



IMPERFECT ALCHEMIST

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PRELUDE: THE STILL-ROOM

Lady Catherine Herbert

Alchemy is no better than superstition. At best, a fond hope; at worst, heartbreak. Even when the goal is something less ambitious than turning dross into gold.

Catherine sets the lantern on the landing and places the fingertips of one hand against the oak door for balance. Her breath comes in short gasps, her chest tight with bands of pain from climbing the three flights of stairs to the top of the house, lifting feet that seem weighted with lead.

She has been disappointed so many times, she has all but abandoned the quest. Yet, once again, even as her head swims from the dizzy spells that now afflict her, she pulls a ring of keys – brass, silver and gold – from the muslin pouch hanging from her girdle. She turns the lock with the largest one, of brass, and with an effort pushes open the heavy door.

The still-room is bathed in moonlight at this hour, its shelves and tables edged with black shadows, bearing no resemblance

to the heated hive of concoction and distillation that has occupied so many of her daylight hours. Now, its cool, eerie silence is forbidding.

She lifts the lantern and enters the room with unsteady steps, inhaling the musky odours of spices and minerals. Her shaky grip sends blades of light and shadow spinning around her until she places the lantern on the worktable that stretches almost the length of one wall. Glass bottles of herbal syrups and cordials, tinctures and balms line the shelves above it, alongside ointments and lotions in pewter pots. Dried herbs from her own garden rest beside costly minerals and spices from abroad, all carefully labelled and separated according to their potential to heal or harm. Stored along the wall beneath the table are chests of ingredients ready to be used once she is well enough to resume her work – if that day ever comes.

Her husband, Henry Herbert, Earl of Pembroke and master of Wilton House, has spared no expense in support of her activity in the still-room, where she has prepared and perfected chemical and herbal remedies for the health of Wilton's large staff and that of the farmers and villagers in the Wiltshire countryside neighbouring the estate. But Lady Catherine has not made this nocturnal visit to obtain syrup for a servant's cough or a tincture to ease a village wife's labour pains. Nor to seek once more the elusive remedy for her own ailments. With such skill to treat others, why is she unable to heal herself?

For years now, her production of medicines has gone hand in hand with the chimerical search for a cure – not for her persistent weakness, but for infertility. Her husband hasn't reproached her for her failure to bear a child, yet at twenty-two and still childless after nine years of marriage, she is all too aware that the absence of an heir to the earldom blocks his hopes for the Pembroke line. She

herself is beginning to lose her capacity to imagine an infant in her arms. It is the child she longs for, not the line.

Impatient with these thoughts, Catherine moves purposefully to the cabinet at the far end of the room, past the open shelves holding all the alchemical vessels essential to her work: glass aludels and retorts, silver still pots and copper pelicans. The aludels, known by alchemists as ‘eggs’ for their ovoid shape, always make her think of her womb, empty and waiting to be filled. Setting the lantern beside the cabinet, she selects the small silver key, unlocks the inlaid door and inhales a muted medley of exotic fragrances. The lower shelves house an array of small bottles and flasks containing specialised tinctures and cordials. Another shelf bears pots of precious spices from faraway lands: cardamom, ginger and saffron from India, nutmeg and cloves from the Spice Islands, cinnamon from Ceylon. When she lifts their lids and closes her eyes, the distinctive note of each aroma mingles in complex harmony with its fellows, intoxicating her senses. The topmost shelf contains the rarest as well as the most dangerous substances, to be used only in small doses for extreme ailments.

The open shelf at the heart of the cabinet is lined with varied pieces of coloured stone, from crimson-veined marble to a large piece of crystalline rose quartz, the queen of her collection, attended by a handful of small gemstones cut from the same quartz – tumbled crystals, smooth and translucent in the flickering light. She rubs one between her fingers and slips it into the muslin pouch.

From the bottom of the cabinet, Catherine removes the object of her quest: a black walnut box, her husband’s gift for the safekeeping of her medicinal recipes. She runs her fingers over the alchemical symbols engraved in the lid and sides: crossed

lines beneath a circle with horns for *silver*, a circle around a central dot, bearing a sideways crown, for *gold*. She never tires of touching these lines, which seem imbued with the power of the substances they represent.

Unlocking the box with her smallest key, of gold, she lifts the lid and fingers the sheaf of papers. She hopes to pass this precious box along to a daughter. But the collection of recipes is not yet finished. The most important remedy still eludes her. Despite her unending failures, her mounting scepticism of alchemy's powers, she knows that if her strength ever returns she will continue the search, however hopeless.

Rosemary, sage, pennyroyal, angelica, juniper, rue. She whispers the names as if casting an incantation or calling upon spirits to fill her body – or naming the girl child she imagines instructing in the art of alchemy one day.

But now, to the task at hand – not a recipe, but a message.

Placing the box beneath her arm and lifting the lantern, Catherine turns. Moving swiftly, she passes so close to the shelves of vessels that the sleeve of her gown catches on one of the glass aludels. The vessel slides over the edge of the shelf and shatters against the floor. She freezes. Then she closes her eyes and breathes out.

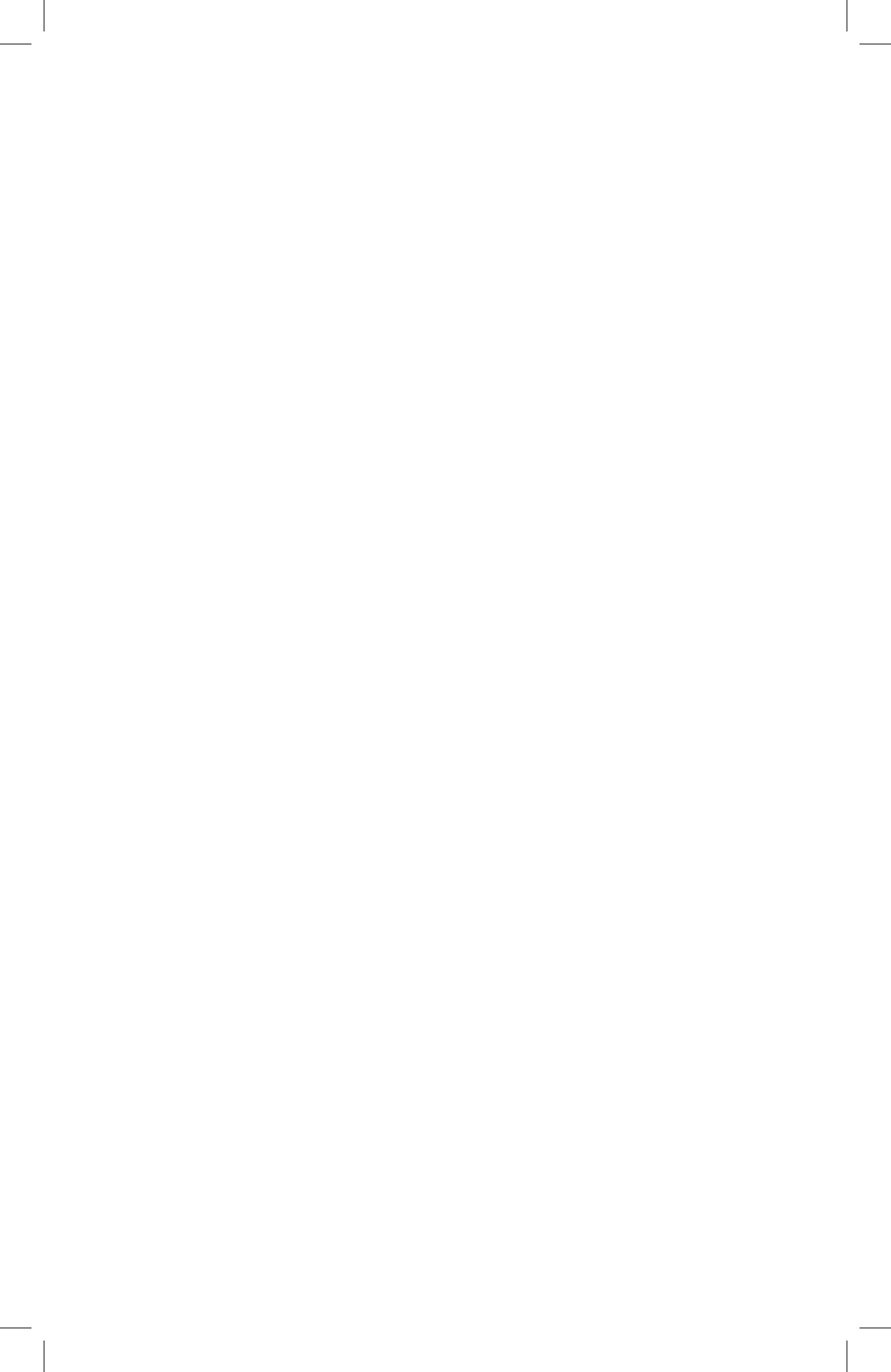
Not all accidents are signs.

Catherine moves to a desk facing the moonlit window and sets down the walnut box. She sinks into the chair fronting the desk, pulls a sheet of paper from the drawer and dips her quill into the inkpot. As she writes, her narrow shoulders relax and her breathing steadies. The words come slowly in the lantern's flickering illumination, but now her hand is firm. At length she sets down the quill, rereads her words and folds the paper. Taking up the sealing candle on the desk, she lights it from the lantern

flame, drips crimson wax onto the sheet. With assurance arising from long practice, her fingers find the small silver pendant, blackened with use, that hangs from a thong around her neck. She pushes the circlet firmly into the wax to complete the seal. As the image hardens in the cooling wax, she replaces the pendant around her neck.

She lifts the engraved lid of the box to place the paper inside, then pauses and, dipping her quill once more, writes with a flourish –

To the next Cleopatra



PART ONE: 1573–78

NIGREDO (*mortificatio*): the initial, black stage, representing the plunge into chaos, darkness, ash; descent, dying.



CHAPTER ONE

Rose, 1573

My mother was a witch.

Or so they said when they dragged her from me. I knew only the truth that she was the centre of my world. But that was why she sent me away.

I was nine years old.

‘The lady in the great house will teach you what I can’t,’ she said. ‘Give you tools no one will question – reading, writing, making remedies. None can challenge her learning.’

She gripped my forearms, hard, her mouth twisting like she tasted something bitter, and I scowled to hide my dread.

‘Learn all you can, Rose.’ Her voice was urgent. ‘But don’t use it unless you have to. Special knowledge scares folks. That’s why—’ She broke off with a gulp. I could see her throat working as she swallowed her words. Her once-plump cheeks, that I so loved to kiss, seemed to have become thinner, but I could still breathe in the heady mix of herbal fragrances from her garden and the storeroom, sharp and sweet.

‘Mum, *you* can teach me all I need.’ My voice cracked with desperation as I tried to burrow into her chest. All I wanted was never to leave her. To stay home with Mum and Da and my little brother. Not to be shut away in the great house to serve a lady I didn’t know.

She shook her head, once, that was all.

There was no use arguing. And nothing else I could give her.

Mum was born a farmer’s daughter, but it was from her mother that she learnt her skills, like knowing the berries on the hedgerows – which to taste, which to toss, and which to press into cordials that could heal. It was her knowledge of herbs that made my father, Martin Commin, a cloth merchant with a market stall in Salisbury, want to marry her.

I loved that story, and asked Mum to repeat it so many times that I could tell it myself. ‘The word is that your daughter Joan knows herbs and grows in knowledge every season,’ Da told Mum’s father, a sheep farmer. ‘I believe there’s a market here for herbal medicines, which I can offer at my stall along with the cloth – to keep my customers healthy as well as clothed. I want your Joan for a wife.’ My father was never slow to get to the point.

Mum told me he dreamt big. ‘That’s what appealed to me when he came courting. He was eleven years older than me, but his dreams seemed as new as my own – to make his way in the world, just like I wanted to.’ I liked this part of the story, for already I had dreams of my own.

‘So we were married in the parish church and set up housekeeping here in Amesbury,’ Mum told me, offering my little brother, Michael, a biscuit and me the story, to keep us both satisfied.

‘I built up the herbal side of Martin’s business and trained his new apprentice – a lad named Simon. Folks soon came from all over Wiltshire for my remedies. At that time, the lord of the great house had taken a first wife he couldn’t abide. And she was no healer. When workers fell ill or came into harm’s way, his lordship sent them to me.’ Here she sighed and fell silent a moment, her sinewed hands smoothing a pleat in her skirt. ‘Simon loved the stars. He taught me the cycles of planets while I taught him the cycles of plants.’ When I frowned, Mum explained the difference between *plants* and *planets*. ‘Planets look like stars in the night sky.’ As I listened I scribbled pictures on the hearthstones, as I had ever since I was big enough to hold a stick of charcoal. I drew plants budding with starlight instead of flowers, and Mum smiled. My drawing during her stories kept us both happy.

‘Together, Simon and I, we made cures to sell that brought as much business as your father could handle,’ she continued. ‘Ah, we taught each other so much! And your birth during those years of learning brought me more joy than any cure I could make.’ When she fixed me in her calm, brown gaze, I knew no one would ever love me more.

But one day the storytelling stopped, and the happy pattern of our days was broken.

‘There’s been some trouble,’ Mum explained as she hurried into our cottage. Taking a deep breath, she fixed me with a steady gaze. ‘Your father’s not home until nightfall from the market, so I need you to listen carefully so that you can tell him what I’m telling you.’

I wondered why she couldn’t wait to tell him herself. But her voice didn’t sound alarmed, so I curled up at her feet, my cheek pressing into her sturdy wool skirts.

‘Last market day, when you were with your father, I spent the time with Sally Hutchins, helping to prepare her for childbirth. Sally had many fears about it, as she’d already lost a child. I brought Michael with me, wrapped in a sling across my chest, because I expected it would be hours before her baby arrived. It took until daybreak, but finally I brought that baby into the world. His left arm was withered, but his mother didn’t care, so long as he lived and breathed. Or so she said, weeping her thanks and pressing a shilling into my palm. But her husband blamed me.’

That was when I heard voices at the front gate, then pounding on the door. I sprang to my feet and Mum lifted little Michael into my arms. Before she opened the door, she looked back at me and said, very clearly, ‘Don’t be afraid.’

When the door swung open, I heard the gasp a crowd makes, for it was a crowd outside. Then one shrill woman’s voice, crying ‘Witch!’ What came next was like the shower of sparks when logs collapse in fire. The crowd sucked my mother away with them, leaving me alone with the embers, my brother wailing in my arms.

When Da got home, I told him what Mum had said. In my haste, I jumbled the facts, but he left at once, white-faced and shaking with fury. ‘Ungrateful scum, these villagers take what they need and bite the hand that heals them.’

My aunt Judith, a chunky woman with loving arms, soon arrived to look after Michael and me, her face as pale as Da’s.

‘*Trial by water*, they call it,’ she said. ‘But you’re not to worry, Rose, for your mum’s innocent. Any babe can have a bad arm. They’ll learn soon enough what fools they’ve been. And that’s the last of Joan helping Wiltshire villagers, shilling or no shilling.’

Aunt Judith explained that they would row Mum into the middle of the river with a rope around her waist and throw her

overboard into the depths. I gasped. I knew Mum feared the dark grasp of the water.

‘If she floats, they name her guilty.’ Aunt Judith’s voice trembled then, and I started to shake.

To keep my mind off my fears and keep Michael happy, I drew pictures for him upon the hearthstones – scary shapes that turned into familiar creatures after all: sparrows and kittens and butterflies. Drawing calmed me, comforted me, gave me a place to change my nightmares into hopes. Michael laughed and pointed to the cat, gurgling, ‘Muggie!’ – baby talk for ‘Mugwort’, our yellow kitten, golden as a clump of mugwort flowers.

I shivered on my hay mattress that night, bringing Michael beside me when he whimpered, and promising him, with a confidence I didn’t feel, that all would be well. Lying in darkness, remembering Mum’s instruction, somehow I kept fear – and tears – at bay. But once I finally slipped into sleep, the cry of *Witch!* haunted my dreams.