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PONFERRADA

SPRING 1259

A mangle-eared mutt cocked his head toward the sky sniffing the breeze, sensing the approaching storm. The dog lowered its head, hunched its shoulders, and sidled into an alley. A concussive boom tore the clouds open, and torrents of rain sluiced over the stone-built town of Ponferrada. Up and down the street people scurried for shelter.

“Amika, help me haul this table up against the wall out of the rain.” Gabriela, stocky though she was, struggled to muscle a heavy oak table under the covered walkway that lined the street. The two women were fortunate their apothecary shop lay along the ancient pilgrimage route, the Camino Santiago de Compostela. Road-weary pilgrims, always in need of remedies to assuage their aches and injuries, walked past their shop every day.

“I’ll be right there,” Amika propped her broom against the wall. Like the dog, she turned a weather eye to the skies. *This rain is going to be hard enough to drown fishes*, she thought.

“Esperanza, take these jars and bottles inside.” A waif-like girl scooped their wares into a well-worn wicker basket. Her serious demeanor and small size belied her twelve years.

Inside their stone house on the ancient cobblestone street, an apothecary cabinet, burnished by age to a rich mahogany patina, dominated the room. An intricate warren of compartments and drawers held ointments, elixirs, and infusions. Bundles of herbs hung upside down from the ceiling. A symphony of spicy, citrusy, fruity, and minty smells harmonized like a fragrant orchestra. When customers entered and inhaled the aroma, their spirits lightened, buoyed by the aromas of nature. With their wares safely inside, the three companions settled on a bench, warming themselves before a capacious open hearth.

“This is the third downpour we've had this month,” Amika said. “It will be a good wildflower season, after it warms up a bit. Esperanza, you, and I will scour the hillsides for herbals to replenish our stock. Wild garlic and sorrel mature early, and we might find rosehips that survived the winter. We'll have a lovely time roaming the hills, won't we, Esperanza?” Amika placed her work-hardened hand atop the girl's soft, delicate one.

The girl turned her smokey grey eyes toward Amika and nodded. Roaming hillsides too steep for the farmer's plough was the greatest pleasure Amika and Esperanza shared. In the two years since Amika discovered the girl curled next to the body of her dead mother along the Camino de Santiago, the two had grown as close as any natural mother and child.

“You're a good student. Think of all you've learned since you've been here.” She beamed at the girl affectionately pinching her ear.

“I'm too old for that!” Esperanza protested. “I'm twelve years old, almost a young lady!” She raised her chin defiantly.

Amika's cupid's bow lips stretched into an amiable smile. “Alright then, no more pinches. I wouldn't want to annoy my little mountain goat. What would I do without you scampering over the hills for me, when all I can do is limp along behind? I need you.”

At twenty-four years old, her childhood living rough as an orphan in the wild hills of the Basque country had made Amika wise beyond her years. Her knowledge of plants, learned at the side of a Wise Woman of the old tradition in her Basque homeland, could fill volumes. The two had ranged over the hills, among the feral grasses and wildflowers, until the antagonism of the Catholic church toward her mentor's traditional ways cost her life and forced Amika to flee. Her flight ended here, in Ponferrada, at the foot of the Cantabrian Mountains, after an injury crippled her left leg. But all she had learned still lived within her, and she was eager to pass it along to Esperanza, the orphan with stormy grey eyes and an ineffable power to perceive illness.

Amika limped along as she taught Esperanza the uses of every plant that grew.

“God did not create a single plant without a purpose,” she instructed the girl. “You just need to learn the virtues of each one. Where others see grasses and flowers, I see foods and medicine.” Amika grew passionate

tutoring her young protégé. Under her wing, Esperanza learned quickly, growing from orphaned stray to beloved daughter.

Gabriela mumbled, gripping her woolen shawl tightly around her shoulders as she retreated into the house. She said nothing as she plopped down heavily on a wooden bench facing an open hearth so large it spanned the room. A tripod hanging over the fire supported a heavy iron pot. When her stomach was empty, as it was now, her disposition soured, and she could focus only on satisfying its insistent grumbling. Amika and Esperanza followed her in and took their places next to her on the bench.

“The farmers and herders will be happy with the rain,” Amika explained. “They can expect bountiful crops, and fat sheep with pelts so thick wolves will get a mouth full of wool rather than a meal when they catch one.”

Esperanza smiled at the vision of sheep so fat and woolly that they were impenetrable.

“I expect we'll see many customers coughing and wheezing,” Esperanza predicted. “We will need plenty of mustard greens for poultices, and catmint for fevers.”

“Alright then, I'll cook up some onion tea and hearty bone broth to comfort the pilgrims along their way to Santiago,” Gabriela added.

“Speaking of cool, wet weather, I have just what we need.” Gabriela heaved herself up off the bench and trundled into the kitchen, emerging with three wooden bowls. Dipping her ladle into the cooking pot, she filled them with a thick stew of beans, onions, and lentils. A smile crinkled the corners of her blue eyes as she handed Amika and Esperanza their bowls, then carved thick slabs of barley bread to fill out the meal. The three companions huddled together like birds in a nest. The warmth of affection enfolded them like a well-loved quilt. Gabriela was plump as a partridge, Amika tall, lithe, and still beautiful with acorn-brown eyes, and Esperanza, defiant and serious, with springy mouse-brown hair erupting from her head, and gray eyes peering out from under a wide forehead. In the years since their unlikely meeting, they had settled into an amicable partnership that did not require words.

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Gabriela had not realized how lonely she had been after her husband's death. Without the money he earned as a stone mason, she had resorted to

doing what she did best - cooking. Her husband had not been good company. Taciturn and gruff, he was often hard to live with, but she had loved him, nonetheless. When he died, he left her with nothing but this ancient stone building. Its dark and joyless interior reflected the gloom of lives together. Its one redeeming feature was that it faced the well-traveled route of the Camino de Santiago.

Every day, an assortment of pilgrims shuffled past her doorway - threadbare penitents, aimless vagabonds, and wealthy grandees riding richly caparisoned horses.

“Have a cup of hearty broth!” She called out to the peregrinos, the pilgrims, as they passed her door. “Look at these! Wouldn't you love some of these vegetables, picked fresh from the garden this morning?”

Despite her humble circumstances, Gabriela was generous to all. To those who could drop a coin or two into her bowl, she gave thanks. To those who could not, she gave encouragement. “Ultrea! Onward!” she called out to the weary pilgrims.

One day a young woman with a pronounced limp blew in on a gust of wind.

“Do you remember the day you arrived on my doorstep?” Gabriela mused.

Amika and Esperanza exchanged knowing glances. The story of her arrival had been repeated so many times it had attained the status of legend. It was the glue that held them together.

“Of course, I do. You took one glance at me, realized I was not going to buy anything, and you couldn't wait to be done with me,” Amika chuckled.

“But you didn't leave, did you? I don't think I had ever met a young woman as bold as you. How old were you? Fifteen?”

“Seventeen.” Amika murmured, lost in reverie recalling the fate that brought her to Gabriela's door.

“You walked right up and made a proposal. You were certain you could improve my business. What gall! We hadn't even met yet.” Gabriela smiled with delight.

Amika glanced down at her malformed knee, so twisted that she would always be a cripple. “After my fall I couldn't finish my pilgrimage to Santiago. The sisters at the convent nursed me back to health. But after I was healed, they asked me to leave.”

“I understand that now, but that day when you showed up at my stall, you were as strange as a beard on a baby,” Gabriela chortled. “Now, look at us. You were right. Thanks to your boldness we have a fully functioning apothecary.” She flung her arms wide encompassing home, hearth, and self-made family.

“As if having you in my life was not enough, two years later this Mateo friend of yours dropped off this homeless orphan girl.” One meaty arm reached out to squeeze Esperanza's shoulder, sending the soup bowl in her lap sloshing. “And I resisted taking the girl, didn't I?” She winked at Esperanza.

“Mateo is your sweetheart,” Gabriela's elbow shot out nudging Amika's ribs. Amika raised a palm in the air, ready to argue, but quickly gave up the pretense of innocence. Her friendship with Mateo was as complex as intertwined rose petals, layered with desire, disappointment, and love.

“You know our story perfectly well!” Amika's voice twanged defensively. “I would marry him the moment he asked. He has been the love of my life since I met him along the Camino,” her smile turned sour. “I was never going to be enough for him. He had ambitions. And now he is a successful, educated man with excellent prospects.”

“He still loves you; you know.” Esperanza stretched across Gabriela's broad lap to squeeze Amika's hand.

“Ah, well.” Gabriela chose to see the rainbow, not the storm. “He is a kind and generous man. You could do worse than Mateo.” She winked conspiratorially. Amika smiled demurely.

Esperanza sat silent. She also harbored a story of how she came to this place, but she had shared it with no one. A single tear seeped from her eye remembering her mother's last words before she died in her arms.

“Esperanza, child of my soul, you will not be alone. I will send two others to you, and they will care for you as their own.” Her mother had closed her eyes and breathed a long, rasping breath, then fell silent. When Esperanza was sure she had crossed over to the life beyond, her mother took one last gulp of air and whispered. *“You will have powers of intuition far beyond those of ordinary people. You will know it is real when your eyes burn and your ears buzz. This is my gift to you.”* Then she was gone - no last gasps, no more final words. Esperanza's heart was too broken with grief to ponder her mother's strange prophecy.

Before Esperanza's mother's body was cold, Amika and Mateo found the girl sheltering under a rock ledge cradling the body of her dead mother. *Here they are. The others who will care for me. Just as mother told me.*

The three women settled into a comfortable silence on the bench before the fire, each one reminiscing about their shared history. Gabriela and Amika believed they would live in harmony forever. Esperanza however, sensed change marching toward them as surely as the mangle-eared dog sensed the storm rolling in.

“Listen!” Esperanza said tilting her head upward. “I think the rain is letting up.” She gathered their wooden bowls, brought them to the kitchen, walked to the door, and drew a deep breath. The air smelled like freshly cut hay. “Today will be special. I can feel it. “

Gabriela and Amika no longer questioned Esperanza's remarkable intuition. It was clear the orphan girl with eyes like thunder clouds and hair as wild as a storm at sea had a rare gift. They had seen it often when she diagnosed invisible ailments. She seemed to see behind the curtain of everyday life to a realm where past, present, and future blended into a continuous rhythmic flow, like the confluence of three rivers.

“That's wonderful,” Amika stood, gathering her herbs, preparing to go back to work. “I would love to have a special day. Days have been so dismal this spring.”

The three of them wrestled the heavy oak table back into the street. Within minutes an old woman approached, tugging a sunken-eyed child by the hand.

“She has a cold with a nasty cough,” the old woman declared. As though on cue, the girl unleashed a spasm of uncontrolled hacking. By the time the fit subsided the child's ragged breath came in short, wheezing gasps. Her cheeks flushed red. Her narrow shoulders crumpled. The episode had exhausted her.

“Poor dear.” Amika bent over the table to pat the child's head. She placed the back of her hand against her cheek. It was warm and swampy to the touch. “Stir a spoonful of honey into warm water. Add a little radish juice and a pinch of salt. Do this three times each day.” Amika prepared a packet with a small square of honeycomb and a vial of radish juice. She pressed it into the old woman's hand and curled the woman's fingers around it.

The old woman opened her other hand. Lines like dark rivers scored the valley of her open palm. She dropped a single copper coin into the offering bowl. "Thank you. I would hate to lose her to the coughing disease as I lost her mother. She is all I have left."

As they walked away, a burly man of middle years who had been lingering in the shadows approached the table. He did not raise his eyes but looked forlornly at the ground, kicking his toe in the dust in embarrassed silence. Eventually he spoke.

"I can't explain what's wrong. I don't even know why I came here today, but I just don't feel right." He appeared to be in excellent health with the muscular build, and ruddy skin of a hard-working man in his prime.

"Are you getting enough sleep? Do you and your wife have a crying baby disrupting your nights? Are you eating enough?" Amika peppered him with questions.

"No, our son is almost grown. My wife sleeps the sleep of the innocents as I lay awake turning from one side to the other like a hare roasting on a spit."

Amika's questions shed no light on the cause of his vague symptoms. She paused, cradling her chin between her thumb and forefinger. When she could think of nothing further to help the man, she pulled open a drawer and sprinkled a palm full of willow bark chips into a cloth bag.

"Simmer these. Wait until the water cools. Strain the leaves out and drink the tea. It may taste like chewing wood, so you might want to add a little honey."

"Willow bark tea," he mumbled. "My wife has made this for me many times. Do you have anything else I might try?"

Esperanza moved to the front of the table to examine him more closely. The man was a giant compared to the slight girl with unkempt hair and large eyes.

"Please show me your ankles," she said. The man looked sharply at the girl, shocked by the cheeky request, then pushed his leggings up a few inches to expose swollen ankles.

"Give me your hand."

Reluctantly he extended his arm toward her. Esperanza turned his hand over several times. The skin under his fingernails was a purplish blue and there was a blue tinge to his lips. She laid her fingers lightly on the veins

radiating from his hand up his arm. She closed her eyes as she held his palm upward.

“You are exhausted, aren't you?” Not waiting for an answer, she continued. “Yet you have trouble sleeping. You are short of breath. You have moments of confusion.”

The man was stunned. “How did you know?”

She ignored his question. Esperanza could not explain how she came by her knowledge, and the man would not have believed her in any case. It came from a place of deep, inexplicable insight. She felt something more - a vibration emanating from the patient. She could not define it, but it was as real to her as his beating heart.

“Your heart has grown weak,” Esperanza told him. “It is working too hard. You must eat less meat and more asparagus, peppers, squash, and onions. Strenuous physical activity will overpower your heart. You must rest more.”

“How will I do that?” He protested. “I have crops to plant, rocks to remove from the fields, animals to butcher.”

Esperanza ignored his excuses. “Your son is coming of age. You love him too much. You have allowed him to become lazy and selfish. You must train him to work as hard as you do. If you do not do these things, your family will be fatherless, and your son will be unable to support them.”

Her blunt words struck him like a hammer blow. How could she perceive these things? She was just a young girl, not old enough to marry, yet she spoke with authority. He turned to go, his stomach churning with dread.

“Don't worry.” Esperanza's tone softened as she tried to offer the startled man some comfort. “Just train your son to do the work. Refrain from the heaviest labor, and eat mostly vegetables, only a little meat. If you do these things, you should live long enough to see your grandchildren.”

Amika called after him. “And don't forget your willow bark tea.”

Gabriela and Amika looked at each other, incredulous but not shocked. Ever since Amika and Mateo found Esperanza that rainy night sitting next to the body of her dead mother, haunted by horror, the forlorn girl seemed to grasp things of which she could not possibly have knowledge. When asked, she insisted she heard her mother's voice instructing her. Now, at twelve, her discernment of illness complimented Amika's herbal treatments. Amika was a master of folk remedies, her knowledge passed down through

generations of healers. Esperanza saw maladies through the lens of her brilliant intuition. Their combined talents, along with Gabriela's nourishing bone broth, attracted many visitors.

By evening, the rain had wrung itself out leaving the dry fabric of filmy clouds hanging in the western sky. Amika and Gabriela gathered up their wares and brought them inside. Esperanza did not move but sat staring toward the darkening horizon. When it was almost too dark to see, someone approached from the west. A black cloak enveloped the person's entire body flowing seamlessly from hood to hem. Back lit by the setting sun, it looked like an ominous apparition emerging from the twilight. *Here he is*, Esperanza thought. *I knew he would come.*

"My girl!" the man exclaimed as he approached. "I haven't seen you since last summer. How you have grown!" He bent over to hug her as he would a child but stopped himself. "You are a young lady now. I must treat you with dignity - no hugs." The man stood erect and leaned over to kiss her hand.

"Nonsense!" Esperanza squealed. She threw her arms around Mateo's neck. "I will never be too old to welcome you as a father."

"What's going on out there?" Amika emerged from inside, wiping her hands on her apron. She stopped abruptly. Her eyes softened; her lips parted; her shoulders relaxed.

"Mateo," Amika's voice caught in her throat. "You're here. I didn't expect you."

Esperanza released him from her embrace, and Mateo straightened to face Amika. He had not changed since she last saw him. Though only of average height, his broad shoulders and regal bearing made him appear powerful and significant. Thick, black hair swept back from his forehead reaching almost to his shoulders. His deep-set black eyes beneath a brooding brow were hypnotic.

Six years had passed since Mateo and Amika met along the Camino. Since that meeting, fate had braided their paths together. But as a braid eventually needs to be untangled, the two were not destined to remain entwined.

"I am coming from Salamanca." Mateo was almost breathless with excitement. "I'm sure you remember our friend, Samuel the Jew?" Without any preliminaries, Mateo dove into the conversation. "When we met him

along the Camino, he was on an important mission as an emissary for King Alfonso.”

“Yes, of course I remember him,” Amika tossed her hair back in a gesture of mock arrogance. “I was the first to make his acquaintance, if you recall. He was delivering important documents from the School of Translators in Toledo to King Alfonso in Burgos. If I hadn't rescued the document that dropped from his saddlebag, his important mission would have failed.”

Mateo smiled indulgently. “Of course, Madam.” He bowed and swept his hat from his head. “You saved his priceless parchment.” He rose smiling. “Samuel has been my great ally in establishing my Academy of Classical Learning in Salamanca. Our students are becoming true scholars. Samuel sent me word that the King has granted our school permission to teach an innovative curriculum meant to prepare our students for the University of Salamanca, and Pope Alexander has approved our charter. Ours will be the first true university preparatory school in the kingdoms of Castile and Leon. I am traveling to Leon to meet Samuel, so we can complete the official documentation,” Mateo explained. “I came to share the news with you.”

When she met Samuel, Amika had not encountered many Jews, sheltered as she had been in the forested hills of the Basque country. Yet she apprehended immediately that Samuel was unique, not only in his high rank, but also in his open-heartedness. He was a distinguished scholar at the School of Translators in Toledo and an aristocrat, but had treated Amika and Mateo graciously, without the slightest trace of arrogance. He was grateful for Amika's quick action in saving his precious document. Samuel insisted that the pair of shabby pilgrims join him for dinner. Without asking permission, the three of them showed up unannounced at the home of Aaron Cohen, Samuel's cousin, and invited themselves to dinner. Though they were dirty and disheveled, Aaron and his wife, Johanna, welcomed them wholeheartedly. Never had Amika seen such opulence as graced Aaron's home in the Jewish quarter of Burgos. Mateo, with his patrician background, felt entirely comfortable in such luxurious surroundings, but Amika was shy, self-conscious about her grimy clothing and disheveled appearance. Once Amika and Mateo were properly bathed and given clean tunics and woollen cloaks to replace their tattered clothing, they joined the family for dinner. Mateo shared with Samuel his dream of establishing a

school of classical learning, independent of the monasteries, and unfettered by the narrow world view of clerics. It would be a school like the Muslim madrassas he had attended in his childhood in Andalusia, modeled after the schools of ancient Greece, dedicated to pursuing philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, and natural history. His graduates would learn the languages of scholars - Latin, Greek, and Arabic.

At the time of their visit to Samuel's home, the dream of opening a school for young scholars seemed unattainable, but here he was, four years later, his vision about to become reality. He could scarcely believe his luck.

Amika pulled her mind away from her memories of the Camino. She was delighted by Mateo's news, but his words swirled around her head like a swarm of bees, buzzing but not landing. The whirlwind of emotions that stirred her had nothing to do with Mateo's school. Her feelings were visceral. Her heart swelled to overflowing, not with pride for his accomplishments, but with an aching need. He had risen so high in the world, she worried he would slip away from her altogether. Her accomplishments were ripples in a stream compared to the waterfall of his success. She knew he would never marry her; their differences were too great. Nevertheless, from the moment she met him on the Camino, she understood he would always be her first and only love. He had ambitious plans that did not include an uneducated peasant girl. Though he loved her in his way, he would never tether himself to her side. She put her disappointment aside as Mateo threw his arm around her shoulder enveloping her in his cloak and led him inside.

Tonight, at least, he will belong only to me, she thought.

That night Amika and Mateo climbed the shaky ladder to the loft above the kitchen, leaving Gabriela and Esperanza to lie on their straw mattress next to the fire.

The next morning, Gabriela and Esperanza arranged their wares outside on the oak table without Amika's help. When the sun rose past the roof lines, Mateo and Amika had not yet emerged from their nest in the loft. Esperanza rifled through the drawers and compartments of the apothecary cabinet, deciding which remedies she would need for today's customers - sweet violet for cloudy eyes, mugwort for sick intestines, spring sage harvested just last week to make a tincture to relax muscle spasms. The last herb she selected was a sprig of a black nightshade, called belladonna; she tucked it into the pouch at her waist. She did not often suggest it to