

Beauty and the Alchemist: The Alchemical Tales, Volume 1

Elle Hartford

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Beauty and the Alchemist is a delightful cozy mystery novel set in an appealing magical community.

In Elle Hartford's fantastical mystery novel *Beauty and the Alchemist*, a reluctant sleuth tracks a murderer.

Born into a family of seers, Red is an alchemist who runs an alchemy and potions shop in pastoral Belville, whose residents are resistant to change. She's a newcomer there. Accompanied by William—a talking sheepdog and former familiar who is capable of protection spells—Red moonlights solving cases, even if she'd rather not. Then Owl, a bookstore boss whose thievery landed him in jail, escapes, leaving a murdered prison guard behind. And then a second body turns up at a remote castle, where a shadow lurks.

William is an amusing sidekick for Red as she sifts through the case. He has human moods and makes pithy observations. Other characters include beauty salon fairies; Officer Thorn (a half-orc policewoman); Red's friend, Luca; and sundry townsfolk whose colorful businesses and gossipy habits fuel the mystery's progression. Theories about who could have held a grudge against the castle victim gesture to Luca, prompting Red to work to clear Luca's name.

The book's worldbuilding is quirky and capacious. It has fantasy elements, but realistic ones as well: a local witch, for instance, favors wearing jeans, and a gnome works as a plumber. Some people have magical abilities, and supernatural creatures come into play. But this lighthearted hodgepodge leads to a busy story too. Indeed, secondary characters come and go at a steady rate; many are only sketched in. And a few contemporary references, including those to balayage hair treatments and aromantic and asexual identities, pull the story further from its storybook context, while the tension between magic and science is implied but underexplored.

The book's settings are developed in a concentric manner. Red's shop is a lively stage; there, William holds court, tea is served, and potions are brewed in a lab. This shop anchors the narrative; Red returns to it at regular intervals. The shops around the town square receive the next degree of focus; there's a forest at the story's outskirts too. Hints at distant islands and wider Pastoria imply a world beyond the story's events as well.

As the investigation widens, incorporating a scavenger hunt surrounding elven history, the book's pace slows. Then there are revelations about the victim's unpleasant nature that lead to dark implications about the townspeople, adding to the list of potential suspects. One person in particular, though, shifts toward animosity with such speed that it defies credulity. And Red learns that teamwork is needed to bring forth the truth.

With an investigation led by an alchemist and her friends, *Beauty and the Alchemist* is a cozy mystery novel set in an appealing magical community.

KAREN RIGBY (June 8, 2023)

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