

Auriel Rising

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Chapter 1

The alchemist should avoid having anything to do with princes and noblemen.

Albertus Magnus (c. 1193–1280)

"Libellus de Alchimia"

London. 5th November 1609

It was two hours past midnight, and at London Bridge the gaunt wooden piers exposed to the moonlight showed that the tidal river, having duly ebbed, was about to turn. And indeed within moments the black waters began to swirl in, setting all the moored ships by Botolph's Wharf rocking gently; but then there was a stillness, a silence, and for a moment the currents of the Thames churned uncertainly round the great pillars of the bridge, then began to fall away again, to retreat seaward past Deptford and Chatham to the lonely salt marshes by Gravesend, as if the pull of the ocean would not be denied.

The drinkers emerging in stupor from the low riverside taverns blinked at this vagary of the tide, shaking their heads as their breath misted in the November cold, and vowing sobriety come morning. Others felt a touch of fear like the finger of the devil on their skin as they paused to watch and wonder.

As if sensing some change in the midnight air—remembering some half-forgotten scent, perhaps, of distant oceans, distant lands—Master Phineas Pett, the King's shipbuilder, who knew the tides as well as any man in London, awoke from his dreams. Nightshirted, nightcapped, shivering in the cold air of his chamber, he rose heavy-eyed from his bed in his Thames-side house and tiptoed over to the window so as not to wake his wife. He noted the turbulence of the murky waters glistening beneath the November moon; he checked his timepiece and looked again, and still

the tide ebbed as it should not, revealing the weed-blackened timbers of the river-stairs by Oystergate.

He opened the window and gazed out, as though following, in his mind's eye, the progress of those turbulent waters downriver to Deptford, where the hulls of the two new East Indiamen, to be launched before the end of the year, dominated the royal dockyard.

A breath of wind rattled the casement. His wife, stirring, called him sleepily back to bed; so he closed the window and went to join her, still calculating rope yardage and beam-to-keel ratios until at last he sank into a dreamless sleep.

Downstream the surly Thames menaced the ramparts of the Tower, where the lonely prisoner Raleigh, whom sleep so often evaded, limped to and fro within the stone walls of his prison yard, and remembered distant voyages, and gold. When a night bird called from the marshes to the east, Raleigh stopped his pacing to draw his patched cloak around himself as the chill salt breeze stole up from the sea. He listened a moment longer, then he went back inside. But the breeze continued its journey across the sleeping roofs of the city, and the turrets of Whitehall, then out to the silent countryside to circle the palace of St. James, where more people were astir in the dead of night; where candles flickered and men talked in grave voices. For in their charge was the fifteen-year-old heir to the throne, Prince Henry, oldest son of King James of England and Scotland: a youth brave and manly in all ways-except when his dreams unmanned him, as they did now. His face was pale in the candlelight, his hands clenched at his sides. "I saw it again. I saw my death in my dreams," he said to the older men who were his advisers, his guardians. "My enemies are gathering; the stars foretell it; there is nothing to be done."

They reassured him, reminding him of the armed men who surrounded him at all times; of themselves, ready to lay down their lives for him. But the young Prince, still shaken by night fears, whispered, "What of poison? I saw it, I tell you; I foresaw my end."

The fire in the great stone hearth had died long ago, and servants were summoned to rekindle it. Someone was sent, at a murmured order, to check that the guards were vigilant at their stations around the palace.

The Prince feared secret enemies. His Protestant soul saw Catholic assassins in every dark dream. Last month he had arranged for charts of divination to be drawn up in dread of his death, though this was against the urgings of his spiritual mentors, who suspected that the blood of his dead grandmother Mary, doomed Queen of the Scots, ran too thickly in his veins.

As the Prince shivered in the ensuing silence, a boy in a palace of ghosts, as bolts were drawn and doors closed on empty corridors, they said to him again, "We have told you that we will guard you from all those who would harm you."

"Yes," he said. "Yes."

Across the city candles were extinguished one by one. The tide had forgotten its transgression and was surging upriver once more, causing the watermen who rowed secret sinners homeward from the brothels of Bankside to grab their oars and curse as their lamps were set wildly rocking in the blackness.

Prince Henry slept at last, soothed by a sleeping draught. Old Raleigh, once the favorite of Queen Elizabeth, stood by his window, breathing in fiercely the chill salt air from the river, as if to prepare himself.

Raleigh had endured disgrace and imprisonment since the death of the Queen six years ago and the succession of Scottish James. But he had reason to hope again. He had been told that by the end of this year his enemies would fall, and his star would rise once more. He had been promised that a letter was to be sent, telling him of a plan to set him free.

But the year was drawing to its close. The letter, if sent, had not arrived. And he knew, none better, that in the wrong hands such a document would bring death, both to himself and to those around him.