

The Apothecary's Grimoire

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Introduction

In plague years, the air itself seems to grow heavy with intention. Bells toll longer, markets hush, and doorways cower beneath chalk marks no one wishes to read. The Apothecary's Grimoire unfolds in such a season, when an old craft is tested by a new terror, and when hands used to grinding seeds and leaves must also learn to balance rumor and fear. This is a book about two lives—a master at the edge of his certainty and an apprentice at the start of hers—set against a city that believes healing and

heresy may share the same shelf.

The apothecary tradition in these pages is drawn from mortar-dust and manuscript gloss, from herb-gardens tucked against cloister walls and from market stalls sweet with fennel and sharp with vinegar. Remedies were stories before they were receipts, passed by mothers, monks, and merchants, carried on riverboats and retold in winter kitchens. Among them flowed the speculative currents of alchemy and the measured caution of the guild—one seeking the hidden natures of things, the other insisting that scales and seals could tame both error and ambition. Between these currents, our apothecary and her apprentice make their way.

The plague presses them into decisions no ledger anticipates: which patient to see first when the lane is full of coughing, which jar to unstop when both promise relief and risk, which authority to trust when scripture and speculation disagree. Accusations of witchcraft find easy purchase in such uncertainty. A vial overturned becomes an omen; a Latin marginal note turns into a spell; an apprentice's quickness reads as unholy gift. The same instruments that coax camphor from laurel—retorts, alembics, furnaces—cast suspect shadows by candlelight.

Yet there is order beneath the panic, if one listens. The book's chapters track the rhythm of a working stillroom: gathering at dawn before the streets stir, washing roots clean of soil and rumor, keeping faith with measures and with the limits of knowledge, and recording outcomes without boast. You will encounter the texture of rue and rosemary, the metallic breath of quicksilver, the sober grammar of weights and drachms, and the beliefs that braided saints' bones with simple syrups. Where the record of history is strong, this story leans upon it; where gaps yawn, imagination spans them with care.

This is fiction, but it is not careless fancy. Names of plants and practices, glimpses of guild charters and monastic formularies, the slow logic of distillation and the haste of triage—all are presented to honor the craftspeople who stood between suffering and the void with only their wits, their shelves, and their stubborn curiosity. If at times the page tilts toward wonder, it is the same tilt that drew medieval eyes to the glimmer of a still and the margin-doodles of a tired scribe. Wonder, after all, is a kind of attention.

You will not find spells here, though some characters will name them so. You will find attention paid—to fevers, to failures, to the quiet triumph of recording what worked and what did not. The apprentice learns that a grimoire is not merely a book of secrets; it is a commitment to remember, to test, and to write plainly even when the ink trembles. The master learns that certainty is a tincture best used in drops. Between them, a city learns that survival is a collaboration of hands, not the verdict of a single voice.

Enter, then, the shop with its hanging bundles and its ash-warm hearth. Listen for the

clink of brass weights, the soft groan of the press, the creak of the signboard in an anxious wind. The doors are barred against the pest, but not against you. On the workbench lies a ledger, its margins crowded with notes, stains, and hope. This is their grimoire, and for a plague year—perhaps for any year—it is also a story of how knowledge is made, defended, and, at a cost, shared.

CHAPTER ONE: The Smell of Rue and Smoke

The morning air in the Oakhaven district did not smell of the coming spring, though the frost had long since retreated from the cobbles. Instead, it smelled of desperation—a thick, acrid cocktail of burning pitch and bruised rue. Master Benedick stood at the heavy oak workbench of his shop, his fingers stained the color of steeped walnut hulls. He did not look at the door, but he heard the click of the latch and the hesitant shuffle of boots that told him the girl had arrived. It was a rhythmic, uncertain sound, the gait of someone who was not yet sure if she was entering a sanctuary or a tomb.

Benedick adjusted his spectacles, which were perched precariously on the bridge of a nose that had been broken in a guild dispute twenty years prior. He was currently preoccupied with a bundle of *Ruta graveolens*, the bitter herb of grace. To the common folk, rue was a ward against the devil; to Benedick, it was a stimulant and an antispasmodic, provided one didn't use enough to blister the stomach lining. He stripped the small, bluish-green leaves from a woody stem, letting them fall into a stone mortar. The scent was sharp, unpleasantly metallic, and citrusy all at once, the kind of odor that clung to the back of the throat like a physical presence.

"You're late, Elsbeth," he said, his voice like the grinding of two dry stones. "The charcoal in the furnace is already white at the edges, and the vinegar for the sponges has begun to turn sharp. In a plague year, time is not measured by the sun, but by the speed at which a man's lungs begin to fill with fluid. Put on your apron. The heavy linen one, not the decorative rag your mother sent you with."

Elsbeth did not apologize. She was a thin girl of fourteen with eyes that seemed too large for her face, a trait that served her well when peering into the depths of a boiling vat. She moved to the peg by the door, donning the stiff, wax-treated apron that smelled faintly of old tallow and lavender. She had been apprenticed to Benedick for only three months, a span of time that had seen the city go from bustling prosperity to a state of hushed, terrifying vigilance. The "Great Sickness" had arrived on a grain barge from the southern ports, and now the bells of Saint Jude's tolled with a frequency that suggested the ringer had forgotten how to do anything else.

The shop, which bore a modest sign depicting a gilded pestle, was a labyrinth of shadows and sensory overload. From the ceiling hung bunches of drying chamomile, sage, and the long, skeletal roots of valerian. Shelves groaned under the weight of ceramic jars, glass flagons filled with suspirating tinctures, and lead-lined boxes containing the more volatile salts. It was a place of precise measurement in a world that felt increasingly immeasurable. Benedick moved to the hearth, where a small iron pot was simmering. He beckoned Elsbeth over, gesturing with a stained wooden spoon.

"Tell me what you smell, child. And do not give me the Sunday school answer. I don't care if it smells like 'safety' or 'mercy.' Give me the components."

Elsbeth leaned over the pot, her nose wrinkling. She inhaled deeply, her mind sifting through the catalog of scents she had been forced to memorize. "Vinegar," she began, ticking them off on her fingers. "Strong white wine vinegar, thrice-distilled. Then rosemary—the oil, not the dried needle. Peppermint for the cooling of the breath. And... something foul. Wormwood?"

Benedick nodded once, a sharp, bird-like movement. "Wormwood to discourage the fleas, though the priests say it's to discourage the demons. We are making 'Four Thieves Vinegar.' Legend says a band of looters used it to rob the dead without catching the rot. Whether they survived by the grace of the herbs or the strength of their constitutions is a matter for the philosophers. For us, it is our primary defense. We will soak the face-masks in it. We will wash the counters with it. If the Bishop asks, we will tell him it contains holy water. If the Guild Inspector asks, we will show him the receipt for the Gallic wine."

He handed her the pestle. It was a heavy thing, made of solid brass and smoothed by decades of use. "Grind the rue. I want it reduced to a fine pulp, not a mash. If you see the oils begin to separate, add a pinch of dried hyssop to bind it. We are preparing a cataplasm for the baker's son. He has a swelling in the groin the size of a pigeon's egg. It won't cure him—nothing cures the Black Death once the humors have fully curdled—but it might draw the heat out enough to let him speak his last words."

As Elsbeth began the rhythmic work of grinding, the sound of the mortar and pestle filled the shop. It was the heartbeat of the apothecary's trade, a dull, reassuring thud-thud-scrape. Outside, the street was unnervingly quiet. Usually, the lane was a riot of noise: fishmongers shouting their prices, the clatter of cartwheels on stone, the laughter of children playing at hoops. Now, there was only the occasional rumble of the 'dead-carts' and the distant, rhythmic chanting of the flagellants two streets over, who believed that whipping their own backs would satisfy a God they perceived as angry.

Benedick watched the girl work. She had a natural hand for the chemistry, a steady grip that didn't waste motion. It was a dangerous time to be a girl with a knack for mixing. The city was looking for scapegoats. When the physicians in their long robes and bird-masks failed to stop the dying, the people turned their eyes toward those who worked with hidden fires and strange powders. An apothecary was a necessary evil, tolerated as long as the potions worked and viewed with murderous suspicion the moment they didn't.

"The smoke is coming from the square," Elsbeth remarked, her voice barely audible over the grinding. "They are burning the bedding of the deceased again. My father says the smoke carries the miasma away, but it makes my chest tight."

"Your father is a cooper; he knows barrels, not breath," Benedick said, though not unkindly. "The smoke does nothing but ruin the laundry. The miasma, if that is truly what it is, is a heavy thing. It clings to the damp corners of the wharves and the stagnant water in the gutters. If you want to stay alive, Elsbeth, keep your feet dry and your hands clean. And never, under any circumstances, breathe in while you are lancing a bubo. The air that escapes the body of the sick is a concentrated poison. It is the breath of the grave itself."

He turned his attention to a small glass retort sitting on a sand bath over a low flame. Inside, a deep crimson liquid was beginning to bubble. This was his private project, a distillation of antimony and wine that he hoped might act as a powerful emetic. In his ledger, he had titled it *The Red Lion*, a nod to the alchemical texts he wasn't supposed to own. The local clergy viewed alchemy as a pursuit of the hubristic, an attempt to steal the creative fire of the Almighty. To Benedick, it was simply the study of how things changed from one state to another. If a base metal could be 'ennobled,' why couldn't a corrupted human body be purged of its rot?

Suddenly, a heavy thud sounded against the shop door. It wasn't a knock, but the weight of a body slumping against the wood. Elsbeth froze, the pestle held mid-air. Benedick reached for a long wooden pole he kept by the counter, used for sliding shutters and, occasionally, keeping the desperate at bay.

"Don't open it yet," he cautioned. He moved to the small barred window set into the door. Outside, a man was crumpled on the step. He was dressed in the livery of the City Guard, but his yellow silk tabard was stained with vomit and filth. His face was a mask of grey, his eyes bloodshot and wandering.

"Master Apothecary," the man wheezed, his voice a wet rattle. "The Captain... he says you have the powder. The white powder from the east. He says it stops the shaking."

Benedick sighed, a sound of profound weariness. He knew the powder the man meant—arsenic in minute, carefully measured doses, often used to treat the ague, but

lethal in the hands of the panicked. "Tell your Captain that the white powder is gone. The shipments from Venice have ceased. I have only the vinegar and the salts of wormwood."

"Please," the guard groaned, reaching a trembling hand toward the bars. "I have the coin. Gold sovereigns. Just a dram of the mercury water. Anything to stop the fire in my blood."

"I cannot sell you a swifter death and call it a cure," Benedick said firmly. "Elsbeth, fetch the long-handled ladle. Fill it with the vinegar of the four thieves and pass it through the bars. Let him drench his tunic in it."

The girl obeyed, her movements mechanical with fear. She dipped the ladle into the vat, the steam rising in a pungent cloud. As she reached toward the door, Benedick caught her arm. His grip was surprisingly strong. "Do not touch his skin. Do not even touch the ladle to his clothes. Drop the liquid from a height. The boundary between his life and yours is thinner than a sheet of parchment."

She did as she was told. The guard didn't even try to catch the liquid; he simply leaned back and let the sharp, herbal vinegar splash over his chest and face. He let out a whimper that was half-sob, half-relief, then rolled off the step and began to crawl toward the middle of the street. They watched through the bars until he disappeared into the thickening fog of the morning.

"He's a dead man walking," Elsbeth whispered, her hand trembling as she set the ladle down.

"Most of them are," Benedick replied, returning to his workbench as if the interruption were no more significant than a passing rain shower. "Which is why we must finish the rue-mash. If we cannot save the guards and the bishops, we can at least try to keep the baker's son from screaming through the night. Precision, Elsbeth. In a world of chaos, the only thing that holds is the scale."

He picked up a small silver balance, carefully placing a brass weight on one side. The delicate arms of the scale teetered, seeking equilibrium. To the outside world, this was a shop of mysteries and perhaps dark arts. To the man and the girl inside, it was a fortress built of glass jars and dried leaves, the only place where the nightmare of the plague year could be broken down into grains, drachms, and ounces. The smell of rue and smoke remained, but as Elsbeth returned to her mortar, the steady sound of the grinding offered a small, defiant rhythm against the tolling of the bells.

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