

Saam sat back slowly beside the broken furnace wall.

"When I found you in the hospital courtyard, you were beyond saving," he said. "There was no choice left to me."

A wave of panic surged through me.

I pushed myself upward violently.

"What have you done?" I demanded. "What is happening to me?"

Saam watched me in silence for a moment before answering.

"You are crossing a threshold."

The fever still burned through me, but suddenly a colder fear began rising beneath it.

"You are becoming a vampire."

My gaze froze on him for a long moment.

Then I laughed.

The sound burst out of me suddenly, wildly, echoing through the underground ruins of the pottery house. I bent forward laughing harder, half delirious from fever and exhaustion.

“Vampires,” I said mockingly between breaths. “The creatures of the night. The drinkers of blood. The immortals.”

I laughed again, louder this time.

“These are stories mothers tell children to keep them inside after dark.”

Saam’s expression did not change.

The silence that followed slowly killed my laughter.

“Then how do you explain your healing?” he asked.

I wiped sweat from my face and shook my head weakly.

“You must have created some potent mixture,” I said quickly. “There are compounds that accelerate healing. Certain poultices, certain—”

“Not this fast,” Saam interrupted softly.

His eyes lowered briefly toward my chest where the knife had entered.

“And not this kind of wound.”

I opened my mouth to answer, but nothing came.

“Even if the flesh had closed,” he continued, “you had already lost too much blood. You were dying before the blade ever left your body.”

My breathing became uneven.

“The knife tore deep into you,” Saam said quietly. “It punctured your heart.”

The words struck harder than the pain had.

For a long moment, I simply stared at him.

Then slowly, unwillingly, memory returned.

The sensation of the blade entering.

The warmth flooding down my body.

The weakness in my limbs.

The cold.

I knew wounds.

I had spent my life studying them.

And I knew with terrible certainty that Saam spoke the truth.

I stared at him.

Denial still fought inside me, but beneath it, reality had begun settling slowly into place, heavy and suffocating as earth falling over a grave.

My wound had healed.

My heart had stopped.

Yet I remained.

The truth crawled toward me inch by inch, and with it came anger.

Violent.

Blinding.

“What have you done?” I shouted.

I lunged at him.

“You turned me into a monster!”

I crashed into Saam with all the strength left in my body, but he did not move. It felt like striking stone buried deep within the earth itself. His hand caught my arm effortlessly and threw me aside.

I slammed against the broken floor.

Dust burst upward around me.

Rage drowned everything else. I staggered upright and charged him again, half screaming now, my vision shaking with fever and fury.

Again, Saam did not retreat.

Again, I hit him like a wave breaking against rock.

And again, I was thrown back.

I collapsed onto my hands and knees.

A violent spasm twisted through my stomach.

I gagged.

Then vomited a thick black ooze across the stones.

The substance spilled from my mouth slowly, dark as oil, carrying the foul stench of rot and old blood. More followed in choking waves while pain tore through my chest and throat.

When it finally stopped, I remained there trembling weakly above the ruined floor.

The anger drained out of me all at once.

Something else replaced it.

Weakness.

An emptiness spreading through my body so deeply that it felt as though my bones themselves had hollowed out.

Then hunger came behind it.

It clawed through me instantly, sharp enough to make my hands shake.

Saam stepped toward me at last.

"You are getting weak," he said quietly.

I could barely lift my head.

"You need to eat."

The chamber around us had grown darker. The pale light filtering from above had nearly vanished.

Night was coming.

Saam walked toward one of the walls and lit a torch from a small clay oil vessel resting among the ruins. Orange light spread through the underground chamber, flickering across broken furnaces and shattered pottery buried beneath centuries of dust.

For a moment, he stood there watching me silently through the firelight.

Then he turned and disappeared deeper into the darkness of the ruins.

Beneath the panic, confusion and hunger something else had begun to settle quietly inside me.

The horrifying understanding that the man who died in the hospital courtyard should not have awakened beneath the earth at all.

I opened my eyes to the sound of shuffling feet against stone.

For a moment, I did not know where I was.

Then the smell reached me.

Blood.

Warm.

Living.

The hunger inside me awakened instantly.

I sat upright.

Saam had returned.

But he was not alone.

Beside him stood a young man, broad shouldered and heavily built, perhaps no older than twenty. His clothes were stained with wine and dust, and his movements carried the looseness of half-drunken exhaustion. Yet something about his face felt wrong. His eyes were unfocused. Empty. He stood beside Saam with the still obedience of a sleepwalker.

Saam spoke quietly to him.

The young man nodded at once.

No hesitation.

No confusion.

Only obedience.

A cold unease moved through me, but the hunger drowned it quickly.

I rose slowly to my feet.

The moment I did, my body pulled toward the man before my mind could resist it.

I could hear everything.

The rush of blood beneath his skin.

The wet rhythm of his heart beating inside his chest.

The breath leaving his lungs.

Even the wine lingering inside him carried a scent sharp enough for me to taste from across the chamber.

My mouth filled with saliva.

Saam turned toward the young man.

"This young man is going to let us take some of his blood," he said softly. "Isn't that right?"

The man answered absently.

"Yes, master."

I moved closer.

Every instinct inside me sharpened violently. The world narrowed until nothing remained except the pulse beneath the man's throat.

Then a burning sensation touched my gums and I felt fangs emerging slowly from my mouth.

Terror flashed through me for an instant, but hunger buried it immediately beneath something far stronger.

I no longer fully controlled my own movements.

My hands seized the young man by the shoulders.

His skin burned warm beneath my fingers.

Then, with motions that felt both foreign and natural, I sank my fangs into his neck.

The sensation shattered me.

Warm blood rushed into my mouth.

It entered me like heat entering frozen flesh.

Like life itself pouring directly into the emptiness inside my body.

The weakness vanished instantly.

Strength flooded through my limbs.

The pounding agony in my chest softened into something deep and ecstatic.

I drank slowly at first.

Half horrified.

Half drowning in relief.

Then the hunger changed.

It became greed.

A terrible frantic need that expanded faster than thought itself.

I pulled the man closer.

My fangs sank deeper into his flesh.

I drank harder.

The young man groaned weakly. His body sagged in my grasp.

I could feel his heartbeat changing.

Slowing.

Weakening.

Yet instead of frightening me, the sensation pulled me deeper into frenzy.

Every drop of blood entering me made me want more.

Saam's voice reached me distantly.

"Enough."

I barely heard him.

Then his hands seized my shoulders, trying to pull me away.

"If you take too much, you will kill him," he said sharply.

"And I know this is not what you want."

But I did not want to let go.

The hunger had consumed everything else.

The young man's knees buckled. His heartbeat fluttered weakly beneath my hands.

Still I drank.

Then suddenly Saam tore me away with violent force.

I was thrown across the chamber and crashed against the stone floor.

The taste of blood still filled my mouth.

Slowly, the hunger began to loosen its grip on me.

The frenzy faded inch by inch, retreating into some dark corner deep within my body. In its place came a strange calmness. My limbs no longer trembled. The burning fever had vanished entirely. Even my thoughts, moments earlier consumed by panic and bloodlust, now moved with unnatural clarity.

The young man lay unconscious on the ground between us.

His chest still rose and fell.

Saam knelt beside him and pressed a folded cloth gently against the wounds on his neck. The bleeding had already slowed.

I sat up weakly and leaned back against the cold wall of the ruined pottery chamber.

Then I looked at the man.

Really looked at him.

His pale face.

The looseness of his arms.

The blood staining his collar.

And slowly, the reality of what I had done began settling into me.

Saam returned and sat beside me.

For a long while, neither of us spoke.

Only the torch crackled softly nearby while water dripped somewhere deeper within the ruins.

Finally, I asked quietly,

“What is going to happen to him?”

“He will live.”

I looked at the unconscious man lying across the stones.

“I will take him back before dawn and leave him in one of the alleys near the tavern,” Saam said. “When he wakes, he will think he drank too much wine and passed out somewhere in the city.”

“He won’t remember?”

“No. Humans remember very little clearly after fear, wine, and darkness mix together. And we can help them forget the rest.”

I turned toward him slowly, baffled.

“Vampires can bend the minds of humans. We can cloud memory. Influence thought. Draw obedience from weaker

wills.", he continued.

My gaze drifted back toward the young man.

The emptiness in his eyes earlier suddenly made terrible sense.

A silence passed between us again.

Then I spoke, my voice hollow.

"So this is what I am now."

The words tasted bitter.

"I was a healer."

My throat tightened.

"And now I am a killer."

I looked at my blood-covered hands.

"A monster."

The anger surged back suddenly.

I turned toward Saam violently.

"Why didn't you let me die?"

My voice echoed through the underground chamber.

"You had no right to turn me into this. I didn't want this."

Saam remained silent for a moment.

Then quietly, he said,

“This monster you see is only a mirror reflecting what already exists inside you.”

“If a mirror shows a man ugliness, the fault is not with the mirror.”

“The ugliness already belonged to the man.”

I stared at him silently.

“But sometimes,” Saam continued, “dust and corruption gather upon the mirror. Fear. Grief. Rage. Hunger. Yet beneath all of it, what truly exists still waits there.”

His voice softened slightly.

“And when something pure exists beneath the dust, that too reveals itself eventually.”

His words carried my mind back to the Syrian desert.

The thief standing before the terrified caravan.

The curved blade in his hand.

The strange mercy he had shown to the poor, the women, the children.

And the desperation in his eyes when he let go of his treasure to save his dying companion.

“In over hundred years I have wandered this earth, I have watched men and women die before me. There were many I

could have saved from death.”, said Saam.

“I never allowed myself to turn them. Not once.”

“But when I found you dying in that courtyard, I knew that if I let you die, I would regret it for the rest of eternity.”

We sat there for a while in silence.

Then Saam walked to the unconscious man, bent beside him, and lifted him effortlessly onto his shoulder, as though his body weighed nothing at all.

Without another word, he turned and disappeared into the darkness of the underground ruins, carrying the man deeper beneath the sleeping city.

PART 4.

Chapter 19. A Name Is a Doorway

We remained in Baghdad for nearly a month.

By day, we hid beneath the ruins of the old pottery factory, among collapsed kilns and broken jars half-buried in dust. Sometimes, when the wind moved above us, grains of sand slipped down through the broken roof and scattered softly over the stones.

At night, we walked.

We kept to the southern parts of the city, where the streets were poorer, narrower, and less familiar to me. I had rarely gone there in my years at the hospital, and Saam said that was reason enough to choose it. The markets were smaller there. The lamps burned lower. The people looked at the ground when they passed one another, and no one cared much for the face of a stranger.

Still, I kept my hood low.

"They think you are dead," Saam said one night as we passed beneath the shadow of a crumbling wall.

"They think many are dead."

"They saw bodies burned beyond recognition. They found enough sorrow to give your name a place among the lost."

The hospital had become a wound inside me. I thought of Ibn Salim. I thought of the students who had stood in my lectures. I thought of the patients whose names I still remembered, and of those whose faces had been lost to smoke and flame.

During those nights, he began to teach me how to disappear.

He told me no man like us survived by strength alone. Strength drew attention. Speed drew stories. Beauty drew memory. Wealth drew thieves. Generosity drew love, and love was the most dangerous chain of all.

"You must become forgettable," he said.

We were sitting that night by the bank of the river, in a secluded place where the reeds grew tall and the city lights trembled faintly on the water. This had become our refuge after sunset. We came there often, away from the roads and the crowded alleys, and sat beneath the open sky while Baghdad murmured in the distance.

Saam picked up a smooth stone from the mud and turned it between his fingers.

"People notice what does not fit," he said. "A man who heals too often. A man who survives what should have killed him."

A man who knows more than he should.”

He turned the stone slowly in his hand.

“Sooner or later, they begin to speak. Then they begin to watch. After that, it is time to leave.”

He looked at me.

“I learned that more than once.”

He spoke of cities I had only seen on maps, and others I had never heard named. He had lived in Nishapur, Merv, Balkh, Rayy, Isfahan, Aleppo, Jerusalem, Alexandria, Constantinople, and smaller places whose names had already vanished from memories.

He had crossed deserts alone, followed mountain roads through snow and hunger, and kept to the land whenever he could. He avoided the sea. Ships, he said, were cages set loose upon water, and for one such as him, there was no more dangerous place to be trapped.

He had watched kings rise from tents and die in palaces. He had seen dynasties born in the dust and buried beneath their own banners. He had seen men kill in the name of God, then build gardens over the bones. He had sat with poets, thieves, judges, monks, physicians, courtesans, assassins, and fools who believed themselves wiser than all who came before them.

“Every kingdom thinks it is the last shape of the world,” he said. “Then the world changes its face.”

He told me he never stayed in one place for more than a few months. A season, sometimes less. Long enough to learn the streets, the wells, the gates, the graveyards, the houses where the poor slept crowded together, the taverns where men forgot their own names, the mosques and churches where the desperate came before dawn.

“Never wait until they fear you,” he said. “Leave while they are still grateful.”

“And if they love you?”

“Then leave sooner.”

He told me never to return to a city too quickly. Decades had to pass. Those who might remember his face, the sound of his voice, the wound he once healed, the child he once carried from a burning house—all of them had to be gone, or old enough to doubt their own memory.

“People do not need proof,” he said. “They only need a face that troubles them.”

I listened as if I were a student again, sitting before a master whose knowledge came from books no library possessed.

He taught me how to change the weight of my walk, how to bend my shoulders to look older, how to breathe like a man with weak lungs, how to let my gaze drift so that no one felt truly seen by me. He taught me to speak less, to laugh when others laughed, to avoid silence when silence made people curious, and to keep silence when speech would make them

remember.

He taught me to carry many names and use none carelessly.

“A name is a doorway,” he said. “Do not leave doors behind you.”

He taught me which coins lasted across borders, which accents betrayed a man, which clothes made a traveler invisible, and which answers ended a conversation before it began.

He showed me how to feed without leaving terror behind. How to choose the drunk, the violent, the cruel, the dying, the men who would wake with shame and invent their own explanation. How to take little. How to stop before hunger became pleasure.

“You do not need much to survive,” he said. “Remember that. The body asks for less than the hunger claims. You can take without killing, if survival is all you seek.”

“And if it is not?”

Saam looked toward the river. The dark water carried pieces of broken moonlight between the reeds.

“Then you are no better than the greedy landlord who takes the whole harvest from the peasant and leaves his children to starve.”

I said nothing.

"There will be nights when you will want more," he continued. "Strength. Speed. Power enough to bend iron in your hands or cross water like a shadow. Hunger will dress itself in noble words. It will tell you that you need these things to be safe, to be free, to become what you are meant to become."

He turned to me.

"It lies. Most hunger lies. Take only what lets you live," he said. "Anything beyond that belongs to greed."

Then one night, when I opened my eyes beneath the ground, he was gone.

At first, I thought he had only risen before me. I waited in the darkness among the broken jars and the cold dust, listening for the sound of his steps above. When none came, I climbed out into the night and searched the streets around the pottery ruins.

By dawn, I had found nothing.

For a whole week, I searched every part of Baghdad. I walked through the southern quarters, through markets, alleys, graveyards, gardens, and abandoned courtyards. I even went into the northern parts of the city, where people might still remember my face, where a careless glance could have dragged my old life out of its ashes.

I went to the tavern where we had first met.

He was not there.

Each night, no matter where my search began, it ended at the riverbank. I sat there for hours among the reeds, watching the dark water pass beneath the faint light of the city. I told myself he had some unfinished business nearby. I told myself he had left to do something dangerous and would return before dawn. I told myself many things because the silence gave me nothing else.

There were no rumors of a strange man burning beneath the sun. No whispers of a demon found smoking in an alley, no story of ash in the shape of a body. So I knew he still lived.

He had simply left.

Without a word.

Without goodbye.

After the seventh night, I rose from the riverbank before dawn and left Baghdad.

I never returned.

PART 5

Chapter 20. Three Hundred Years

When Saam left Baghdad, he took no cloak, no horse, no book that I could see.

He took only himself. That's how I also left Baghdad.

At first I went east because I still believed leaving had a direction. Saam had once spoken of Nishapur with the care of a man handling a cup already cracked. He never called it home, yet the name carried something in his mouth. A tenderness. A wound. Perhaps both. I followed that sound across the lands of Persia, through roads I had known only from maps and the talk of merchants.

I traveled alone.

That must be understood.

I did not join caravans, though I kept near their roads. I did not sit with men around fires, though I watched the glow of their camps from hillsides and dry riverbeds. I learned the habits of travelers and followed them as a wolf follows the movement of sheep, far enough to remain unseen, close

enough to know where the wells lay.

By day I hid.

Saam had taught me every trick he knew for surviving daylight on the road. He had taught me which ruins men avoided, which caves belonged to shepherds, which dry wells still held enough depth to hide a body, and how to read the land before dawn when there was no shelter in sight. He had taught me to dig fast, to cover the loosened earth with stones and brush, to leave no shape that looked like a grave, and to choose ground that would not collapse when the sun heated it. He had taught me that daylight did not kill only through fire. It killed through carelessness, through panic, through the foolish hope that one more mile could be crossed before morning.

At sunset I rose.

The roads to Nishapur were full of pilgrims, scholars, merchants, soldiers, beggars, and men who had once been rich enough to own horses.

In Nishapur, I found Saam everywhere and nowhere.

I did not need to ask for him. The city carried echoes of him without knowing his name. I heard it in the speech of men who turned every answer into a question. I saw it in scholars arguing beneath shaded arches, their fingers stained with ink, their pride hidden poorly behind courtesy. I felt it in the dervishes who gathered near gardens and graveyards, speaking of love, annihilation, fire, and the soul as if language were only a door they meant to break open.

I walked through it all with Saam's voice inside me.

After Nishapur, the path carried me deeper into the heart of Central Asia, through cities whose names once sounded eternal in the mouths of merchants and scholars. I passed through Merv, Bukhara, and Samarkand during the final years of their greatness. Their markets overflowed with silk, paper, spices, manuscripts, and gold. Scholars debated philosophy and medicine beneath domes of blue tile while caravans arrived from lands so distant that even the languages spoken in the streets seemed endless.

Then the Mongols came.

I witnessed cities collapse beneath fire and horse hooves. I saw smoke rise above Bukhara like a second sky. I saw Samarkand emptied of its certainty. Roads filled with refugees carrying children, books, cages of birds, sacks of grain, fragments of lives already breaking apart. In the ruins of Merv, silence itself felt wounded. I learned then that kingdoms die the same way men do: suddenly to those inside them, slowly to those who survive long enough to remember what existed before.

Farther east, I followed the Silk Road across deserts and mountain passes into lands Baghdad had spoken of in silk, porcelain, and impossible distances. I crossed Kashgar and the great empty stretches beyond it, where the nights felt large enough to swallow memory itself. Near Dunhuang, I sheltered inside caves whose walls were covered with painted Buddhas watching silently through centuries of smoke, sand, and conquest.

I reached China when it was beneath Mongol rule.

The cities there seemed impossibly vast. In Khanbaliq, the capital of the Great Khan, I saw Mongol rulers presiding over Chinese officials, Persian astronomers, Muslim physicians, and merchants from every corner of the world. Power there did not live only in armies. It lived in roads, records, granaries, walls, canals, and the movement of information itself. For the first time since Baghdad, I felt small before the scale of human achievement.

In Hangzhou, I walked beside canals and gardens whose beauty survived even beneath the weight of conquest. I entered pharmacies where physicians practiced forms of medicine entirely different from those I had learned in Zaragoza and Baghdad, yet no less sophisticated. There, more than anywhere else in my wandering, I understood how vast the world truly was and how little any single civilization understood of it.

I returned west slowly through Central Asia and Persia, crossing lands still scarred by Mongol conquest. In Tabriz, I spent years among scholars and astronomers who measured the skies with such devotion that they seemed to speak to the stars themselves. In the mountains of the Caucasus, I heard Christian hymns again after centuries among Persian and Arabic voices, and the sound awakened memories I had buried too deeply to name.

The roads carried me westward along the edges of the Black Sea, through lands where empires pressed constantly against one another without ever fully swallowing the other

whole. Mountains, forests, monasteries, ruined fortresses, fishing villages, and old Roman stones filled those years of wandering. I moved through Anatolia, Bulgaria, Wallachia, the Greek lands, and the regions surrounding the Black Sea while kingdoms rose, fractured, and rebuilt themselves beneath the shadow of larger powers.

Those lands felt older than many of the empires ruling them.

In the mountain villages, shepherds still lived much as their ancestors had centuries earlier. Monks copied scripture by candlelight inside stone monasteries hidden among cliffs and forests. Traders moved between Constantinople, Trebizond, and the northern shores carrying furs, grain, wine, slaves, spices, and stories from every direction. Soldiers changed banners more often than languages changed prayers.

I spent time near Constantinople during the years after the city had recovered from the Latin occupation. Even wounded, the city remained unlike any other place I had seen. Its walls stretched across the horizon like something built against the end of the world itself. Greek churches glowed with gold mosaics beneath incense smoke while markets overflowed with merchants from Italy, Persia, the Arab world, and the steppe. The city seemed suspended between exhaustion and greatness, surviving not because history spared it, but because it refused to die.

Farther north along the Black Sea roads, Mongol influence still reached deep into the region. Merchants spoke

cautiously of tribute owed to eastern khans. Caravan routes remained open beneath fragile peace enforced by fear as much as law. In taverns and roadside inns, I heard endless rumors of wars, crusades, raids, and dynasties already collapsing before the news of their victories had fully spread.

Wandering did not mean constant movement. There were years when I crossed deserts and mountains without remaining anywhere longer than a few nights, and there were years when I disappeared into a single city for months or years at a time, remaining hidden enough that those sheltering me remembered little more than a quiet stranger after I vanished.

In Rayy, I spent two years beneath the workshop of an aging alchemist whose hands were permanently stained by mercury, ash, and copper salts. Men came to him searching for gold, immortality, perfumes, medicines, poisons, and miracles, often without understanding the difference between them. From him, I learned distillation, acids, mineral compounds, combustion, purification, and the strange discipline required to observe matter carefully instead of merely dreaming about it. He spoke little while working. Most lessons came through silence, repetition, and burned fingers.

In Persia and Central Asia, I often traded medical knowledge for shelter or access to libraries. There were cities where I vanished into manuscript collections for entire seasons, reading until dawn among mathematicians, physicians, philosophers, and theologians long dead.

Sometimes I slept beneath those same libraries during daylight, hidden among storage chambers, crypts, or forgotten foundations while scholars argued above me unaware of what listened beneath their feet.

I studied astronomy in Tabriz beside scholars who measured the movement of stars with instruments of brass so delicate they seemed devotional in their construction. Night after night, we climbed observatory towers to chart the skies while below us entire kingdoms argued, traded, fought, and disappeared without the stars altering their course even slightly.

In China, I spent years learning quietly inside pharmacies and medical houses, watching physicians diagnose illness through pulse, breath, complexion, and balance rather than anatomy alone. Their understanding of the body differed greatly from the traditions of Baghdad and al-Andalus, yet I found wisdom there no less profound. I copied medical texts by candlelight and memorized herbal treatments unknown in the western lands. More importantly, I learned humility. The world was larger than any civilization's claim over knowledge.

There were periods when I lived almost openly as a physician.

In the Greek lands near the Black Sea, plague transformed monasteries and healing houses into places of desperation. I remained for nearly a year in one small infirmary attached to a monastery where the sick arrived faster than the dead could be buried. The monks believed I suffered from a

disease of the skin that forced me to avoid daylight. They asked few questions because exhaustion had already stripped curiosity from them. When spring finally arrived, the bells stopped ringing so often, but silence had already settled permanently inside the valley.

Over the course of those three centuries, I found myself drawn near Zaragoza more than once, though I never planned the road that way. Some hidden part of me kept bending westward, toward the city I refused to name.

The first time, I came close enough to recognize the dry hills and the smell of the Ebro in the wind. I turned away before the city walls could appear.

Decades later, the road brought me near again. By then, everyone I had loved was long dead, and still I could not enter. As long as I stayed away, Zaragoza remained untouched inside me. My father still crushed herbs by lamplight. My mother still moved through our house. The courtyard still held the silence after Miriam's death. The room where Isabel had taken her last breath still remained closed in memory, spared from dust, strangers, and time. To return was to lose them again.

The third time, I do not know what changed. A longing rose in me so quietly that I did not fight it until it was already stronger than fear.

So after more than three hundred years, I let the road carry me home.

PART 5.

Chapter 21. Where the Fig Tree Stood

I reached Zaragoza when the last traces of dusk still clung faintly to the western sky.

For three centuries I had come near it and turned away. I had seen its walls from distant roads, from olive groves beneath winter stars, from the backs of silent horses moving through the dark. Each time, courage failed me before the gates. But that night my feet carried me forward before fear could stop them.

The city had changed its face.

The roads I remembered had changed. Houses had climbed farther up the hills since my youth, and walls now crossed fields where goats once grazed beneath the sun. Bells rang from towers that had not existed when I was a boy. Men called places by names I did not know. Yet my body knew the way better than memory did. I followed the old road upward, passed the bend where Miriam's father's shop had once stood, where I had first seen her, and came to the hill where my father's house had stood.

At first I thought I had climbed the wrong slope.

A monastery rose before me.

Its walls were pale beneath the moon, high and clean, with narrow windows and a bell tower cutting into the sky. The house where my father had received the sick was gone. The courtyard where I had carried water as a boy was gone. The rooms I had built with my brothers, the rooms where Miriam had lit our first fire, where Isabel had slept between us during storms, had all been swallowed by stone.

I stood before the gate and searched for the fig tree.

It had been old even when I was a child. Its roots had lifted the courtyard stones. In summer its leaves made a soft green shade where Miriam liked to sit with Isabel against her breast. Beneath that tree I had buried them both.

There was no tree.

In its place stood a long building beside the monastery wall. A small lamp burned inside one of its windows. From beyond the shutters came the sound of children coughing in their sleep. A wooden toy lay near the threshold. Little shoes had been left in a row beside the door.

Children were sleeping where my dead had lain.

The next night, I returned after the bells of compline. A lay brother opened the side gate and looked at me with the caution men reserve for strangers who arrive after dark.

"I am told you keep the sick here," I said.

"We do what we can."

"I know some medicine."

He studied me. "Then come in the morning and speak with the prior."

"I cannot come by day," I said. "I work in a shop in the city until the lamps are lit. I can only offer my hands at night."

It was a poor lie, but a useful one. The city was full of men who labored from sunrise to dusk and still needed bread.

He led me through the cloister to the long building I had seen from the road.

They called it the House of Mercy.

The monastery held three buildings within its walls. The largest was the house of prayer and study. Beside it stood a smaller hall for orphaned children, and beyond that, a healing house for the sick poor.

A monk with tired eyes moved between the beds. His kindness was greater than his skill. He had bandaged a wound too tightly. He had left fevered children too close to the healthy ones. His instruments had been rinsed, not boiled. I saw all this before he asked my name.

I gave him one that was not mine.

"What work have you done?" he asked.

"A little healing," I said.

He gave me a cloth, a basin, and a place beside a boy whose leg had swollen from an infected cut.

By midnight, the monk had stopped watching me as a stranger.

I cleaned the wound slowly. I boiled the knife before touching flesh. I mixed honey with crushed herbs and packed it beneath clean linen. I asked for more water, more vinegar, more light. I moved the fevered children away from the others and opened the shutters where the air had grown foul.

They were small things.

My father had taught them to me before I knew they were medicine.

After that, I came every night.

At first they thought I came out of charity. Then they thought I came out of penance. No one asked too many questions. A man willing to clean wounds after midnight is rarely troubled about the shape of his past.

Days later, one of the brothers told me the story of the land.

The last owners had been a husband and wife with no children. The husband had been a physician. He had treated the poor in his house, as my father once had. His wife had fed those who came hungry and kept a room ready for children left at the city gates. When they grew old and knew no son or daughter would inherit the place, they gave the

land to the Church. Their only condition was that a monastery be built there with a house for orphans and a healing hall for the poor.

The brother spoke their names.

I did not know them.

Still, I believed they had come from my father's line. Some great-grandchild of my brothers or sister, perhaps. Some branch of our family that had survived plague, war, hunger, and forgetfulness. My father's house had vanished. His grave was lost. His name had fallen out of the mouths of men.

Yet his work remained.

A child with no mother slept under a roof because of him. A poor man's wound was washed because of him. A fevered girl was given water through the night because some echo of his mercy had passed from hand to hand across the centuries.

After a few weeks, the infirmary began to change.

Wounds closed cleaner. Fever left bodies that would once have been carried to burial before dawn. Fewer children died through the winter months. The smell of rot grew less common. The brothers no longer moved through the halls with the same quiet expectation of death hanging over them.

At first the monks spoke of it as fortune.

Then they began bringing me their own illnesses.

A brother with pain in his chest. A nun whose cough had lasted through two winters. A priest whose hands shook whenever he tried to write. Soon after came their families. Then friends. Then neighbors from farther down the hill who arrived after sunset carrying lanterns and wrapped bundles of herbs or bread in gratitude for treatment they could not afford to repay.

The infirmary grew crowded long into the night.

To help with the smaller chores, the brothers sometimes sent older children from the orphan hall before their bedtime. Most came unwillingly. They cleaned bowls slowly, complained beneath their breath while changing linens, or disappeared whenever they believed no one was watching. They would rather have been asleep, playing in the hall, or whispering stories to one another beneath blankets.

Except for one girl.

Her name was Sara.

She was twelve years old, thin as a willow branch, restless as a sparrow, and full of more energy than the entire infirmary together. The moment I stepped through the doors each night, she appeared beside me as though she had been waiting in darkness solely for my arrival. And when the brothers finally drove her out toward bed with raised voices and threats of punishment, she was always the last to leave.

She followed me everywhere.

When I cleaned wounds, she watched my hands. When I mixed herbs, she asked what each one did. When I boiled instruments, she wanted to know why heat mattered. Her questions came without pause, one after another, as if fear existed only in other children and had somehow forgotten to enter her.

“What causes fever?”

“Why does this smell different?”

“Why do some wounds turn black?”

“Why do you wash your hands so much?”

“How do you know where to cut?”

At times I answered only to silence her for a few moments.

It never worked.

She looked at everything with fierce attention, as though the world had hidden meanings waiting for her alone to uncover them. Even when carrying water or folding cloth, her eyes remained fixed on my hands, studying every movement.

And each night, against my will, I found myself waiting for the sound of her footsteps.

There was something painfully familiar in her.

Not only her manner, though that too carried echoes I could not escape. It was the way she looked at me when she listened. The shape of her eyes. The brightness inside them. Sometimes when she tilted her head while thinking, the years between centuries seemed to vanish for the briefest moment.

She looked so much like Isabel.

Weeks became months, and without noticing when it had happened, Sara had woven herself into the fabric of my nights.

She no longer followed me merely with questions. She began anticipating what I needed before I spoke. Water was already boiling when I arrived. Clean cloth waited folded beside the beds. Herbs were sorted and dried correctly without instruction. When the work grew quiet after long nights among the sick, she would sit nearby reading aloud from old manuscripts borrowed from the brothers, stumbling over difficult words and growing irritated whenever I corrected her.

Sometimes, while walking toward the infirmary through the dark courtyard, I found myself listening for her voice before I even opened the door.

One night, when I entered the infirmary, she was not there.

The absence struck me instantly.

My eyes searched the room before I had even removed my cloak.

“Where is Sara?” I asked.

One of the brothers looked up from grinding herbs. “She has a fever,” he said. “We put her to rest in the sleeping hall.”

Before he finished speaking, I was already moving.

I crossed the courtyard quickly, the cold night air cutting through my cloak. The orphan hall was dim except for a single lantern near the entrance. Rows of children slept beneath blankets while rain whispered softly against the shutters.

Sara lay near the far wall.

Even before touching her forehead, I could see the fever burning through her. Sweat covered her skin. Her breathing came unevenly. Strands of dark hair clung to her face.

Without hesitation, I lifted her into my arms and carried her back to the infirmary.

The brothers protested weakly that she only needed rest, but I ignored them.

I cooled her skin with damp cloths. I mixed herbs into steaming water and held the cup to her lips when she drifted awake. I remained beside her through the long hours of the night, counting breaths, changing cloths, listening to every small sound she made as though her life depended upon it.

Near dawn, the fever finally began to loosen its grip. Her breathing steadied. The strain faded from her face. She fell into deeper sleep while pale morning light slowly crept against the lower edge of the infirmary windows.

Only then did I realize how dangerously long I had remained.

The sun was close.

For a moment I simply sat there beside her bed, unable to move.

And that night, as dawn crept slowly toward the infirmary windows, I realized it was not only Sara who had begun to see in me the father she had never known.

Somewhere along those passing months, I had begun to love her as the daughter I had lost beneath the fig tree centuries before.

Months passed, and the bond between Sara and me deepened until the nights of the infirmary no longer felt complete without her beside me.

I had already broken nearly every rule Saam had once taught me.

I had allowed myself to become known. People spoke of the physician who only worked after sunset, whose patients healed faster than they should.

Worse still, I had allowed love to return to my heart.

And I had remained too long in one place.

Saam had warned me about all of it.

A vampire survives through movement, obscurity, and distance. Never become important. Never become loved. Never stay long enough for the world to begin arranging itself around your existence.

I had done all three.

There were nights when the infirmary emptied and silence settled over the halls except for distant coughing and the whisper of candles. On such nights, I sometimes found patients already standing at death's threshold. Men whose fever had devoured them beyond saving. Women whose wounds had rotted too deeply. Old souls who begged not for life, but for an end to suffering. And there were others who could still survive with only a little blood taken from them.

So I fed carefully.

A few drops from the neck. Sometimes the thigh or arm where marks would remain hidden beneath cloth.

Still, questions began to spread through the monastery.

Some patients woke with small wounds they could not explain. I dismissed them as bug bites, rashes, skin infections—simple explanations spoken with enough confidence that most accepted them.

One night, deep past midnight, I brought a young man into an empty storage chamber beside the infirmary. Fever had

already hollowed him.

As I fed from him, my fangs deep in his neck, a cold unease moved through me.

I looked up and froze.

Someone stood in the doorway.

Sara.

I had not heard her approach. Her footsteps had been impossibly soft.

For a moment neither of us moved.

Blood touched my lips. My fangs were still drawn.

The young man lay limp in my arms.

“What are you doing here?” I whispered harshly.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she said softly.

Then silence.

We stared at one another for what felt like an eternity.

She did not scream.

She did not run.

I waited for terror to enter her face, for her eyes to finally see me as I truly was.

Instead, after a long pause, she slowly walked toward me.

Then she wrapped her arms around me tightly.

The warmth of that embrace nearly broke me.

I think she saw it in my eyes then—that I was more afraid than she was.

Carefully, I lowered the unconscious onto the floor.

“Sara...” I said quietly. “I need to leave.”

She pulled back slightly. “Leave?”

“Yes.”

“When will you come back?”

I looked at her for a long moment before answering.

“Never.”

The word shattered her.

Tears filled her eyes instantly. She grabbed my sleeve with both hands.

“No,” she whispered. “Please no.”

“You do not understand. I cannot stay here anymore.”

“Why?”

Because eventually men would notice I never aged. Because rumors would spread. Because fear always follows difference. Because one day someone would see too much. Because monsters who build homes eventually burn with

them.

But I could not say any of that.

"It is dangerous for me to stay," I said.

"Then take me with you."

"No."

"Please."

"You cannot come with me."

"Why not?"

"Because life beside me is not an easy life."

"I don't care."

"You should."

She was crying openly now.

"You promised you wouldn't leave."

"I never promised that."

"You stayed," she said through tears. "You stayed when nobody else ever did."

The words struck deeper than any blade.

I turned away from her because I could already feel myself weakening.

"You belong here," I said. "You have a future here."

"I don't want this place!" she cried. "I want to stay with you."

"You are a child."

"Then let me be your child!"

The room fell silent.

I closed my eyes.

For centuries I had survived by walking away before attachment could root itself inside me. I had buried cities, names, entire lifetimes behind me without looking back.

But standing there with Sara crying in the darkness beside me, I understood with terrible clarity that I could not leave her behind.

Not again.

Not a second time.

Before the bells of morning prayer could rise over the hills, I placed an empty coffin onto the old carriage the monastery used to carry the dead to the cemetery, and beneath the cover of night, Sara and I left Zaragoza behind.

PART 5.

Chapter 22. A Home for a Little While

We began our journey beneath the shadow of Zaragoza's gates, leaving the city in the final hours before dawn. I carried little fear that anyone would follow us. The monastery barely possessed the resources to feed the children within its walls, let alone search for those who vanished from them. Orphans disappeared often enough that the world learned not to ask where they had gone. That knowledge eased my mind. No riders would come after us. No priest would knock upon doors asking whether a girl named Sara had passed through.

The beginning was difficult.

By day we hid from the sun wherever we could find shelter. Sometimes it was beneath abandoned sheds beside the road, sometimes beneath dense groves far from travelers, and sometimes simply inside the carriage itself with heavy blankets nailed across the openings to keep the light from reaching me. We remained silent through the long hours of daylight while the horse rested nearby. Then, as soon as darkness covered the roads, we continued moving again.

One night during the first weeks of our journey, near dawn, I found an abandoned shepherd's shed beside the road and stopped there to hide for the day. The night had turned bitterly cold. Sara was asleep inside the carriage beneath a pile of blankets while the horse pulled slow clouds of breath into the dark air.

I tied the horse beside the shed, laid food out for it, then climbed back into the carriage to settle into my coffin before the sun rose.

As I pulled the lid open, Sara stirred.

Half asleep, eyes still closed, she whispered softly,

"I am cold, Papa."

For a moment, I simply stared at her. The last time someone called me that was centuries ago.

I took off my cloak and laid it gently over her. She pulled it closer around herself and drifted back to sleep while I remained there beside the coffin, unable to move, carrying a warmth no fire had ever given me.

Before Sara, I had needed very little from the world. A few handed coins could sustain me for months. Hunger no longer belonged to me in the way it belonged to men. But now there was food to buy, clothes to replace as she grew, medicine for sickness, grain for the horse, blankets for winter, shoes worn thin by mud and stone. For the first time in centuries, I found myself thinking about money every day.

So I began taking small work wherever we traveled.

I chopped wood behind inns after the kitchens had gone quiet. I carried water from wells, unloaded sacks from late wagons, stacked barrels in cellars, repaired stable doors, and cleaned stalls by lantern light while Sara slept inside the carriage. Most paid little, but little became enough when gathered night after night.

After several weeks, we no longer slept hidden beside roads every morning. We began staying at inns along the trade paths, sometimes for several days at a time. There I found better opportunities. I prepared compounds and medicines and sold them quietly to local healers who cared more for effectiveness than questions.

Things began to improve.

Sara ate warm meals instead of hardened bread. The rough wool clothes we bought in roadside markets became softer fabrics dyed in richer colors. The child who once sat silently in the corner of a carriage slowly began laughing again. Sometimes I would catch her staring at herself in mirrors, smiling at dresses she never could have imagined owning inside the monastery walls.

As the months passed, the inns grew finer. The horses grew healthier. The roads no longer felt endless.

Then, after our first year together, when we had traveled far enough from Zaragoza that no one spoke of the extraordinary physician once hidden inside its monastery, we rented a small home in a quiet town far from the roads

that knew my face.

I wanted to give her more than comfort. I wanted to give her beauty. Fine meals served on clean plates, dresses chosen for delight, painted dolls from market stalls, ribbons from distant cities, and little silver trinkets that made her smile when the lantern light touched them.

But such things demanded money.

Medicine earned enough to survive. It was chemistry that brought real coin.

So I returned to the knowledge I had learned long ago beside the alchemist in Rayy. Skills that once belonged only to curiosity slowly became trade. I built small furnaces and crude stills wherever we settled long enough. I distilled scented waters from rosemary, lavender, and rose petals for merchants and wealthy households. Apothecaries bought medicinal alcohols, oils, and mineral salts from me. I refined pigments for painters, made scented soaps for wealthy homes, and prepared powders for miners and metalworkers.

But my most profitable creations were fire and smoke.

Using salts, oils, powdered minerals, and mixtures few understood, I created colored flames and strange smokes unlike anything most villages had ever seen. Green fire that burned like witchcraft. Deep crimson flames that frightened children and delighted nobles. Thick white smoke that rolled across festival grounds like morning fog. Traveling performers bought them from me. Wealthy merchants paid

for them during weddings and celebrations.

The work earned far more than medicine ever had.

And for the first time in centuries, I found myself chasing wealth not for power, nor survival—

but simply because I enjoyed seeing Sara happy.

I wanted to teach Sara everything I knew.

At first, I thought she would grow tired of my voice. No child should have patience for a man who had lived too long and remembered too much. But Sara never grew tired of it. She listened while I spoke of cities buried beneath other cities, of the hospital of Baghdad, of stars measured by men who died centuries before she was born, of herbs, bones, fevers, metals, poisons, prayers, kings, wars, and all the strange foolishness of mankind.

She was quick. Quicker than I expected. Soon she could read Latin better than many clerks, count faster than merchants, name plants by leaf and scent, and understand the movement of the stars with a seriousness that made me forget her age. By fifteen, she possessed more knowledge than most boys sent to cathedral schools or taught by private masters in noble houses.

But learning the world from me was not the same as living in it.

As she grew older, she wanted more of the world than I could give her by candlelight. She wanted to walk through

the market during the day, to choose cloth with her own hands, to hear bargaining voices beneath the sun, to stand among people without me beside her like a shadow.

But she never said this plainly to my face. Even then, she knew where my wounds were. She feared that if she spoke too openly of daylight, markets, and ordinary afternoons, I would hear only what I could not give her. So she wrapped her longing in useful reasons.

“We would work faster,” she told me. “If I buy the materials during the day, we do not lose half the night searching for what the merchants have already sold.”

She was right.

Still, I could not let her out of my sight.

For months I made excuses. The roads were unsafe. The merchants cheated young girls. The town asked too many questions. The sun was too bright, the hour too late, the errand too small. Sara heard each excuse and grew quieter after each one.

Then, when she was sixteen, I ran out of reasons that did not sound like fear.

So one afternoon, while the sun still stood above the rooftops, she left our home alone to buy the salts, oils, and powders we needed for our work.

I remember the sound of the door closing behind her.

At once, I regretted allowing it.

I stood in the shuttered room, unable to follow, unable to sit. I walked from wall to wall, listening for the sound of her return — her steps outside the door, her hand on the latch, the rustle of the parcels in her arms. Every minute stretched until it felt like an hour.

And until she returned, the house felt emptier than any grave I had ever slept in.

Her mood changed after that.

Daylight brought something back into her that I had not realized was fading. She became more energetic, more alive. Sometimes I would hear her singing softly in another room while she worked. Other times I would catch her spinning across the floor for no reason at all, dancing alone while she believed I was not watching.

She was happy among her own kind.

She liked the noise of crowded markets, the gossip of women beside fountains, the smell of fresh bread drifting from ovens before sunset. She liked belonging to the rhythm of ordinary human life in ways I never could.

And because of that, every departure wounded her.

We moved often. We had to.

But Sara never stopped putting down roots.

As soon as she learned the streets of a town, memorized the voices in its markets, found her favorite bakery or fountain, perhaps even made a friend despite my warnings not to

grow too close to anyone, I would tell her it was time to leave.

And each time, the same sadness would return to her face.

“Just one more month, Papa,” she would plead. “The people here are nice, Papa.” she would argue.

Truthfully, there were times I wanted to believe we could stay too.

And sometimes I agreed to stay a few more weeks.

But a few weeks never changed what we were. Sooner or later, we packed our things, left another home behind, and searched for a new one.

PART 5.

Chapter 23. Where Love Took Root

Around the time Sara turned eighteen, we entered Seville while the night was still young.

Even at that hour the city lived as though sleep had been forgotten by its people. Lanterns burned above tavern doors and beneath the arches of inns. Oil lamps glowed behind latticed windows. The streets were alive with voices, laughter, music, mule carts rattling over stone, and the distant ringing of bells from churches hidden deeper within the city. The smell of roasted meat drifted through the night air with wine, river water, horse sweat, smoke, and orange blossoms from unseen courtyards.

We crossed beneath the city gates among merchants arriving late, sailors shouting near the river road, and servants carrying baskets through crowded streets that still pulsed with life long into the night.

Sara pressed herself against the carriage window the moment we entered the city.

I still remember the look on her face.

Her mouth hung slightly open, her eyes wide with wonder as lights passed across them like reflections on water. Every few moments she turned her head toward something else—a musician beneath an archway, women laughing from a balcony, rows of lanterns swinging above the market streets, the distant silhouette of towers rising over the city.

There was a sparkle in her eyes I had not seen in years.

And before we had even crossed half the city, I knew she had already fallen in love with it.

That worried me.

Love always made leaving harder.

“I want us to stay here,” she whispered without taking her eyes from the window.

I did not answer at once.

The truth was that Seville made sense. Large cities were safer for men like me. Crowds swallowed faces. Neighbors minded their own lives. Travelers came and went every day. A quiet man could disappear there for years if he was careful enough.

But I had learned long ago that every place eventually became dangerous.

And the more Sara loved a place, the more painful it would be when the time came to abandon it.

That night she insisted we stay in one of the finer inns near the center of the city instead of the quiet roadside shelters we usually chose. And how could I say no, when she looked so joyful?

The inn stood beside a busy street lit by hanging lanterns. Its courtyard overflowed with merchants, servants, horses, and travelers speaking in accents from places far beyond Castile. Music drifted from the lower hall, and somewhere nearby someone was dancing to the sound of a lute and hand drums.

When we finally reached our room, I told her she needed sleep.

She laughed at me.

“How can anyone sleep in a city like this?”

Before I could answer, she had already pulled me back toward the stairs.

So we went out again.

We walked through Seville until the final lights began to die one by one across the city. We crossed crowded squares and narrow streets where whitewashed walls trapped the warmth of the day. We passed taverns spilling music into the night, bakers already awake before dawn, old men playing dice beneath lanternlight, and women pouring water across stone doorsteps before morning prayers.

Sara walked ahead of me half the time, turning in circles to look at everything around her as though afraid the city might disappear if she blinked.

And for those few hours, watching her smile beneath the lantern glow, I almost forgot that one day we would have to leave it behind.

The next night we set out to find a place to rent. The city had already been chosen. There was no reason to continue hiding inside temporary rooms above an inn while Sara spent every hour talking about Seville as though she had discovered paradise itself.

So we dressed in our finest clothes and made our way toward the district near the cathedral where merchants, notaries, and brokers conducted business late into the evening. Men looking for servants, warehouses, transport, or property often gathered there in the taverns and courtyards nearby. Wealthy travelers did not wander the streets searching for homes themselves. They asked questions through men whose entire living depended on knowing who wished to sell, rent, marry, borrow, or disappear.

"Let's rent a big house, papa," Sara said enthusiastically as we stepped out of the inn and into the lantern-lit street. "With a large basement for your shop and big rooms and closets and maybe even a courtyard."

I glanced at her. "You plan to fill all these closets already?"

"Of course," she said. "Did you not see the dresses in the market?"

I laughed.

The medicines and chemical mixtures we had sold over the years had filled our coin chests steadily enough that money was no longer a concern.

"Let's see what we can find," I said. "But it needs to be away from the madness of the city."

Sara rolled her eyes dramatically.

"You worry too much, papa. Nobody cares what we do."

I looked ahead at the crowded streets, the passing lanterns, the strangers moving shoulder to shoulder beneath the night sky.

People always cared eventually.

As we walked, we chose our names for the city and built the story we would wear like borrowed clothing.

Her name was to be Maria, and mine Sebastián.

We would be father and daughter. A respectable family from the north. My wife—her mother—had died some years earlier, God bless her soul. Grief had hollowed our home until remaining there became unbearable. So we had sold what remained of our life and come south to begin again among strangers.

It was simple enough to be believable.

The best lies were always built from pieces of truth.

We rehearsed the story quietly as we crossed the city.

"Where are we from?" I asked.

"Toledo," Sara answered immediately.

"No. Too large. Too many chances for questions."

She thought for a moment. "A village near Toledo."

"Better."

"And my mother?"

I hesitated only briefly.

"She died from fever."

Sara glanced at me sideways. For a moment the smile faded from her face. We both knew too many women who had died that way.

Then she slipped her arm through mine again.

"And what is your profession, Sebastián?" she asked with exaggerated seriousness.

"A merchant," I replied.

"You look far too pale to be a merchant." We both laughed at that.

By the time we reached the crowded courtyards near the notaries and wine houses, we had repeated the story

enough times that it almost sounded real even to me.

It did not take long before we found the perfect house to rent.

It was the largest home we had ever stayed in, though not so large that it resembled the grand mansions of nobles and governors. It had a wide courtyard at its center with cracked stone tiles and a small dry fountain surrounded by orange trees that filled the evening air with their scent. The house rose two stories high around the courtyard, its whitewashed walls softened by age and streaked gold by years of sun and rain. Wooden balconies overlooked the inner court, and colored glass lanterns still hung beneath the arches even though dust had gathered over them.

But what caught my attention most was the underground vault beneath the house.

The house belonged to the widow of a merchant who had died the previous winter. Unable to maintain the property alone, she had decided to return with her small children to her family's estate farther north.

The widow explained that her husband had used it for storing wine, olive oil, and trade goods during the hotter months of the year. Stone steps descended into a series of cool vaulted chambers beneath the house, sheltered from the heat of Seville and hidden far enough underground that even during the day the darkness there felt complete. Large clay jars still lined parts of the walls, and old wooden racks for wine casks remained untouched beneath layers of dust.

To me, it was perfect.

The house stood exactly where I would have chosen had I searched for months myself. It rested near the outer parts of the city, close enough that wagons could reach the markets and river docks within a reasonable time, yet far enough from the crowded heart of Seville that neighbors did not watch every movement behind your walls. The streets there were quieter, lined with gardens, workshops, and scattered homes belonging to merchants and lesser nobles who preferred distance from the noise of the city center.

Sara loved the house immediately.

She moved through the courtyard slowly, breathing in the orange blossoms with the quiet wonder of someone entering a dream. She touched the stone edges of the fountain, peered into every room with growing excitement, and climbed the stairs twice before the widow had even finished speaking.

"This room has morning light," she said from the upper floor.

Then moments later:

"And this one overlooks the courtyard."

Then:

"Papa, we could fill this place with our books and still have shelves left empty."

We began building our home.

I beneath the house, and Sara above it.

We cleared away the old furniture left behind by the widow, carried out broken chests, cracked pottery, rotten carpets, and shelves swollen by dampness. For days the house smelled of dust, soap, wet stone, and fresh wood as servants and laborers moved in and out beneath Sara's endless instructions.

During the daylight hours, while I remained below or slept inside my coffin, Sara transformed the upper floors of the house piece by piece. Every evening after sunset I would wake to find something new had appeared. A painted table from the market. Copper pots hanging neatly in the kitchen. Fresh curtains by the windows. Clay jars filled with herbs. Cushions embroidered with flowers and birds. She wandered through the markets of Seville with more excitement than caution, bargaining with merchants, choosing fabrics, lanterns, plates, rugs, and furniture as though she had spent her whole life preparing for that moment.

The house slowly began to feel alive.

Sara planned and decorated every corner with relentless care and enthusiasm. She planted a small vegetable garden in the courtyard beneath the orange trees and spent mornings tending herbs, onions, beans, and lettuce while sunlight poured across the stone. A few days later she returned home carrying two chickens in a basket with the

proud expression of someone who had accomplished something monumental.

“So I can have fresh eggs every morning,” she announced triumphantly.

Meanwhile, beneath the house, I built the largest workshop I had ever possessed.

The old wine vaults became something entirely different under my hands.

I expanded the chambers deeper into the earth, hired masons to reinforce the walls, and filled the underground rooms with furnaces, distillation vessels, copper alembics, glass retorts, presses, drying racks, grinding tables, and storage shelves lined with oils, salts, powders, herbs, minerals, and strange compounds gathered from across the known world. Crates arrived from distant ports carrying Venetian glassware, eastern perfumes, rare minerals, dyes, and instruments crafted by artisans far beyond Seville.

At night the underground chambers glowed with furnace light and smelled of smoke, alcohol, herbs, sulfur, oils, and boiling metal. Pipes crossed the ceilings. Copper vessels hissed with steam. Colored liquids moved slowly through glass tubes while charcoal fires burned beneath iron stands deep into the night.

It was not merely a workshop anymore.

It was a manufactory.

The greatest I had ever built.

Barely a year after our arrival in Seville, the demand for my products had spread far beyond the city, beyond Castile itself, and across the seas.

The fireworks had brought us comfort before; in Seville, they brought us a fortune.

What started as small wooden crates sold during festivals and noble celebrations soon became entire barrels leaving my underground factory on wagons bound for the docks of Seville. Merchants from Granada, Valencia, Genoa, Alexandria, Tunis, and even distant cities of the Mamluk Sultanate came searching for the man whose fireworks burned brighter and louder than anything they had ever seen.

Night after night, wagons rolled out from our house carrying barrels stamped with my mark toward the river port where ships waited beneath forests of masts.

And the money poured in faster than either of us could spend it.

Meanwhile, Sara was no longer the frightened girl I had carried out of Zaragoza.

She had turned nineteen and moved through Seville as though she had been born within its walls. She knew the markets, the churches, the hidden courtyards, the bakeries that opened before dawn, the bridges over the river, and the quiet streets where musicians gathered after sunset.

Servants, merchants, flower sellers, and tavern keepers greeted her by name when she passed.

And slowly, without me noticing when it truly began, she started spending more and more time away from home. Away from me.

In the beginning she was always there when I emerged from the underground chambers after sunset. I would find her in the courtyard feeding the chickens, reading beside the fountain, arranging flowers, or waiting for me with stories from the city.

But over time her returns grew later into the night.

At first it was only once every few days.

Then almost every evening.

Whenever I asked where she had been, she always answered easily enough.

She had lost track of time at the market. There had been music near the river. A festival in one of the squares. A woman she met who sold fabrics from Valencia.

And though I never challenged her answers, I always knew when she was not telling me the full truth.

Still, I convinced myself it was harmless.

She was young. Beautiful. Alive in ways I no longer understood. Of course she wanted a life beyond the walls of our house.

I told myself she had found friends, music, laughter, and all the things a young woman should find in a city like Seville.

I refused to name the thought that worried me most.

That she had found a lover.

The nightmare I had dreaded most since the night we entered Seville finally came one night outside a tavern.

The nightmare of having to leave.

Feeding in a city like Seville was easier than anywhere I had lived before. Taverns remained open deep into the night, and the streets around them were often filled with drunken men barely able to walk home. It was easy to find someone alone in a dark alley, someone who would awaken the next morning believing too much wine had stolen his memory.

That night I chose a tavern I had never visited before, believing unfamiliar streets would keep me safer. Near midnight, a drunken man stumbled out through the entrance, laughing to himself as he struggled to keep his balance.

I followed him into the alley beside the tavern.

The moment we disappeared into shadow, I stepped close, placed him under my control, and sank my fangs into his neck.

Then voices erupted behind me.

A group of men burst from the tavern entrance laughing loudly before suddenly falling silent.

I looked up.

There were perhaps ten of them staring directly at me, their friend limp in my grasp, my fangs buried deep in his neck.

For one frozen moment none of us moved.

Then someone shouted.

The men rushed toward me in panic and fury. One of them tore the burning torch from beside the tavern door and swung it wildly toward my face. Fire exploded across my vision as I recoiled backward from the flames.

I threw the first two men aside with enough force to send them crashing into the others. Before they could recover, I fled.

I disappeared into the night before their minds could understand what they had seen.

By the time they reached the alley mouth, I was already far across the rooftops and narrow streets of Seville.

I returned home in a state of panic I had not felt in many years.

I had always been careful.

Always patient.

I chose lonely streets, isolated travelers, quiet corners
where no eyes wandered.

But somehow, without realizing it, Seville had made me
careless.

Or perhaps happiness had.

The next morning, when Sara was preparing to leave the
house, I had already decided what needed to be said.

It was time to leave the city.

Before rumors spread.

Before frightened men began whispering about monsters in
tavern alleys.

Before someone started hunting.

Chapter 24. The Unread Letter

Sara stood near the doorway, adjusting her cloak. The door behind her was open, and morning light from the courtyard spilled into the house, stopping just short of the shaded corner where I stood.

I opened my mouth to tell her.

But the words never came.

Instead I only said, “Be careful.”

She smiled at me warmly.

“Don’t worry, papa.”

For a moment, I wanted nothing more than to cross the room and hold her in my arms.

But the sunlight lay between us, trapping me in the shadows while she remained beyond my reach.

As soon as the sun disappeared beyond the walls of Seville, unease returned to me like a sickness.

I paced through the darkened house while the first lanterns of the city came alive outside our walls. Back and forth across the living room. Past the courtyard doorway. Past the silent fountain. Every few moments my eyes drifted toward the entrance, expecting to hear footsteps, her voice, the familiar sound of the door opening.

But the house remained silent.

Minutes became an hour.

Then another.

The worry inside me slowly sharpened into fear.

Several times I stepped toward the stable, ready to go after her, but stopped myself each time. Seville at night was endless. Crowds filled the streets until dawn. Where would I even search for her?

I tried to calm myself.

She was young. She was alive. Cities were made for people like her.

Still, another voice inside me whispered the truth.

We had stayed too long.

By the time midnight neared, I had already decided.

Tomorrow night we would leave this God forsaken city.

I knew she would hate me for it. I knew it would break her heart. But hearts healed. Graves did not.

I was still battling those thoughts when at last the door opened.

Sara stepped inside.

The moment I saw her, fear turned instantly into anger.

I crossed the room in a flash, seized her by the shoulders, and shouted in her face,

“Where were you?”

The words came out harsh.

“What were you doing out this late?”

Her eyes widened in shock.

“I... I was only—”

“Only what?” I snapped. “Do you think we can live like ordinary people? Do you understand how dangerous this is?”

“Papa, you are hurting me.”

The words struck through my anger instantly.

I loosened my grip, but I could already see tears gathering in her eyes.

“Nothing happened,” she whispered. “I was at the perfume shop. I lost track of time.”

I turned away from her and pressed my hand against my face.

The terror from the tavern still burned inside me.

The torchlight.

The men staring at me.

The look of horror in their eyes.

"We are leaving," I said finally.

The room went still.

"What?"

"We leave by the end of week."

"No."

Her answer came instantly.

"We just made a home here."

"We will make another one somewhere else."

"That is not the same."

"It has become dangerous."

"You always think everything is dangerous!"

I looked back at her.

"I have seen what people do when they fear what they do not understand," I said. "I have watched hospitals burn. Homes burn. Entire cities drown in blood because of ignorance."

Tears rolled down her face now, but anger had begun replacing fear.

“People are not the same as they were centuries ago.”

she argued through tears. “They are different now.”

“And I am tired of running!” she shouted suddenly.

The words echoed through the house.

Silence followed them.

For a moment we only stared at each other across the dim room.

Then she shook her head, crying openly now.

“This is not fair.”

Before I could answer, she turned and ran for the door.

“Sara—”

The door slammed shut.

A second later I heard the horse outside.

I rushed after her, stopping only at the edge of the courtyard where moonlight touched the stones.

“Sara!”

But she was already riding toward the city.

For several minutes I remained there in silence, telling myself she would return once her anger faded.

But I found myself unable to remain still.

Fear pushed me after her.

I followed her into Seville through the midnight streets until she finally stopped outside a small perfume shop near the market district. She climbed down from her horse and threw herself into the arms of the young shopkeeper, who had just stepped out at the sound of hooves.

I stopped far away, unable to go any closer.

The moment I saw him touch her, everything inside me became still.

She buried her face against his chest while he held her gently, one hand stroking her hair as she cried. I could not hear every word, only fragments carried through the open shutters.

She was telling him about leaving Sevilla.

After a while he lifted her face carefully in his hands.

Then he lowered his face to hers and kissed her with the tenderness of someone trying to hold together all the broken pieces she had brought to him.

Even from across the street, I could hear their hearts.

Fast. Drawn toward each other like living things desperate to become one.

And in that moment I finally understood the truth behind her late returns, her smiles, her excuses, the growing distance between us.

Sara had fallen in love.

I was no fool.

From the beginning, I knew there would come a day when Sara would fall in love. A day when she would want a life that did not revolve around hiding in shadows beside a creature like me. She would want a husband, children, a home filled with warmth and noise and ordinary human days. She would want to grow old surrounded by the people she loved.

I had always known that day would come.

But I had hoped for more time.

From the moment she embraced me in that ruined infirmary eight years earlier and begged me to take her with me, I had known our story would end in heartbreak. Reason had warned me then.

But sometimes the heart silences reason.

Even if I could protect her from the dangers of living beside me, there was one thing I could never save her from.

Time.

She would grow old.

And I would not.

I was not going to endure watching another child die while I continued breathing. No parent should have to bury their child while their own heart still beats.

So there was only one reasonable thing left to do.

This was as good a moment as any to say goodbye.

She had found love.

She had enough wealth to live comfortably for the rest of her life, and even if she desired more, she knew our trade almost as well as I did. She no longer needed me to survive.

Those were the thoughts running through my mind as I made my way back home through the sleeping streets of Seville.

When Sara finally returned, she went straight toward the stairs without saying goodnight.

I could still see the redness in her eyes from crying.

While she remained upstairs, I began packing the barrels in the underground chambers for the next night's shipments. Fireworks. Oils. Perfumes. Dyes. More than enough trade passed through our hands now to secure her future many times over.

When I finished, I sat at my table and began writing her a letter.

My hands remained still above the paper for a very long time before the words finally came.

Dear Sara,

Forgive me.

By the time you read this, I will already be gone. If I had stayed to say goodbye, I know I would have failed to leave.

Loving you has been the greatest joy of my long life, but it has also become my greatest fear. One day you would grow old and perish while I remained the same, and I do not possess the strength to watch that happen.

You once begged me to take you with me into the unknown, and for eight years you filled my cursed existence with more warmth than I believed possible. But you belong to the world of sunlight, laughter, love, children, and ordinary days. I do not.

*I saw the way he looked at you.
And I saw the way your heart answered him.*

Stay. Love him. Build the life I could never give you.

Every coin in this house is yours. Every part of this home belongs to you now.

Do not look for me.

Love for eternity,

Your papa.

I went upstairs and placed the letter inside her stone jewelry box, hiding it beneath her necklaces and bracelets so she would not find it too quickly.

By the time she discovered it, I intended to be far away from Seville.

Then I sat in the chair at the far corner of the living room where sunlight never reached, and waited for morning.

When Sara finally came downstairs after waking, she found me still sitting there in the shadows. Her eyes were still slightly red from the last day's tears.

She saw me sitting there, but said nothing.

She was still angry with me.

"You know," I said casually, "I have been thinking a great deal, and perhaps you were right. I have been paranoid."

She stopped where she stood.

"This is a big city, so many faces, no reason to worry mine will be remembered" I continued quietly.

For a moment she simply stared at me.

Then hope suddenly flooded her face.

"So... we are not leaving?" she asked carefully, almost afraid the words themselves might ruin it.

"Not unless you wish to," I answered.

Her expression broke instantly into joy.

“No,” she said quickly, shaking her head. “No, I want to stay.”

Then she ran toward me and wrapped her arms around me in the tightest embrace she had given me since she was a child.

Sara hurried back upstairs to her room to prepare for the day, and for the first time in many months, I watched her go knowing that I had already decided to leave her behind.

As soon as the sun disappeared beyond the walls of Seville, I loaded the barrels onto the wagon and headed toward the port.

I left Sara at home while the night was still young. She was in the courtyard, watering the herbs and scolding the chickens for scratching too close to the vegetables.

“I am only going to deliver the shipment,” I told her.

She looked up and smiled.

“Do not stay too long, papa.”

I promised her I would not.

She had no idea it was the last shipment I intended to sell. She had no idea that a letter waited upstairs in her stone jewelry box beneath her necklaces and bracelets. She had no idea that I planned to leave before dawn and never return.

The docks were alive with noise and lanternlight when I arrived. Sailors shouted over one another while cargo disappeared into the bellies of ships bound for distant shores. I sold everything. The fireworks. The oils. The perfumes. The dyes. All the last pieces of the life we had built together.

By the time I returned home, the night had grown strangely still.

The gate was open.

I stopped before it.

For a moment I only stared.

Sara never left the gate open.

I stepped inside slowly.

The courtyard was silent. One of the clay pots had been broken near the herbs. Feathers lay scattered across the stones. The fountain trickled softly as if nothing in the world had changed.

Then I saw the door to the house.

It hung half open.

Something cold moved through me.

I entered.

The living room had been destroyed.

Chairs overturned. Shelves broken. Curtains torn from their rods. One of the lamps lay shattered across the floor, its oil spread dark over the tiles. There was blood on the wall.

And in the middle of the room, Sara lay motionless.

For several seconds I could not move.

My mind refused to understand the shape before me.

Then I saw her face.

I fell beside her and pulled her into my arms.

“Sara.”

Her name left me as a whisper.

I touched her cheek. Cold.

“No.”

I pressed her against me, rocking her as though she were still a child waking from a nightmare.

“No, no, no...”

Her throat had been cut.

One of the men from the tavern must have recognized me afterward. Perhaps from the port where I delivered shipments, or from the markets where I bought supplies for the workshop. He might even have been one of the physicians or merchants I sold alcohol and chemicals to.

They had come while I was at the port. They had questioned her. Demanded to know where I was. Demanded to know what I was.

And Sara had told them nothing.

She had died protecting me.

A sound tore out of me then, raw and broken, a grief so old and so new that it seemed to split the house itself.

I held her there among the ruins of the life she had built with her own hands.

The curtains she had chosen.

The table she had polished.

The room where she had laughed, argued, danced, and waited for me to rise from the earth.

She had died believing I was coming home.

And I had been preparing to abandon her.

I do not know how long I remained there with her in my arms.

At last, the grief became still inside me.

The men would return.

Perhaps they had gone to gather others. Perhaps they wanted fire, priests, soldiers, proof. Men who had seen a monster once would always come back to destroy it.

I carried Sara downstairs into the underground chamber and laid her beside my coffin.

Then I went back upstairs and prepared the house for its final night.

Barrel after barrel of powder, oil, alcohol, sulfur, and chemical mixtures were dragged from the vaults and placed throughout the rooms. Beneath the stairs. Along the walls. Behind the furniture. Under the wooden beams Sara had once decorated with hanging lanterns.

I worked without thought.

Without mercy.

When everything was ready, I ran a long fuse from the main floor down into the deepest chamber beneath the house.

Then I returned to Sara.

I carried her down into the underground chamber and sat beside my coffin with her in my arms.

For a long time I only held her.

Her head rested against my chest, her hair damp with blood beneath my fingers. I rocked her gently, the way I had rocked her years ago when nightmares woke her in the carriage and she was still small enough to curl against me.

"I am sorry," I whispered.

The words vanished into the dark.

"I was going to leave you," I said. "I thought I was saving you."

I pressed my face into her hair.

"I should have stayed. I should have been here. I should have told you the truth."

She lay still in my arms, peaceful in the darkness, while the house above us waited in silence.

I spoke to her until there were no words left. I told her I loved her. I told her she had been the only light left in my cursed life.

Then, above us, I heard them.

Footsteps.

Voices.

They had come back.

I lit the fuse.

The small flame caught, hissed, and began its slow climb upward through the darkness.

I lifted Sara into my arms, climbed into the coffin, and held her against me one final time.

Then I closed the lid above us.

PART 5.

Chapter 25. A Life in a Few Lines

A tear slipped from Emma's cheek, blackened by smeared eyeliner, and fell onto the notepad in her lap.

The ink spread through the few lines she had written.

Adam, son of Pedro.

Born in Zaragoza, 1082.

Eldest son. Two younger brothers. One sister.

Apprentice in his father's house of healing.

Miriam. Isabel.

The plague came to Zaragoza.

Isabel fell ill.

Then Miriam.

That was all.

A whole life reduced to a handful of words, trembling beneath the dark stain of her tears.

Adam drew a long sigh and stood from his chair.

Across the room stood a white medical dispensing counter, narrow and rectangular, with softened corners and a seamless surface. Above it, a monitor was mounted on the wall, glowing faintly in the quiet room. Below, a narrow hatch waited to open when a selection was made.

Emma watched him walk toward it.

"You know," Adam said, touching the screen, "a few years after the Bloodfall, they stopped producing RedLife."

Emma looked up. "The artificial blood?"

Adam nodded.

The screen woke beneath his fingers.

"The Bloodfall destroyed more than ninety percent of the vampires in less than thirty days. After that, even the few who survived would not trust anything made for them. They feared every bottle might carry a marker. A poison. A signal. Some hidden way to find them again."

He scrolled through the glowing pages.

"So they stopped the production altogether. The factories closed. The formulas disappeared. Since then, I have been feeding on the generosity of thousands of people who donate their blood to me."

Faces appeared on the monitor one after another. Men and women. Mostly young women. Each face came with a name, an age, a city, and a few lines of biography. A music student in Vienna. A nurse in São Paulo. A poet in Montreal. A girl

from Seoul whose note said she had once feared vampires, until Adam made her understand that hunger and cruelty were not the same.

Adam kept scrolling.

Then Emma's face appeared on the screen.

She looked younger in the photograph. Her hair fell over one shoulder, and her smile was uncertain.

Adam's hand stopped.

Behind him, Emma drew in a sharp breath.

"So you got my blood," she whispered.

Adam turned slightly.

"I tried so many times," she said. "They never told me if it reached you."

"It reached me," Adam said.

Adam looked back at her picture.

"I received your gift," he said. "And it was special."

For a few seconds, neither of them moved.

Then Adam scrolled past her name.

A few more faces passed beneath his fingers before he stopped on another donor and pressed

Select.

The machine answered with a low hum. Somewhere inside it, glass shifted against metal. Cold vapor breathed from the seams. A latch opened with a soft click, and from the mist a golden chalice rose slowly.

Adam took it in both hands.

The blood inside was warm.

He drank quickly, without ceremony, then set the empty chalice back on the tray. The machine drew it down again into the fog.

When Adam returned to his chair, Emma was still looking at the monitor, though her face had already vanished among the others.

He sat down.

"When I lit the fuse," Adam said, "when I entered the coffin carrying Sara with me and closed the lid, I believed that would be the end of me."

Emma lowered herself slowly back into her chair.

"I believed it would be the end of my suffering," he said.

His hands rested on the arms of the chair, pale and still.

"I did not know then that vampires could remain in an inanimate state without blood, without breath, for centuries. Perhaps for thousands of years."

The room fell quiet except for the faint pulse of the machine behind him.

“The next time I opened my eyes,” Adam said, “more than six hundred years had passed.”