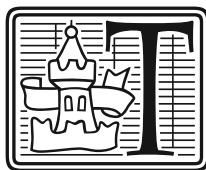


## PRELUDE

*The Astrologer*

1593



THE HUNGER TO KNOW her destiny enflamed Aemilia's heart, driving her to Billingsgate on a scorching afternoon. She hastened down Thames Street, crammed with grocers whose vegetables wilted in the heat, offering up their odors of slow decay. This parish was a gathering place of outcasts and refugees, peopled by immigrants fleeing the religious wars that raged in the Low Countries. The Dutch and Flemish paid dearly for their lodgings in once-great houses that had become tenements, rotting away like the unsold lettuces in the market stalls.

A waif darted in Aemilia's path to distract her while his accomplice attempted to snatch her purse, only to receive a swat from Winifred, her maid, who towered over Aemilia like a blond giantess. Winifred, her stalwart protectress.

"Oh, mistress, let us go home," the maid pleaded. "This is no district for a gentlewoman."

But Aemilia pressed on until she sighted the steeple of Saint Botolph's Billingsgate and beside it the Stone House, the former rectory, its chambers now let by tradesmen. Over the shadowy entrance hung the shingle she had been seeking.

DOCTOR SIMON FORMAN  
MASTER ASTROLOGER & PHYSICIAN

Winifred balked, but Aemilia led the way across the threshold and up the stairs to the astrologer's consulting room. A sallow apprentice opened the door, its hinges squeaking like bats.

“The master astrologer shall see you shortly, madam.”

Aemilia blinked as her eyes adjusted to the murk of this chamber with its single window. Her eyes lingered on the star charts and sigils scribed on virgin parchment and pinned to the ancient wainscoting. The room was sweltering, for a fire blazed beneath a bubbling still. The astrologer appeared absorbed in casting various herbs into the strong water, their essential oils marrying in a fragrant alchemical dance that left her reeling.

To calm her nerves, she examined Doctor Forman’s bookshelf. Apart from his prominently displayed Geneva Bible, most of his texts were Latin—Alcabitius’s treatise on the conjunctions of the planets and Gilbertus Anglicus’s rules for testing a patient’s urine. She smiled to see *Philosophia Magna* by the great Paracelsus, a book she knew well but hadn’t had the opportunity to read in years. Opening the pages, she whispered the Latin words in an incantation, for Paracelsus’s hermetical ideal fascinated her—nature was the macrocosm, humanity the microcosm. Everything in the universe was interdependent, like the interlocking parts inside a clock, everything moving together in divine harmony.

“Madam reads Latin?”

With a start, Aemilia turned to the astrologer, who had appeared at her side, sweating inside his black physician’s robes. When he took the book from her, she couldn’t resist selecting another tome, one with Hebrew letters on its spine. Though she pored through the pages, the incomprehensible letters did not yield their secrets.

“But madam does not read Hebrew,” the astrologer concluded, snatching that book from her as well. “It’s purported to be a kabbalist text, though I confess I can’t decipher the thing. A sailor from Antwerp gave it to me in exchange for his star chart since he’d no other method of payment. Now what can I do for you, madam?”

Doctor Forman steered her away from his books and offered her a chair, then seated himself before her, far too close for her comfort, their knees almost touching. The man’s fame as an astrologer was equally matched by his notoriety as a seducer of women.

Aemilia cast a glance at Winifred, who took up position beside her chair and glowered at Doctor Forman, as though prepared to brain him with one of his own specimen jars if he presumed to take liber-

ties with her mistress. Doctor Forman cleared his throat and moved his chair a few inches back, allowing Aemilia to breathe more freely.

“Master Forman,” she said. “I would have you cast two charts for me. One for my past and one for my future.”

“My services do not come cheap, good mistress. What’s your income?” The astrologer appeared to study her intently, as if trying to deduce her rank and station from her taffeta gown and the lace and pearls at her throat.

“Forty pounds a year,” she said.

“Hardly a princely sum.”

“I’m rich enough to the man who married me,” she said tartly.

Her show of temper seemed to intrigue the astrologer. Perhaps he imagined that a woman with a grudge against her husband would prove an easy conquest.

“What’s your name, madam?” The astrologer began to scribble notes in a small black book.

“Aemilia Bassano Lanier.” She spoke her name with dignity but braced herself for the astrologer’s reaction, the sly innuendo and surmising she had come to expect.

The astrologer remained bent over his notebook. “And where do you reside?”

“Longditch, Westminster.”

He raised his eyebrows. “A most prestigious district. So close to court.”

Aemilia said nothing.

“Now tell me how you came to receive the income of forty pounds a year. Is this your inheritance?”

She looked at the astrologer wonderingly and struggled not to laugh. Was there truly a soul left in London who didn’t know her history?



❖ I ❖

*The Magician's Daughter*



# I

## *The Liberty of Norton Folgate, 1576*



PAPA WAS A MAGICIAN. No one was ever more loving or wise than he.

Seven years old, Aemilia nestled by his side in the long slanting light of a summer evening. Friday, it was, and Papa was expecting a visit from his four brothers. This was a change in custom, for previously Papa had always gone to meet them at Uncle Alvisè's house in Mark Lane. *But this evening was special*, Aemilia thought, glancing at Papa's expectant face. The air seemed golden, filled with blessing, even as from outside their garden walls came the cries of the poor lunatics locked up within Bedlam Hospital. From the west came the baying of the beasts held within the City Dog House. Drunken revelers sang and howled as they spilled out of the Pye Inn just down the road. Yet none of it could touch them here within the boundaries of Papa's magic circle. Aemilia imagined his sweet enchantment rising around their family like fortress walls. This garden was his sanctuary, his own tiny replica of Italy on this cold and rainy isle.

The pair of them sat beneath an arbor of ripening grapes, planted from the vine Papa had carried all the way from Veneto. Around them, his garden bloomed in abundance. Roses, jasmine, honeysuckle, wisteria, and gillyflowers released their perfume while from within the house echoed the music of her mother singing while Aemilia's sister, Angela, played the virginals. Beyond the flower beds, Papa's kitchen garden brimmed with fennel, haricots verts, and rows of lettuce that

they ate in plenty. Papa even ate the bloodred love apples, though Mother swore they were poison and she would not let her daughters near them. It was an Italian habit, Papa said. In Veneto, people prized the scarlet *pomodoro* as a delicacy.

Beyond the vegetable beds lay the orchard of apples, plums, and pears, and beyond that the chicken run and the small paddock for Bianca, the milk cow. Food in London was expensive, so what better reason to plant their own? Aemilia's family never lacked for sustenance. While Papa was away, a hired man came to look after the gardens for him.

They dwelled on the grounds of the old priory of Saint Mary Spital, outside London's city wall. The precinct was called the Liberty of Norton Folgate, Papa told her, because here they were beyond the reach of city law and enjoyed freedom from arrest. Some of their neighbors were secret Catholics, so it was rumored, who hid the thighbones of dead saints in their cellars. But Papa's secrets lay buried even deeper.

When Aemilia begged him for a *fiaba*, a fable, a fairy tale, he told her of Bassano, the city that had given him and his brothers their name. Forty miles from Venice, it nestled in the foothills below Monte Grappa. Italian words, as beautiful as music, flew off his tongue as he described the Casa dal Corno, the villa where they had dwelled that occupied a place of pride on the oldest square in Bassano. A grand fresco graced the Casa dal Corno's façade. Holding Aemilia close, Battista described the fanciful pictures of goats and apes, of stags and rams, of woodwinds and stringed instruments, and of nymphs and cherubs caught up in an eternal dance.

Aemilia turned in her father's lap to view their own house that had no fresco or any adornment at all, only ivy trained to grow along its walls. Loud black rooks nested in the overhanging elm trees.

"Why didn't you stay there?" she asked, thinking how lovely it would be to live in that villa, to be sitting there instead of here. She pictured white peacocks, like the ones she had seen in Saint James's Park, strutting beneath the peach trees in that Italian garden.

Papa smiled in sadness, plunging an arrow into her heart. "We were driven away. We had no choice."

"But *why*?" Her fingers tightened their grip on his hand. "It was so beautiful there. *Bellissima!*"



Aemilia believed that Italy was paradise, more splendid than heaven, and that Papa was all-powerful. How could he have been chased away from his home, like a tomcat from her mother's kitchen? Aemilia's father and uncles were court musicians who lived under the Queen of England's patronage. They performed for Her Majesty's delight and wore her livery. Papa was regarded as a gentleman, allowed a coat of arms. Though the Bassanos of Norton Folgate weren't rich, they had glass windows in their parlor and music room. Their house boasted two chimneys. They'd a cupboard of pewter plates and tankards, and even two goblets of Venetian glass. A fine Turkish rug in red and black draped their best table. Their kitchen was large, and they'd a buttery and larder attached, and a cellar below. Battista Bassano was eminently respectable, a man of means. How could such a fate have befallen him?

Papa cupped Aemilia's face in his hands. "*Cara mia*, you will never be driven from your home. You'll be safe always."

"When I grow up, I shall be a great lady with sacks of gold!" she told him. "I'll sail to Italy and buy back your house."

With the red-gold sun dazzling her, it seemed so simple. She would grow into a woman and right every wrong that had befallen her father.

Papa stroked her hair, dark and curling like his own. "How will you earn your fortune, then? Will you marry the richest man in England?" His voice was indulgent and teasing.

Solemnly, she shook her head. "I shall be a poet!"

"A poet, Aemilia. Truly?"

Even at that age, it was her desire to write poetry exquisite enough to make plain English sound as beautiful as her father's native tongue. Poets abounded at court, all vying for Her Majesty's favor. The Queen herself wrote poetry.

As Papa held her in his gaze, she offered him her palm. "Read my future!"

He took her hand in his, yet instead of looking at her palm, he stared into her eyes. Aemilia imagined her future unfolding before his inner vision like one of the court masques performed for the Queen. Cradling her cheek to his pounding heart, he held her with such tenderness, as though he both mourned and burned in fiercest pride when he divined what she would become.

"What do you see?" she asked him. "What will happen to me?"

Before he could answer, her uncles slipped through the back gate, which Papa had left unlatched. She watched as Uncle Alvis carefully bolted it behind them. Her uncles were usually boisterous, making the air around them explode with their noisy greetings, but this evening they were as quiet as thieves. Aemilia's heart drummed in worry. What could be wrong? Papa was old, already in his fifties, and her uncles even older, their hair thinning and gray. Giacomo, Antonio, Giovanni, and Alvis kissed her and patted her head before Papa instructed her to go inside to her mother and leave them to their business.

The child wrapped her arms around her father's waist. "No, no, no! I want to stay with you!"

The garden at this hour was at its most enchanting, with moths and fireflies emerging from the rustling leaves. She could believe that the Faery Queen might step out from behind the blossoming rowan tree, her endless train of sprites and elves swirling round her.

But there was no pleading with Papa. Stern now, he swept her up and delivered her into the candlelit music chamber. Without a word, he closed the door and left her there.

"Come here, Little Mischief." Angela held out her arms.

At sixteen, Angela was already a woman. She hoisted Aemilia into her lap and positioned Aemilia's fingers on the virginals keys. "You play the melody and I'll play counterpoint."

Papa called Aemilia his little *virtuosa*, for she was nearly as skilled in playing as her sister was. Their fingers danced across the keyboard while Mother and Angela sang in harmony, as though to cover the noise of Papa and his brothers descending into the cellar.

Mother could not read, but Papa had taught both Angela and Aemilia to read and write in English and Italian, and to scribe in a fine italic hand. Angela could play the lute and recorder. Yet Angela wasn't Papa's daughter and Mother wasn't his lawful wife. The neighbor children taunted Aemilia on account of being a bastard, something she understood to be a shameful thing. But she knew that Papa loved Mother. When Mother's husband—Angela's father—abandoned her, Papa had spent his savings to buy her this house. He had even given Angela her Italian name so everyone would think she was his.

Angela was well named. With her hair the color of spun moonlight, her sea-green eyes, and her wine-red lips, she looked as though she had

swooped down from heaven. Mother was her mirror image. She was in her thirties, much younger than Papa. Angela and Mother were tall and fair, as English as elderflower posset. But Aemilia knew she took after Papa. Small and dark and foreign looking, she was wholly his.

Her thoughts flew back to him and her uncles, to what they were doing beneath the floorboards. Were they singing down there? Her sister only played louder while Mother crooned at the top of her voice. *What are they all hiding from me?* It seemed impossible to wriggle out of Angela's lap. Her arms darted across the keyboard on either side of Aemilia, pinning her in place.

As if in answer to her silent plea, a loud knock sounded on the front door. Angela's hands froze on the keys. She and Mother exchanged a long look. Usually their maid answered the door, but Papa had given her the evening free so that she could visit her parents. As the knocking continued, the men's voices arose from below, singing in another tongue. Not Italian, but something utterly alien.

Angela thrust Aemilia from her lap and made to move toward the door, but Mother shook her head.

"Keep playing," she told Angela.

All business, Mother set down her mending and marched for the front door, her face creased in worry. In their trepidation, she and Angela appeared to forget all about Aemilia. Seizing her chance, the child dashed to the kitchen and then stood above the trapdoor that led down to the cellar. Though she tugged on the ring with her entire might, it wouldn't give. The men had latched it from within.

"Master Holland!" Mother's voice came shrill with surprise.

Angela cried out in delight. Francis Holland was her suitor and Mother placed all her hopes in him, for he was a gentleman, the youngest son of a West Country knight. Even his footfalls sounded elegant as he strode the floors in his Spanish leather boots. Her sister was besotted with the man, but Aemilia despised the way he talked through his nose as though they were beneath him, the way he brayed like an ass when he laughed. Mother said his manner of speaking was a mark of quality, the way all rich men spoke.

Still hovering over the trapdoor, Aemilia considered pounding on it and begging her father and uncles to open up, to let her join them, but she knew they would refuse and even punish her for her impudence.

“What a pleasure,” Mother was saying to Master Holland. “Come watch Angela whilst she plays the virginals. I’ll fetch the Canary wine.”

“Ah, my musical maiden, queen of all the Muses,” Francis Holland drawled.

Angela giggled while she continued her arpeggios.

At the sound of approaching footsteps, Aemilia scurried beneath the kitchen table and squeezed herself into a ball as Mother fluttered in to get the wine. Her mother sang to herself like a woman already drunk, as though to cover what was happening below. Meanwhile, Angela pounded the virginals keys as if her life depended on it. But if her sister drank wine with Master Holland, Aemilia reasoned, surely she would have to lift her hands from the instrument.

“Where has that child gone?” she heard Mother ask Angela.

“I thought she was with you,” said her sister.

Mother took over at the keyboard. Aemilia knew this because that unholy jangling could not have been her sister’s music.

“The moon is so lovely tonight, Master Holland,” Mother shouted over the jarring notes. “Why don’t you and Angela step out into the garden?”

Huddled under the table, Aemilia listened to them go out the back door, Angela laughing like a Bedlamite in response to Master Holland’s japes and jests. Mother waited a minute before dashing after them. Until they were formally betrothed and the wedding banns set outside Saint Botolph’s church, Mother would guard Angela as though she were a diamond.

When they were finally gone, their voices swallowed in the garden’s hush, the men’s song arose again. Aemilia pressed her ear to the vibrating floorboards. How she yearned to unravel her father’s mystery. She held her breath to hear him chant in the forbidden language he would not speak to any but his brothers.

*Barukh atah Adonai m’kadeish haShabbat. Amein.*

Seven years old, what could she comprehend of banishment and exile?

EVERY SUNDAY WITHOUT FAIL, the Bassanos attended church at Saint Botolph-without-Bishopsgate where Aemilia learned to stand with her spine rigid and not yawn lest Mother pinch her. The curate frowned upon organ playing, so they sang the psalms a capella. Though Aemilia adored the singing, the sermon on the torments of hell was so fiery that it raised her skin. In a panic, she gazed over to the men's side of the church where Papa stood, his face unreadable. When the service dragged to an end, she launched herself into his embrace.

"Do you fear hell?" she asked, her heart pounding sickly. How was she to know if she was part of the Elect who would be saved or merely one of the countless damned?

Papa's face crinkled as he lifted her in his arms.

"Aemilia, I will tell you a secret," he whispered in her ear. "Do you promise not to speak a word of this to anyone?"

Solemnly, she nodded.

"Hell is empty," he whispered.

As she gazed at him in astonishment, he kissed her cheek.

"All the devils live up here in plain sight."

He pointed across the road to where a gaggle of idlers loitered outside Bedlam Hospital. Their guffaws pricked the air as they pointed and jeered at the poor Toms peering back at them through the barred windows.

"Angels live amongst us, too," he whispered, turning to smile at Aemilia's sister and mother. "Look to the angels and they will look after you."

ONE SUCH ANGEL WAS their neighbor, Anne Locke. In the parlor, Aemilia read aloud from the Geneva Bible while Papa looked on and Mistress Locke listened, clearly impressed that he had taken such care to educate his daughter.

"When I was your age," Mistress Locke told Aemilia, "the mere thought of young girls reading the scriptures was heretical. Why, it was my great patroness, Catherine Willoughby, the Duchess of Suffolk, who first petitioned King Henry to read the Bible for herself. But you, my dear, are the daughter of a brave new world!"

The Widow Locke might have appeared severe to some in her plain

dark gown, her hair pulled back beneath her starched white cap, but her smile was as wide as her heart. Aemilia would have turned somersaults in a tempest to please her. Anne Locke was a poet, the first to write sonnets in English. Papa said she was one of the best-educated women in the realm. During the reign of Catholic Queen Mary, Mistress Locke had fled to Geneva with John Knox and there she had published a volume of her translations of Calvin's sermons. Here in the Bassano parlor stood a great woman of letters. Mistress Locke beamed at Aemilia, as though she were her goddaughter.

Hope beat fast in Aemilia's heart. Might she not tread in Mistress Locke's own footsteps, become a poet just like her? Trembling in awe, she recited from Mistress Locke's own sonnets.

The sweet hyssop, cleanse me, defiled wight,  
Sprinkle my soul. And when thou so hast done,  
Bedewed with drops of mercy and of grace,  
I shall be clean as cleansed of my sin.

Yet even as Aemilia uttered Mistress Locke's pious words, Papa's secret reverberated inside her. *Hell is empty*. What deeper mysteries did her father conceal? Surely in time he would reveal them to her when he judged her to be old enough.

Glowing in the warmth of his gaze, Aemilia told herself she was heir to his magic. Weren't she and Papa both born under the stars of Gemini, the Twins? This meant they had two faces, like the moon. One they showed to the world while the other remained hidden like a jewel in its case, only revealed to those they loved and trusted most.