

4,900 words

The Handmaiden-Alchemist

By Marie Vibbert

Loire Valley, 1520

Estienne's shadow fell over me and I could not, of a sudden, recall the stitch I was making. He had invited himself onto the ladies' porch without announcement.

Odette's voice faltered. "Take—" She was reading from the Queen of Navarre's latest work, and the next line was given to King Henry. She pressed her face closer to the page, as if to deny she had seen him. "Taking a woman by force is the highest honor he can pay her. Whenever you hear of some woman being taken by force—"

Estienne crossed right through our midst to read over her shoulder, "You know she has refused the man all other means of obtaining her. It proves her virtue without depriving her of pleasure."

The baroness, seated on the opposite side of the porch, was silent, her hand raising and lowering with her thread.

Estienne was delighted. "Are these the improving words you ladies are so fond of?"

The baroness, without looking up, said, “Many a castle that could have been saved is razed, because men think negotiation is half defeat.”

Estienne put his fingertips under my chin and raised my head like I was a pear he was considering eating. “To start negotiation is to surrender, when your beauty conquers men so easily.”

Men always speak of the power of beauty as though it were like the power of their arms. If it were, I could use my power to move Estienne away from me.

The baroness held her embroidery out for me to take. “We have idled enough. It is time to prepare for supper.”

As I rose, Estienne gathered my skirt and held it to his hips so I couldn’t get away. His hot breath coated my cheek. “I am helplessly captured,” he gasped. I took the chain of my pomander in hand and wished it weighed enough to be a weapon, knowing any attempt I made to get away would be more comedy than valor.

“Estienne,” the baroness said, “my arm grows weary.” He let go of my gown at last so I could take the baroness’ hoop, stepping on my own work.

Odette brushed shoulders with me as we climbed the stairs. “If I were young like you, I imagine I’d be smitten by the turn of Estienne’s calf as well.”

I was at a loss for a vehement enough denial. “If he were just his calves, I should be pleased; his legs are more amiable companions than the rest of him.”

The baroness, following unhurriedly, said, “It is best to assume men see us as castles to besiege, and keep our draw-bridge up and our portcullis down.”

It was easy enough to speak of portcullises when wealthy and well-married.

In the main room of my father's house, where the windows onto the street let in the light, stands my father's workbench. He'd left the *Mirabilis* laid open to a page describing various properties of sulfur, stained with brown splotches of oak gall. I picked up a jar I knew well, full of orpiment powder the lovely color of fresh egg yolks. My hands shook as I tapped a small amount into the crucible.

"What are you doing home, child?" My father came in from the back door, holding a bundle of herbs.

Heat and warmth marked my fear, a release of the humors, soaking quickly into my bodice. I curtsied to my father. "I asked to be excused for supper. Odette walked down from the chateau with me."

He set his herbs on the dining table. "Excused? Whatever for? And what are you doing with my crucible?"

"I thought I would distill some arsenic, Father."

"Oh. That's kind of you, my heart, I was nearly out. But why are you here?"

I felt suddenly unable to face him. I crouched to light the ceramic oven father used for distillations and spoke to the growing fire as I fed it tufts of straw. "One of the baron's gentlemen, Estienne, he..." I could not give voice to my fear. "I had to get away."

To extract arsenic takes a hot fire indeed. I scooted back to wipe the sweat from my brow and felt my father standing over me. He was frowning. "And why are you thinking to collect a poison tonight, my darling child?"

Did he suspect my true purpose? I affected as meek a pose as I could. "Merely to be useful to you."

He bent so our eyes were on a level. “Don’t have your head turned by romantic notions of what lengths a woman should go to protect her virtue.” He grimaced, straightening, and then spoke carefully. “A fallen woman can still be... married.”

Perhaps he meant this kindly. I only heard that he would not intervene before I had fallen, only after. “I have no wish to sin, Papa.”

He met my eyes, and I began to fear, as I had as a small child, that my father could read minds. He kissed my forehead. “You’ll go back to the Baroness, be a sweet and beautiful companion, and she will arrange the best marriage for you.”

“Of course, Papa,” I said. He looked expectant. “You were reading the description of sulfur again, I see. Have you made new discoveries about it?”

His eyes lit up and soon he was lost in soliloquy. I started some lye percolating and looked for a glass bottle small enough to fit in my pomander.

#

Odette returned not long after Father retired to read. Her skirt swayed before her as she paced. I was combining slaked lime¹ and potash². I’d gotten distracted by a description in father’s book of stronger, “caustic” potash³ and I wanted to see what it looked like. Potash is a copper-colored brittle substance made from soaking the ashes of certain plants, and my father had some already ground into powder.

Odette pulled me back by the arm, as though the mixture could leap out of its bowl and harm me. “What are you doing?”

“You were not long at your prayers,” I said.

Her face pinched at the corners. “And you have not been at them at all.”

¹ Ca(OH)₂

² K₂CO₃

³ KOH

“I am mixing potions for my father.”

“Natural philosophy! It’s worldly and carnal,” she crossed herself. “The baroness shouldn’t allow it.”

“You are speaking of my father’s work,” I said, more boldly than I felt. Behind my back, pure lime⁴ was quietly falling out of the liquid solution like snow.

“We’ll see,” Odette said, and dragged me off to the village church. She insisted I hold the cross and recite the Our Father until she was convinced holiness did not blacken at my touch. I could blacken things easily with nitric acid⁵ silver, but the look on her face would not be worth being burned as a witch.

#

Before returning to the chateau, I secreted between my chemise and the bodice of my kirtle a vial of arsenic⁶, a vial of the caustic potash, which turned out to be white, and my soft-bound book. I tied the kirtle tight, but still kept touching the small lumps under my breast, afraid my vials should drop and be shattered. But the arsenic was unlikely to be useful, merely a distraction while I made my real weapon. Inside my pomander, instead of the usual ball of perfumed resin, rested my father’s smallest glass bottle, full of Aqua Fortis⁷, a good strong acid. Should Estienne try to dishonor me, I would burn him. Let him use his sophistry on scars.

#

⁴ Calcium hydroxide

⁵ HNO₃

⁶ H₃AsO₄

⁷ Nitric Acid - HNO₃

When I came down to fetch a reed-light the next morning, the baroness and Father Guillaume stood like a bridal couple at the chapel door, flanked by Isabel and Catherine, which made for the entirety of the baroness' retinue, minus Odette and myself.

"There is some concern," the baroness said, "over your piety, child, and your chastity."

My chastity? I clutched my bodice. "My lady!"

The baroness held up a finger. "And then there is your continued fascination with alchemy. So-called 'natural philosophy' leads nowhere but confusion."

"But..."

She gestured to Father Guillaume. "Therefore, I have decided you will be my chaplain's assistant this month."

"But I have work to do for my father!"

She advanced. Her gabled headdress brushed my hood. She spoke through a seeming kiss, lips hardly moving, "I am giving you sanctuary from the lout."

I was over-awed by the close contact, by the white powder on her cheek, by her clever kindness, and then she and her other handmaidens were gone, leaving me alone with the priest.

I had often read that holy men were not necessarily to be trusted with a woman's virtue, especially not young priests. I lifted my pomander into my hand.

Father Guillaume bowed. "I only scourge the altar attendants hourly."

It took me a full measure to recognize the jest, and then I had nothing I could say. He shook his head at my expression. "Come with me." He gestured into the doorway. "I promise – no scourging."

We walked into the cool darkness of the chapel. Small and built entirely of stone, it nestled against the back of the chateau. It would have made an excellent workshop. Father Guillaume settled on a stone bench under one of the three cruciform windows. “Devotional service should never be a chore, or even worse, a punishment,” he said. “I am told you are something of a scholar. You should enjoy increasing your wisdom in the chapel.”

Before I could stop myself, I said, “I’ve never found repeating the same words over and over to increase one’s knowledge of them.”

He looked away, like a modest maiden. “Tell me you don’t talk to your mistress this way.” His face was delicate, like a crystal, and his eyes clear.

I liked that. I quickly cast down my eyes. “I am tired, and my words get away from me. I am sorry, Father.” I curtsied. “May I go?”

“Tarry a moment longer. Tell me how you would increase your knowledge, if not through prayer. Please? Don’t look that way, this isn’t a test, or a reproach. I wish to know.”

I held my hands to my stomach and carefully sat myself. I couldn’t look at him. My eyes fell on a misericord at the back of the room. I’d always admired the simple carving and the wisdom that placed it there for the older members of the household to lean against. “I look there, and I see a misericord,” I pointed. “And I know it is made of wood, and I can examine the grain and find it to be oak. I can burn the wood and leach its ashes to extract the lye⁸ within. Every substance around us has other substances inside, and every year, mankind learns more, and the divides become finer.” Father Guillaume’s eyes were fixed on me. Perhaps his gaze collected light like a lens, and that

⁸ NaOH

was why I felt so warm. “The church sees only a seat and can tell me nothing more about it, save that it is a seat, and I should not think about it because there is nothing inside anything but God.”

He nodded, slowly. “Isn't God beautiful to contemplate, even in a piece of wood?”

“You can contemplate him, blandly, on the surface, but if you try to ask any interesting question, you are told it is blasphemy and to be silent!”

He raised an eyebrow. “Ask me an interesting question.”

Suddenly I felt as afraid as when Estienne grabbed my skirts. I shook my head in silence.

“Not all questions are forbidden. Surely you have one?”

“If... if God the Father and God the Son are the same entity and substance, why does He talk to Himself?” I blushed. It was a childish question, but I couldn't remember a better one.

Father Guillaume smiled. “But that's easy. Don't you talk to yourself?”

“But they argue!”

“And don't you argue with yourself?”

I fumed. “That is a terrible answer, and I'm not sure it's theologically correct.”

“It's also not that interesting of a question.”

I wondered how terrible of a sin it was to strike a priest. “May I go, Father?”

“An interesting question,” he leaned back thoughtfully, “is ‘why do good people sin?’”

“I have no inclination to sin,” I said.

“Ah,” he said, “but that answer itself is a sin of pride.”

I stood. “Clergymen choose the answers they want and then declare themselves right.”

He shrugged. “We do wish to emulate God.”

I stared aghast. He put his hand on my wrist. “I’ll show you a place to store whatever you’re hiding under your bodice, and then I’ll show you how you can help me with my work.”

“What? I – What do you mean, hiding?”

He beckoned for me to follow him through an arch beside the altar. It led to the sacristy. A wardrobe dominated one side, and on the other there was a bench and pegs, from which hung robes. The far wall was a different stone, part of the chateau itself.

Father Guillaume opened the wardrobe. One of the shelves was empty. “You can put your things in here.”

I hesitated. He stepped back. Embarrassed, I drew out my notebook first, and then the two vials. He gave me room and time to set them down.

“And what are these?” He touched the shelf next to the vial of potash.

“Chemicals.”

“What are they for?”

“For study.”

“Then you may keep them safe here for your studies.” He left the room with his hands clasped. He did not ask to read my journal. He said nothing about whether my interests were appropriate.

I had a new sin; I was completely in love with Father Guillaume.

#

I carried the tithe box to the village church for Father Guillaume that evening. It was a pleasant walk and I got to ask many of the questions Father Jehan had refused to answer when I was a child. Father Guillaume's softly curling hair and the gold thread on his alb caught sparks of candlelight. I'd never noticed how beautiful church service could be.

As we returned to the chateau in the deepening twilight, I felt an almost holy happiness, proud of my exhaustion and hunger. Until a figure stepped onto the road directly in front of us as we passed the postilion posts.

Estienne swept his hat from his head, the white plume glowing in the moonlight. "Good evening," he said. "I've come to accompany Margot to dinner."

I moved closer to Guillaume. "I'm eating in the sacristy tonight. I thank you."

Estienne shook his head. "A celibate man can hardly enjoy your company as much as I." He stepped deftly, as though we were dueling, and hooked my arm, dragging me from behind Father Guillaume. "Don't over-act your reluctance!"

"I have no wish to go anywhere with you." My throat hurt because I could not say it as strongly as I felt it.

Father Guillaume set his box on the ground, though it contained the holy host itself. In a gentle voice, he said, "I fear she must dine with me tonight, or it will displease the baroness."

The men looked at each other, both silent, and I could do nothing but stand there with the tithe box in my hands. At last, Estienne let go. He left indents in my elbow

where his fingers had been. He stepped back and doffed his hat again. “Then I must be disappointed.” He left us.

We walked in silence all the way to the sacristy, where Guillaume put the host away and blessed it.

I was still shaking. “You lied.”

“Not at all. The baroness would be displeased if I interrupted her supper to demand you return with me.” He looked at me and his smile faded. “You should sit.” He led me to the nearest bench.

“He frightens me. I hate it, but I can’t stop being frightened.”

Father Guillaume held my hands. I wished I could calm myself. “Here,” he said, “One moment. I’ve something to take your mind from it.”

He left and came back with a book wrapped in cloth. He set it on my lap and pulled the cover off so I could read the title. It was the *Opus Maius*⁹. I almost wept. “But this is an important work of natural philosophy!”

“The baron has me read all the books your father purchases, to ensure they are free of blasphemy.” He ducked his head. “I confess I find it dull; I’m three books behind.”

I clutched the book to my breast. “Here is a service I can do for you with pleasure! Show me the others!”

He blushed. “They’re... in my chamber.”

“Please? I’m afraid of walking back to the baroness’ room tonight. Let me stay here and read.”

⁹ Natural science treatise by Roger Bacon, 1267

He looked uncomfortable, but I pressed until he promised to fetch the other books for me. He went through an arch opposite the one that led to the sanctuary, one hung with a wool curtain, and I realized this must lead to his bed. I pictured a white plastered room like the sacristy, only glowing with the beauty of the forbidden. A holy reliquary for a chaste body.

Oh, I was going to perdition, and not for studying chemistry.

We shared his dinner of bread and cheese in the chapel while I poured over the books, two of which I'd never seen before. "But... this is completely new! You see, like I said? What we thought were four humors controlling the body are in reality six metals. Every year, we learn more."

Flipping pages as fast as I could, wishing I could absorb each instantly, my eyes caught on a page title. "Of the dangers of arsenic and other chemicals to male potency and virility."

I set down my bread, leaned back against the wall, and propped the book up on my knees, to protect Father Guillaume from seeing the realistically drawn phallus on the top of the page, rendered in brown ink, both erect and flaccid.

Father Guillaume stood, brushing the crumbs from his gown. "I see you are entertained for the evening. Will you be safe alone?"

"Of course," I said, not looking up from the page.

This was greater than knowledge – this was a weapon.

"I'm only on the other side of this wall," Father Guillaume said. I should respond, but I was too absorbed to do more than hum. He laughed. "Take the candle with you when you leave."

#

I awoke in the early dawn sore in my back and side, cold on the bench of the sacristy, and what is worse, with a small puddle of saliva on my notes.

I checked over them in a panic, but fortunately nothing was lost as my notes were in silverpoint rather than ink.

I'd read everything in the medical text on impotence, including how to treat it, because often a malady is contained in its cure, and I'd read a good chapter about "Potions that absorb into the body quickly and those that do not".

I had listed the materials I would need. A boiler. A pot. A fire. A glass vial and a grinding plate. I would create a new potion – a potion to cause impotence – and feed it to my nemesis, rendering myself safe. Perhaps Father Guillaume would be interested in it as well, as an aid to those of his brethren who found their vows hard to keep. It would be a pious gift, and I would relish in his chaste gratitude, though the thought of said chastity was half agony.

My skirt was filthy, and my hair had come all undone from its plait. I stood and dusted myself, then picked up my pomander and chain from the bench beside me and fastened it on.

Odette and Isabel were standing in the door to the sanctuary, looking at me like I was some new, vile sort of creature.

#

Isabel, as eldest lady-in-waiting, knelt on the floor in front of me. Odette and Catherine stood with their backs to us. I wished they were outside of the room altogether. "You have to open your legs," Isabel said, her hands on my knees.

My skirts were pulled up around my waist. I felt bloodless, horrified. She pried gently. “This will take less time if you relax.”

My sweat turned cold. She forced my legs apart. I felt her dry finger parting the wrinkled folds I never myself parted. It was painful. I wondered that I did not die from the humiliation.

Isabel stood. “She’s whole,” she said.

I threw my skirts down as fast as I could and sprung from the chair like it burned me. I felt like something had been uncovered that could never be covered again. I pressed my thighs tight together, but it didn’t help.

“I was in a church, studying!” My voice was loud and broken.

Isabel did not return my pomander to me – she said it smacked of earthly vanity. She gave me the wooden cross she wore in its place.

I curled on my cot, sobbing. Odette sat at my side; her hand flat on my back. “This would not have happened,” she said, “if you didn’t make an enemy of Estienne. What did you say to make him accuse you of seducing a priest?”

I could not answer. My head was heavy and dry. I slept some time.

When I awoke, Odette told me the baroness had relieved me of duty for the afternoon. I asked Odette to come with me as I gathered herbs. I dared not go alone anywhere, anymore.

#

I told Odette I was making a concoction to remove stains from velvet. Without guile, she accepted this and even offered assistance grinding and mixing, provided I would treat a gown of hers if it proved effective.

It takes four measures of arsenic to kill a man. My potion contained one, but as I did not wish to have Estienne's death on my soul, I took a healthy drink of it as experiment. The taste was bitter, like dandelion. When enough time had passed that I was sure it would have affected me negatively if it was going to, I performed one more test. I took some milk from the kitchen and fed it and a few drops of the potion to the baroness' dog. I then washed and brushed him as an excuse to observe him. The draught did not harm him, but I could not tell if the dog was impotent and almost fainted trying to think how to test it. I accepted that while I had proven the potion safe, I would have to allow its efficacy to be tested by human use.

I found Estienne with some of the other gentlemen, discussing fencing on the side lawn, dancing back and forth, pointing their swords at invisible opponents or each other. I waited to be seen.

Estienne smiled broadly and approached me. He was sweaty and his jerkin bore the urine stink of unwashed silk.

"I bring you a peace offering," I said, holding out my poison with lowered gaze.

"This is the second loveliest thing I have ever seen," he declared, taking the chalice. He quaffed the wine in one gulp and smeared his red lips on his linen cuff, unthinking that some lady of the house would have to wash it. He handed the empty chalice back with a deep bow. "You have won my heart forever."

"I am glad you are no longer angry with me," I lied, and left as quickly as possible. I heard the gentlemen tease behind me, but I felt lighter than I had in days.

I was pleased to tidy up the chapel and the sacristy after evening prayers, thinking how I could sleep now, unafraid of Estienne forcing himself upon me.

“You are much improved by a little study,” Father Guillaume stepped around my sweeping to hang his vestments. “I wish it were the love of God entering your heart.”

“It’s also that,” I said.

“Do not spend the night here tonight.” Father Guillaume faced me, gravely serious. “I don’t wish to protest my virtue again.”

“I promise I won’t. I will take a few notes, and then I’ll be to bed.”

He made a sign of blessing and left to hear the baronness’ bedtime prayers.

I set the broom in its nook and knelt before what I now considered “my” cupboard. I took out the materials I had gathered. I had my caustic potash, a small bit of arsenic, liquid lye, a few dried herbs, and the white lime powder, which foamed when mixed with wine, producing nothing. Perhaps my father’s workbench had as humble a beginning as this.

I opened my book and took up my silver point.

The door behind me opened. I turned, but Estienne grabbed my shoulder and pushed me down before I could rise. “I heard you liked to secret yourself here.”

My confidence in my potion vanished. I trembled. My hand reached behind me, knocking vials over. The quantity of arsenic I had could do nothing. The Aqua Fortis was gone. Caustic Potash burned, but only over long exposure.

He covered my mouth. My cry was muffled, a weak mewl like a kitten through his heavy leather glove. He held me to the floor, working to open his breaches with his other hand. I twisted. I pushed.

I felt him still. His hand tugged on his member, like he could force it to strengthen. I flushed with triumph and smiled against his pressing hand.

His eyes widened. “Witch!” he cried. He punched me, and I was nearly insensible as he dragged me back and threw me against the floor again. It didn’t matter that I’d rendered one weapon useless – he still had the rest of his body to destroy me.

He brought both his hands to my throat. He was stronger than I ever imagined. I thrashed. I pleaded with God.

He lessened the pressure, bringing his fist back. “Undo your sorcery,” he said, “or die now.”

I flung powder at him. It fell, as harmless as dander. He struck my cheek. I spat on his face and threw the caustic powder after my spittle, hoping it would make it stick. A drop of mixed powder and spit landed on my shoulder and burned. How it burned! I rolled while he howled. I scrambled to my feet. His eyes were red, both hands clutching his cheek. “Sorceress!” He cried. “Harlot!”

I spat again and sent another handful of powder at his other cheek. The fizzle I had seen in wine – the liquid brought something out of the powder. I felt powerful indeed, using my disgust to burn him.

His screams brought the kitchen-boy, and the kitchen-boy brought the rest of the house.

#

At least they sat me on my own cot, this time, in the baroness’ chamber. I lowered my skirts, cheeks hot, legs squeezing tight to banish the memory of exposure.

The humiliation was worse than the pulsing, droplet-shaped burn on my shoulder. Isabel nodded to the baroness, who had watched the proceedings with mild curiosity.

Isabel washed her hands and then carried the pitcher out of the room to fetch fresh water.

Odette squeezed my forearm. "I never liked Estienne."

"They'll burn me as a witch for defending my honor."

"No! Father Guillaume witnessed everything!" Odette brushed my sweating hair back from my forehead. "No one is angry at you for that. Only you have been somewhat forward and free. You have a responsibility to protect men from the power of your beauty."

The baroness brought Estienne in. He had a strip of clean linen wrapped around his cheeks and kept his gaze forward. Odette held me as I stiffened. How I wanted to strike him again.

"As this is a matter of the heart, the baron has granted me the right to dispense this justice," the baroness folded her hands. "Estienne has been adequately punished for his attempted crime, and Margot is yet a maiden." She leveled a gaze at each of us, though I did not know why I was being included in that stern reproach. "Therefore, you are both to continue in this house, and are absolved. You are ordered to exchange a sign of peace with each other and swear never to cause disharmony again."

I would have sooner kissed nitric acid, but I did as I was bidden. My lips felt frozen against the rough linen on his cheek.

"And Estienne?" The baroness placed her fan in front of him as he turned to leave. "It will displease me to see you on the ladies' porch."

She spoke mildly, correctly, but somehow sent the steel of her anger into the core of the words. Estienne bowed low and did not look up again as he left.

#

Alone in the sacristy, I took out the holy host plate. It was the best mirror in the chateau. I held what remained of my caustic powder and a cup of holy water. They say that beauty has power over men, and that we should be pleased with this power, but I had access to a stronger one, and needed beauty no more.

I made the sign of the cross on each cheek, and commended my soul to science.

END