

## The Alchemist

While she walked through the secluded forest of her beloved home, Lizzie felt the final rays of sunshine warming her rosy cheeks. It was the last warm day of September and as the sun gently disappeared behind a distant slope, Lizzie muttered a silent goodbye to burning warmth with azure skies. Summer had always been her favorite season. The world was alive and sounds of spirited birds mixed with children's laughter provided reasons to continue awakening each following morning. But similar to white piano tiles needing black tiles, summer demanded its parallel to regain energy for another summer of vitality. Winter. Bony trees offering nothing but coldness with the world asleep for eternity and darkness surrounding people's minds and sight. Lizzie despised winter.

Feeling the last warmth leaving her cheeks, Lizzie opened her eyes and looked amongst the trees. She saw a little robin flying through the trees. Its fragile wings floating in the wind guiding the small bird home. Lizzie sighed and started walking back to her little neighbourhood.

She had lived in Garden's Hallow for five years now after moving from her office job in Leeds to take over an elderly lady's bakery. Since she was a young child, Lizzie has always been baking. Whether it was cakes for fundraising events at school or biscuits for Christmas which she still bakes together with her father. Not seeing prospects as a baker, Lizzie decided to study law and eventually started working at a law firm in Leeds. Her position made her happy for a year, but Lizzie felt drainage and fatigue wash over her body so slightly until the last drop of bliss left her frame. Only after her friend's concern grew louder did she rethink her possibilities. It must have been faith that a few weeks later, her father sent her a picture on their holiday in Garden's Hallow of the bakery she would soon call her own.

The owner, Mrs. Hatchkins, was hesitant at first. She wanted a qualified baker and not a dream chaser but since Lizzie showed talent and ambition in the two weeks she worked with Mrs. Hatchkins, she eventually agreed. As in her favourite movies, Lizzie subsequently quit her job and after signing her thoroughly read contract, she received the keys to her new aspiration.

Recalling this precious moment all too frequently, Lizzie rounded the last corner and walked to her bakery. "Chez la Petite Boulangerie" was written on a sign over the entrance. It had been initially her mother's idea and despite it being a cliché, Lizzie could have never selected a better name. She opened the door of her apartment and avoided the awaiting mirror. She read in a news article that observing yourself for five minutes a day was the key to body positivity and joyful and healthy life.

“Bullshit,” said Lizzie quietly, and passing the mirror without a glance, she walked to her office.

Her laptop was still open and with a swoosh over the mousepad, the organisation of the local Christmas baking competition was on her mind again. It had been a tradition for the last decades that all five towns near Garden’s Hallow would participate in a competition. The host of the competition differed each year since a different city would host the event every year. The cities choose in advance a star baker who would organize the event with help of other citizens. Lizzie had participated the last five years and loved everything about it. All the participants baked with such delight and cherished every second.

When being asked if she would be the host for this year’s competition, Lizzie was overfilled with joy and even more pleasure when she found out that Mrs. Hatchkins had suggested her name. She was now officially accepted by the former baker. But the initial happiness faded after discovering the amount of effort she would have to put into the organization of the event.

The competition was approaching rapidly, and Lizzie felt every nerve in her body being tense. With a final sigh, Lizzie slumped down in front of her laptop and began on registration formulas. Needless to say, there were customized papers but even though no one specified it, there was a golden rule for personalizing those formulas every year. Not doing it would not boycott the event however it would be noticed, and Lizzie wouldn’t allow that at her first competition. The participants were lovely, but she needed to exceed the already high expectations to avoid peeved glances for the following weeks.

Fidgeting with a hair tie, Lizzie thought about wonderful formulations when the hair tie slipped from her hand and under the old cabinet next to her desk. Being tense for weeks, she suppressed all the swearing words demanding their escape and crouched down on the floor. Next to mice of dust and her hair tie was a piece of paper. Thinking it was a forgotten print-out, she snatched both the hair tie and paper and adjusted herself. Brushing off the last dust from her sleeves, she analysed the paper more attentively.

“For everyone searching for true love”

Snorting out a laugh, Lizzie thought she had stumbled into a scene of one of the many soap operas her mother watches frequently. Being nevertheless curious, she continued reading the following instructions of the sallow paper.

1. Prepare an empty glass with a spoon
2. Place a mirror in front of the glass
3. Mix the ingredients in the glass
4. Pour Pawtucket Pat in the glass

5. Stir for 3:28 minutes clockwise
6. A last strong stir counterclockwise
7. Wait 10 seconds
8. Drink the mix in one gulp

Ingredients for mixing in the glass: Glowing Mushroom, Hanging Moss, Lavender, Moon Sugar, Scathecrow

Lizzie looked bemused at the paper in her right hand. This had to be a joke by one of the children in town. It did not however explain how the paper could eventually be found under Lizzie's antique cabinet. It was nearly impossible that the paper flew through her office window from beneath the street and landed under the cabinet. Nonetheless, it had been there and was now still in Lizzie's hand.

It could be so easy. Just crumble it up and throw it in the paper bin, but no. Being a former lawyer and having examined every little detail of various documents, Lizzie was intrigued and wanted to know the secret behind the little paper. Knowing that she couldn't possibly find the source of the paper, she decided the ingredients would be her best lead.

Hanging Moss and Lavender were plants Lizzie immediately knew and Pawtucket Pat was the name of the local beer yet the others left her clueless and her quick google search left her bewildered even more. Scathecrow, Glowing Mushrooms, and Moon Sugar were ingredients that could be found in the video game "Skyrim". Lizzie groaned. Although she practically expected John Quiñones to appear in her room and tell her about his show "What would you do?", she still couldn't discard the paper. Something, even if she was mistaken, felt genuine.

Checking the time, she knew that the paper had to be an issue for tomorrow-Lizzie considering the formulas for the competition still needed filling out and since she needed to prepare dough for the next day. Finishing her final tasks, Lizzie decided a visit to the local library would help her search and went to a slumber sleep.

The next day was uneventful and having closed her bakery at 5 pm, Lizzie walked to the nearby library. On her way, she saw familiar faces and received warm greetings from passing friends. During little breaks, Lizzie had taken notes about the paper but had not gotten any further than the day before. Entering through the glass door, Lizzie was welcomed by a wide smile from her friend Rebecca.

"Hello, Lizzie! What a surprise," said Rebecca, and before Lizzie could answer she added "I never see you here. What brings you to the library?"

“I am looking for books about herbology.” Seeing her friend's bemused face, she added, “On my walks through the forest, I encounter so many plants that I don't know anything of. I would love to know about them more. I also read about some plants that I want information about”

Rebecca's face brightened and with a flip of her hand, she gestured Lizzie to follow her. Walking through the shelves, Rebecca asked Lizzie if she remembered the name of the plants and before Lizzie's hesitation to the question became obvious, she answered Rebecca.

“One of the plants is Glowing Mushroom. I heard about it from a game, but I thought it might be something you can encounter in actual life.”

Casually as if everyone would know this, Rebecca answered, “Oh yeah that's a real thing. Those are called bioluminescent fungus and you can even find them here in England”

“Do you know the name of that fungus?” Lizzie asked in return.

Having arrived at the small herbology section, Rebecca traced her finger over the few books until she fished out a brown leather book. Skipping through the pages, she suddenly stopped. “It's named *Panellus stipticus* or as common folk would call it, bitter oyster.”

Lizzie left the library with more knowledge than she would have thought. After Rebecca helped her with the Glowing mushroom, she helped her further with the other ingredients. It turns out that although the names suggest magical or almost alchemist objects, they are common plants or roots. Moon Sugar was simply a sugar beet. The white beet once reminded people of the moon and having been boiled to the viscous and sweet syrup, it had been called Moon Sugar for a time. Scathecrow on the other hand was harder to define. After long searches, both women discovered that the word was used in certain dialects for Aloe vera.

Knowing the ingredients and now having attached herself to this ominous riddle, Lizzie was determined to try the recipe. She remembered that the town close to Garden's Hallow had a gardening center where she would presumably find everything she needed. She quickly googled the “All Seasons Gardening”, but disappointment sheathed her face seeing the closing times. Lizzie hence planned a trip for the next day and walked to her apartment. Back home at her bakery, she prepared everything and went with a content mind to bed.

“All Seasons Gardening” was enormous. Before even entering, Lizzie saw various trees and could even discern little ponds in a secluded area. Walking through the entrance, Lizzie felt every one of her senses awakening as she entered another world. The various colours, noises, and smells left her speechless, and she understood why her uncles spend most of their time with

plants and in a garden center. She could have walked through the center for ages, but she knew that she needed to finish her visit as quickly as possible to test the potion. Asking employees and searching for herself, she eventually found all ingredients needed and even bought herself a new pot plant.

Lizzie gathered all ingredients and tools on her kitchen table. Before taking the final step, she hesitated. Why was she doing this? The ingredients alone were harmless but apart from a may dangerous mixture of all plants, why was she that ambitious to discover the secret of the potion? It was a potion for “true love” and although Lizzie had not been in a relationship for some time, she was not yearning for a lover. Nevertheless, the paper radiated some sort of magic that pulled her continuously towards a finished mixture.

She looked at the paper and the glass in front of her. Although the recipe did not mention cutting the plants, she surely would have to. Additionally, there were no measurements on the paper. Knowing that she would not receive answers, Lizzie trusted her gut and prepared everything for the stirring. Looking at the paper she realised the timing of 3:28 was her birthday. March 28.

“What a coincidence,” she thought and started stirring clockwise. Lizzie had rarely been focused as much as she was now which surprised even her, who as a baker knew strict time instructions. Starring at the timer beside her, awaiting the 28 to appear, Lizzie charged a final counterclockwise stir and waited ten seconds. Thinking the potion had failed, Lizzie felt frustration arise but suddenly her eyes widened. After eight seconds, the liquid in the glass formed bubbles and one second later, the liquid resembled boiling water.

Knowing that she could not waste long, Lizzie guided the glass with the bubbling liquid closer to her hungering lips. One sip and she would know the magic. Sweetness and bitterness traced her lips and with a deep breath and closing eyes, the liquid traveled down her throat. Lizzie waited. Anxious of what to see in the mirror she kept her eyes closed. Hope filled her body.

Opening her eyes and seeing her face in the awaiting mirror, she gasped. She recognised herself but the woman she saw was different. Instead of despising the moles on her face or her nose, she felt merry. Her amber hair and the brown of her eyes. Instead of dullness, they held richness and warmth. Hatred had turned into fondness.

Looking at the paper, neat letters appeared, and Lizzie understood at last:

“For the ones who have forgotten that true love comes within oneself”