

AN ALCHEMICAL TALES STORY

EYES OF THE BEHOLDER

A Valentine's Day in Belville

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Eyes of the Beholder

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I was the only one in town, it seemed, who hadn't gone crazy for pink hearts and compatibility quizzes. With the crescent moon, a travelling fortune-teller had set up shop in Belville's main square. Each day, the crowd around the brightly-colored wagon grew larger and more desperate. Now the moon was nearly full and *still* it seemed that Belville hadn't yet had its fill of love.

The bright side to the mayhem was that romance, it turned out, meant good news for the alchemy business. As I closed up shop and tallied the sales for the day, I turned to my companion -- a magical black dog named William -- with my eyebrows raised.

"We sold four rose quartz powder vials, a *dozen* cleaning potions, all the salts of Venus, six spice sets, and three gold necklaces today alone. Plus Gloria's asked for a refill on dianthus hair products for the salon already. And all this on top of the usual custom orders -- it's a wonder we have anything left in the shop!"

“We *wouldn't* if you let go of your morals for a minute and made some glamours,” William informed me as he nosed a few glass bottles back into place in a ravaged display of preserved flowers. “Everyone wants to look good for their dates.”

“Glamours are like lying, which I do not support. As you know well.” I tucked away the receipts with another incredulous shake of my head. “But I’ve been thinking about a rose quartz solution. I think it could be even more popular than the powder.”

William snorted. “If you sell them a pink sparkly potion, people will use it on their--”

Fortunately at that moment the bells above the front door jangled. With all the business around the square, I’d kept the shop open late; the sun had already set over the mountains outside of town, and now I had to squint to see our visitor. Of course, I should have known better than to be curious. Only one person in town would have the audacity to bother us when we were clearly closed.

“I should’ve locked up faster,” William growled.

“Saves me a trip around to the back door,” the half-orc Officer Thorn agreed blithely. The buttons on her police uniform gleamed as she stepped into the candlelit shop.

No bit of cheerfulness ever intimidated William, though. “We’re fresh out of tea and Red just closed up the till, so scram.”

“Did you just tell your local officer of the law to ‘scram’?” Thorn looked down her long, crooked nose at him. At easily seven feet tall, with green skin and long black hair and more muscles than anyone could shake a stick at, she could do quite a bit with a look. “If I wasn’t here on more pressing business, we’d be having a talk.”

“I don’t think the two of you could manage a ‘talk’ without bickering,” I told them both, with a look of my own at William. “Come on, Officer -- I’m about to head upstairs anyway. William, you’ll be okay finishing up here?”

It wasn’t really a question, and neither was it an invitation to argue. William turned his fluffy tail on me disapprovingly, but he gave Officer Thorn no trouble as she passed him. Thorn herself had already redirected her attention to me.

“Lead on, Red.” As we climbed the spiral staircase leading to my apartment above the shop, she continued, “I suppose you’ve noticed the hullabaloo in town. First time a love-mancer ever showed up way out here in the sticks! Hope it’s not the last time. You may as well know that’s what I’m here about: a jealous lover ransacked the wagon just this afternoon, and the fortune-teller’s missing. Say, what do you have cooking for dinner? Is that bay I smell?”

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After securing an invitation to join us for squash stew and biscuits, Officer Thorn filled me in on the details of the crime. She and I sat around my tiny dining table at one corner of the apartment, while William -- who had dallied for as long as possible while locking up the shop, but had been unable to deny his curiosity forever -- took up his habitual post in the bay window at the other corner. Given the size of my living quarters, this put him out of swiping distance but near enough to hear every word.

“I’m surprised you didn’t notice any of it,” Thorn remarked, sopping up broth with half a biscuit. “It’s just under the old oak tree, right across from your front windows.”

“We’ve been too busy running a business to pay attention to romantic mumbo-jumbo.” William crossed his paws and sneezed disdainfully.

“She *means* about the break-in,” I informed him. “But he’s right, Officer. The shop has been jammed all day, and pretty much every day since everyone got all excited about finding their true love or whatever it is the fortune-teller’s been promising.”

“And that,” said Thorn, beaming at me, “is precisely why I came to you, Red.”

Across the room, William’s eyes narrowed. “You want her to help you investigate some minor vandalism when there’s potions to be made?”

“Not a minor, it was a full-grown werewolf.” After chuckling at her own pun, Officer Thorn went on, “He made a right mess, too. Apparently he took one of the fortune-teller’s quizzes and it told him something he didn’t like. By his own admission, he went loony -- it *is* near the full moon, you have to give him that -- and tore up the caravan. If he wanted something other than revenge, I couldn’t say yet, but we’ll get it out of him. I’ve left him at the station with Trent to calm him down.”

“It sounds like you already have the culprit,” I said. “So why would you need my help?”

“Oh, there’s no question who did it,” Thorn agreed. “Found him over at the bakery with paper hearts in his hair and brocade under his nails. No, what I need you for, Red, is to figure out how far it went. Our culprit doesn’t remember much -- that or he isn’t telling everything. And like I said, no one’s heard from the fortune-teller all afternoon.”

I set down my spoon. “You’re thinking this might be murder?”

“I haven’t made up my mind yet. “The officer produced a pink piece of paper from her breast pocket and slid it across the table. “Which is why I need you to take a quiz.”

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“Um.” I picked up a magic quill, one of my favorites with gold ink, and set it back down. I looked around, but I’d already cleared the dishes, put away the leftovers, made tea, turned up the lights, and taken my seat back at the table. I had nothing left to do.

“Why exactly do you need me to do this love quiz, again?”

Officer Thorn leant forward in her chair, making it creak against the wooden floor. She spoke as if to a child. “It’s like this, Red. The fortune-teller can tell you who your true love is, but there’s some things you have to do first. First you fill out the quiz. Then you burn it up and blow the smoke toward the square, so the fortune-teller knows you’re done.”

“That explains all the fires lately,” William muttered. “Why does love involve arson?”

“Then,” said Officer Thorn, ignoring him, “your answers are matched with someone else’s answers. And once that happens, a messenger comes to you, showing you who you were matched with. That’s your true love.”

William scoffed. “That’s a bunch of baloney.”

“You’ll notice I didn’t ask *you* to fill one of these out.” Officer Thorn turned to glare at him over one large shoulder.

“I’m a familiar. Familiars don’t have true loves.”

“You’re a skeptic is what you are,” said Thorn scornfully. She turned back to me. “Come on, Red. I’m not saying you have to marry anybody.”

I fiddled with my pen. “Uh-huh. And what are you saying, exactly?”

“I’m *saying* I need to find out if the fortune-teller is still around and doing magic, and you and your dog are just about the only ones in town who haven’t taken this quiz.”

“Why can’t you just have someone do a tracing spell or something?” Unlike William, I didn’t hesitate because of doubt. Truthfully, I grew up among fortune-tellers before traveling the world and finally ending up in Belville. If anything, I believed too *much* in the fortune-teller’s potential power.

“No one’s seen ‘em,” Officer Thorn said with a shrug. When William and I simply stared at her, she added defensively, “The fortune-teller *was* there, in the caravan, but now it’s empty. No one ever got a glimpse of what the fortune-teller looks like because the front window’s covered in gauze.”

“What about the results?” William pointed out. “Those are magically delivered to your door, I suppose?”

“Bit more clever, actually.” Thorn grinned. “Everyone’s results are delivered by a different creature. Now, if you ask me, the messenger’s always the same, just in a different shape. Rumor is the shape of the messenger corresponds with your true love. Say, if you’re in love with a certain bookseller, then maybe your results turn up in the hands of, I don’t know, a bookworm?”

“That’s ridiculous,” I said. “Bookworms don’t have hands. Also it’s ridiculously complicated.”

“Isn’t everything, in love?” Officer Thorn looked dangerously like she might break into song, or at least whistle. Instead she pointed to the pink paper in front of me.

“Come on, Red. Just do this for me and if it comes to nothing, we know the fortune-teller’s in trouble. And if something *does* come of it --” she winked -- “I promise not to tell.”

I scowled at her, but bit my tongue. Unable to come up with a valid argument not to, I turned to the quiz and began to read.

Find Your True Love Quiz!

Answer all questions to the best of your ability.

1. *Name:*
2. *Occupation:*
3. *Hometown:*
4. *Favorite Spot:*
5. *Favorite Food:*
6. *Favorite Month:*
7. *Favorite Constellation:*
8. *Favorite Flower:*
9. *Favorite Gem:*
10. *Favorite Element:*
11. *Favorite Hobby:*
12. *Favorite Story:*
13. *Favorite Dream:*
14. *Three Words that Best Describe You:*

Oh, brother. That's a lot of favorites. Wiping my hand across my brow, I sighed and settled in to write.

The apartment remained deadly quiet while I filled out the quiz -- but not for long. Somewhere around question number five, Officer Thorn started humming to herself. I

worked faster, knowing that if she started singing in front of William, there might be bloodshed.

By question eleven, she'd begun mumbling words along with the tune. It sounded like a romantic ditty. *Someone's pleased with their quiz results*, I thought. As quickly as I could, I jotted down some adjectives and set aside my quill.

"Done. Just let me get a candle. Officer, will you open a window, please? Just in case that helps."

Thorn laughed as she stood to do as I asked. "Don't worry, Red. I'm not going to look at your answers."

From his seat of safety, William sneezed.

"Alright then. Here goes."

I rubbed my hands on my tunic, hoping to hide how sweaty they'd become. *This is why I stick to science*, I thought as I set the paper alight and closed my eyes to blow the smoke out the window. *This is so, so . . . ridiculous.*

"Right, then." Officer Thorn shut the window with a snap and beamed benevolently around the room.

William shook his ears, as though we'd just woken him up. "Now what?"

"Now," said the Officer, taking her seat once more, "we wait."

"Do you not know how long it might take?" When Thorn shrugged at me again, I sighed. "Okay, fine. I'm making brownies. If anyone expects to try some, you'd better come and help."

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Two trays of brownies -- Thorn wanted strawberry filling, but William insisted he was allergic to pink and demanded his usual triple-dark variety -- and one very messy kitchen later, we'd managed to avoid any injuries more serious than over-full stomachs. We stayed that way, sprawled out on the couch and hearth rug in front of my tiny fireplace, until at some point we drifted off to sleep.

I'd fallen deep into an unsettling dream about shadowy flying unicorns when a low *woof* from William woke me up.

"Red. Red! Something's trying to get in through the window."

"What?" I blinked, sitting up against the overstuffed couch pillows.

Thorn had already leapt from her place in front of the embers. "Let it in! It's the messenger!"

"What kind of fortune-teller delivers fortunes in the middle of the night?" William argued.

I glanced around. Above the half-curtains, the sky beyond the windows looked pitch black. One of the window frames above the dining room table pulsed blue, a sign that the protective wards William kept up had been triggered. A slight but insistent scratching emanated from that side of the apartment.

"It's probably a bat or something," I said, fully awake now.

"Or a jealous werewolf," William said pointedly at Thorn.

"That's nonsense," she retorted. "This is how the fortune-teller works. The messenger comes when you least expect it."

"Then it ought to expect locked windows," said William primly.

“Usually it opens them itself,” Thorn informed him. “But you and your Fort Knox spells over here are ruining Red’s chance at love!”

“Hey, I thought this wasn’t about me,” I protested, scrambling to my feet. “We have to make sure that thing is from the fortune-teller in order to know no harm’s been done, right? So I’ll just go over to the window and look out.”

I vaulted over the couch and made it to the table, but Thorn and William paid me no mind.

“I’m not risking a home invasion for some silly game,” he growled.

“We *asked* for the home invasion,” she insisted.

“I most certainly did not!”

“Oh, would you just lighten up for a *moment*?”

A crash came from their side of the room and I looked over to see Thorn lying half in and half out of the window seat, something black and furry sticking out from under her arm. Pillows scattered around her feet suggested that she’d tried to step forward and shake William but instead had tripped and fallen headfirst on top of him.

Before I could re-cross the room and help them untangle themselves, a *pop* sounded and a draft of frigid air washed over my back. A black shadow rushed right for my face.

“Yikes!” Instinctively I threw my hands over my head.

“Red! Are you okay?”

“Get off me!”

“Ack!” This time I clenched my jaw as I grabbed my toe, which I’d stubbed against a chair in a blind attempt to get to the window. The black shape continued to flit around me as though looking for a weakness.

“Is it the messenger?”

“You made me drop the wards!”

“Will everyone -- just -- be *quiet?*” I yelled, still covering my face protectively. Something tugged at my ponytail. My hip bounced off the back of the couch. Aloud, I realized, “This was a terrible idea.”

“Turn on a light,” Thorn suggested. “Get a look at it!”

“I still think it’s a bat,” I answered through gritted teeth, hopping one-footedly to the kitchen, where I kept extra lightsticks in a drawer. The black shape dogged my steps. I swear it nipped at my heels.

I’d opened the drawer and begun rummaging through it one-handedly when a shock of blue light blinded me.

“That’s *it!*” Apparently, William had freed himself from Thorn. He stood on the couch, shaking and glowing ferociously. “What is it? Where is it?”

“Stop that!” reprimanded Thorn.

“No,” I said, “actually, the light --”

“EEK!”

“What?” I stumbled on a fallen mixing spoon and stepped backward. My ears were pierced by another

“Eeeek!”

And my hands slipped off the kitchen counter, and then silence reigned.

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The next thing I saw was Thorn's face looming over me. She grinned broadly.

"Ugh." I shook my head blearily and realized I sat on the cold kitchen tile, crumpled against a counter. "What happened?"

"It was the fortune-teller. I saw it clutching a letter," Thorn said too loudly for someone right in my face. I waved her away and as she stepped back, William spoke over her shoulder.

"I got rid of it. I say we get rid of the Officer too."

"You know what? I'm in such a good mood, I'm going to ignore that threat," said Thorn as she offered me a hand. I accepted it and stood, wincing as the floor beneath me tilted.

"That makes one of us," I mumbled, rubbing my aching back.

"You'll be fine," Officer Thorn grinned. "Just think! You turned out to have a true love after all!"

"One that breaks into houses and attacks people," William growled.

One, I realized slowly, that might have looked a lot like the black unicorns in my dream.

"And I can let Ronnie out soon's he promises to pay damages," said Officer Thorn, still beaming.

I eyed her. Someone had lit a lightstick, flooding the kitchen with yellow light which reflected off the suspicious glint in her merry gaze. "Are you sure this wasn't all a ploy to get me to take that quiz?"

“Oh, come on, Red,” said Officer Thorn, with a clap on my shoulder that made me wince. “You’re too smart to fall for ploys.”

“Uh-huh. And you’re sure that was the fortune-teller?”

“Positive. Too bad you made a fuss and scared it off; now you’ll have to find out who your match was yourself. You know,” Thorn added, “love comes in many forms.”

“*Too* many, if you ask me,” muttered William.

“No one did.” I sighed, but that sigh became a chuckle -- and finally a laugh. “If you’re both done fighting and setting me up, then I say we make another batch of brownies. And this time, we’re making ones that *I* like.”

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