
Story by Kosuzu Kobato
Illustrations by Yasuyuki Syuri
The Apothecary Witch turned DIVORCE AGENT
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The Apothecary Witch Turned Divorce Agent: Volume 2 [Complete]

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1. Carla’s Apothecary

The wedding between Crown Prince Abel of the Kingdom of Selvaster and Lady Patricia of the Duchy of Hemmings took place as it was originally planned.

The day of the celebration was blessed with good weather. Hoping to catch a glimpse of the new royal couple in their ceremonial dress, crowds flocked to the area surrounding the Central Cathedral of the royal capital, where the ceremony took place. It caused quite a commotion indeed.

Many said that such festivities had not been seen in the royal capital since the wedding of the current king and queen. Thanks to the police officers and the knights keeping a watchful eye on the goings-on of the day from various corners, there were no major incidents or accidents either.

As dictated by royal practices, the wedding ceremony spanned three days. During that time, the entire town surrounding the castle was painted in colors of celebration. Lodgings and restaurants everywhere enjoyed full houses, and all along the streets, temporary stalls and vendors also set up shop. There was bustling excitement everywhere that was not usually seen.

Even the back alley in which Carla’s apothecary stood was no exception, for vendors set up shop close by there as well. Since it contained no other business but the apothecary, however, the alley was always a somewhat lonesome place, and unlike the main street, the period of temporary bustle was much shorter there. The alley soon returned to its quiet self.

Some days passed after the wedding, and the town overall gradually calmed down as well. Of course, memorabilia and souvenirs commemorating the marriage still occupied large corners of many stores, and people continued to excitedly place bets on where the young royal couple would go on their next official assignment—or rather, date. Being removed in various ways from the hubbub of the main street, though, the back alley was deserted even today. Although it was shortly after the lunch hour, few walked past its soot-covered walls.

However, without any hesitation, a young woman wearing the uniform of the

royal academy knocked on a wooden door as old as those walls themselves.

“Welco—oh, Lilith, it’s just you.”

“What do you mean, it’s ‘just’ me, Carla?! Such a beautiful girl has come to visit, yet that’s what you say?!”

When Carla turned around upon hearing the ringing of the doorbell, she saw Lilith Cabot standing there. The girl had round, brown eyes and chestnut hair that reached her shoulders. She was the kind of girl that, if you asked ten different people, all ten would describe as pretty. She was also the perpetrator of the failed plan meant to separate Abel and Patricia, as well as the victim of threats by the man who had come up with the plan in the first place.

Being met with such an unwelcoming greeting from Carla, Lilith pouted. In response, Carla said, “But I didn’t invite you.”

“Oh, come on! You must be happy to see me!” Lilith insisted.

“Not really. Though I do agree with you that you’re a beautiful girl.”

“Hee hee. Right?”

When Lilith smiled, full of confidence, Carla could not even bother to hide her own exasperation.

How did I end up having her so attached to me...? Carla wondered.

Carla had been the one to undo the magic circles Lilith had let run amok and to unlock the magical tool bracelet that had caused so many problems. Lilith may have felt some gratitude for what Carla had done, but Carla could not have guessed that Lilith would then begin coming by the apothecary as frequently as she now did.

As Carla continued lining up her products on the shelves, Lilith looked around the store, which stood empty, as usual. Finally Lilith mumbled, “There are no customers today either...”

“Lilith, if you have something to complain about, you can go ahead and take your leave,” Carla said, glaring, her quiet anger clear from her expression.

“No, I have zero complaints!” Lilith replied, panicking and giving a hurried apology. She then slid into a chair at the counter.

Seriously!

Carla's apothecary now took regular orders from the Duchy of Hemmings, which was the territory belonging to Patricia's parents. Even so, just because she sold a few soaps and hand creams did not mean that the shop's revenue was going to increase dramatically.

In addition, although Carla had resumed her training in magic to make medicine, her skills had not changed much. The oral medicine she made was still nowhere near sellable. And since the expenses for her ingredients had increased because of her renewed practice, the shop continued to be in the red. Carla was only able to manage thanks to the income she earned through her work as a divorce agent, which came to her through word of mouth and called for the use of her transformation magic.

I still haven't finalized a single divorce though... When will I ever be able to proudly receive my reward for a successful case?

Even though the results were different from the initial goals, her clients were always more than satisfied with Carla's work and paid her a higher reward than what had originally been agreed upon. Carla, nonetheless, felt dejected each time.

In any case...just what does Lilith come here to do all the time?

Although Lilith had been feeling unwell due to the effects of an unsavory magic circle, she was now completely recovered. She was attending the royal academy again, and she had also returned to the sorcerers' order, where she planned to work after her graduation. Given that Lilith was receiving a scholarship at the academy based on her performance, however, she should be prioritizing her academics above everything else. She should not have time to be hanging out in the town surrounding the castle so frequently.

Once she finished placing her products on the shelves, Carla returned to the dispensary. She then returned to the counter with herbs and a mortar in her hands. She knew from experience that Lilith was not the type to leave without taking her sweet time. Carla's precious time would be lost if she did not attempt to get at least some work done while Lilith was at the apothecary.

As she tore the herbs and placed them in the mortar, Carla turned to Lilith—

who sat on the other side of the counter with her cheek in her hand—and asked, “This isn’t your day off, is it? Why aren’t you in class?”

“Well, I’m supposed to have sorcery practicum all afternoon. But it’s way too easy for me, so I decided to take the day off. I’m ditching, in other words,” Lilith finished with no trace of remorse.

Lilith’s gesture of looking up at Carla with her round brown eyes while shrugging her shoulders was cute. It did not, however, have any effect on Carla.

“Isn’t it bad for a scholarship student to be ditching class?” Carla asked.

“I mean, creating a water magic circle is way too basic for me! Why should I waste my time doing that? And besides, the professor told me that if I’m there, the other students lose motivation. Isn’t that the same as telling me that I shouldn’t show up to class?”

“Huh? What did they mean by that?” Carla asked in shock.

Lilith was skilled at sorcery—which was the whole reason she had been admitted to the academy on a scholarship. Having experienced for herself the force of the magic circles that Lilith produced, Carla understood that Lilith’s abilities surpassed those of most ordinary instructors. As she was in a position to receive instructions directly from the sorcerers at the royal castle, it was also probably true that Lilith did not need lessons in basics either.

But still, it doesn’t seem appropriate for a teacher to tell a student that she doesn’t need to be in class.

“How pathetic, for a professor at the most prestigious academic institution in the kingdom to try to gloss over their own lack of skills,” Carla commented. She also did not like the fact that the instructor had used the other students as an excuse to force Lilith not to come to class. Even if they had nothing to teach her, they could have her give demonstrations in front of the other students or serve as an assistant during the lecture.

“Hee hee, I bet they think that they’ll lose face if I’m there—since I’m better than they are,” Lilith quipped.

“That’s absolute rubbish. They should get rid of such useless pride.”

When Lilith saw Carla get upset like she had been the one wronged, Lilith simply smiled and said, “It’s fine. I mean, it’s true that it’s a class I don’t really need.”

“Okay, so I understand your reasons for ditching, but why do you come here?” Carla asked. “Don’t you have somewhere else to go? Like to the sorcerers’ order or to your family?”

When Lilith heard mention of her family, her expression immediately brightened. Having been brought under protection by the queen for their indirect involvement in the incident concerning Abel and Patricia, Lilith’s family was now working in the castle’s herb garden and living in the dormitory for the castle staff. Lilith could not live with them, since she herself lived in the dormitory of the academy, but the distance was such that she could visit them as frequently as she wanted.

“I’m going to go see my folks later. My little brother has his doctor’s visit today, so they’re probably at the medical clinic right now,” Lilith explained.

“Oh, I see. And how’s your brother doing?” Carla asked.

“The new medicine he switched to seems to be working. They said the number of attacks he has at night has decreased.”

“Hey, that’s great!”

“Yeah! The staff dormitory is so much better than the hovel of a house we used to live in. I’m so glad my parents and my brother were able to come to the castle. I really appreciate what the queen did for us.”

Lilith’s younger brother, who was turning ten years old this year, apparently suffered from frequent respiratory attacks. One would think that the countryside was a better environment for rest and recuperation, but a paper mill located in the territory of the Earl of Dalaney made the air quality there worse than in the royal capital. Furthermore, there were few physicians available in the countryside, decreasing the opportunities to receive medical examinations.

Now, however, with her parents working in the royal castle, Lilith’s younger brother was able to receive treatment at the palace medical clinic at the cost

reserved for those who worked there. Because of that, his condition had improved, and he was even showing signs of recovery.

Although they had been ordered to leave the territory that they had known their entire lives and relocate to the capital, Lilith's family felt nothing but gratitude for what had resulted from the move. Carla was, once again, impressed by the queen's sagacity, displayed because of the incident.

"The medical clinic at the palace has a reputation for being reliable and trustworthy. I think you'll have nothing to worry about," said Carla.

"My brother said that this new medicine is a lot more bitter than the one before it. But it's probably still a lot easier to take than the medicines you make, huh, Carla?"

"Hey, Lilith, don't you think that you're being kind of rude?"

"Aha ha, but it's the truth!"

Carla gave a soft grunt in response, unable to deny what Lilith said.

When she laughed so innocently, Lilith was charming enough to draw the attention of people regardless of their gender. When she was like this, she seemed cheerful indeed—yet it was also true that her position at the academy and in the sorcerers' order was not one to be envied.

The academy had always been a place where the majority of the students were the children of nobility or wealthy merchants. Since the faculty, too, was mainly composed of alumni, Lilith—as a commoner from the countryside who had entered the academy on a scholarship—always seemed out of place.

Not only that, at the academy—a microcosm of broader society—Lilith had made a move on the crown prince, who already had a fiancée.

Lilith had mentioned how, after Abel and Patricia's relationship had returned to normal, the three of them showed off to the other students that their relationship had been mended as well by eating together in the academy cafeteria and spending time together in other ways. However, the animosity that the daughters of other noble families felt toward Lilith for attempting to steal away someone's partner would most likely not disappear so easily.

It's an open secret that Lilith's sorcery caused the fire at the gazebo. It would be better if it were possible to explain to the other students the background of the incident, but they say that's still not possible.

Peter Sadler, who was the Earl of Dalaney's accomplice, had not yet been found. The fact that Lilith had been threatened with her family's safety had not yet been made public because it would affect the continued search for Sadler. Because of that, many students still believed that Lilith had let her magic circles run amok out of jealousy for Patricia.

Even now that Patricia and Abel had graduated from the academy and were married, there were few students who tried to befriend Lilith. Due to Lilith's exceptional aptitude, even the professors were treating her like some kind of an undesirable element in their midst.

It was also true, however, that—even as a perpetrator—the fact that Lilith would have to withstand such treatment from others had been taken into consideration when her punishment was determined. Lilith was quite open, therefore, about the fact that her position in the academy was not a terribly comfortable one but that she did not have any complaints about it either.

It's a saving grace that Lilith herself doesn't seem to care much about her negative reputation. Of course, she might just be putting up a tough front.

Carla herself knew that there were times when one had to tough it out without being able to lean on others for help. Inheriting the apothecary had been one such time for her. Perhaps the reason Carla could not bring herself to dislike Lilith was because she sometimes saw her past self in the girl.

But she's talented enough to have been promised a job with the sorcerers' order as soon as she started at the academy. Once she graduates, she'll be able to make even more of a mark for herself and live a lot more freely than she can now.

Unlike at the academy, the sorcerers' order was not a place in which people were marginalized for their social status or origin. What mattered were their abilities. Things might be difficult at the sorcerers' order now because of the aftereffects of the incident with Patricia and Abel, but as soon as Lilith began achieving her own successes, others' evaluations of her should also change.

The alienation Lilith was feeling was temporary. If she wanted to be near Carla during that time, then the apothecary witch was fine with that.

Carla, however, did not interact with many people outside of her circle of witches and her small network as an apothecary. Since Lilith was neither a relative nor a friend, Carla did not know how to treat her. She felt at a loss.

It's probably best if Lilith made some friends at the academy...though I guess it'd be nearly impossible for daughters of nobles to know how to handle Lilith too. And the few other commoner students seem to be putting distance between themselves and Lilith as well, just because she's a special scholarship student.

In general, witches tended not to become too deeply involved with others. They even had few ties among themselves. Since she recognized her own lack of subtleties necessary for the construction of strong human relationships, Carla could not say much to Lilith on that front either.

But it's not just that, Carla thought.

Lilith's tendency to change her behavior so blatantly in front of men was a problem. Daughters of the nobility who were attending the academy in search of their future partners were probably unable to stomach that about Lilith—though since Carla had no interest in romance or marriage, she did not mind. In fact, she thought it made Lilith easier to read.

"Then why don't you go to the sorcerers' order?" Carla asked.

"Oh my gosh, Carla—listen to this! I have a new mentor, but he's a total grandpa! How can it possibly be that someone who's as young and cute as I am is paired up with such an old guy?!"

"Who cares?" Carla replied.

"I do! Looks are so much more important than sorcery skills!"

"Well that's quite a statement there," Carla mumbled.

As she let Lilith's complaint enter one ear and go out the other, Carla continued grinding her herbs under the counter. The mortar she was using was a magical tool made by her witch friend Nettie. It was enchanted with magic

that maintained the freshness of the herbs while they were being prepared. It also had the ability to prevent the unintended inclusion of unwanted ingredients. Thanks to this convenient tool, Carla was able to work on her medicine even while carrying on a conversation at the shop counter.

“I was so looking forward to finding out who my new instructor would be. But then it turned out to be some grandpa... Even if he is the commander of the sorcerers’ order, my motivation to do well went down by about half when I found out.” Lilith sighed.

“Wait, the commander is your new mentor? That’s amazing. He’s famous, isn’t he? Uh, Eu...something or other.”

“Eustace. Commander Eustace McKay,” Lilith offered.

“Yeah, I thought it was something like that.”

“Jeez, Carla. Even kids on the streets know the name of the commander of the sorcerers’ order.”

“I’m not some kid on the street, so I can’t help it.”

“That’s unacceptable!”

“Say what you will. I can’t bother to remember things that I’m not even interested in.” Rather than remembering the names of people she was never going to meet, Carla wanted to store in her brain knowledge about herbs and dispensation.

Lilith’s previous mentor had been Sadler, the vice commander of the sorcerers’ order. He had been identified as being involved in the incident with Patricia and Abel, having created the bracelet with the disturbing magic circle. He had fled the order, and his whereabouts were still unknown. He was now wanted as a key witness.

The stance of the sorcerers’ order—that as long as one had the ability, then neither character nor ideology mattered—was one of the factors that had led to the scandal involving Sadler. Although reform of his character was being called for, it was not the kind of thing that would happen overnight.

Lilith’s research on transparent magic circles and other techniques in sorcery,

which she had been conducting alongside Sadler, was now on hiatus. Lilith, however, did not seem very interested in it. She was, instead, making a fist on the counter while puffing out her cheeks.

“Anyway, I’m not happy at all about this,” she said. “Vice Commander Sadler may have been a middle-aged man, but he was still handsome. He had dark-blond hair, and even though his eyes weren’t all sparkly because they were reddish brown, he was still stylish. What am I supposed to look forward to now when I go to the sorcerers’ order?”

“Maybe they assigned you a grandpa because you say things like that,” Carla commented.

“Seriously? Is that even allowed?”

According to Lilith’s additional complaints, there had been some heated discussions at the sorcerers’ order about who should serve as Lilith’s mentor in place of Sadler. Although it was true that Lilith herself had caused problems in the incident, the order did not want to let go of her, given what a capable sorcerer she was. There had been a request from the palace to keep her on as well.

In order for a student to be affiliated with the order, they had to be assigned a mentor. In an order that was essentially a collection of individualists, however, there were few members willing to give up their own research time in order to train new subordinates. After the sorcerers’ attempts to shove the task onto each other’s plates, Eustace—the aging commander who was whispered to be close to retirement—stepped up to take on the role.

When he was young, Eustace had been described as the most powerful sorcerer on the continent. It had, however, been more than a decade since he had stepped away from the front lines. Now, given his experience and his accomplishments as well as his vast social network, he was serving as the negotiator between the order and the palace and nobles—in other words, he was a commander who worked behind the scenes.

“Setting aside his looks, though, what is he like? Do you think you can get along with him?” Carla asked.

“I’ve only met him once, so I really can’t say. He’s pretty advanced in age, so

apparently he doesn't come to the order that much."

"Oh, I see."

"I have a feeling that I'll be learning more theory than practice, so I'm already bored," Lilith said, her pout brimming with dissatisfaction.

"Don't get bored so fast," Carla replied, smiling wryly.

According to Lilith, although Eustace had his office as commander, he also had his own research lab. Even so, he only visited the order every half month or so, staying only briefly each time. If that were the case, it was not practically possible for him to train newcomers to the order. His title as "mentor" would only be on paper.

At the least, there seemed to be little worry that he would take advantage of Lilith as a subordinate the way Sadler had.

Maybe it's better for Lilith to be left alone rather than to have a mentor who is the type to hammer down the nail that sticks out.

"Are there not enough people at the sorcerers' order?" Carla asked.

"It's just that I am too excellent, and they couldn't give me some half-baked instructor! Sure is tough being a capable woman!" Lilith lamented.

"Yeah, you go ahead and keep thinking that," Carla replied.

"But really," Lilith began, "I came to the capital to attend the academy, but my main goal is to find a rich and handsome husband. I don't have time to be hanging out with a grandpa."

"You can do what you want, but I also feel like you can cut back on that a bit too."

"I always knew that nothing would ever happen with Prince Abel," Lilith said after a pause. Her voice sounded genuinely sad. Carla leaned slightly forward to look into Lilith's face. As she sat with her elbows on the counter, looking away, Lilith appeared vulnerable for a moment.

Could it be...that she actually had feelings for him? Carla wondered.

Lilith had attempted to steal Abel away from Patricia because she had been

threatened and forced to do so. Of course, Lilith's advances had meant nothing to Abel himself. Perhaps for Lilith, though, that was not the whole story. There was no use bringing it up now, though.

"Lilith," Carla called softly, giving them both a moment. "When you were back home, you weren't seeing anyone?"

"There's no way someone good enough for me is out there in a countryside like that."

"I completely understand. It's not about the countryside; it's your personality that's the issue," Carla concluded.

"Huh? But I was the only girl aside from Lady Patricia that stirred up any kind of rumor with Prince Abel."

"Yeah, yeah. Oh wow, Lilith, you're so pretty."

"Jeez, you don't mean that at all!" When Lilith puffed out her cheeks, the shadow that had crossed her face earlier was gone.

Maybe she'll be fine after all.

"It's not like you can't live if you don't have a partner. You have sorcery at your command. I feel like it'd be so much more meaningful if you put your time and energy toward your work," said Carla.

"No way. That would be so boring. Love is the spice of life! My late grandma said that to me too!"

"Okay, fine." Carla sighed—but when she looked up as she added new herbs to her mix, her eyes met Lilith's, twinkling with expectation.

"So I'm saying," Lilith began, "my classes at the academy are too easy, and I have nothing to do even when I go to the sorcerers' order. That's why I want you to teach me magic—"

Ah, so we're back on that topic again.

"I refuse," Carla declared.

"Wasn't that too fast for you to reject me?!"

"I'm sorry; it's just not possible," said Carla, sighing at the request that was

not being made for the first time. She even put her palms out in front of Lilith to emphasize the fact that she was refusing the request.

Lilith had first asked Carla to take her on as an apprentice some time ago. Since then, Carla had rejected her several times already. She wished Lilith would just stop asking, since it would be troublesome if Carla accidentally said yes in a moment of absentmindedness.

“I’ve already told you: ‘The only one who can be an apprentice to a witch is a witch.’”

“Whaaat? But...”

“No buts. I’m a witch, and you’re a sorcerer. The sorcery you use is entirely different from the magic I use as a witch. There’s no way for me to teach it.”

“What’s wrong with a sorcerer learning the ways of a witch?” Lilith asked, pouting again. Given how pretty she was, though, she looked adorable even then.

Even so, Carla would not nod her head when it came to this request. “It would be like teaching a bird how to swim. There’s no point. In fact, it isn’t even necessary.”

“Huuh?”

Lilith seemed dissatisfied, but that was the only response Carla could give. In terms of using one’s own magical powers to conduct magic or sorcery, a witch and a sorcerer were the same. They both also occasionally employed the use of supporting apparatuses such as magic stones and wands.

While witches were able to express their magical powers directly as magic, however, sorcerers like Lilith performed magic by creating magic circles with their powers first, and then performing sorcery through them. Because sorcerers were unable to perform sorcery without magic circles, they had to have the skills to produce magic circles precisely and efficiently.

On the other hand, witches like Carla did no such training.

The methodology used by witches involved understanding the nature of their own powers and being as deeply in touch with the objects involved in the magic

as possible. In that sense, the magic of witches relied entirely on the witch's own senses.

If sorcery was the skill of performing a song on an instrument, then magic was the ability to create the song itself. Even if in the end the same music could be heard, the processes by which it was produced differed. Magic and sorcery were fundamentally distinct. One was not superior to the other; they were simply two different things.

"You'll just have to give up. If anything, having an incomplete knowledge of magic would get in your way when you're trying to use your magical powers for sorcery."

"But you were still able to erase the magic circles I made."

"Oh, I see—you were just annoyed that someone messed with your sorcery," Carla said, nodding.

"Th-That's not it at all!" exclaimed Lilith, turning away in embarrassment.

If that were the case, Carla could understand. *I wouldn't feel good either if medicine produced by means of a magic circle was better than what I made through magic.*

Once Carla finished grinding the herbs, she added purified water to them. She then stirred the mixture with magic from her fingertips.

Now the medicine was complete.

"What undid your magic circle was my magical power as a witch, but if you tried to do the same thing using sorcery, you would take a different approach. You're a smart girl, Lilith—you can understand that, can't you?"

"Jeez, don't treat me like a kid!" Lilith protested.

"But you actually *are* younger than me. Just because you're the older sister at home doesn't mean that you have to act like it in front of me too."

Upon hearing Carla's words, Lilith opened her eyes wide and turned slightly pink.

Lilith had been born to parents who were sharecroppers. She had grown up in a poor family, with a younger, sickly brother. She was, nonetheless, blessed

with an attractive appearance and a talent for sorcery. Whether she liked it or not, at home she must have had to play the role of the “reliable older sister.”

Habits like that end up running deeper than we realize.

Carla had become an orphan when she was young. Adopted as an apprentice by a witch who was old enough to be her grandmother, Carla had never been given a role in a family that could be described as “normal.”

Recently, however, Carla had begun stepping into very private situations—marital problems, to be specific—in “normal” households, through her work on behalf of wives who sought divorce.

The things Carla heard through this work often had commonalities. For example, there were frequent cases in which individuals were so fixated on roles as “husbands” and “wives” that they lost sight of their partners as actual people. Her most recent case had been precisely that.

Maggie had come to the apothecary after hearing about Carla’s work through word of mouth. She had given the fact that she was unable to have children as her reason for wanting a divorce. She had married into a family of well-established merchants five years prior. Now she was suffering under the pressures of others wanting the birth of an heir.

Having been raised by Varne, Carla knew that blood ties were not necessary to form a family. In reality, however, there was no small number of people who believed that blood was everything. Whether one could have a child or not was not determined by individual will either. As an apothecary, Carla shared that fact every time she had a chance. The idea was not one that was easily accepted, however. Furthermore, for some reason, the wife was more frequently blamed as the cause when a child was not conceived. Maggie’s case was no exception.

Although her husband had come to her defense, neither the negative, sarcastic comments nor the supposedly helpful advice—coming from both within and outside of the family—ceased. To top it off, Maggie overheard her in-laws planning to have Maggie and her husband separate in order to have her husband marry a different woman.

The woman who was named as the potential new wife was a distant relative,

known for being young and beautiful. Maggie had met her only once, at her and her husband's wedding. The impression Maggie had had of the young woman was that she was assertive and confrontational.

If her husband were to marry a woman who was already under the influence of their relatives, the power he had within the family would decrease even further. She felt, however, that perhaps that was better for her husband, who was gentle and preferred to avoid conflict.

The young girl was already on board with the plan. A meeting with her had already been set, disguised as her and her family's visit to watch the parade to celebrate the marriage of the crown prince. Realizing that everything had already been decided behind her back, Maggie felt completely dejected. She decided, as her final act in the marriage, to ask for the divorce herself.

Maggie did not want to divorce her husband because she detested him. In fact, he had tried to protect her, even though he did not have the power to do so. Because she was grateful to him, she was not able to bring up the divorce herself. This was why Maggie had come to Carla, to ask her to serve as a divorce agent.

Once Carla confirmed that Maggie's will was set, the two women had multiple discussions in order to create a meticulous plan of action. Yet when Carla finally spoke with the husband, she was met with another unexpected situation.

"...You don't need one?" Carla, transformed as Maggie, asked.

"Even if we don't have a child, I'm happy as long as I have you. So we'll not be getting a divorce," replied the husband.

"B-But your father and your mother, as well as your uncles, all say that not having an heir will cause problems—"

"It doesn't have to be our child who takes over the business, does it? My younger sister Emilia has three children, and we can even have the children of our cousins take over. Having the person who wants to do it take over the company will be better for business too."

Maggie had told Carla that her husband was always smiling. Carla saw that his eyes were certainly shaped like they might accompany a smile, but he was

clearly angry—*very* angry.

Wait, doesn't he seem like he's actually super in love with his wife?

Maggie had also told Carla that, while the couple got along, they did not necessarily love each other passionately. She had shared that what her husband felt for her was more of a familial affection.

The two had married because Maggie's family was one of the merchant family's clients. The relationship between the two of them, however, was not exactly necessary. If he had to choose between the company, which had existed for generations, and his wife, Maggie was certain he would most definitely choose the company.

Carla, therefore, was flustered that the husband's reply seemed to house a much deeper emotion.

W-Well, I mean, I've faced situations like this one before... Yeah, I'm still on the right track!

In previous cases, Carla had also encountered situations that differed from what the clients had shared with her in advance. This one seemed to still be within the realm of Carla being able to manage the situation—though she hoped there would not be much more ad-libbing required of her.

Gently touching the magical recording tool that hung around her neck, Carla stepped back into her role as "Maggie." When she donned an expression of sheer anxiety, the husband looked at her apologetically, his eyebrows furrowed.

"Even if we did have children, those people would find fault with something else. It doesn't matter what the reason is," he said.

"But...I don't think that I can take it anymore."

"Me neither."

"I understand that. That's why we should get a divorce—"

"I am completely fed up with the idiocy of those people."

"Huh?"

"I'll say it again: We're not getting a divorce. They're the ones who will be

leaving.”

Carla drew in her breath when the husband suddenly took on a much more menacing air.

According to the husband, the relatives had been criticizing not just Maggie, but also him as the young owner. Thinking that he could serve as the breakwater that would protect his wife, he had simply not taken the slander from his family members to heart. Upon learning that his wife was also being attacked through a different outlet, however, the husband now had a terrifying smile on his gentle face.

“I was wrong to have taken pity on them and tried to settle the matter peacefully. I want you to choose, Maggie. Which would you prefer: to run them out or to leave here ourselves?”

“Wh-What do you mean, which do I prefer?” asked Carla.

“Do you want to send those old fogies out to a branch office in one of the frigid lands far away? Or would you prefer to take all their business partners and clients and start a new business, just the two of us? It’s entirely up to you.”

Carla opened her eyes wide at the husband’s cool and collected voice.

Wait, wait! Didn’t she say that he was the kind-but-weak third-generation owner?! He’s super combative!

“Though either way, I’ll have my parents retire. If they can’t even protect their own daughter-in-law and are instead leading the charge to torment her, then they’re failures as both parents and business managers. I’m glad that all the preparations I’d been making just in case are coming in handy.”

When he looked beyond the door, most likely in the direction of his parents’ room, Carla felt the air of the room turn cold.

I-I don’t think anyone but his wife can respond to this!

Rubbing her arms to shield herself from the sudden chill, Carla stepped out of the room, telling him that she was going to fetch a shawl. She then switched places with Maggie, who had been in the next room, listening to the entire conversation.

After that—in the capital that was bustling with the wedding celebrations of the crown prince—the reputation of a certain merchant skyrocketed.

It was one of the more well-established merchants that had been in business for three generations. It had been rumored, however, that despite the high quality of their products, the attitudes of their employees were unsavory. The company restructured its internal personnel, however, and restarted with new business practices in place.

Although some of the newer employees took more time to respond to questions, all of their customers now had only positive things to say about the business. Other employees, who seemed to have been treated poorly by the previous manager, now seemed more engaged in their work as well.

It was when Carla returned to her shop after watching the thriving storefront from afar that she received the honorarium from Maggie.

The side of the husband that became apparent through the conversation about divorce that evening was, in fact, his original personality. He had been hiding the more fierce part of himself in front of his parents and relatives, thinking that playing the part of a son who was honest and just shy of stupid would cause fewer problems. When he realized that his act would make him and his wife unhappy, though, he decided to quit playing the role of the good son.

As she left the shop, Maggie confessed to Carla that her heart fluttered when she learned that about him. Maggie, too, had stopped being a mere obedient wife. She shared that the relationship between the couple was now better than ever. With both of them no longer playing the part of the Goody Two-shoes, the two of them fought more—but they also enjoyed the process of reconciling, said Maggie, laughing cheerfully.

And in the end, they didn't get a divorce. Jeez, may they live happily ever after, being in love like newlyweds! Seriously!

With her mission ending unsuccessfully for the umpteenth time, Carla began to think seriously about the idea of quitting her side gig.

She had no emotional hesitation closing her doors as a divorce agent. Yet sadly, operating her day job was not possible without the income from her

secondary work.

It was also true that her clients—who often came to her with pale faces and complaints about physical ailments—regained both their physical and emotional health after she completed their requests.

Although Carla was the apothecary witch, she was not able to treat people's illnesses with medicine. She was, in short, a failure. Yet if Carla's transformation magic was helping her clients regain their health, then it seemed wrong for her to quit.

Well...in any case.

Carla did not distinguish between her identity as an apothecary witch and her identity as her true self. From her perspective, living as a husband or a wife seemed like a cramped lifestyle, with no time to live just as one's own self.

"You're you, Lilith. There's no need for you always to be someone else's older sister," Carla said. Even if one found meaning in a particular role, it was still possible for weariness to accumulate in mind and body without one realizing it.

"Carla, you always say things like that so easily. That's what makes me want to come to this apothecary," said Lilith, her cheeks flushing as she turned away.

Yet this rare expression and mumbled words of embarrassment from Lilith were neither seen nor heard by Carla, who was carefully transferring the completed liquid from mortar to glass so as not to spill any of it.

"Even the ancient characters you use to create the magic circles—I only understand them instinctively because I'm a witch. It's not that I can read them because I studied them. So there's really nothing I can teach you, Lilith."

"But still..."

"No matter how many times you ask me, my answer isn't going to change. If you don't like that, you don't have to come to the shop anymore."

"You meanie!"

"Stop whining. Instead of teaching you, I'll let you experience the magic of a witch for yourself. Here, drink this," Carla said, gallantly placing on the counter a glass filled with the herbal drink she had prepared as she chatted with Lilith.

Lilith looked suspiciously at the drink, which was nearly overflowing from the oddly shaped glass, and asked, “What is this liquid of dubious color...?”

“Don’t worry. It’s not poison.”

“You’re lying! There’s no way this isn’t poison!”

The liquid was of a yellow-green color, reminiscent of butterfly larva. When Lilith fearfully lifted the glass, she was forced to move her face away from it as much as possible. The liquid reeked of fish, with an eerie unripeness to it.

“Plus it’s oozy! Ew, it’s super gross!” Lilith shouted.

“Make sure you hold your first sip in your mouth for at least ten seconds before you swallow it.”

“What kind of torture is that?!” Lilith demanded, turning blue with fear. Carla, however, was not trying to torment the girl. This was a simple magic potion, made by grinding medicinal leaves and berries, adding water to it, and mixing it by way of magic. It was not as effective as more formal medicine, but it came in handy as a nutritional supplement.

“If you’re not gonna drink it, then go home and sleep. You’re sleep-deprived, aren’t you?”

“How did you know...? O-Okay, I’ll drink it! I’ll drink it, but...I won’t die, will I?”

“Even if something happens, I’ll be sure to revive you.”

“That doesn’t give me any peace of mind!”

“You have to drink it all up, okay?”

“Oohhh...”

It seemed Lilith really did not want to go home. After much fussing, she drank all the liquid in the glass—then slumped over the counter. Her quivering fist indicated just how difficult it was to swallow the medicine. Of course, Carla pretended not to see it.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you—I don’t think it tastes very good.”

“You’re telling me that now...?! Ugh...what is this grassy, bittersweet, indescribable grossness... I feel like I just drank a green smoothie that was left

out in a shed for hours in the middle of summer...”

“Thank you for the very specific and yet not at all flattering comment.”

Was it that bad? No way. No, but... Hearing Lilith describe at length the awful taste of the medicine in a hoarse voice filled with what seemed like unimaginable suffering, even Carla’s face began to twitch.

In the past, when Varne made the same thing for Carla, it did not taste terribly good either—but Carla did not remember it tasting as bad as what Lilith was describing.

It seemed Carla was not very good at making oral medicine. She did not need this fact reconfirmed, however.

“And? How is it? I think it should be starting to have an effect by now,” Carla said.

“What do you mean, ‘how is it’?”

“Your canker sore. You have one on the inside of your lower lip, don’t you?”

“Huh?! How did you...? Wait, it’s gone! Plus my stomach feels oddly refreshed...”

All right! Regardless of the taste, I still pass for efficacy.

Lilith seemed to have forgotten all about the bad aftertaste in her mouth. She was putting her hands to her lips and stomach, looking astonished.

Because the drink Carla had just made used fresh herbs, it worked much more quickly than a tea that was made from dried herbs.

Carla did not have much confidence in it because she had not had anyone try it out for her recently. Its effects, however, seemed just as immediate as before. Carla was satisfied, knowing that her skills had not decreased.

Though I guess I learned that the training in magic that I’ve been doing has had no effect... It seems I’ve got a long way to go.

Even as Carla was looking emotionally off into the distance, Lilith, her eyes all aglow, was ascertaining for herself the power of “magic.”

“I’d been frustrated by that canker sore for three days already... So this is

magic?” Lilith asked.

“It’s one type of witch’s magic.”

The magic with which Carla made medicine did not have any problems. The efficacy was not the issue either. The medicine she made, however, failed in the categories of taste and ease of consumption. It also often had extra, unwanted side effects.

While she was alive, Carla’s teacher Varne had hypothesized, “Perhaps there is some kind of obstruction that is preventing your magic from being fully expressed, leading to your production of an incomplete medicine.”

Unlike with sorcery, it was not possible to logically sort out and systemize a witch’s magic. Because of that, Carla did not even know whether there were witches in the past who had faced the same problems as she did. To resolve the issue, Carla had to find out the source of her condition herself.

My teacher really did stick with me for so long. If it were me, I’m not sure if I’d be able to do all that, even for my own apprentice.

Every time Carla had failed, Varne made sarcastic remarks and even been disappointed. But she also consoled Carla and told her, “One day you’ll be able to do it.”

Carla was the one who gave up first.

Ever since resuming her training in magic, Carla realized again and again just how amazing Varne was—so much so that she ended up pulling out her old dispensation notebook and started to grow herbs that were no longer in mainstream use.

For a fleeting moment, Carla recalled her memories of the past—but then she snapped back to the present when Lilith asked her, “But how did you know? I didn’t tell you I had a canker sore, did I?”

“Mmm... It seemed like it hurt a little for you to talk,” Carla replied.

“No way, really?! Even my family didn’t notice anything when I saw them last night,” Lilith said.

“An apothecary is more skilled than family when it comes to stuff like this.”

Smiling at the astonished Lilith, Carla took the now-empty glass. On the inside, there were traces of yellow-green slime, almost as if to say, “There was something suspicious in here until just a moment ago.”

I know I shouldn’t think this as the person who made it, but...it looks gross.

Lilith was a champ for drinking the whole thing. Carla was a fan of this aspect of the young sorceress—her boldness and willpower.

“I can’t believe you actually put a drink of such an awful color in your mouth,” Carla mumbled.

“Wait a minute, *you* told me to drink it!”

Just as the indignant Lilith stood up from her seat, though, the bell on the door rang.

“Hello, Miss Witch! We’ve come to bother you!”

When Carla and Lilith looked up, they saw Thane and Tobias, wearing the uniform of the knights’ brigade. In contrast to Tobias, who raised his hand cheerfully as he gave his greeting, Thane entered the shop in silence, his face donning his usual disgruntled look.

“Oh my gosh! It’s Sir Tobias and Sir Thane!”

Hearing Lilith’s giddy voice, Tobias looked at her with surprise and said, “Hmm? There’s a student here. Uh, you’re...Miss Cabot, right?”

“Yes, I am! Hello! Sir Tobias, you remembered my name—that makes me so happy!”

Oh wow, as expected—her transformation really does not disappoint.

Her eyes now twinkling, Lilith had switched out her medicine-induced frown from earlier for an adorable smile. She bounded lightly over to the knights. Carla could not help but be impressed at the speediness of Lilith’s change in attitude.

“It’s not a day off at the academy, is it?” asked Tobias.

“My afternoon classes have been canceled,” Lilith explained, boldly.

“Oh, I see. Oh, did you have something to drink?” Tobias asked, pointing to

the empty glass.

“It was Carla’s special drink! It tasted horrible, but I did my best to finish it!” Lilith answered proudly, emphasizing the awful taste of the drink.

Thane, glancing suspiciously at the glass in Carla’s hand, frowned and asked, “Was it a magic potion?”

“It has more medicinal properties than herbal tea, but it’s not as strong as straight-up medicine. What, Thane, you want some too? Speaking of which, you seem kind of pale. Do you want me to make you one that’ll help you recover from fatigue?” Carla asked.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” Thane retorted. “If I drink such a questionable thing, I’ll feel even worse.”

“You’ve never even tried it,” Carla shot back. Not even minding Carla’s irritation, Thane retained his usual sour expression.

And here I bothered to worry about him. What a waste of my concern! He really did lack color in his face, but seeing as how he was able to make his usual snide remarks, Carla assumed that he could not be feeling all that bad.

“It’s true that it tastes bad, though, isn’t it?” Thane remarked.

“You’re as rude as always. Even though your uniform changed, your personality hasn’t changed one bit.”

The knights’ brigade uniform that Thane and Tobias wore had recently changed from the traditional white to a navy blue.

The uniform, renewed after many years, had been revealed at the recent wedding ceremony of the crown prince. Its shape and design followed what they were before, but the textile was now one woven with thread treated with sorcery. The uniform had increased defensive abilities, and it seemed to have also improved its resistance to offensive magic as well.

The renewal of the uniform had come about when Thane requested it of the queen as his reward for resolving the case surrounding the dissolution of the engagement between Abel and Patricia.

Carla later learned, however, that other knights had been wanting the

uniform to be modified since even earlier.

Although the white uniform looked handsome, it dirtied easily, making maintenance quite a task. This had been less of an issue in years prior, when being a knight in the royal guard was a vanity career for the children of nobility. Under the current king, however, the knights were tasked with taking the lead to head into less savory, and more messy, situations.

And yet the knights were still reprimanded if they dirtied their uniforms. Of course that would be a cause for complaint among the knights.

In addition, because the fabric had been woven with older technology, not only was it heavy, it was also hot in the summer and cold in the winter. The uniform, in other words, had not been designed with an ounce of comfort in mind.

Thane made it seem like it was because I said that I didn't like the white knight's uniform...but there must have already been plans to change it, right?

It was probably true that the implementation of the change had been sped up because of Thane's request. His wish, however, was not the only reason for the change.

Learning that, Carla felt somewhat relieved.

Having not interacted much with others, for something to change because of her—outside of the realm of medicine or magic—was too much of a burden for Carla.

Even so, Carla welcomed no longer having to see that white uniform, which she could not help disliking based on sheer instinct. She still disliked knights themselves, but at the very least she no longer felt shock or irritation at just the sight of them.

Thane and Tobias, too, now stopped by the apothecary in their navy knight's uniforms. Carla was relieved that they were no longer being so blatantly considerate toward her.

As though to pacify Carla and Thane as they continued quarreling loudly, Tobias said, "You're not wrong in your diagnosis, Miss Witch. Thane actually hasn't taken a break from work in days."

“I thought so,” said Carla.

“Tobias, keep your mouth shut,” muttered Thane.

“Even the commander was worried about you today. Just how many days do you plan on going without a day off?” Tobias asked.

“Don’t tell me—you’ve been working nonstop even when you’ve been told to take time off? You’re just suffering the consequences of your own actions,” Carla declared.

Carla could not believe the explanation Tobias gave. She wished she could take back the sympathy she had felt, thinking Thane was being forced to overwork himself.

“They say that those who don’t know how to play don’t know how to work. Isn’t it a given that people who are good at their jobs remember to take time off too?” Carla asked.

“Don’t liken your days of zero customers at the apothecary to the work being done in the knights’ brigade,” Thane replied.

“Oh, stop acting like you’re all superior.”

“What did you say?”

“Aha ha, come on now, you two,” Tobias interjected.

Even so, sleep deprivation really did seem to be taking a toll on Thane. Despite there being no emergency, he seemed to be displaying his usual commitment to his duty.

The explanation Tobias gave—even as Thane stood there looking sullen—was that, since the day before yesterday, Thane had been assigned to investigate an incident of theft that had occurred at the residence of a certain noble, on top of his regular responsibilities. Rather than the case itself, however, the master of the house seemed to be troublesome, causing much mental exhaustion for those involved.

“Speaking of which, the actual robbery case was solved, right?” Tobias asked.

“Who knows?” Thane answered.

“What do you mean, ‘who knows’? Come on now, Thane,” Tobias replied, his expression one of disbelief.

Thane shrugged his shoulders at Tobias, then glanced over at Carla and Lilith. Ordinarily, details about the work of the knights’ brigade was not to be shared with outsiders. Thane seemed to judge, however, that the witch Carla and the palace sorcerers’ apprentice Lilith were not outsiders. He continued, saying, “That’s the only way to describe it. There was no trace of an intruder, and it wasn’t even clear what had actually been stolen. The servants and the other family members all said that no theft occurred, yet the patriarch alone insisted that something was most definitely taken.”

“Huh? How is that even possible?” Carla asked.

“We have testimony from the servants and the son, who said that as far as they could tell, nothing had been taken from the mansion.”

They all tilted their heads in puzzlement at the strange story. Furthermore, the patriarch insisted that, “Even if nothing has been stolen yet, something will be stolen in the future—so catch the thief.”

“That sure sounds troublesome,” Tobias said, grimacing at what Thane shared.

Even when they asked the patriarch what kinds of items might be stolen, he responded by saying that it was not his job to know. Not knowing what they needed to guard, there was no way the knights could do their job. In the end, they reached a compromise by agreeing to increase the patrol around the mansion.

“It was quite a task just to get him to agree to that arrangement. And the son’s wife seemed to be in ill-health, so we were not able to speak with her. Since we’ll have to go back to get her testimony, the case is somewhat closed—but not exactly,” Thane said.

“Wow, I see. Well no wonder you said, ‘Who knows?’ I feel for you,” offered Tobias, expressing sympathy for Thane, who rarely complained about his work.

Carla, however, was stuck on a different point. “I didn’t know that the royal guard worked on normal cases like theft,” she noted.

“I wondered about that too,” Lilith joined in.

Within the knights’ brigade, the royal guard was fundamentally tasked with the protection of the royal family and the security of the castle grounds. With that said, the royal guard was also sent to check on the rise in the water level of rivers and to oversee the patrol of the capital by city police. Perhaps, then, it was not strange to investigate a case of (suspected) burglary as well.

Tobias, though, explained to the confused Carla and Lilith that this was a special case.

“It was the residence of one of the higher-ups in the House of Peers. As is common among men who are our fathers’ age, the patriarch in question is the type to make a fuss about status and formalities. He looks down on commoners, and he doesn’t like letting normal knights and police officers into his house.”

“Oh, I see. That’s why he wanted a member of the royal guard, who’s a noble... What a bother,” said Carla.

Carla herself found the obsession with social status and disparities between families to be suffocating. She did understand, though, that others placed much stock in such things. And just as Carla did not care about status, those same people most likely thought that it would be no terrible loss if Carla—along with her apothecary and all other witches—ceased to exist.

Not everyone found value in the same things.

Since such sentiments went both ways, Carla thought it was better for people with differing opinions to live apart from each other, not causing any direct harm. There were, however, times when that was not possible.

“Aha ha! Yeah, it really is a bother,” Tobias agreed.

“You’re laughing, but you’re a noble too, aren’t you, Sir Tobias?” Since they did not wear their status on their sleeves, Carla almost forgot, but Thane and Tobias had both been born to noble families.

To Carla’s comment, though, Tobias simply replied, “I’m the second son of an earldom in the countryside, so I’m just a noble on paper. Though if my family name is gonna come in handy for an investigation, I’m happy to use it. But

that's really about it. Isn't it the same for you, Thane?"

"Of course," came the reply.

"I see. Well, whether it's name or status, it's good to use whatever you can," said Carla.

"Wow, you seem so uninterested! I love your attitude of not giving a damn about the royal guard or the nobility!"

"Because I really don't care. It's not like they change how magic is cast on people or how well medicine works for them."

"Yeah, that's so true," said Tobias, continuing to laugh.

Carla could not figure him out and said, finally, "I really don't get what makes you laugh, Sir Tobias."

"It's fine, it's fine—don't even worry about it," he said.

"I don't."

"See, it's stuff like that!"

As Carla continued twisting her neck in puzzlement, Lilith entered the conversation, saying, "But, Sir Thane, even though Carla's special drink tasted horrible, it really worked wonders. I think it might actually be worth trying. I bet you'll feel better in no time. I mean, my canker sore went away immediately! Even though it tasted really horrible!"

"Hey, Lilith, you don't need to say that it tasted horrible twice," Carla interjected.

"Miss Witch's medicine tastes bad, huh? I'm kind of curious," said Tobias.

"Unless you want to die, Tobias, don't even think about taking it," remarked Thane. "I'm going to decline."

In contrast to Thane, whose expression seemed to scream that he absolutely was not going to drink it, Tobias seemed quite excited at the thought. Seeing him, Carla nodded and said, "Yeah, Sir Tobias doesn't seem like there's anything wrong with him, so I don't think he needs to drink it."

"Oh wow, you can tell things like that?" Tobias asked.

“Is that weird? Knights can tell the condition of their opponents when they go up against them too, can’t they?” Carla said.

“Oh yeah, I see.”

While Tobias nodded, seemingly convinced, Thane continued sporting his usual look of dissatisfaction.

Jeez, if he's gonna be in such a sour mood, he should just not come. Speaking of which...

Although Carla's apothecary was technically in the capital, it was located in a back alley quite far removed from the castle, where Thane and Tobias worked. The distance was not such that the two would just drop by without having some kind of a task to carry out.



“So what did you two come here for? Were you taking a friendly walk

together?” Carla asked the two knights.

“Hah? It’s not like we planned to come together,” Thane replied.

“Oh right, I almost forgot. Thane and I just happened to run into each other while on the way here. I have these to give you,” Tobias said, taking out several documents and handing them to Carla.

When Carla flipped through them, she saw they concerned the trade of the various ointments and compresses she made.

“I wanted Miss Witch to check the details of last month’s deliveries and payments,” explained Tobias.

“Oh, for Morgan, huh?” Carla replied.

The merchant Morgan had been caught reselling Carla’s medicine to the knights’ brigade at exorbitantly high prices.

He had, however, admitted his guilt and sworn he would never do such a thing again. Carla, as a victim of his crime, had forgiven him as well. He therefore continued to do business with both Carla and the knights’ brigade.

To prevent the recurrence of any such misconduct in the future, however—Tobias explained—the brigade had instituted the practice of regularly checking purchase details.

Tobias, who was in charge of managing the supplies of the knights’ brigade, had an all-around gentle personality. He was, however, very strict when it came to dishonesty and wrongful acts.

“I know it’s kind of a pain to go through these each time, but Morgan’s only being allowed to continue doing business with us since you chose not to have him punished. I really appreciate you helping us check,” said Tobias.

“Yeah, it’s fine. I actually don’t dislike paperwork,” replied Carla.

“Oh really? This might sound rude, but I feel like it’s rare to meet a witch who’s good at paperwork,” said Tobias.

“You think so?”

She did not necessarily like it, but Carla had learned to deal with paperwork

because she had to. Since she was of little use as an apprentice in terms of actually making medicine, she made an effort to complete other miscellaneous tasks perfectly—including preparing the herbs, cleaning the equipment, keeping the books, and maintaining other documents.

"Is there research out there that says witches aren't good at doing paperwork or crunching numbers?" Carla asked.

"No, I don't think so. I guess I just have this image that witches are beyond such practical matters," Tobias explained.

"I'm not sure if that's the case...though, I can't really say."

It was not just Carla. Her witch friend Nettie was also good with paperwork and fast at it, to boot. It seemed that working on magical tools must have given her a lot of training in computing because Nettie was also quite good with numbers.

Nettie, however, had the flaw that her writing was so messy only she was able to decipher it.

As for other witches... Ange read the stars as part of her fortune-telling, which meant that she was also able to draw charts. She was, however, so bad at keeping things organized, that although she had records of past cases, she in essence really did not, given that she could not actually find them.

Wait, maybe it is *true that witches aren't good with paperwork... B-But, it's not like it affects anyone else!*

"Miss Witch?" Tobias said, looking at Carla.

"Oh, uh, I was just thinking that the knights' brigade, too, might have people who aren't that good at handling paperwork," Carla said, attempting to change the subject so she would not make more self-incriminating comments.

"Yes, that! That's exactly right!" Tobias lamented, putting his palm to his forehead. "Just yesterday, a giant stack of documents was sent back to my desk because people in the knights' brigade had filled them out incorrectly in one way or another. I mean, how can you mess up so much on a one-page application?"

“That’s true,” Thane murmured from the side.

“Thane, don’t forget you’re one of those people,” Tobias reminded him.

“Ohh? What’s this now?” Carla asked, teasing Thane.

“Quiet, Carla,” Thane replied, glaring, though that did not scare Carla at all. He was just attempting to surreptitiously look away from Tobias, who suddenly looked very haggard and worn out.

“I’ve started thinking recently that the only reason I was made vice commander was so other people could thrust paperwork on me...” Tobias muttered.

“That’s not it at all! It’s all because of Sir Tobias’s merits!” Lilith exclaimed.

“Yeah, thanks. I’ll tell that to myself too,” he said.

As Lilith sidled up to Tobias as though to comfort him, Tobias naturally evaded her. They were both skilled at their respective games.

With a sidelong glance at the three on the other side of the counter, Carla flipped through the papers Tobias had given her, checking the various numbers and prices. Seeing nothing amiss with the total amount, she moved to sign her name in the spot indicated—when Thane stopped her, demanding, “That’s too fast, Carla. Did you actually check everything?”

“Sure I did. There weren’t so many calculations that I would get them wrong,” she replied.

“In other words, you just didn’t sell that many products,” he concluded.

“Don’t point out something I can’t deny,” Carla said after a slight pause.

She should not have admitted it, but Carla had a difficult time responding to Thane’s comments with silence.

Hearing Carla’s all too honest response, even Tobias and Lilith frowned.

“Miss Witch...”

“Oh, Carla...how unfortunate.”

Argh, Thane’s smug face of victory really ticks me off! But I just can’t help it—I can’t lie, nor do I want to!

As though to soothe the irritated Carla, Tobias remarked, “As for the knights’ brigade, we would really love to buy a lot more of Miss Witch’s medicine—so much so that you’d have a tough time checking your ledger!”

“Morgan’s said that to me before. It makes me happy, but I really can’t make my medicine in large quantities in the first place,” Carla replied.

“Yeah, he mentioned that to me too. At first I thought Morgan was limiting the quantities in order to prevent his fraud from being detected, but then he told me that wasn’t the case,” answered Tobias.

“Is that right, Carla?” Lilith asked.

“Yeah,” Carla nodded at Lilith, who did not seem to understand why. So Carla explained the reasons she could not mass-produce her medicine.

One was the ingredients. Carla used plants that she grew with her own cultivation magic for her medicines. She did not have a field or an herb garden. Because the only space she had to grow them was a single room on the second floor, it was difficult to increase the amount of herbs she grew.

The other reason was the consumption of magical power. Unlike light magic for blinding or cultivation magic, which could be used without being conscious of it, the magic for making medicine consumed quite a bit of power.

If I accidentally use up all my magical powers, I’ll end up like last time.

When Carla had gone to the academy transformed as Lady Patricia, she had ended up using more magical power than expected. As a result, she had passed out and fallen into a deep sleep. Ending up incapacitated regularly would affect her day-to-day life.

Because of that, Carla had a preset number of products she made each day that she sold to the knights’ brigade.

Even for ordinary tasks, Carla tended to require more power to activate her magic than other witches did. The efficiency of the consumption of magical power was, therefore, an important topic for Carla. It was going to pose some difficulties for the magical training she had just recently resumed as well.

I used to go all out without thinking. My teacher and Nettie yelled at me so

many times for that.

People said that if you repeatedly put yourself in a condition of having depleted your magical power, you would be able to increase how much magical power you held—but this was an urban legend. There was no such convenient reality. Carla could declare that with confidence, having forced herself to exhaust her magical powers and collapsed repeatedly, numerous times, with no effect.

Consuming magical power so recklessly during one's youth, however, actually seemed to affect one's physical growth. Varne had chided Carla, telling her that she had thus stunted her own growth.

Carla wanted to believe that those two factors were unrelated. Not having any memories of her own family, however, she could not refute Varne's claim by saying that she took after her parents.

I guess the only thing I can do is to find a way to use my magical powers more efficiently.

In terms of how quickly Carla consumed her power, her witch friend Nettie was also working to come up with some sort of a solution. For witches, however, whether regarding magic or magical powers, so much was left up to the sense and feeling of each individual.

With so many personal differences, even advice from other witches did not always prove applicable. The effects of her training were also slow to make themselves known. In order to resolve the issue, therefore, Carla simply had to find the cause herself.

Well, I guess I've already decided that I'm going to do it!

It had been two years since Varne's passing.

Although Carla's heart had been plagued by pessimism and dark thoughts during those years, it seemed to have lightened with the recent incident involving Abel and the others. Carla had become able to feel enjoyment tackling new and difficult things again.

Carla believed that this was a good thing.

If I stayed stuck in one spot, not being able to move forward because of something I had no control over, even my teacher would be angry with me.

Varne had rolled her eyes at lively and noisy occasions, claiming she did not like them—but she had disliked overly sad and pitiful sentiments even more.

It was not that Carla had ceased to mourn the loss of her adoptive parent. It was that if she remained morose over it much longer, she felt like the spirit of Varne would sweep her out of the shop with a broom.

If you don't have money, then earn it. If you can't have something you want, then make it. If you can't do something, then struggle as only one who can't can struggle. To complain without doing anything is the arrogant pride of a layperson. Varne had said those things to Carla many, many times.

Although unfriendly and obstinate, Varne had had first-rate abilities. Then and now, Carla's goal as a witch was to be like her teacher.

I wonder if I'll be able to get at all close... I was her only apprentice, after all.

As she circled back to such thoughts, Carla finally managed to sign and hand back the stack of papers to Tobias, saying, "Here you go. Checked and done. And what brings you here, Thane?"

Tobias managed the supplies in the knights' brigade and was also in charge of the area that included this back alley. Carla could understand why *he* would be here. Thane, however, was different. The two knights had said that they had run into each other on the way here, but Carla certainly had neither business nor personal matters to discuss with Thane.

When she directed her gaze and conversation toward him, Thane began speaking with yet another disgruntled expression on his face.

"I have two reasons," said Thane, after a long moment of hesitation. "First, Prince Abel and Princess Patricia have expressed a desire to see you."

"Why?" Carla asked.

"Hey, what makes you think that that is an acceptable response when the crown prince and princess have bothered to call upon you in the first place?!"

Thane must not have expected Carla to respond with anything but an eager

acceptance of the invitation. When she replied with a genuine question, he essentially chewed her out.

“Huuuh...? I mean, it’s not like they want to buy my products or anything, right?” Carla said.

“Of course not. The merchants that supply the royal family are already established,” Thane replied.

Items used by royalty, even if they were consumables, had to go through several checks and tests. Safety, of course, was one issue. Given that use by the royal family could also affect the balance of goods in the market, though, the decision to deal in a particular good was not made lightly. Sometimes it even called for parliamentary approval. There was thus no room for a tiny apothecary from a back alley to sneak in. In fact, if that happened, it would simply cause more problems for Carla.

“The two of them want to meet with you personally. Since it’s difficult for them to come into the city, they are asking you to come visit them at the palace of the crown prince,” explained Thane.

Not only did they have a mountain of official duties to take care of, they were also still at the center of attention, having just gotten married. Of course the young royal couple would not be able to so casually visit such a back alley.

Carla could understand that, but she also could not understand why they wanted to see her.

The last time she’d seen the prince and the now-princess in person was when she had gone for an audience with the king and queen at the royal palace. Since then, Carla had exchanged letters with Patricia several times through Scott, the butler of the duke’s mansion. If Patricia had any particular business, she would write to Carla that way.

If that’s the case, then is it Prince Abel who’s summoning me...?

Had it been Patricia, Carla would have responded to the invitation positively. If it was Abel, though, she could simply ignore it.

“Mmm, if I have a chance,” said Carla.

“Understood,” grumbled Thane.

Being one to put the royal family above all else, Thane made a face when he saw that Carla was clearly unwilling to rush to visit the prince and princess. He did not, however, force her to modify her response either.

Although Abel had been brought up, Lilith did not seem to be particularly agitated. Carla felt relieved.

“And? What’s the other thing?” Carla asked Thane.

“I am extremely reluctant about this, but—I have a request for you from the queen,” he answered.

“From the queen... She’s not trying to get me to dissolve someone else’s engagement, is she?” Carla suggested.

Paying no mind to Carla’s suspicious expression, Thane continued speaking, indifferently saying, “It’s a different matter. She wants you to supervise the herb garden in the castle—”

“I refuse.”

When Carla thrust her hands forward to express her rejection of the request even while Thane was still talking, Lilith and Tobias donned expressions of surprise. Thane, on the other hand, finally revealed his exasperation and said, “What did you say? Why, you—”

“It’s not ‘you,’ it’s ‘Carla.’”

When she interrupted him again to correct his manners, Thane gave an exaggerated sigh.



“Stop fussing over such a small detail. Plus you’re refusing? Do you know just

what you're saying?" he demanded.

"Of course I do. But given that you came to relay her request orally, it must not have anything to do with the pact between witches and the royal family, right?"

Unlike with the previous case, Thane had not come bearing a personal letter. As it was not part of the pact she could not refuse, it was up to Carla whether she wanted to accept the request or not.

When she said as much, Thane appeared even more dissatisfied and said, "It's true that it's not related to the pact, but..."

"Then I refuse. And that's that," concluded Carla.

"But it's a request from the queen! Of course you can't refuse!"

As Thane attempted to argue this and that to Carla even as she turned the other way, Lilith tilted her head and looked up at Thane innocently to ask, "Oh, Sir Thane. Just what is the queen's request all about?"

"Huh? And what are you going to do with that information?" Thane demanded.

"Why, you're so cold! Please call me 'Lilith' too, not just 'you'! And also, let's go on a date sometime soon! There's a theater troupe that everyone's been talking about lately. They have some performances coming up in the capital. How about we go together?"

When Lilith smoothly switched to the topic of going out on a date together, Thane furrowed his eyebrows even further, looking as though what she was saying to him was absolutely incomprehensible.

"What is this thing...? Hey, Carla. Take care of this somehow," Thane said, turning to Carla.

"Why don't you two go home together? As in, go home," Carla reiterated.

"Aha ha ha! Thane, she sure told you," said Tobias.

"Shut up, Tobias," said Thane.

"Wait, Carla. Don't tell me to go home," begged Lilith.

Rejected by Thane, who offered not even a foothold on which to make additional advances, Lilith now turned to Carla with nary a sign of discouragement. Lilith looked at her with a seriousness in her gaze that Carla had not seen before. Carla blinked, momentarily surprised.

“I mean, the queen’s herb garden is where my parents are working now, right? I’ve heard that there was a seedling that wasn’t growing terribly well, and my parents were saying that they were having such a tough time with it. So it really does kind of concern me, or, uh, I think my family would be happy too if you came...”

“I see,” said Thane.

“Thane, don’t be convinced by her so easily,” said Carla. “It doesn’t matter how many people try to convince me—I’m not going.”

“But, Carla, you can at least hear what’s going on!”

Lilith had somehow become more assertive than Thane, who had been the one to bring the request in the first place.

When Lilith leaned toward Carla over the counter, Carla took a step back. She then looked at the three of them and said, “You’re wasting your time...as in, the queen most likely knew that I was going to refuse. Right, Thane?”

“Huh?!” exclaimed Lilith, shocked at Carla’s comment. Tobias also looked surprised.

Having been called out, Thane frowned with about thirty percent more intensity. He closed his lips tight and glowered silently.

“See? He doesn’t deny it,” Carla observed.

“Is that true, Sir Thane?” Lilith asked.

“The queen did mention that Carla might perhaps refuse,” Thane awkwardly confessed, as Lilith tugged at his sleeve.

Carla puffed out her chest in mild triumph. Although she was able to read into the situation that much, Carla still could not figure out the queen’s true motive.

Having me supervise the castle’s herb garden, huh...?

The queen had made her previous request to dissolve the relationship between Abel and Patrica because she knew about Carla's transformation magic and side job. Carla had thus not questioned anything.

The reason for this new request might seem on the surface to be, "Carla is the apothecary witch and can use cultivation magic." Given that the queen conducted research on pharmaceuticals, however, she must understand herself just how misguided such logic was.

And that's why she sent Thane with a simple "request," rather than invoke the more forceful pact. I get that much, but...what is her actual purpose?

Although she had had some misunderstandings with the king, the queen was intelligent and very capable. It seemed unlikely that she would make a request that she could easily predict would be turned down without having some ulterior motive.

Carla could not read the queen's mind, but Thane and the others, too, seemed unable to understand why Carla would refuse the queen's request. As Carla stood there deep in thought, Lilith once again appealed to her, saying, "Why do you refuse? You said that you were good at raising plants. You have a lot of knowledge too, right? Then I feel like you could help the castle's herb garden. If the queen is asking you, I'm sure you wouldn't be working for free."

Tobias seemed to have thought similarly; he even assured Carla that she would definitely be compensated.

"That would help in terms of sales at the apothecary too, wouldn't it?" Lilith insisted.

"Lilith, there is no need for you to worry about the operations of this shop. That's not what I mean. It's *because* I'm the apothecary witch that I can't help with someone else's herb garden."

"What do you mean by that?" Thane demanded.

"You're gonna make me explain that too?" Carla lamented.

"Of course."

"You should just hear it from the queen," Carla muttered.

Carla could understand that, as the knight of the royal guard who had been entrusted with the request, Thane could not so easily back down. Even so, she felt he truly was so inflexible.

Carla sighed deeply, looking infinitely bothered. She then gave up resisting and said, “Jeez... If you wanna know that much, then come with me. It’s easier if I just show you.”

Carla came out from behind the counter, walked past the three of them, and headed toward the entrance of the shop. She stood before an empty wall, where there was a small opening between two shelves. She pointed her index finger and blew a breath filled with magical power—and turned the wall into a door. When Carla opened the simple, wooden door—devoid of decoration, almost like the entrance to a closet—a stairwell appeared.

“Oh my gosh, there’s a hidden door here! No, wait...a staircase? Wow! This is kind of exciting!” Lilith exclaimed in surprise.

“Ha ha, this is amazing. This is how you go up to the second floor, huh?” Tobias, also impressed, said as he clapped.

“The door looks like it might open to a cleaning closet,” Thane remarked.

“Thane, could it be that you have been cursed by a spell under which you die unless you make some kind of a snide remark at everything?”

“Ha! It’s the truth, though.”

This was a terribly rude comment, given that it was the entryway into her sacred, private realm. Glaring at Thane, Carla stepped into the stairwell.

The space was small, but a skylight filled it with brightness, so it did not feel closed off. With books and potted plants placed on each step, however, there was only enough room for the group to proceed in a single file. Carla and Lilith, being petite, had no problem; for Thane and Tobias, given their builds, the climb proved somewhat difficult.

“Be careful of all the stuff around, okay?” Carla said.

“I’m not a kid! I won’t break anything!” Lilith protested.

“Oh, no, Lilith. That’s not what I mean—I mean, that stuff is dangerous, so

don’t touch it,” Carla cautioned the group as she made her way up the stairs.

“It’s dangerous?” Lilith asked.

Hmm? Do normal people not know about witches’ belongings?

When she realized that, Carla turned back toward Thane and the others.

“So... Oh, wha—?!”

Immediately in front of her was a pair of lapis lazuli eyes.

Surprised to find Thane so unexpectedly close, Carla nearly missed a step. She lost her balance, and her body swayed—but before she fell down the stairs, Thane managed to hold her in place.

“Carla, are you okay?!” Lilith shouted.

“What are you doing?” Thane asked.

Thane and Carla completely appeared to be embracing. Although it should have been an unstable position, Thane was holding her so securely that Carla could not move an inch.

“What do you mean, ‘what’...?” Carla managed.

“Watch where you’re going. We’re on the stairs.”

“I know that!”

They were at eye level with each other since she was standing on a higher step. The difference in their height did not amuse Carla at all.

Carla somehow managed to regain her balance while still in Thane’s arms. Then, ignoring her pounding heart, she began climbing the stairs once again.

J-Jeez, that scared me... I didn’t think that he was standing right behind me! And he was at my eye level!

She felt frustrated, but she did her best not to think about it.

“Uh. There are cursed spellbooks, and plants that’ll give you a rash if you touch them. So if you mess with them without being careful, you might get yourself killed,” Carla explained.

“What? How scary!” Lilith exclaimed.

“It’ll be fine as long as you don’t touch them. It seems my teacher’s teacher had a bit of a habit of collecting things. So we just have a lot of things left from her time.”

Carla had been told that the person who started this apothecary was Varne’s teacher.

Since neither Varne as the direct apprentice nor Carla as the apprentice’s apprentice had any intention of getting rid of the original owner’s belongings, everything that had been collected simply remained just as it had always been.

The apothecary storefront was so tidy that it appeared almost bland, but the second floor was packed with memories and a wide miscellany of items.

“I see. But with things like that lying around, how do you stay safe, Miss Witch?” Tobias asked.

“Well, when it comes to curses, only the super powerful ones tend to work on witches. Plus I can treat my own wounds, and goodness knows I have enough medicine here that I can take,” Carla said.

“Tch, how troublesome.”

In contrast to Tobias, who was looking around with much interest, Thane seemed displeased.

Thane did not like witches to begin with. Carla could understand that a witch owning many dangerous items would only contribute to the negative image he had of them. She wondered, though, if he was not perhaps putting his ill will on display a tad too much.

When you really think about it, he really does have such a difficult personality...

He must have no desire to be involved with witches, and yet this overly serious knight was unable to refuse the orders of the queen.

It was not that Carla did not sympathize with him. Yet as a witch—and thus a target of his displeasure—she could not help but say things to provoke him.

“If you’re gonna complain about it, Thane, then you don’t have to come up here. A mere *ordinary person* like you has no resistance to magic anyway,” Carla

remarked.

“Just how arrogant do you intend to be when you’re just a puny witch yourself?” Thane shot back.

“Oh, what, are you scared or something? I guess a brain that’s been taken over by muscle can’t help protect against magic, huh?”

“What did you say?!”

“Ha ha, you two sure get along,” said Tobias, cheerfully teasing them.

“We do not!” Carla and Thane shot back at Tobias in unison as the group finally managed to finish climbing the staircase.

There were four rooms on the second floor of the apothecary—two bedrooms on the side facing the alley and a bathroom and a small library across the hallway. Carla put her hand on the knob of the door leading into the first room on the alley side. Before she opened it, though, she turned toward the three of them and said, “Like I said before, there are dangerous things here, so this is the only room you can enter. Don’t go into the other rooms, okay?”

“Got it! So, Carla. What room is this?” asked Lilith.

“This is my room, which doubles as the cultivation room for all my herbs,” Carla said as she opened the door.

The makeup of the room was simple. Looking in from the door there was a closet to the right and a window straight ahead. The only piece of furniture was a small couch that could seat one person comfortably but probably not two.

And—

“What the hell is this place?” murmured Thane.

The three visitors stopped dead in their tracks when they saw that the rest of the space in the room was completely filled with plants.

2. Herbs and the Gathering of the Witches

Inside the room, there were plants in so many pots and planters of various sizes that there was no room for a human to maneuver. In addition to herbs, there were also fruit trees taller than Thane. Some were even bearing fruit.

Magical tools for providing light and water could also be spotted. Thanks to them, even the corners of the room furthest from the window did not seem dark.

As proof of the high quality of the nurturing environment, every single plant had lush, green foliage with limbs and stems that extended as far as they might.

“Wait, this is your room, Carla? Don’t you mean that this is some kind of an indoor garden or a greenhouse?” asked Lilith.

“This is honest to gods my room, Lilith.”

“So, uh, I read this adventure novel the other day, and the main character has a maritime accident and ends up getting washed up on the shore of a deserted island. And it was supposed to be something like this...”

“Oh, come on now, Sir Tobias,” Carla laughed.

Although Carla denied it, the pot that hung nearby from the ceiling had vines stretching from it in various directions. No matter what she said, she could not wipe away the feeling of being in a dense jungle that the other three seemed to be feeling.

Save for a minimal amount of space that had been spared in order to perform necessary caregiving tasks for the plants, every inch of the room was covered with pots of plants. The master of this room was clearly the plants, not Carla. There was thus no way that four full-grown adults could move through the room at the same time. Seeing that the room lacked any hint of a person living there—as in, the room was not a space appropriate for human life—the three were shocked and nearly appalled.

“But Carla...where do you sleep?” asked Lilith, her mouth open in shock.

“On that thing,” Carla said, pointing to the one furniture-like object in the room.

“That? But that’s a couch, isn’t it?!”

Carla’s response deepend the furrows of Thane’s brows, and he said, “That thing is for sitting, not sleeping.”

“Well, too bad for you, I’ve been sleeping soundly on that thing for over a year now.”

“Huh? You’ve gotta be kidding me...” Thane muttered.

The couch, upholstered in tweed, was very comfortable to sit in. The back was at just the right angle that with the cushion on the seat and a warm blanket, it was possible to fall into such deep sleep that one did not even dream.

“I used to have a bed over there, but it was taking up space. Once I got rid of it, I was able to have a lot more plant pots,” Carla explained.

The wall to which Carla pointed now had shelves from floor to ceiling. It, too, was filled with planters. Even if there were a bed there, one would not be able to sleep calmly for fear of having a potted plant fall on them. The three visitors all stood, their palms to their respective foreheads.

“Just how crude are you?” Thane asked.

“Crude? How can I possibly be crude, when I take care of these plants with such tender, loving care? Besides, it’s not like I’m causing you any trouble, Thane.”

“I am questioning your character as a human being,” Thane murmured, adding, “Even in the temporary dormitory of the knights’ brigade, there’s at least a bed...”

Though it was most likely for the purpose of letting in sunlight, the window of this room did not even have curtains. When Thane, exasperated, demanded just how much the plants were prioritized over the human, Carla proudly declared that it was not a problem.

“Besides, I end up falling asleep downstairs on the first floor a lot anyway,” she commented.

“Oh, then Miss Witch’s bed is actually downstairs, right?” Tobias asked, smiling with relief.

“Of course not. There’s a chaise longue in the kitchen, so I sleep on that,” Carla said, dismissing his suggestion.

“Carla...this is all so terribly unfortunate...”

“Lilith, do you have another complaint?”

“It’s not a complaint, but...”

It should not matter where one slept. Why did they insist on recommending her a bed, which took up so much space? When Carla remained unapologetic, seeming not to understand why they all cared about the issue so much, Thane glared at her, annoyed.

“There are other rooms on the second floor. What do you use those for?” he asked.

“What, Thane, you too? The one next door is my teacher’s room. The two across the hallway are the bathroom and the library. There’s no other bedroom.”

“No bedroom? But...” Thane started to object. He then suddenly remembered something and muttered, “Ah—that’s why you were able to sleep so much in the office of the knights’ brigade.”

After the confrontation with Lilith at the academy, Thane had taken Carla—exhausted and completely depleted of magical powers—to the administrative office of the knights’ brigade in the royal castle. There, Carla had slept soundly on the very stiff and uncomfortable sofa.

Thane had taken pity on her then, thinking that she must have been unbelievably tired. However, hearing her explanation that she slept on chairs on a daily basis, he realized that that was business as usual for her—regardless of whether that was good or bad.

“You made me worry over nothing.”

“What did you say, Thane?” Carla asked, unable to hear his muffled remark.

“Nothing. I was just incredulous.”

“’Scuse me? I don’t wanna hear that from you, who lacks any and all delicacy.”

“Come on now, you two,” Tobias stepped in to calm them down, stopping a quarrel before it could even start. “It’s fine as long as you’re okay with it, Miss Witch. But I do think that you’ll be able to get more rest if you could actually lie down horizontally.”

“I said I’m fine. I’m not even sick.”

“Says you,” replied Thane.

“Okay, enough about the bed! We came up here so that I could explain to you why I’m not helping out with the herb garden at the castle!”

Why does it feel like I’m having to make excuses?!

Cutting short the discussion about her sleeping arrangements, Carla turned on her heel and stepped into the room. Choosing a relatively small pot from the many scattered about the room, she handed it to Tobias. The plant was covered in glossy leaves.

“Hold this, Sir Tobias.”

“Oh, I’ve seen this a lot in the forest. It’s, uh...mint, right?”

“Yup. It’s pennyroyal. It works as an insect repellant and also has antibacterial properties.”

What grew in the pot was a very mainstream herb—a type of mint. It had some height, but since it was the type of plant that covered the ground, it did not grow terribly tall.

“I didn’t know it was called that. You sure know your stuff, Miss Witch,” said Tobias.

“There are lots of different kinds of mint. I dry these and put them in my deodorizers too. If you make herbal tea out of this, you can expect it to alleviate cold symptoms and address issues of irregular menstrual cycles—but since its main active ingredient is poison, you can’t take too much of it.”

“It’s poisonous?” Thane repeated.

“Thane, whether it’s alcohol or salt, anything can be poisonous if you take too much of it.”

Although plants with pharmacological effects were called “herbs,” it went without saying that, depending on how they were used, they could also be harmful to the human body. Because poison and medicine were but two sides of the same coin, there existed apothecaries who had proper knowledge of both.

Thane seemed to agree with what Carla said. She glanced over at him as he fell silent, and then she pointed to the mint that Tobias held.

“Lilith, tear off a piece of this mint,” Carla said.

“Are you sure?” Lilith asked.

“Yeah. A leaf, a part of the stem...anywhere is fine.”

“Ooohh, how exciting... Then, this here.”

With a look of excitement on her face, Lilith reached for a small leaf about the size of her fingertip. At the same time, Carla also picked off a leaf from the same plant. When the leaves separated from the stem, a refreshing scent gently filled the room.

“Wow, it smells amazing— Wait, huh?” Lilith muttered.

“It withered? Miss Witch, why?” Tobias asked.

The leaf that Lilith held between her fingers had turned brown instantaneously. On the other hand, the leaf that Carla held was still a vivid green.

Having witnessed the abnormality, not just Lilith and Tobias but also Thane looked on with their eyes wide in surprise.

“Carla, what happened?” Thane asked.

“All of the plants in this room are enchanted by my cultivation magic. Because of that, their efficacy increases, and I can harvest a lot of essential oils from them. But that also means only I can handle them.”

“What does that mean...?” Thane asked, after a moment of trying to

understand the situation.

“It’s just as you saw. Why don’t you try it out too, Thane?”

When she suggested it to him, Thane, still suspicious, broke off a small stem. It, too, withered immediately. As he stood there surprised, Carla placed the leaf she had broken off into his hand. That one maintained its green color.

“If I harvest it first, then I can give it to someone else to handle,” Carla explained.

“Carla, why is this the case?” Lilith asked.

“This is a part of a witch’s magic. I’ve told you a number of times that sorcery and magic are different, right? Magic can’t be reproduced by anyone but a witch.”

“...I see,” muttered Lilith woefully.

Carla smiled wryly at Lilith. She had asked Carla many times to teach her magic, and Carla had repeatedly said no. Lilith finally understood what Carla had been trying to explain to her. If Lilith was going to be convinced just by *seeing* it, maybe Carla should have demonstrated it like this in the first place.

“This is one of the reasons I don’t help with other people’s herb gardens. It’s not realistic if I’m the only person who can harvest things.”

“Ah, that’s true. I understand,” Tobias said, seeming convinced.

Lilith, however, still clung on, saying, “B-But what if you don’t use any cultivation magic? I’ve heard that you’re good at growing things, even if you don’t use any magic.”

“The castle has a professional gardener, and it even has labs for herbs and pharmacology. Those people have way more knowledge and skill than I do.”

“But...”

“Besides, the department that makes the medicine is separate from the herb garden, right?”

“That...yeah. I think I heard my parents say that the herb garden is just for growing the ingredients.”

The work in the herb garden included harvesting, separating the flowers and leaves, drying them, and processing them minimally. Creating the actual medicine was done by the medical clinic and the plant lab, where the herbs from the garden were sent. In other words, the castle had a division of labor in place.

“I can’t take responsibility for medicine that’s made where I can’t even see it. And as an apothecary, I can’t permit myself to have herbs that I help grow be used for medicine that I can’t take responsibility for.”

To take responsibility not only for the final medicine but also for every ingredient that was used—that was the pride of an apothecary witch. That was why Carla had a policy of not becoming involved with the production of herbs that were to be processed by someone other than herself.

In the past, people had asked her to sell them the herbs she had grown. She had staunchly refused all such requests. Not knowing where or how the people were going to use them, she could not so easily hand them out.

“To clarify where responsibility lies in the creation of medicine—that’s fundamental for anyone who handles medicine. The queen should know that too.”

“You’re right...”

When Carla made her declaration as she looked straight into Thane’s eyes, he seemed finally to be convinced. He nodded reluctantly and then looked down at the withered mint leaf he held in his hand.

Although that’s not the only reason I’ve ended up with so many pots of plants.

Even if they were ingredients for the medicine she made, Carla did not mine her own minerals; she bought them. As long as she could examine them, she was also fine buying herbs.

The reason she stuck to using herbs she cultivated herself was because she had learned that by doing so the medicine she made with her magic had the most efficacy.

It was the result of Carla—who could not be confident in her own magic—being particular at least about the ingredients she used. Her room was the only

place she could use to grow the herbs, so she had put out as many pots as possible and created a little jungle.

If I were as skilled as my teacher, even if the quality of the ingredients I bought wasn't so good, I'm sure I'd be able to make up for it with my magic... Seriously, I rue my own inadequacy!

Nevertheless, Carla's ointment—which made up for her lack of skills in magic with the ingredients used—was of very high quality.

She was satisfied with the medicine she produced, and she had no intention of changing her ways—though even Varne herself, who had been the one to recommend that Carla start growing her own herbs at home, probably never thought that Carla would end up getting rid of her own bed.

She'd probably be exasperated, saying that I always go from one extreme to the other.

As Carla reminisced about her teacher's lessons, the three visitors fell silent, having been shown the withered leaves and told the very legitimate opinions of the apothecary witch.

Feeling the air about them grow heavy, Carla looked up and, trying to lift the mood, said, "In any case, those are my reasons for not going to the castle. But...I guess I can hear about the conditions of the plants and at least...give some advice."

"Really? I'm sure that alone would make my parents so happy!"

Lilith broke into a smile when she heard Carla's compromise. Thane, too, looked up in surprise.

Tobias handed the pot he was holding back to Carla and said, smiling, "Regardless of what you claim, you're good at caring for other people."

"Th-That's not it! It's just that it's more troublesome if people are persistent."

"Sure, sure. Well, whatever the reason, Thane must be glad that he can at least give a positive response to Her Highness."

"Yeah..."

Wait, why does he still seem dissatisfied?! Seriously, he's such a pain!

Seeing Thane nod so truly begrudgingly, Carla almost wished that she had not made her offer a moment ago.

Paying no mind to Carla, however, Thane began making their next plans, saying, “If that’s the case, you’ll first need to interview the staff of the herb garden. That means I’ll come here again next week—”

“Huh? Thane, you don’t need to come, do you? If you have any reports or questionnaires, you can just give them to Lilith, can’t you?”

Although he dropped by the shop so casually, Thane was a knight of the royal guard—plus he was a vice commander to boot. Of course he did not have time to be coming so frequently to Carla’s apothecary in a back alley on the outskirts of the royal capital.

It was more likely that Lilith would continue frequenting the shop, and since her parents worked at the herb garden, she probably would not mind getting involved with interviewing the garden staff.

Plus he dislikes witches, right? And just because they’re not wearing those white uniforms anymore doesn’t mean that I like knights all of a sudden either.

If Carla and Thane could manage to keep a distance from each other, things would be more peaceful. Yet Thane looked even more frustrated at Carla’s comments, and Tobias seemed about to burst as he stood there trying to stifle a laugh.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I can’t just hand off a task that was directly given to me by the queen,” said Thane.

“Sir Thane, in that case, why don’t you and I come to Carla’s shop together from now on?”

“I refuse.”

“Gosh, how mean! But you look handsome even when you’re like that! But, say...”

When Lilith’s attempt to get closer to Thane came to naught, she twirled for dramatic effect—but as she did so, she seemed to spot something. She pointed to a small pot on the windowsill and asked, “Carla, what’s that one? That pot is

the only one that's empty."

"Hmm? Oh...that one is special."

What Lilith had noticed was a pot with just soil in it—with not even a small sprout poking through. It was so small that it fit completely in two hands. There was a clear dome-shaped hood covering it. Carla set the pot of mint down and picked up the seemingly empty pot, as if handling something very precious.

"I planted this little guy a long time ago, but he hasn't sprouted yet. He's been like this for three years."

For some reason it repelled even Carla's cultivation magic and gave no signs of germination. Thane and the others were curious at Carla's explanation. They all peered into the pot.

"Is it an herb?" Thane asked.

"Actually, Thane—it was a seed I'd never seen before, and even though my teacher and I looked it up together, we ultimately couldn't figure it out. If it sprouts, I feel like I should be able to get some kind of clue."

"Oh wow, a mysterious seed that not even Miss Witch's magic can sprout, huh? That really is curious. You don't think it's gone bad, do you?"

"Don't worry, the seed is still alive."

Although she did not know when it had been harvested, as long as they were preserved under good conditions, seeds could live for many years. Some seeds of wheat, for example, could sprout even twenty years after being harvested.

"There are some seeds that don't sprout unless all the right conditions have been met, and others that just take a long time. So I'm just waiting, patiently."

"I see... That's kind of romantic."

"It doesn't mean it's going to have a beautiful flower, Lilith."

I'm pretty sure it's not a seed for an ornamental flower...

Carla had at least surmised that it was an herb of some kind. What it was, though, she had no idea.

The only thing she could do was to use cultivation magic so that the seed

would not wither or rot before it had a chance to sprout. She also covered it with a tool that was enchanted with preservation magic. This magical tool was courtesy of Nettie.

“There are plants that even an apothecary witch can’t grow, huh?” Thane scoffed, teasing Carla with certain victory.

“Oh, you would say that? I would’ve never guessed such a comment to come from a knight of the royal guard who failed to stop an attack that came from Prince Abel, who was not only younger, but also still a student,” Carla shot back.

“What did you say?”

“Aha ha! I never get bored watching you two!” Tobias exclaimed, laughing at the pair.

“Sir Tobias, you have bad taste,” Carla muttered.

“Right, right. I really like that about you—that you’re so blunt with people.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?” Thane asked in disbelief. “Tobias, don’t you dare say such nonsense.”

Carla had been told that Tobias, who seemed to enjoy the situation even more when both Carla and Thane were glaring at him, was the same age as Thane. However, he seemed to be older in various respects. Tobias's current smile—an expression that suggested he knew something others did not—was also hard for Carla to decipher.

If my older brother were alive, I wonder if he would have been like this... Whoa, wait. What am I talking about, "my older brother"?

Carla did not even know her older brother's face, so it felt strange to compare him to others or even to think that he was similar to someone.

However, the way Tobias acted—like he was more mature than others or as though he was meddlesome while actually not being terribly concerned about things—did seem to resemble a certain someone that Carla knew.

Wait a minute. Could it be that Sir Tobias is kind of like Nettie?

"Carla!"

The face that popped into her mind was that of her witch friend Nettie—who occupied the position of Carla's surrogate meddlesome older sister. Carla also thought she heard that very witch's voice coming in from the outside.

"Hmm?" Carla wondered out loud to herself at the coincidence.

"Th-Th-This is the second floor, right?!"

It seemed, however, that Carla was not the only one who heard Nettie's voice from the window. Lilith also turned around at the voice and then promptly held her breath in frightened shock when she saw—beyond the window framed by overgrown herbs—someone floating against a backdrop of the sky.

A black robe and red hair that stood out against it. A woman wearing glasses with frames that matched her green eyes well. It was Carla's witch friend, Nettie.

Carla approached the window, making her way around the three others who stood there with their mouths agape. She opened the window wide and said, "Oh, I didn't just imagine it—it *is* you. What's going on, Nettie?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing. The entrance to your shop is gone. I

thought you were out, but then I heard voices from the second floor, so I just flew up."

"Oh, sorry. I might have inadvertently made the shop door disappear when I came up the stairs."

"It sure is like you not to think that you'll have any customers, Carla!"

Nettie was floating on what might be considered a very stereotypical item when one thought of witches—a broom made of gorse.

Witches did not need to use a broom to fly. Nettie, being one who wanted to try anything and everything, had experimented in the past with a ruler, a spinning rod, and even a basket. With every single test item, she was able to fly without any problems.

She had finally settled on a broom because she said it felt "the most appropriate."

The reason Nettie was able, even as a witch, to fly around the capital without being called out by onlookers was that she was also using a spell that caused her to simply appear as a bird to anyone who was looking up from the ground.

Gosh, and here I am, not good at either flight magic or magic to make myself look like a bird.

Although Carla was able to use transformation magic to actually *become* a bird, she had a difficult time casting illusion magic to make herself *appear* like a bird to many people. Here, too, was another piece of evidence of her being a failure of a witch.

It would be a lie if she said that she was not jealous. She would be much happier, however, if she improved not her flight magic but instead her magic related to making medicine. In other words, the jealousy she felt was not in earnest.

"I wish I could tell you to come on in, but I guess it's kind of cramped in here, huh? Hang on, I'll make the front door reappear," Carla said to Nettie.

Carla's room, which had already been filled with plants, was now officially at capacity thanks to the presence of the four adults. As Carla made a move to

rush downstairs, Nettie stopped her.

“Oh, no worries. I’m just here to pass on the word,” she said with a beaming smile.

“What word?” asked Carla.

“The date for the next gathering has finally been set!”

Oh, shoot!

While Nettie made her announcement in a high, singsong voice that may as well have been accompanied by a grand “ta-da!,” Carla made a face as though she found the news to be supremely unpleasant.

“I’m not going!” Carla shouted.

“Too bad for you. This is the annual one and attendance is mandatory. It’s tomorrow night, same place as always—Lakebell.”

“Tomorrow? But I can’t go on such short notice! I have medicine I was planning to blend today!”

“That’s precisely why I came to tell you the day before. If you really put your mind to it, you’ll be able to finish by tomorrow, right? Besides, if I told you too far in advance, you’d try to come up with some excuse not to be there,” Nettie declared, an expression of triumph on her face.

“Wow, you saw right through me!” Carla shouted, then hung her head in disappointment.

“Now that I’ve told you, make sure you come, okay? Carla—what do you say?” Nettie asked, reiterating the invitation with intimidation in her voice.

“Y-Yes, ma’am,” Carla replied, raising both her hands in surrender, at which point Nettie disappeared back into the sky.

When Carla turned around, she saw that Lilith and Tobias still had their mouths hanging open.

“Was that the craft witch?” Thane muttered in a cold voice that indicated his distaste for witches.

“Thane, you know her too?” Tobias asked.

“Of course not. I’ve only seen her once.”

In the ordeal to dissolve the engagement between Abel and Patricia, Thane and Carla had stopped by Nettie’s magical tool shop on their way to the academy in order to borrow a certain magical tool. Thane had met Nettie then.

In fact, to say that he had met her might even be an overstatement. None of them had gotten out of the carriage at the time, and Carla had been the only one who even spoke with Nettie during that brief encounter.

Carla was genuinely impressed that Thane remembered Nettie despite the brevity of their so-called meeting. If it had been her, she would have completely forgotten.

“Thane, you only met her once, but you still managed to remember Nettie, huh?” Carla remarked.

“Of course. You... Don’t assume I have the same poor memory you do,” he replied.

“There you go, calling me ‘you’ again. Would you like me to call you ‘dar-ling!’ in my best falsetto the next time you decide to say that?”

“Don’t you dare.”

“Ha! Knock it off, you two! That’s too funny!”

Hearing the customary exchange between the witch and the knight, both Tobias and Lilith burst out laughing. Given that Carla was trying to lodge a serious complaint, she did not appreciate that the two found so much amusement in the situation.

Working to stifle his laughter, Tobias asked Carla, “When you say ‘craft’...is she by chance the witch lady who makes magical tools and things?”

“Yup, that’s right. She has her magical tool shop on the main street close to the castle. You’ve never met her?” she asked.

“Unfortunately, no. I’m not in charge of the area around the castle, I’m afraid.”

“What about you, Lilith?” Carla asked.

“I’m a student—of course I can’t buy expensive things like magical tools. That horrid bracelet was the first and the last. I’ve never even stepped foot in a magical tool shop.”

“I see,” Carla said.

Tobias’s jurisdiction seemed to include the area surrounding this back alley. If that was the case, then he may indeed never have met the owner of a store that was in a prime location closer to the royal castle.

In addition, magical tools—which tended to be on the expensive side—were not the kind of thing a student from a commoner background like Lilith would be able to easily afford.

Besides, the tools that Nettie makes aren’t at all like the mass-produced stuff out there.

Nettie specialized in research about magical tools. Although her store carried common and more traditional magical tools, she did her best work when it came to made-to-order items. As a result, most of her clients were nobles and wealthy merchants—those who were well-to-do.

“Let’s see... Sir Tobias, do you remember the magical tool that recorded what happened at the academy? She made that.”

“Oh, that pendant! Of course I remember—that was amazing. So that witch lady from earlier made that?”

When Tobias so openly admired Nettie’s work, and with such excitement, Carla felt proud even though he was not even talking about her.

Nettie’s shop often received orders from not just the Kingdom of Selvaster but also other countries. Despite the fact that her business practices—including whether she would take a particular order and how long she would take to fulfill it—were all based on her whims, her shop was still successful. This, of course, was simply because her skill in crafting magical tools was second to none.

“That’s amazing... Hey, Carla. I would love it if you would introduce me to her next time,” said Lilith.

“You want me to introduce you to Nettie? Why?” Carla asked.

“Because if she makes magical tools, maybe we’ll be in the same profession someday. Plus maybe I’ll buy something at some point. It’d just be nice to meet her.”

“Oh, I see.”

Sorcerers often served as magical toolmakers. In fact, the bracelet-type magical tool that the Earl of Dalaney had forced Lilith to wear had been created by Vice Commander Sadler, a member of the sorcerers’ order.

Given how skilled Lilith was at creating magic circles, Carla had assumed Lilith would continue to conduct research in that field. However, there was also a possibility that she would come to be interested in creating magical tools as well.

With more sparkle in her eyes than when she had been trying to draw Thane and Tobias’s attention, Lilith clasped her hands together in front of her chest and made her request.

Well, well. Doesn’t she look adorable.

Lilith’s attitude changed very obviously when she was in front of handsome men. Even so, she did not seem terribly attached to anyone in particular. Perhaps she was truly more interested in sorcery after all. Carla figured that for Nettie, too, knowing more people in the sorcerers’ order was not a bad thing.

“Sure, if I have a chance,” Carla offered.

“Miss Witch, can I tag along when that happens? I actually really like things like magical tools,” said Tobias.

“You too, Sir Tobias? Well, as long as Nettie is okay with it, it’s fine by me.”

“All right! Wow, I can’t wait,” Tobias exclaimed, the excitement on his face resembling that of a young child. What Tobias had seen in the past was a magical tool made specifically to be used by witches. Even though he could not use it, he was probably genuinely interested in exceptionally designed tools.

“Well then... Now that I’ve explained why I can’t help with the herb garden and seeing as I now have more things I have to finish before tomorrow—shall

we call it a day? Lilith, you should get back to the academy too," Carla said.

"True. We should also get back to the knights' brigade," Tobias agreed.

The medicinal solution that Carla was currently extracting in the dispensary would keep for two days at most. Given that she would be gone all day tomorrow, she needed to finish preparing it this evening.

And here I was, thinking I would take my sweet time making it today and tomorrow...

Even so, Carla had no intention of wasting her precious ingredients.

"Oh well... I guess if I work until late tonight, I should be able to manage," she muttered.

Carla sighed at the realization that she would have to stay up all night. Then she had Lilith and Tobias leave the room first, and the group once again began to descend the stairs single file. Just then, Thane, who was walking behind Tobias, remarked, "The craft witch mentioned something about a gathering."

"That's right," Carla casually replied.

"Oh, hey, Carla. What do you do at a gathering like that? Do you show off your magic to each other and stuff?" Lilith inquired.

"Mmm, we exchange information, and then we eat and drink."

Lilith seemed to be imagining something akin to a research presentation, but these gatherings were mostly social.

"So it's basically a party," Thane concluded.

"You could call it that."

"Wow, that sounds fun. Are all the witches there?" Lilith asked.

"It's usually people who feel like showing up. I don't go to those, though."

"What do you mean 'usually'?" Lilith wondered.

"Once a year, there's a day when attendance is mandatory. And that's tomorrow," Carla explained. "Oh gosh, I really don't wanna go..."

A gathering of the witches was held every now and then, but Carla had not

attended one in a long time.

When Carla's expression clouded, Lilith tilted her head and asked, "Why don't you want to go? I thought there weren't that many witches to begin with. If that's the case, I feel like it's important for everyone to get along. Oh, is it that you don't get along with the other witches or that everyone is super mean?"

"That's not what I mean. Even though we're not really chummy, it's not like I dislike them either. I think my relationship with them is pretty normal," Carla remarked.

"I don't think your sense of 'normal' is terribly reliable," Thane said.

"There you go, Thane, saying yet another disagreeable thing," Carla said, sighing.

On a fundamental level, relationships among witches were not overly friendly. There was neither a strong sense of fellowship nor an effort to pressure each other into adhering to certain beliefs. Witches were instead connected by a loose but unbreakable sense of solidarity. Since they all prioritized being their individual selves, they had no use for fighting or maintaining factions. Even relationships between masters and apprentices were not burdened with heavy meaning. Once an apprentice became independent, they became simply a "former apprentice"—turning the relationship into one between equals.

In fact, Carla was a rare case to have lived with her teacher until her passing, and to have a witch friend like Nettie who frequently came to check up on her.

If you let witches be, they were bound to become isolated. It was important, therefore, for them to see each other regularly. That was one reason for the gatherings.

"If you don't dislike them, then why don't you want to go?" asked Lilith.

"Because it's a pain to have them all on my case."

When Carla added in a mumble that the other witches still treated her like a kid, Lilith tilted her head in wonder and asked, "Like a kid? But, Carla, aren't you older than I am?"

The group had already returned to the first floor, and the front entrance had

also reappeared. Lilith, nonetheless, had stopped in front of it. Realizing that Lilith was not leaving until she was given a response, Carla begrudgingly explained why she did not want to go. “Yeah, I’m already an adult. But unfortunately, I’m still the newbie among the witches.”

“You’re the newbie?” Lilith repeated.

Although the apothecary was always in the red, Carla managed a store by herself. She was, in all respects, a full-fledged member of society. When the others seemed to not understand the meaning of the term “newbie,” Carla shook her head and said, “It’s not about my age or the years I’ve been an apothecary. It’s about how long I’ve known that I’m a witch. Of all the witches in this kingdom, I’m still the newest one—though, in terms of age, too, I’m probably the youngest.”

“Is that right?” Thane asked.

“Why do you seem so happy to hear this, Thane? I bet you’re thinking I’m just an underling or something, aren’t you?”

“Perhaps.”

When Thane raised the corners of his mouth in delight—a rare expression from him indeed—Carla glared at him. Thane, of course, seemed completely unfazed.

Carla hated the fact that his handsome face held such a nonchalant expression. Come to think of it, she still had not managed to purchase her pair of stiletto heels. She made a promise in her heart that, even if it meant having to skip a meal, she would go buy them the next time she had an income.

“So what does that actually mean?” Lilith pressed.

“Well, um, it means that no other witch has been discovered since I was. And that’s why I’m the latest newbie.”

“Oh, I see,” she said.

Tobias and Lilith both seemed to understand the situation, but Carla herself crossed her arms and looked far into the distance, saying, “But you know, it gets old when you’ve been a newbie for fifteen years.”

“Fifteen years?!” Thane repeated.

“Mmm, maybe sixteen? It’s since the time I came to live with my teacher, so...about that long,” Carla said, counting the years on her fingers.

Even Thane seemed surprised at just how long Carla had been a “newbie.” Their surprise made sense since their idea of new came from when both the knights’ brigade and the academy welcomed its new members and students every year. Even if witches only came into being naturally and a new witch did not appear so frequently, it seemed the other three had not thought that it had been that many years since the last appearance of a new witch.

When one discovered that one was a witch truly depended on the individual. Some knew from the time they were born, while others only learned of it after their grandchild was born. There were neither foretelling signs nor special triggers.

In the past, there had apparently been those who researched whether there were particular conditions or causes for becoming a witch, but they seemed to have been unable to identify anything.

Carla had learned that she was a witch around the same time she was adopted by Varne. She did not know if she had been adopted *because* she was a witch or if it just so happened that the child Varne adopted was also a witch. She had not asked, and in truth, it did not matter.

“The first time I was introduced to another witch was also when I was about four or five years old. I know that back then it made sense to treat me like a kid. But now I’m twenty years old.”

Carla hung her head dejectedly. She had not only been young at the time but also fairly small for her age. No matter who saw her, they had probably assumed she was younger than her actual age. Because her memories had also been lost due to the shock she experienced from the fire, she had not spoken in complete sentences for about a year after that either.

Carla’s witch friends still carried with them that first impression they had had of Carla—an image that had stirred in them such strong desires to protect. Carla understood that, but she also wanted them to reassess how they now perceived her.

“Being treated like a newbie for that long, huh? That is pretty rough,” said Tobias.

“You understand me, huh, Sir Tobias? I want a newbie for myself...as in, I’d really like to graduate from my status as an underling.”

Carla had been the newbie for fifteen years. To say that she was now a true professional at being a newbie was not an understatement. She felt she had the right to be bored with the position.

“But if no one knows when the next witch will realize that she is one, then there’s a possibility that the next ‘new’ witch could be older than you, right?” asked Lilith.

“Don’t say that, Lilith. I’m trying not to think about that possibility,” replied Carla, letting out a heavy sigh.

Tobias asked another question. “All the newbies in the knights’ brigade are made to build up their stamina. What are newbie witches made to do? Do they have to train in magic or run errands for other witches?”

“Witches aren’t as hierarchical as knights are, so we don’t have stuff like that. But at the gatherings they really make me eat, so I’m literally fed up with it.”

“They make you eat?”

“They all act like they’re my big sisters, and they tell me to eat this and that. They treat me like I’m a kid in the middle of a growth spurt.”

For witches, who rarely gathered in a large group, there were no rules that had to be learned. Since each witch specialized in different magic, there were no ranks either. One also did not worry about receiving unreasonable commands.

Given that Carla was a failure as a witch, the other witches were oddly intent on treating her like a child, and that exhausted her. But what caused the most trouble for Carla among all the ways they treated her was how they fed her.

I can stand being teased about how I don’t make a good witch, and I can deal with a lot of off-the-mark advice about how to get better at magic, but...I really can’t stomach eating any more dishes made from weird creatures just because

they claim they'll help improve my control over magical powers!

Carla was fine being served dishes that were the other witches' specialties. But she truly wanted them to stop recommending "special" items to her that were supposedly nutritional in some questionable way.

It would have been touching if the others became disheartened when Carla refused to eat. Instead, they simply stacked plates in front of her, and if Carla did not eat what was on them, they would simply use magic to force the food into her mouth.

Moreover, ever since Varne had passed away, the other witches had been making Carla eat even more than before. With all of them ganging up on her with so much love and affection, Carla felt as though her stomach would give out before her heart did.

Carla always ended up having to down her own homemade stomach medicine after returning from a witches' gathering. Although it was her own creation, it tasted truly awful, and she had to prepare herself to pass out every time she drank it. She did not want to do so if she could help it.

"They force food on you, huh? That sounds like something that aunties would do," Lilith said.

"Is that how aunts are?" Carla asked.

"Oh, sure. Whenever I see mine, they make me eat a whole lot too. I gain weight every time, and my face breaks out, so I know exactly how you feel!" Lilith agreed, furrowing her eyebrows.

"Though I guess for me it's less a problem of my weight and more a problem of my stomach and my sense of taste," Carla mumbled.

"I understand what you mean too. My relatives still think that custard pudding is one of my favorite dishes," Tobias chimed in.

"Oh, Sir Tobias, you like sweets too? I'm a fan of them myself!" Lilith exclaimed.

"Oh, no. But I guess the first time I ate it, I got all excited about it. I was so small at the time that I don't even remember. But whenever we get together as

a family, they give it to me night and day and say to me, ‘You really like this, right?!’ So now I feel sick just looking at custard pudding.”

“I totally get what you mean. But Sir Tobias as a little boy... Hee hee, you must have been so cute!”

I see. So that’s what normal families are like.

Carla watched with much interest as Lilith and Tobias excitedly discussed their memories from childhood. As she knew little of what a “normal family” was, Carla could not exactly partake in their conversation.

When she looked up, though, she saw that Thane—who had been the one to bring up the witches’ gathering in the first place—looked bored and disinterested.

In fact, he seemed to be feeling pain in his stomach...or rather, his chest.

Wondering what was causing him to have such an expression, Carla started to say, “Thane...?” But as she moved to ask him what was wrong, Carla suddenly snapped back to reality.

Wait a minute. Just how long did these people intend to stay?!

The knights of the royal guard did not have abundant free time. And Lilith’s family should be returning from the medical clinic right about now. Carla, of course, now had things she had to take care of for the day.

“All right, we’ve had enough. Get going, all of you,” Carla said.

“Oh, wait, Carla. Tell me just one more thing. The witch from earlier said that this was the ‘one with mandatory attendance.’ Does that happen on the same day every year?” Lilith asked, tugging on Carla’s sleeve as if to cling to her for a bit longer. She acted like she only wanted to be pampered, but Carla recognized a genuine interest in her eyes. Carla, therefore, could not refuse to answer her.

“The only thing that’s certain is that we meet on ‘clear nights with a full moon,’ but you’re not required to go to all of them. But once a year, on the night of the biggest full moon, everyone is required to attend. And that just happens to be tomorrow.”

“Why the night of a full moon?” Lilith asked.

“Lilith, you’re so full of questions about this. Do you care about witches that much?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Wh-Why? What do you mean? Um...I just want to know. Is that bad?”

As Carla stood there unable to understand why Lilith had so much interest, the girl muttered something and her cheeks flushed.

“It’s not bad. I just don’t understand why you want to know. It’s not like you gain anything just because you know about it.”

“Come on, Miss Witch. She doesn’t want to know because she thinks she’ll gain something by it,” Tobias stepped in.

“Then what’s the purpose?”

“Well you know, it’s admiration, or more that she wants to know things about the person she likes—”

“S-Sir Tobias! It’s fine! I wanna know about it, so just tell me! If I hear this last thing, I promise to go home!”

A panicky Lilith interrupted Tobias, who seemed about to reveal something important. Carla remained confused, unable to understand Lilith’s intentions.

Even if she learned more about these things, it’s not like I can teach magic to Lilith since she isn’t a witch.

“Hmm, I don’t really get it. But it’s not a secret either, so I’m fine telling you,” Carla said. “We just gather on the night of the full moon because that’s just what we’ve always done.”

“That’s it?” Lilith asked, seeming almost disappointed upon hearing Carla’s response.

“Yup.”

There had always been a relationship between witches and the moon.

There were various theories for why, but witches—including Carla—tended to care little about the established calendar and lived a lifestyle that often inverted

day and night. Because of this, the moon, which was visible at night, was easier to use as the basis for choosing dates.

Also, perhaps because magic tended to work more effectively when the moon was bright, such an evening also simply felt more pleasant for witches.

The origin of the gatherings may simply have been that witches of the past, being in a good mood, felt like they wanted to get together with their old buddies to drink.

It's true that when the moon is full, my medicine turns out better than usual too. I might have better luck with my oral medicine too, so I'd rather stay behind and make medicine than get together with everyone... But I guess I should show up once in a while.

Not all witches were holed up in their houses the way Carla was, making medicine or some other magical item. Some witches had thriving social networks, and there were others who went out traveling the majority of the year. Such witches had all sorts of new information about the goings-on both in and outside of the kingdom.

Maybe a type of herb that Carla did not know about had been discovered. Or, perhaps, someone had manifested a different kind of magic. Thinking about the inevitable toll on her digestive system made her hesitate, but Carla knew that she really ought to attend. While she was begrudgingly making up her mind, though, Lilith tugged at her sleeve once more.

"Lilith...now what?"

"Eheh heh, this is really my last question! So how do you know when it's 'the night of the biggest full moon'?"

"Oh, that. One of the witches finds out through fortune-telling."

"Huh? Fortune-telling?"

"Don't underestimate fortune-telling. Besides, the 'fortune-telling witch' Ange is so good, she used to be called the 'foresight witch'—"

"Carla. What did you just say?"

As Carla was explaining further, Thane suddenly interrupted her and

approached her with enough force to push her aside.

“Thane? What? I said fortune-telling—”

“After that.”

“Hey, Thane,” Tobias said, stepping in to stop him.

Huh? No wait, what—?!

Thane, however, seemed not even to hear Tobias. Carla took a step back, cornered even further in a dreadful fashion. Her back met the wall where the door to the staircase had appeared.

When she could not step back any more, Thane pounded his hands on the wall on either side of Carla’s body, enclosing her.

She had nowhere to escape to.

“You just said ‘foresight witch,’ did you not?”

He was so close she could feel his breath on her face. His lapis lazuli eyes, now tinged with dark flames, came even closer.

Carla drew in her breath, realizing this was the first time she had seen him with such a threatening expression.

“I did, but what does that—?”

“Let me meet her.”

“Huh?”

When she heard those unexpected words, Carla blinked her rounded eyes several times. She heard him, but she did not understand what he meant.

Let him meet her? Who?

“Jeez... What are you doing, Thane.”

“Ggh?!”

Just as Carla heard Tobias’s question mixed with a sigh, she felt the intimidating force disappear from before her. By the time she realized what was happening, Tobias had already separated Thane from Carla by grabbing his uniform collar.

Carla now saw Lilith, whose eyes were wide open as she stared at Carla with her cheeks bright red.

“Oh my gosh, so that’s what was going on between the two of you... Wait, you’re gonna get that close without even kissing?” she asked.

“Hey, Lilith! What about that interaction would lead you to have such a misunderstanding?!”

“I just now finally understood the reason Sir Thane is so brusque with someone as adorable as I am. Yup.”

“You’re not hearing me at all!”

When Carla, indignant, denied her claim, Lilith simply nodded as though to tell Carla that she needed to say no more. Carla, however, felt that Lilith was being absolutely irrational.

Thane appeared as though he wanted to say something to the exasperated Carla, but Tobias’s hand was covering his mouth. The other knight then proceeded to shove Thane’s head down into a bow of apology.

“Why, you—mg!”

“Sorry, Miss Witch! This guy’s just a little on edge, being sleep-deprived and all that... Though, that’s not really an excuse, is it? Come on now, Thane! Apologize!”

As Tobias continued to apologize alongside him, Thane finally seemed to understand what he had done. He turned away from Carla awkwardly and said, “Sorry about that.”

“I really am sorry too,” Tobias added. “I’ll take him home and give him a good talking-to.”

“No, I was just surprised. But if you’d waited a moment longer, I probably would’ve sent him flying with my magic,” Carla said. “Hey, Sir Tobias—can you also take Lilith home? You guys are going in the same direction, right?”

“Oh wow, really? That makes me so happy! In that case, I’ll see you later, Carla!” Lilith shouted.

“You don’t have to come for a while,” added Carla.

“That’s so horrible of you to say! Sir Tobias, Carla is being mean to me!”

“Yeah, that’s really too bad, isn’t it?”

While Lilith left the shop as though walking on clouds, Thane was dragged out, looking as though he was concerned about something he was leaving behind.

As the three of them left noisily and the old door closed slowly, a strange silence settled in the apothecary.

Exhaling heavily, Carla leaned back against the wall and felt herself go weak.

“What...was that...?”

When she remembered the feeling of Thane pressing her up against the wall as though to overcome her, she felt her heart beat very loudly.

Her heart beat loudly, but she had not been scared. She had merely been surprised.

Carla disliked knights.

She disliked the previous white uniforms of the royal guard in particular, but it was not just their clothes—she did not like the people either.

Carla understood that there were knights like Tobias with whom she could get along, but on a fundamental level, she was only interested in speaking with them if she had to.

Not only that, she and Thane had had the worst impressions of each other since their first meeting. Every time they saw each other, they quarreled. If such a person came unnecessarily close to her, it would not be strange for her entire body to be covered in goose bumps.

She had been surprised, and she had been annoyed. She had not, however, gotten any goose bumps. Not only that, she had not felt the usual disgust that made her feel like throwing up nor the uncontrollable fear that she used to.

Why is that?

She did not understand it herself. Had her impression of him changed so much just because the knights’ uniform had been changed from white to navy

blue? She could not, however, come up with any other reason.

“The power of clothes is amazing,” muttered Carla, almost as if to convince herself.

She then breathed deeply once more and, creating a checklist in her mind of all the things she had to do before tomorrow, headed back to the dispensary.

3. The Queen’s Circumstances

When the three of them exited the apothecary, the door closed behind them and disappeared.

Tobias and Lilith opened their eyes wide, unable to hide their surprise at what now appeared to be merely a stone wall. Thane, however, was seeing this phenomenon for the second time and thus did not find it worthy of his surprise.

“Wow, it’s magic! This really is Miss Witch’s apothecary! But boy, Thane—you sure managed to get yourself disliked back there,” said Tobias.

“She only closed the shop early because she has to prepare for tomorrow,” Thane responded.

“That’s a separate issue. Thane, you really ought to reflect on what you did. Don’t go doing anything to scare her.”

“She didn’t seem scared.”

“That’s not the issue either!”

Tobias tried to explain, but it seemed Thane did not quite understand his point.

As Tobias chided Thane, Lilith—who had conveniently situated herself between the two knights as they walked—spoke up and said, “But really, Sir Thane, you’re actually very bold! I myself don’t dislike advances like those, but many girls feel uncomfortable when a man is too forceful. So you should be careful about who you do that with.”

“Huh?” came Thane’s only reply.

“In any case, how passionate, to approach her like that even though other people were watching! I’m definitely prettier, but if it’s Carla, then I give special permission,” Lilith continued.

“What are you saying, you—”

“It’s not ‘you,’ it’s ‘Lilith’! Please remember that!”

After a considerable pause, Thane said, “I have a report to make to Her Highness. I’m going ahead.” He seemed to want to express that he had no desire for this headache even after leaving the witch’s apothecary. He thus left Lilith in Tobias’s care and quickened his pace.

“Hey, Thane! Jeez, that guy...” Tobias muttered.

“Sir Thane looks cute even when he’s embarrassed!” Lilith exclaimed.

“I’m not so sure he was embarrassed. Either way, though, you’re quite tough.”

“Tee hee, feel free to compliment me more! In that case, Sir Tobias—shall we go on a date?”

“You mean to see that theater troupe you mentioned earlier? I don’t really know that much about theater, though...”

Even as Thane heard the back-and-forth between the happy, bouncing voice and the bewildered, exasperated voice behind him, he continued walking. What he kept repeating in his mind, as he traced the path he had grown so accustomed to with hurried steps, were Carla’s words from earlier.

The “fortune-telling witch” Ange used to be called the “foresight witch.”

Thane asked himself, *The fortune-telling witch and the foresight witch are one and the same...?*

The person who had caused the downfall of the family of the Baron of Howell—Thane’s family—as well as the death of Thane’s father was the foresight witch herself.

Having been a child at the time, Thane did not know the details of what had taken place between his father and the foresight witch. What he knew, however, was that his father had taken out multiple loans and sold anything and everything that could be sold—and after giving all the money to the witch, met his demise.

His mother, who had been sickly, could not handle the relentless demands for the loans to be repaid or the scandal that surrounded the loss in the family, and she passed away soon after, as though to follow her husband. Thane and his

older brother had then been left to fend for themselves.

Had the crown prince and princess at the time—the current king and queen—not extended a helping hand to the two brothers, they and the people of their territory would all have met one tragic end or another.

No matter what kind of a father he was, though, he was still family.

Thane did not have terribly salient memories of his father.

Indecisive and terrible at bargaining, his father had been incapable of navigating his way among nobility. He was also not terribly suited to managing the family territory. He had maintained a modest household as a baron, but the family's economic situation was most likely always poor.

Perhaps because he had little to no peace of mind, the baron had also had little to do with his own family. Thane thus did not have any memories of playing with his father when he was young or of being taken anywhere by him either.

His father had even pretended not to notice that his own wife was ill. Perhaps the patriarch simply had not cared about his family at all.

The problems we had as a family or with the territory were my father's responsibilities. However, it cannot possibly be that the witch who exploited him is faultless.

Why would the foresight witch have had any dealings with his father?

Although he had wanted to meet with her directly to ask her about her true intentions, the witch had gone into hiding immediately after his father's death. Thane had not known the witch's true name either.

The number of witches in the Kingdom of Selvaster was small. They were also required to be registered with the kingdom. It was possible to search for her if he used his privileges as a member of the royal guard. The only reasons Thane had not done so were because his older brother had been less willing and because the aversion that he himself felt toward having anything to do with witches was stronger than his desire to know the truth.

Besides, there was no longer anyone who called herself the "foresight witch."

Thane had thus assumed that she had simply left the kingdom.

If I could have gone the rest of my life not having anything to do with witches, I would have been happy.

What came to mind when he recalled those terrible days was his father, dejectedly turning his back on him, and his mother, crying and bedridden.

And the single time that he saw the foresight witch.

When Thane saw her, she was with the creditor. She was scoffing at his father, her expression bored.

Things may have been easier for Thane had he been able to cast away his past and his memories. They were, however, far too heavy for him to do so.

As he had continued to let his emotions smolder over the years, he had received the order from the queen. Although his heart had become restless upon hearing it, he knew that he had to prioritize his duty as a knight over both his nostalgia and personal grudge.

"The apothecary witch Carla," as expected of a witch, behaved beyond the scope of common sense. And even then, she was still a peculiar character. When Thane had made clear to her that he disliked witches, she had not hesitated to say to his face that she disliked knights as well.

She did not hold back in expressing her thoughts. She expressed her dissatisfaction by saying that even the fact that he was accompanying her was unpleasant. She displayed no loyalty to the royal family either.

Yet despite her complaints, she did not neglect the task she had taken on nor did she speak lies or deception.

I do feel, though, that the only reason she didn't flinch when the crown prince attacked her at the academy is because she's simply slow.

If she chose to use her transformation magic more effectively, she could bring in much more income. She was, to put it bluntly, very odd—and that included the side of her that insisted on struggling to remain an apothecary witch at a shop where only tumbleweeds were regular visitors.

The only reason Thane had stayed in contact with Carla after he had

completed his task of being the messenger for the witches' pact was because he had needed to visit the apothecary.

Yet Thane did not need to shoulder that responsibility. He could have simply ordered someone else to take care of the task. In truth, Tobias had asked him several times if he wanted to be released from the duty.

Thane himself did not know why he had refused that offer.

"Tomorrow, huh...?" Thane muttered to himself, after having been lost in thought for some time.

If the gathering required the attendance of all witches, and if she herself had been the one to set the date for it, then the fortune-telling witch—the foresight witch herself, perhaps—must certainly appear at the gathering as well.

With his usual sullen expression even more intense than usual, Thane clicked his tongue and hurried back to the castle.

§

When he arrived at the Indigo Palace within the castle grounds, Thane was told that the queen was in the courtyard. He directed his steps there without hesitation.

Despite its small size, the courtyard was filled with plants throughout the year. It was a space that brought pleasure to the eyes of its visitors, with its elaborate fountain and vividly colored flowers.

Although the previous queen only used the courtyard to receive guests, Sylvia, the current queen—who had studied pharmacology even before her marriage—used the area to plant herbs. The castle grounds were vast, and the dedicated herb garden was far from the palace, but the queen must have wanted to have her research materials close at hand.

When Thane reached the courtyard, the queen was with a member of the plant laboratory staff. She was gathering herbs and placing them in the basket the staff member held.

When the queen turned to look at him, Thane struck the heels of his boots together and saluted, saying, “Thane Howell, vice commander of the First Battalion of the Knights of the Royal Guard. I have returned, Your Highness.”

“Very good. Let us hear the report,” she replied.

Thane briefly explained to the queen that Carla had refused the request to come to the herb garden at the castle but that she was willing to advise the staff at the least.

“That is all I have. I am afraid that not everything went as hoped. I apologize for not being able to bring better news,” Thane concluded.

“No matter,” the queen replied. “I had told you that Carla would most likely refuse.”

“Yes, but...”

“You managed to get her to promise that she would at least consult with us. If you were able to do that with this apothecary witch, then that is more than enough for now,” the queen said, nodding, satisfied with Thane’s report.

Thane nonetheless objected to the queen’s current order. Although he had not said anything, it seemed his sentiments were evident on his face. Closing her harvesting shears and handing them to the staff member wearing a white coat, the queen turned to look at Thane and remarked, “You look as though you have something you want to say, Thane.”

“If I may,” began Thane after hesitating. “I cannot help but wonder why you continue to entrust work to that Carla character. Frankly speaking, her skills as an apothecary seem lacking.”

Until now, only the king and the other members of the royal family had made use of the pact with witches. Carla was the first to whom the queen had made a direct request.

Everyone in the knights’ brigade knew that the medicine for external wounds that Carla made worked wonders. Yet her apothecary, as usual, had no customers. The only products on her shelves were soaps and other items that would be categorized as daily necessities. The fact that she did not stock any oral medicine—what should be her primary offering—indicated that she was, in

fact, a failure as an apothecary witch.

Why, then, did the queen concern herself with the unskilled Carla?

There were other witches who not only were known to achieve results but also had not reached the limit on the number of requests that could be made by the royal family, as indicated in the pact. Why did the queen choose Carla, who was wasting away at some apothecary in the back alley, rather than other potential witches? Thane could not guess the reason at all.

“Ah, you have doubts,” said the queen.

“There are other capable witches. Even if her transformation magic was useful in the case involving the crown prince and Lady Patricia, it was not strictly necessary for her to transform herself and go to the academy in order to resolve that issue. And when it comes to this matter of the herb garden, there is no need to rely on a witch in the first place.”

Just as Carla had pointed out, even if there were herbs that were difficult to care for, it could not be the case that the gardeners and the researchers at the botanical garden within the castle were unable to handle them. Furthermore, if the queen had already predicted that Carla would refuse, Thane understood even less why the queen had chosen to make the request anyway.

Once Thane had said everything that was on his mind, the queen simply smiled gently and answered, “It is only that I want to remain involved with Carla.”

Thane raised his head, as if to express his desire to know what she meant. The queen waved her hand, indicating to the staff member carrying the herb basket next to her to take their leave.

When the staff member had left the courtyard and only the queen and Thane were left, she lowered her voice and said, “Because there will be more occasions for me to send you forth with such requests, I shall tell you this now.”

I guess I’m not to disclose this to anyone, Thane told himself.

Understanding the queen’s implications even if they were not explicitly stated, Thane straightened his posture and prepared to listen.

“You do know that Carla has no blood relations,” the queen began.

“Yes—though I did not hear it from her directly.”

If the witch Varne—who passed away two years ago—had been both her mentor and her adoptive mother, it must mean that Carla did not have any family. Carla herself had said she was adopted when she was about four or five years old. Thane thus assumed that that was also around the time she had lost her family.

Once she heard Thane’s response, the queen told him that Carla’s entire family had died in a fire.

“When I was a child, my dream was to become an apothecary—not the queen,” she continued.

“Huh?”

Thane could not see where the story was going.

It was a well-known fact that the queen had been conducting research on pharmaceuticals since before her marriage. Thane could not see, however, how that fact fit into the current discussion.

The queen nonetheless continued, paying no mind to the fact that Thane seemed not to follow her story.

“Unlike my dear friend Marie, who had been recognized as the next queen, I was raised like any other daughter of a noble. I studied at the academy, and though I frequented the botanical gardens and the research labs, my skills as an apothecary were mediocre at best. I did not have any outstanding talents, and I could only produce limited results. And yet...I enjoyed it. I had no intention of ending my research.”

The queen must have truly meant what she said. She smiled gently as she looked out at the flower bed that extended throughout the courtyard. However, her expression turned more serious as she resumed speaking.

“But when I met the king, I became uncertain of my future for the first time. If I became the crown princess and eventually the queen, it would be impossible to continue with research. Given my relationship with Marie, I debated with

myself whether to accept the proposal at all. Eventually my heart settled on declining His Majesty's offer."

"I had no idea," whispered Thane.

The queen's confession was unexpected.

The king and queen were irreplaceable partners to each other in both public and private realms—though it was obvious that the king's attachment to the queen was much stronger than hers to him. Thane thus could not imagine that there had once been a possibility that the two would not stand next to each other.

When Thane's face clouded with an expression of bewilderment, the queen half closed her eyes and said, "But there was someone who gave me words of encouragement when I needed them the most."

The queen described the woman as an upperclassman—someone whom she respected as another female researcher within the field of pharmacology. The woman had married a male botanist and been blessed with children. She had thus stepped away from her work within the palace laboratory, but she had maintained her affiliation as a mentor that others could depend upon.

That upperclassman researcher cheerfully dismissed any anguish Sylvia could have been feeling.

"Oh, Sylvia. I think you'll be perfectly capable of handling both your official duties and your research duties."

It was possible to do research even as the queen. There is always a possibility, as long as you are able to find a way—the woman had told her, laughing merrily.

"There's no rule that says a queen can't do research. Anyone can learn."

It was not, however, within everyone's powers to guide other researchers or create conducive environments for such work. Such efforts were only possible for those who stood above others—those who had power.

"Isn't such work worthwhile as well?"

The woman—who had ended her advice by saying, "You'll be able to build an

entire laboratory suited to your tastes”—had continued conducting her own research at home while raising three children. Just a few days before that conversation, she had submitted for review the manuscript for a meticulously researched article.

“There was no need to choose one and let go of the other. Besides, whether we marry or leave our place of work, some of us are simply unable to escape our desire to do research. When she told me that, I was convinced. I knew that I was just as she described,” the queen confessed.

“So you were able to make your decision after receiving that advice,” Thane suggested.

“That is correct. She was someone I admired, and I owe her much even as a researcher,” the queen replied. “Yet after my engagement to the king, it became difficult to see her as easily as before. For some time, we grew estranged from each other. When she next contacted me, I was already married. She told me that the powers of a witch had manifested in her youngest daughter.”

When Thane heard the word “witch,” he twitched slightly.

The woman’s youngest daughter had been born apart in age from the two older children and was still very young.

There was no need for a witch to necessarily learn magic from a predecessor. However, during infancy and childhood, when one did not have strong control over one’s own reason, controlling one’s magical powers was difficult. There were cases of young children using their magic without full control and endangering both themselves and those around them.

The woman had thus asked whether she could be introduced to a witch who was known to the royal family in order to consult with them about when and how her daughter ought to begin learning magic.

“The daughter that she brought looked very much like her mother—with golden hair and eyes the color of new buds.”

Thane drew in his breath. The image of the girl described by the queen overlapped with that of the young woman Thane had just met with earlier.

“The daughter apparently was able to use cultivation magic. One who excels at that is either a ‘healing witch’ or an ‘apothecary witch.’ If she had taken after her mother in both appearance and disposition, she would most certainly be an apothecary witch,” the queen explained.

Having heard that much, even Thane knew what he was being told: the daughter the queen spoke of was Carla.

“I put her in contact with the witch Varne. Some time later, I received a letter from her letting me know that she had been able to arrange a meeting with the older witch,” the queen said. “That was the last time I heard from her while she was alive.”

The queen exhaled slowly, and her voice grew heavy.

“When I learned that she passed, half a month had already gone by since the fire. I was told that Varne had taken in the youngest daughter, the only one to survive the incident. I went to see them, but her entire body was still covered in bandages. I was not even able to properly see her face.”

The queen had sent a doctor from the medical clinic of the palace, but they were not able to do any more than what the apothecary witch had already done for the little girl.

“Had Varne not been there, even the life that had been spared could have been in danger,” the queen whispered. “It seemed she struck her head and lost some of her memory. Even though she did not remember, she still became terribly confused when she saw something that evoked her family or the fire. Even mentally, she was not stable. For the sake of the girl, Varne told me not to visit her anymore.”

The queen and the witch had discussed setting up a reunion once the girl’s memories returned or after she became an adult. Yet before such hopes were realized, Varne passed away. Thus the promise went unfulfilled.

“And that is why you wish to keep Carla...” Thane began, hesitatingly.

“She is the orphaned daughter of a woman to whom I owe a great deal. She is also the direct apprentice of the witch Varne, who was very capable. It would seem strange *not* to care about her.”

Just as Thane had said, there were others with more accomplishments if the question was just one of fulfilling the pact.

The queen had thought of making the request of Carla when she heard, by sheer coincidence, the story about “a witch who can use transformation magic” from the Countess of Beckett—and the queen realized that that was Carla.

“Carla does not know anything about the relationship that exists between us. It is unnatural for me to summon her or go see her out of the blue. I ought not to phrase it this way, but the case with Abel and Patricia was a good opportunity. And besides,” the queen said, “I doubt that another witch would have been able to bring the two of them back together.”

“I do agree with you on that point. However, that alone does not convince me regarding the newest request.”

“She *is* capable, is she not? Who was the one that deactivated magic circles that were not visible and also extinguished the fire at the academy? You should know this.”

“That—”

“Even if she has no memory of it, she must still dislike fire,” the queen said, raising a hand to stop Thane in his objection. She also seemed to be checking her own expression, as though to control her emotions.

“You, too, must remember the corruption that existed in the knights’ brigade,” the queen began again. “At the time, there were issues in the upper echelons of the laboratory as well—although it was not as bad as in the knights’ brigade. Because of that, the palace entrusted the research and analysis of various drugs and medicine to Carla’s parents, who did not pose the threat of deceiving their colleagues or exposing confidential information. All in absolute secrecy, of course. I only learned of this after the fire.”

“Wha...?!”

“Poison of unknown provenance, medicine that was highly addictive... The analysis and research done by that couple made many such things known. The antidotes that she created saved the lives of many.”

Hearing the queen’s confession, Thane opened his eyes wide.

“The house of those who had been undertaking confidential orders from the palace burned down, and the researchers died in the fire. You know what that must mean, do you not?” asked the queen.

The incident should not be filed away as a mere accident. Even a complete amateur would be able to judge that.

Because they handled items and information that had to remain confidential, Carla’s parents had kept details about their identity and work from others. The neighbors had thus only known them as a family of scholars, not even knowing that they had connections with the palace.

It was one small house in the outskirts of the capital that had burned. The fire had not even spread. Even the police had determined that the fire was an accident of unfortunate circumstances. The incident did not make it into the newspaper or come up as a topic of conversation among the nobility in the capital. By the time the staff in the palace learned of it, it was already too late.

“So, you believe there is a high probability that the fire was caused by arson...?” Thane asked after what felt like a very long pause.

“It seems only natural to assume that the family was killed by someone who found their research to be inconvenient—and that they then set fire to their house in order to destroy all evidence.”

Despite the fact that the couple had been entrusted with crucial work, the previous king had not sent a single guard to watch over them. Had Sylvia used her powers as the crown princess earlier to uncover the confidential information, she may have been able to advise the palace and prevent the death of the four family members.

Nothing could alleviate her regret. The queen gripped her fists tightly and bit her lip.

“It was a silver lining that Carla had lost her memory. Had she remembered the face of the perpetrator, she would have been killed, despite being a young child,” said the queen.

“I cannot deny that,” agreed Thane.

“Varne thought similarly. We have therefore not told Carla anything—not the

relationship between me and her mother, not even the names of her family members who passed."

The fire that killed her four family members had been filed away as a simple accident. Because there was no evidence to overturn that finding—or, rather, because no one had been *able to produce* such evidence—no additional investigation had been conducted.

They had reached the present day with only suspicions that could not even be spoken of.

"It is my own form of atonement to be concerned with that girl. It is also my own selfishness to want to watch over her in place of her late mother—though if Carla found out, I'm sure she would tell me to mind my own business," the queen said self-mockingly, with a look not of a queen or a parent but of a single woman.

After being told by the queen not to share any of their discussion with Carla, Thane left the Indigo Palace, his feelings in complicated knots.

4. Lakebell

In a deserted back alley in the capital, the wooden door to the apothecary lit up by the morning sunlight opened with a ring of a bell and out stepped its shop owner, Carla.

She wore a thin mantle for travel. Looking very obviously sleep-deprived, Carla narrowed her eyes at the brightness of the sun.

As she had done on the day she had traveled to the royal castle, she placed the key that appeared in her hand—after it had automatically locked the door by magic—into her bag. She then took a step forward, mumbling to herself.

“I’m so sleepy... I don’t wanna go—whoa, Thane?!”

“That’s quite a greeting, for you to see my face and then stagger backward.”

Thane was leaning on a soot-covered wall with his arms crossed. Carla nearly leaped out of her skin in shock.

Holding her hand to her pounding chest, she looked up at his—as usual—sullen face.

“Well, of course I’d be surprised! I didn’t detect your presence at all! You’re giving me a heart attack so early in the morning...!”

“You couldn’t detect me because you were being absent-minded. You’re an apothecary—just make some medicine for heart palpitations and take it.”

“That has a different usage. And don’t call me ‘you,’” she shot back. “And? What’s your business? I’m about to close up shop and go out for the day.”

“I know that.”

“Of course you do,” she murmured back.

Although she had not told him what time she was leaving, Thane had been there when Nettie told her about the gathering of the witches. Of course he knew that she would be leaving today.

As Carla looked at him suspiciously, Thane said to her, as though in defiance,

“That’s why I came.”

“Huh?”

“You’re going to the gathering of the witches, aren’t you? I’m going with you.”

“Huuuh?”

Carla thought maybe she had misheard him, but it was true that Thane was not wearing his knight’s uniform today.

She did not know if he had the day off or he had taken the day off, but it must be true that he had come to go with her. Carla somehow managed to move her wide-open mouth to ask, “Why?”

“Help me meet the foresight witch.”

He had said this yesterday as well—and saying so, he had acted so strangely.

Even after a whole night had passed, Carla still did not understand the meaning of his actions. The only thing that was certain was that his expression was one of desperation that she had never seen before.

“And by ‘the foresight witch,’ you mean Ange? Why do you want to meet her?”

“I have something to ask her.”

The expression on his face was even more sour than usual. Of course it was not for any pleasant business.

Something he wants to ask, huh...?

As she looked at Thane—who seemed disquieted himself—Carla could not help the sour expression that crossed her own face.

“Only witches can enter the place of the gathering—and besides, I can’t so willingly introduce you while you are being super intimidating without even realizing it,” Carla responded.

“I’ll explain on the way there. You can introduce me to her once you’ve been convinced by my explanation. Let’s go.”

“What do you mean, ‘let’s go’? Do you even know where I’m going?”

“The craft witch yesterday said something about Lakebell—though I’ve never heard of a place with such a name.”

“Wow, I’m so impressed that you remember! But of course you’ve never heard of such a place—it’s just a name that we witches use to call it... Wait, hey, Thane?!”

Carla hurried to chase after Thane, who had already started walking. Although he did not know their destination, whether out of luck or instinct, he had headed in the direction Carla was going to go.

“Hey, wait up! Why do I have to be led by you, Thane?”

“It’s because you’re slow, Carla. Are you going to walk there?”

“No, I’m taking the stagecoach—”

“Then it’s this way.”

Wait, why am I even responding to his question?!

The sun had already begun to rise when Carla managed to finish the various tasks related to preparing her medicinal products. Thane, who had arrived unexpectedly when Carla was in her sleep-deprived state, had disrupted her rhythm.

Carla jogged to catch up to him, then managing to somehow keep pace, looked up at the knight. His face had the usual frustration, but Carla could also sense nervousness coming from him.

Did my eyeballs go funny from fatigue? This is the insolent Thane we’re talking about—of course he wouldn’t get nervous.

“Thane, is today your day off?” Carla asked.

“I took the day off.”

“You mean, just for this?”

“What’s it to you?”

“Whoa, such a combative response.”

Thane, the workaholic, had taken a day off. It seemed, furthermore, that this was not a vacation day he had been planning. Not only that, Thane had not

known what time Carla would be leaving her house. It was possible that he had been waiting in front of the shop since before the sun was up.

“And? Where are we headed?” he asked her.

“Knockridge,” she replied begrudgingly.

“What an expectedly out-of-the-way place.”

“I’m surprised that you’ve even heard of it—that village doesn’t have anything interesting to be known for.”

“It’s common sense to know names of places within the kingdom.”

“Oh, is that so?”

Thane must not have known where they would be going, and yet he was dressed in a similar traveling outfit to Carla’s.

Given that he was so thoroughly prepared, he most likely was not going to back down just because she refused.

Carla had no intention of getting into an unnecessary argument after having basically pulled an all-nighter. She quickly gave up on trying to convince Thane not to follow her.

For now I should hear his story while we travel and then decide what to do after that.

“If I’m not convinced, I’m not letting you meet Ange,” she finally said to him.

“That’s fine.”

If he gave a terribly unreasonable argument for his request, she would simply refuse to serve as an intermediary.

Once the two reached the main street, they stepped into a stagecoach headed for Knockridge. Then they sat there, swaying next to each other.

§

Knockridge was a small village to the southeast of the royal capital.

Although it was not terribly far, there were no highways that went there directly. Because a trip there required taking roundabout routes, it took three or four hours to get there from the capital by coach.

There were only two regularly scheduled stagecoaches that headed toward Knockridge: one in the morning and one in the evening. Because Carla had no other means of transportation, she needed to take the one that left in the morning.

As soon as she sat in the seat of the coach—which could not be described as comfortable no matter how generous one attempted to be—Carla fell asleep, even before hearing Thane's story.

Ordinarily Carla would not do something so careless as sleep while she was in transit. Today, however, she could not fight against her sleepiness—and she knew that Thane was next to her.

Although he was not wearing his knight's uniform, anyone would be able to tell by a mere glance at Thane's poise that he—with his dagger ready at his hip—was no stranger to combat.

Thanks to him, Carla as his traveling companion had no need to remain nervously vigilant against pickpockets and the like. She was thus able to fully relax and fall asleep. Thane had ambushed her in the morning and followed her of his own accord. He could at least do this much for her.

"Carla, we're here. It's Knockridge."

"Hmm...?"

Carla, gently shaken awake, opened her eyes.

The stagecoach, which had been fairly crowded at the beginning of the trip, now only held an elderly couple aside from Carla and Thane.

"Mmm, morning, Thane. Thanks for keeping watch," she said, yawning.

"Can it," he replied, exasperated.

The gathering would not begin until after the moon had risen. They would have to travel by foot for some time to reach their destination of Lakebell from the village of Knockridge. Carla should be able to hear Thane's story during that

trek.

“I can’t believe just how much you’re able to sleep, with all that jostling on those hard seats. You didn’t even wake up once.”

“Unlike nobles, I was raised to be as tough as weeds.”

“You’re supposed to be raising herbs, not weeds.”

“Aha ha, good one, Thane!”

Carla followed Thane as he clicked his tongue, exasperation still on his face. She stretched her cramped body and looked around.

It’s been a while, but nothing has changed.

It was lunchtime. The one restaurant in the village was crowded, and there were villagers doing their shopping on the main street. It was not, however, the kind of place that attracted tourists. Carla and Thane, being outsiders, were getting furtive glances from passing residents.

“Thane, did you bring lunch? I’m going to buy mine here.”

“I’ve brought some rations with me.”

“And just which battlefield were you planning to go to, carrying such a thing around...?”

The portable food that the knights’ brigade carried as rations were tough pieces of bread, similar to hardtack, that were made out of wheat bran. They did not spoil, and they filled the belly—but that was all they had going for them.

Carla had once been given a piece to try by the elderly knight who was Varne’s old friend, but it had completely dried up the inside of her mouth. Carla remembered nearly choking on it.

Not only did it have no flavor, but it had the indescribably bad taste of chewing on a piece of dry sponge. Unless it was an absolute emergency, no one would choose to eat it.

“I think you should just hang on to those rations of yours. Oh, the sandwich at that store is pretty good.”

Although it was a small village, there were several stores around the

stagecoach stop. There were also vendors that had set up stalls nearby. Carla and Thane purchased light meals at one of the stalls and then set off walking deeper into the village.

“How long do we walk for?” Thane asked.

“Mmm, about an hour or so,” Carla replied.

From there to Lakebell, Carla would be leading the way.

She had no energy as usual, and her pace was rather slow. Unlike in the royal capital with all its stones, however, Carla felt it was easier to breathe in the countryside where the greenery was lush. She believed—though unfoundedly—that because she was a witch who used cultivation magic, her physical strength increased when there were many plants in her surroundings.

After they walked for some time and there were no longer villagers around them, Thane mumbled, “It seems you weren’t lying when you said that you could sleep soundly even on a chair.”

When he had witnessed Carla fall asleep in the swaying stagecoach, he must have remembered the conversation they had had on the second floor of the apothecary in the botanical garden that was Carla’s bedroom—the conversation about her not having a bed that made everyone speechless.

“I sleep on a sofa, not a chair. You finally believe me, though?”

“It seems witches are made to be crude.”

“That’s an overgeneralization. Unlike me, Nettie is very particular about how she sleeps. She’s very picky about her bed and blankets, so she’ll get upset if you liken me to her.”

Whenever Carla stayed over at Nettie’s house, she forced Carla to use a bed that was large enough to sleep three adults—one with a canopy, to boot. Although Carla was always flustered by the difference between Nettie’s sleeping arrangements and those at her own house, given that she could sleep anywhere, she got restful sleep in both the bed fit for a princess and the solid chair.

When Carla shared that with Thane, though, he gave her another exasperated

look. Sensing that it seemed to forewarn of more scolding, Carla immediately changed the subject.

“Lakebell is in the forest deep in the village of Knockridge. But the path to the gathering place won’t open until the moon comes out, so I usually get pretty close to it and then just kill time.”

“I see. Though I didn’t see any other witch on the coach that we took.”

“You saw Nettie yesterday. Everyone else flies to the forest on a broom.”

“And you, Carla?”

“You do not need to ask such a question.”

If I could fly, I wouldn’t bother with taking a coach!

Thane seemed to understand what she wanted to say when she pouted and turned her back to him.

Carla could float while on a broom, but it was difficult for her to fly long distances. When Nettie invited Carla to fly around together on Nettie’s broom, Carla used up magical power just to keep herself from falling off. The fatigue she felt then was no ordinary fatigue. This was another reason she needed to make her consumption of magical power more efficient.

Although Carla had already come to terms with the fact that she could not use flight magic, Thane was looking at her as though seeing a lost cause.

“Shut up, Thane.”

“I wasn’t saying anything.”

“Your face alone speaks volumes.”

They walked as they argued loudly with each other, Carla occasionally picking attractive flowers that were growing on the side of the path. There were no more houses around, only fields of grass as far as the eye could see.

When they turned a large corner, a densely overgrown forest suddenly appeared up ahead.

“Is that the forest?” Thane asked.

“Yup. Shall we take a break here, then? There’s a small creek if you go down

that hill. You can wash your hands and get some rest."

"Just me? What are you going to do, Carla?"

"I have something to take care of over there. I'll go by myself, so you can go ahead and enjoy your lunch."

"You're not going to just say that and then run away, are you?"

"What? Gosh, you have no faith in me. You can come if you want, but there's really nothing interesting over there."

"That's fine by me."

"You're actually coming? In that case, don't complain to me later that you actually found it to be boring!" Carla said to him, but as she turned into a narrow path overgrown with plants, Thane quietly followed.

I'm pretty sure he's going to find it really boring...

Carla walked assuredly as she stepped through the tall grass. Before long, they had reached an area that seemed like a slightly open field. Although it was covered with weeds, like the path they had traveled, the plants in this area alone seemed to be oddly thriving.

Toward the back of the field, there were clearly man-made artifacts, such as a half-crumbling well. When they stepped into the area, the birds that had been pecking at the berries on the nearby trees flew away in surprise.

"Carla, what is this place?" Thane asked.

"The house I was born in used to stand here."

When Carla reached the burned remains of a brick wall, she turned around to look at Thane and said, "It's gone now—it burned down in a fire."

Thane drew his breath. He seemed shocked by her sudden confession.

"I'm the only one who survived. But I was small, so I don't really remember anything. I was told that I had parents and an older brother and an older sister—but I can't remember their names or faces."

Thane's lapis lazuli eyes seem to cloud with sorrow. For Carla, though, it was a past that did not have a sense of reality to it. She thus felt no sadness.

“I was about to become an orphan, but then my teacher took me in...though, you’ve probably heard this story from someone already, haven’t you, Thane?”

Carla was not trying to hide anything. The person who had told Thane that Carla disliked the white knight’s uniform must have also told him this story as well. In fact, it seemed that Tobias, who had become the new overseer for the area around the back alley, had been given the information as part of taking on the position.

“I’ve heard a bit of it, but...” Thane managed.

Carla could not help laughing when Thane answered her without deception. It seemed that this stupidly honest knight was unable to mince words even when it came to awkward questions.

“You don’t have to feel bad. I’m not hiding it, and I just happened not to have a chance to talk about it before. And since I don’t remember much in the first place, there’s really nothing I can talk about, anyway.”

“I see.”

Carla left Thane, who stood there not knowing how to respond and walked over to the large, flat stone that must have served as the house’s foundation.

“My teacher just told me that I used to live here. By some coincidence, it’s close to Lakebell, so I come and see them whenever there’s a gathering.”

Carla took out a small bottle of wine and some baked goods from her bag and placed them on the ground with the flowers she had picked along the way. Because she did not know what the deceased preferred, she always brought a random assortment of offerings. Even so, she felt that they would be happy no matter what she brought them.

“The oldest memory I have is being here, next to the burned remains, watching my teacher fighting with a knight of the royal guard.”

“The royal guard?”

“Apparently, they came to inspect the scene, but they didn’t do anything. They just took one glance and said, ‘It was just a fire.’ And that was it.”

“What?”

“They said it was just an old shack that burned down and that the people who lived in it must not have been worth anything either.”

The knight had kicked away the rubble as though it was somehow tainted. He had laughed and said that everything had burned down, making his job easier.

Because her eyes had been clouded by the smoke, Carla had not seen clearly enough to remember the face of the hateful knight. The only thing she had been able to see was the pure white uniform of the royal guard—so clean it felt heartlessly cold.

“That’s why I dislike knights. And I dislike the white uniform of the royal guard even more.”

She felt him hold his breath behind her.

“Though I should say,” Carla continued, “it’s not about you. So I don’t want you to apologize, Thane.”

“No, but—”

“You even got the uniform changed for me.”

Now even when she went out, Carla did not have to see the white knight’s uniform. Even if Thane’s request had not been for Carla alone, it was true that she had felt saved by what he had chosen to do.

“So...thanks,” she said to him.

Although Thane started to say something, Carla closed her eyes slowly, as though to refuse his reply.

The past-gazing witch may have been able to pick up the voices of her family that still remained on this land. The only thing Carla could hear, however, was the sound of the wind.

“I’m sorry that I come to see you so rarely. I’m doing fine, though.”

Rather than bringing her hands together in prayer, Carla spread her palms out wide and let fly small grains of light with her magic. The golden light she made rain down twinkled and glittered, and all the flowers it touched seemed to sway with happiness.

The only thing Carla recalled in times of happiness or difficulty was the face of her teacher Varne.

The concept of “family,” which ordinarily did not spring to Carla’s mind, was a precarious one for her. A past that was based only on hearsay might as well not be real.

But it isn’t as though I’ve lost it...

Although the past felt hazy and out of reach, from time to time Carla felt like she could make out the vague outlines of her memories. Disappearing just as soon as she tried to catch them, such memories almost seemed like a thin halo that shone pale around the moon. Carla did not know whether the tightness in her chest she felt each time that happened was because of the burns that had taken so long to heal or because the life that she lost had been one filled with happiness.

The only thing she could wish for was that the people who had once been her family were now by Lisandra’s side, resting in peace.

When the last grain of light disappeared, the air about the witch and the knight returned to normal. Carla tilted the bottle of wine to let the earth drink it, then she crumbled the baked treats and scattered them about. Once Carla and Thane left, the birds would return to peck at them.

Carla clapped her hands to dust off the crumbs, then turned around with a satisfied expression on her face and said, “Thanks for waiting. Shall we go back? It was boring, wasn’t it?”

“No... I’m sorry to have followed you,” Thane replied awkwardly, with an uncertain expression on his face.

“That’s okay. Though, it is a place where people died. But if you’re not uncomfortable with that, Thane, then it’s fine by me.”

“In our job, it’s not infrequent for knights to have to be present when someone passes,” he offered.

“Oh, that’s true. I guess the royal guard of our kingdom does a bit more than just protecting the king and his family at the palace.”

Watching Thane and Tobias, Carla had the impression that the royal guard spent more energy managing and supervising the police and ordinary knights in the royal capital than escorting the royal family or patrolling the palace. She had also heard that the royal guard went straight to the border as reinforcement when a skirmish with another kingdom erupted—though this had not happened in recent years.

The previous king had emphasized the kingdom's appearances and presentations toward neighboring countries. The current king and queen, however, focused more on internal affairs. Thanks to that, it had become rare for just a small group of nobles with a vested interest in the kingdom to overwhelmingly receive special treatment, and for commoners always to receive the short end of the stick. On the other hand, there now seemed to be increasingly more pushback coming from the nobility.

Though I bet that the king and queen would be able to make even people like that work to their advantage.

Carla recalled the royal couple that she had met in the audience room of the royal palace.

Although his sense of authority had somewhat paled given what happened later that day, the seemingly scheming king most likely was a driven go-getter—except in relation to his wife, of course.

Abel and Patricia—the next king and queen—were also supposed to be quite capable. Given that they were of good character, they would most likely rule with consideration for the common people as well.

"Oh, I almost forgot."

"What is it, Carla?"

Just before she stepped out of the area of the house's remains, Carla turned around. Pointing to Thane standing next to her, she smiled at the space before her—though there was no one present—and said, "This weird guy is a knight of the royal guard that I met recently. He's always super rude to me, so the next time he's working late at the castle, give him a spook on my behalf!"

"Hey..."

The castle, where the royal guard worked, was a place with a very long history. It also had many places within its grounds that had frightening backstories associated with them.

I hope he gets creeped out by some mysterious thing every time he passes a place like that!

The knights' dormitory where Thane lived was also quite old. Carla had heard several ghost stories about the place from the elderly knight she knew.

"What? Are you scared of ghosts? No way that Sir Knight would be such a scaredy-cat," Carla said, teasing Thane.

"As if. There's no way," Thane said, frowning and glaring at her. He seemed, however, not to have anything more to say in response.

"Shall we go?" she asked.

"Sure," he replied.

Carla, having felt like she had scored a point against Thane, walked quickly away. Behind her, Thane turned around and bowed once, deeply, toward the burned ruins.

§

Once they returned, they found a suitable spot by the side of a creek to sit down.

They ate the sandwiches they had purchased at the stall for a late lunch. Although the chicken was a bit firm and overcooked, it went well with the cheese. The sandwich tasted more than fine.

As they both sat there chewing, they finally addressed the important question that still lay between them.

"So, Thane. Why is it that you want to meet Ange?" Carla asked.

"The person I want to talk with isn't the witch Ange—it's the 'foresight witch.'"

“Okay...”

“I met the foresight witch once before, but I don’t know her name, so I don’t know if it’s the woman you’re talking about.”

“Wait. What do you mean by that?”

Carla had to process Thane’s explanation, which he gave in his usual aloof manner. She had assumed he had business with Ange, but now he was saying there was a possibility that the “foresight witch” he spoke of might not even be Ange at all.

“I have something to ask the woman who went by the name of ‘foresight witch’ fifteen years ago,” said Thane.

“Fifteen years ago? You’re telling me that, in order to see someone from that long ago—I mean, someone that might not even be the person you’re looking for—you were waiting in front of my shop from early morning?”

“Do you have a problem with that?”

“Well, it’s not about me having a problem—”

“What was I supposed to do? I had no other leads until now.”

“Huuuh?”

If he was this determined, then no matter what Carla said or did, she could not have avoided having Thane follow her today. At this point, she was more impressed than bothered. Carla felt, however, that this stubborn knight before her ought to learn something about not overdoing things.

“Though, I guess this is just how Thane is. Oh, whatever,” Carla finally said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Never mind that. Anyway, fifteen years ago, huh? That was around the time I was adopted by my teacher.”

Carla put a hand on her chin and tilted her head slightly.

“Remember how I told you that I don’t have any memories of my childhood?” Carla began. “I don’t know if it’s because of the fire, but I couldn’t really talk either. It also took me a few years to remember the faces and names of the

other witches. So I know for certain that Ange used to be called the 'foresight witch' in the past, but I don't know exactly when that was."

Thane furrowed his brows upon hearing Carla's response. "Is that why you have a difficult time remembering faces?" he asked.

"No, now I just don't have any interest. If it's about medicine, though, I can remember it and talk about it without any problems."

He was probably referring to the fact that she did not remember his colleague Tobias's face. Carla, however, simply allocated the resources of her brain to what she felt were more important things. It was not that she was forgetful or had poor memory. It was simply the result of her streamlining things in her mind. She could recite from memory the knight's royal charter that she read in her spare time. Her memory was just fine—and yet Thane was looking at her as though he did not trust her.

"You're so sloppy about things," he said.

"Thane, you remember things too much and then feel suffocated because of it. You really should try to be more like me."

"No thanks."

There was no proof that Ange was the foresight witch Thane had in mind, but Ange was also the only witch with a past of having been called the foresight witch. Carla believed that she, in fact, was the person that Thane was looking for.

The reason Carla was reluctant to say this, though, was because she remembered the other witches talking about the Baron of Howell in the past.

The family of the Baron of Howell must be Thane's family, right?

As she was the latest newbie, all the other witches aside from Nettie always saw Carla as a child. Because of that, whenever gossipy rumors were being shared, they all covered her ears and prevented her from hearing them. Carla therefore did not know the details of what the other witches had discussed.

But they all definitely seemed to be in a bad mood when they were talking about it.

The change was not only noticeable in the ordinarily jovial witches—even Varne, who was rarely fazed by anything, had seemed serious, with a stern expression on her face.

Carla, not knowing the full story and not being involved in the incident herself, could not speak carelessly based on speculation. Plus Thane's behavior toward anything related to the foresight witch seemed disturbed. If he had a negative connection to her, Carla had to be even more cautious about what she said.

"Do witches change their names often?" Thane asked.

"It's not often, but names aren't permanent either. I know I'm the 'apothecary witch' now, but if something happens and the power of my healing magic becomes greater, I'll probably end up being called the 'healing witch.'"

"Ha! As if you fit the image of a healing witch."

"Excuse me? If I weren't so merciful, I'd be cursing you left and right, Thane."

"Stop saying something you don't even mean."

"Aren't you glad that Miss Carla is a kind and gentle apothecary witch?"

When she teased him with a grin, he responded by clicking his tongue. Carla felt a bit lighter, seeing as how the delicate atmosphere that had surrounded them earlier at the site of the fire had dissipated.

When she looked down, though, she saw that Thane had already finished eating his sandwich even though she still had more than half of her own left. Each one of his bites must have been bigger than hers.

"Was that enough food? Do you want some snacks? I have cookies," Carla offered, rummaging through her bag and pulling out a packet of herb cookies.

"You mean the ones from before?" he asked, noticing that they were the same ones she had given as an offering earlier.

"The gathering is a potluck, so I just made extra. The rosemary is to promote blood circulation and ward off evil spirits. The aniseed is to prevent an upset stomach. Plus they're made with special herbs that were raised to have higher efficacy, with cultivation magic performed by yours truly."

“Handmade by Carla... Are these even edible?”

“Jeez, how can you be so incredibly rude? Even Nettie likes these!”

Carla could not understand what this knight thought she was, exactly. It was true she did not cook often, and she also did not do much baking either. She could, however, perform housework quite well.

Carla pouted and turned away from him as she said, “Unfortunately they don’t go well with coffee, but they are great with tea. I reduced the amount of sugar I used, so they even go well with wine. I recommend red.”

“There’s only water here.”

“Quit your complaining.”

Although Carla had assumed he would refuse them, Thane reached out to grab a cookie. His expression did not change, but he continued to eat a second and then a third.

Well, well...

Maybe she should have baked them to be slightly larger. As she watched him with her eyes wide, Thane suddenly looked up.

“You’re not planning on selling these at the apothecary?” he asked.

Huh? Does he like them that much?

She knew she was being simpleminded, but his comment made her happy.

“Do you think they’ll sell? But I run an apothecary, not a pastry shop.”

“It’s a little too late to be so specific, don’t you think?”

“Nggh!” Carla grunted.

He has a point, so I can’t say anything back—how frustrating!

Even now, Carla’s “apothecary” was making ends meet by selling deodorizers and hand creams. As Carla sat there, unable to retort, Thane lifted the corners of his mouth into an ironic smile.

Even if sales remained low, however, adding any more products that were not medicine would hurt Carla’s pride.

“I think I’ll draw the line at selling food,” Carla mumbled. “Anyway, Thane—what do you want to do when you meet the foresight witch? Unless I know that, regardless of whether Ange is the one, I won’t be able to let you meet her.”

Although Ange was not a friend of Carla’s in the way Nettie was, as long as she was a fellow witch, Carla did not want to do anything that would sell Ange out.

When Carla looked straight into Thane’s eyes, he, uncharacteristically, looked away. Then he heaved a deep sigh and began speaking—as though he was trying to suppress his emotions.

“About fifteen years ago, my father began to frequent the ‘foresight witch.’”

“Okay.”

Although it seemed difficult for him to share these memories, Thane recounted his past in a clear voice.

“Although we had been given the rank of a baron, as far as I remember, we never had any financial cushion in our lives. At that time, our territory was struggling with continuously poor harvests. My older brother said that our father most likely asked the witch to foretell the weather.”

“Ah, that sounds possible.”

Despite its name, “foresight” did not mean the ability to see everything. There were also cases when only implicit suggestions could be made. Even so, people who grasped at straws were not few. Those who asked about the weather or their crop yield were very often such cases.

The witch’s foresight was correct, and the baron’s family temporarily recovered. As a result, however, the baron ended up becoming fascinated with the powers of the foresight witch.

“Once he ran out of what little money he had, he began selling off anything he could in order to pay for her services. It seemed he had her perform her magic, but I have no idea if any of her predictions came true. By that point, my father no longer saw or cared for any of his family members.”

Thane muttered, self-mockingly, that what little conversation he used to have with his father disappeared entirely.

In no time, their family life became more difficult, even more so than before the baron began frequenting the witch. Thane's father, who had ceased coming home, eventually returned as a corpse—silent forever.

It was only after the fact that the family learned the baron had mortgaged not only their residence but also the income that the territory anticipated following the next harvest.

"The witch, who was with the creditor, only called him 'a fool who was deceived.'"

"I see."

"I want to ask her about her true intentions."

His mother had died soon after, as though she were in a hurry to join her husband. The two children who were left behind had nowhere to turn. After taking away the livelihood even of those who lived in the family's territory—what had the foresight witch gained?

Clenching his fists so tightly that they changed color, Thane said that that was what he wanted to know.

So that's what he's been dealing with.

If one's family had to experience that while one was still a child, the word "hardship" would not even begin to capture what one must have had to go through.

Carla had assumed that just because Thane was a noble he had grown up without a care in the world.

I lost my family and my memory, but because my teacher took me in, I never had to worry about anything.

Carla did not live in luxury, but she did not feel the desire to do so either. Carla had never had to worry about where her meals would come from or whether she would be safe. Although after Varne's passing the apothecary's sales had declined dramatically, at the least Carla had work and a house in

which to live.

There was no point in comparing their past circumstances, and Carla still disliked knights. She did, however, admit that she had been narrow-minded because of her preconceptions.

She also felt like she understood the reasons behind the expression on Thane's face when Lilith and Tobias had excitedly talked about their own childhood memories. Unlike Carla, who had no such memories, Thane had a past to compare with others'—and his own childhood had been neither a peaceful nor a happy one.

"The crown prince and princess...the present king and queen, who heard about my family, supported us. Because of them, I was able to enter the knights' brigade, and my older brother was able to inherit the family estate."

"Oh, that's why. So you being a workaholic isn't just because you're stupidly serious."

"Do you have to say it like that?"

"Sorry."

If they had saved the two brothers from their plight, it was only natural for Thane to feel indebted to the king and queen. The trust and respect that Thane felt for the royal family must have come from this incident. That would have been no different even if he had not become a member of the royal guard.

The territory of the Baron of Howell had been placed under the temporary jurisdiction of the royal family. Once Thane's older brother graduated from the royal academy and gained experience managing other territories, he returned to his family's estate and stepped into the role of its new feudal lord. Now he was blessed with a happy family and, though he did not display any kind of flashiness, was steadily managing the territory.

"Does your older brother also want to find the foresight witch and speak with her?" Carla asked.

"No. My brother has always been reluctant when it comes to things related to my father. He seems to not want to dig up the past at this point in his life."

“That’s another way to think about things.”

It seemed, however, that the younger brother Thane felt differently.

To have things resolve without any incident...is going to be difficult.

Carla cast a sidelong glance at Thane—who was beyond serious and encroaching into the realm of stubborn—and sighed softly.

§

Once Thane had concluded the story he had been reluctant to tell, a silence settled between him and Carla.

I haven't talked about this in years, thought Thane.

Tobias knew the gist of Thane's past, but even to him—one who had known Thane for years—Thane had not explained the story of his life so precisely from beginning to end.

Even from the get-go, Thane had intended to explain his circumstances to Carla. What had made it so easy for him to do so, however, may have been hearing about Carla's past first.

She had not interrupted him as he told his story, so he had not run into any of the situations he had feared—like suddenly becoming distraught or incoherent. Once he finished his story, Thane exhaled, as though he had been holding his breath for a long time.

"Thane, you mentioned that the only time you met the foresight witch was fifteen years ago. Do you remember anything about what she looked like?" Carla asked.

"Her hair was of white gold or some similarly pale color."

It had been the night of the funeral when the witch, accompanied by the creditor, had appeared at the baron's mansion. The impoverished family had not even had enough candles to light the room. Thane, therefore, could not remember the color of the witch's eyes or even the expression on her face.

Her pale, white skin against a witch's robe. Her long hair the color of the cold moon floating behind her. Her mocking voice. Those things, though, he could never forget.

"I see... Ange's hair is white gold," Carla replied.

"If that's the case...!"

"Wait, let's calm down a bit here. Anyone can easily dye their hair, right?"

Sitting next to Thane, Carla wrapped the remaining untouched half of her sandwich back in its paper. She then turned toward Thane.

Not that it mattered to him, but—this witch sure ate very little. Even when she had been invited to a lavish dinner with the family at the duke's mansion, her hands had stopped moving halfway through the meal. From the state of her room, which was essentially a botanical garden, Thane surmised she most likely had little interest in life in general.

"For the time being, I understand the circumstances behind your request, Thane. But I still can't promise you that I'll put you in touch with Ange," said Carla.

"Why not?"

"Well, we still don't know if Ange is the same 'foresight witch' that you know. If she tells me that she doesn't know of any Baron of Howell, then that's that. And there's also a possibility that she really *isn't* the witch in your story," she explained. "What's more, if Ange *is* in fact the witch you're looking for—would you be satisfied just meeting and talking with her?"

"That's..."

Thane himself did not know the answer to that question.

The foresight witch was someone whose very existence Thane could not bring himself to forgive. He had always thought that if he had the chance to meet her, he would question her, criticize her, and let his resentment for her be known.

Once he met Carla, however, he had become less certain of his feelings.

Thane still despised witches. He also realized, however, that there were other emotions tied to his feelings about the foresight witch.

That drop of realization that had fallen into his blackened heart did not itself turn a dark, ink-like color. Instead, it created silent ripples.

It was easier when I could simply detest the witch.

As though seeing through to his hesitation, Carla locked her pale-green eyes with Thane's.

"I'm sorry, but if you ask me to choose between a witch and someone who

isn't, then I will always choose to side with the witch, regardless of whether our relationship is good or bad. What the queen and king are to you, witches are to me."

"It can't possibly be the same," Thane protested.

"I'm saying that the feelings we hold in our hearts are the same."

Just as Thane wished to display loyalty to the royal family, witches, too, saw each other as family to be loyal to, Carla explained calmly to the knight.

"Knights are no different, right? Even if you might not get along, you would never sell out your colleagues, and you wouldn't want to betray them."

Thane remained silent, swallowing his retort as he realized she may, in fact, be correct.

He, too, felt that even if a fellow knight might, in fact, be at fault, he would not so easily be able to hand them over to the other side. Not only that, with the request that he had brought to Carla, he had not even verified that Ange was the witch he was looking for.

"But at the very least, I'll ask Ange—if you can promise me that you'll be okay with however that conversation turns out. If you can't, I won't become involved in this matter at all," Carla said finally.

"That's fine."

"Well, that was easy," she remarked, tilting her head and blinking in slight disbelief. "Then it's settled. Since you might not be able to meet Ange even if you wait here, what do you want to do? If you head back to the village now, you should be able to get back to the capital on the evening stagecoach."

"I should be able to go near that Lakebell place or whatever it's called. I'll wait there."

If it were not for the requests of the queen, Thane would have had no occasion to be actively involved with witches. Although he did not say it out loud, he felt instinctively that this might be the last opportunity for him to learn anything about the foresight witch.

No matter what it took, he had to resolve this issue somehow.

Tobias and even the commander of the knights' brigade had reacted in shock when Thane had submitted his request to take time off for the first time in his career.

Seeing Thane be unwilling to bend his will to the last, Carla crossed her arms as though in exasperation.

"It's fine for you to wait, but it is kind of dangerous at night," she began. "There aren't bears here, but boars are pretty common. If you head back to the village, there may not be lodging, but there is a restaurant. If you ask them, they might let you stay. If you're gonna wait, that might be a better option."

"I'm accustomed to camping out. We often do it as part of our exercises."

After pausing for a moment, her eyes wide in surprise, Carla burst out laughing and exclaimed, "Why are the knights of the royal guard used to camping and sleeping outside?! I thought you were all nobles! Aha ha, our kingdom is so weird!"

It was probably true that compared to those in other countries, the duties of the royal guard in Selvaster were somewhat odd. Knowing about the knights' brigade of the past, which had been rotten through and through, however, Thane felt that the current organization was much more wholesome and welcoming.

"All right, so you're gonna follow me until the very end, huh? That's fine. In that case, there's still time until the moon comes up, so you can do whatever you want until then," Carla said.

"What are you going to do, Carla?"

"I'm gonna sleep. I walked a lot, so I'm tired."

"Huh?"

"Unless I sleep and recoup some of my strength, I'll never be able to keep up with the other witches. Those people have way too much energy."

"Hey, Carla—"

After she gave her explanation, Carla lay down on the grass without even responding. Just as he thought he saw her close her eyes, she was already

snoring softly.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me...”

How woefully lacking in vigilance she was, even after she had tried to intimidate Thane by speaking of bears and boars. Not only that, she was a woman—and yet she made herself so defenseless.

But she’s still a witch—she must have at least prepared some kind of defensive magic.

The visibility of defensive sorcery used by the sorcerers of the royal castle depended on the spell’s strength. A film of protection through which one could clearly see facial expressions would protect against pebbles. A film through which one could only get a hazy look at the other party would protect against attacks by swords.

Carla, however, was a witch, not a sorcerer. If she used magic that required neither incantation nor magic circles, she could also erect a transparent film of protection...probably.

She doesn’t seem to be using any magic, though.



Had Thane not accompanied her, Carla would have traveled this far by

herself. There was thus a possibility that she had cast such magic as part of her preparations before she even left her shop.

Thane held his opened palm up above Carla, but he did not feel any resistance whatsoever.

Perhaps it's only activated when it senses danger?

Come to think of it, when he woke her up at the end of their coach ride, he was able to touch her normally as well. Yet it could not possibly be that she had prepared no precautionary measures.

After a moment of hesitation, Thane withdrew his dagger and brought it forcefully down upon Carla's sleeping body.

The blade, pausing just inches away from her, shone in the sunlight as though nothing had happened. He felt absolutely no resistance then either.

"What the hell is with her?" Thane murmured to himself, furrowing his eyebrows and letting out a long sigh.

She had expressed concern for Thane, who was armed with a sword—and yet she herself had not even used defensive magic despite lacking any physical power or strength.

He could not begin to understand why she held so little regard for herself.

She was like that at the academy as well.

She had shown no fear of Abel, who had pointed his sword at her with an undeniable intention to kill. She had also not been afraid of Lilith, who had manipulated multiple magic circles that were highly aggressive. In fact, he recalled moments when Carla seemed to be taking the initiative to close the distance between herself and a potential source of danger.

And yet, he did not detect in her the questionable aggressiveness of one who had a taste for seeking out dangerous stimuli—something Thane occasionally witnessed in other knights and soldiers.

What he felt was an overwhelming lack of her attachment to her own self.

It's always about other people.

Whether it was Patricia or the merchant Morgan, who had been reselling her medicine at an exorbitant price, or even Thane, to whom she made complaints as frequently as though she were exchanging greetings—there were moments when Carla seemed to think of the other as someone who had to be prioritized over her own well-being. Perhaps that was how she had to be as the apothecary witch.

Yet for some reason, Thane found it unpleasant.

“Head back to the village... As if I could do that with you in this state. Hey, Carla.”

Even when he shook her lightly, Carla merely frowned in annoyance. She gave no sign of waking.

Her mantle seemed to conveniently serve as a bedsheet, so she should not get cold. But her thin, golden hair already had grass tangled in it.

This hopeless kid.

That was the only way Thane could think of her as he sighed and took another bite of the cookie in his hand.

It was evening when Carla awoke. The wind had already grown cold.

“Mmm... That was some good sleep. I wonder if it’s because I’m outside,” Carla muttered.

The great outdoors must have been a similar environment to her bedroom, which was filled with plants. Nonetheless, her complete lack of wariness left Thane’s mouth agape.

Carla, on the other hand, paid no mind to the astounded Thane, as she had worked off her sleep debt and was now in a particularly good mood.

“Hmm? Wait, Thane, have you been here this entire time?” she asked.

“Do you have a problem with that?”

“I do not, but...weren’t you bored?”

“You would ask that after falling asleep on me?”

“Aha ha, that’s true.”

Carla raised her arms high in the air and stretched. Then she stood up, not even bothering to shake the grass out of her hair. She began walking after just a quick dusting off of the hem of her skirt and a casual “Let’s go, then.” Perhaps her marching to the beat of her own drum was because she was a witch, after all. If she were a new member of the knights’ brigade, she would have to have discipline and a stronger group mentality beaten into her, no questions asked.

“You really ought to be glad to be a witch, you,” Thane commented.

“I don’t know what in the world you are talking about, but for starters, don’t call me ‘you.’”

“It’s tangled.”

“Whoa, wh-what?!”

When he pulled a piece of grass—so long he did not understand how she did not feel it—out of her hair, Carla turned to him in exaggerated surprise. After blinking several times, she finally saw the piece of grass Thane held in his hand and seemed to understand the reason for his actions.

“Is *this* the kind of thing that makes the other witches treat you like a child? Well, I suppose they aren’t wrong,” Thane remarked.

“H-How rude!”

“Even if another newbie comes along, you most likely won’t be able to garner much respect as a senior witch.”

“What?! How dare you! I’ll have you know that any newbie would be much happier having me as a senior to look up to, rather than having a stiff and serious square like you, Thane!”

“Ha! That’s debatable.”

As they proceeded noisily and without any likelihood of a peaceful reconciliation, the two finally stepped into the forest of Lakebell.

The forest itself seemed to have been left alone to grow as it pleased. The grove of trees grew in such a way as they had become nearly entwined with each other. What must have been a path before was now covered with

undergrowth that reached one's waist. It seemed like it would be difficult to continue walking on it.

Although the sky was just barely light still, the dense forest was already dark. Carla took a lantern from her bag and handed it to Thane. She then held her open palm toward the ground.

"I'm gonna leave the light to you," she said to him.

"That's fine, but..."

When Carla released her magical power from her palm, it touched the undergrowth and parted it, creating a path. Glancing at the surprised Thane with a look that might as well have been accompanied by her placing a feather in her cap, Carla resumed walking. The undergrowth that had been parted closed again behind Thane, leaving the path as it had originally been.

"Are you going to be doing that the whole way?" he asked.

"Mmm, basically."

The task seemed to consume a lot of magical power, but Carla said that was not actually the case.

"I slept earlier, so I have a lot of my power back. Plus I'm just asking the grass to make way for us. Plant magic is a lot easier on me than other magic."

"Other magic?" Thane asked.

"Yeah, my magic seems to be really inefficient. Even when I'm casting the same spells, I seem to use a lot more power than other witches do."

"Is that why your transformation magic has a time limit as well?"

"Oh, that's beyond the realm of efficiency," she replied. "Transformation magic just consumes a ton of power. I've been talking with Nettie about whether we might be able to create a magical tool to deal with that, but it's been a challenge."

Carla remarked in jest that she would rather not have the requests requiring transformation magic, given how much it tired her out. It was clear, however, that her transformation-based side gig brought in a lot more income than her day job. In fact, she would make much more money if she focused her efforts

on her side job instead.

“I’m not working as a divorce agent with my transformation magic because I want to. I mean, I know that I mentioned it first, but it was just a way to mitigate my client’s physical symptoms like headaches and things. Then other people came, saying they’d heard about it from someone else. That’s why I’ve had to—”

“If you’re accepting the requests, though, it’s the same thing.”

“But still!”

“If you don’t want to do it, you should just refuse.”

“I can’t exactly do that, can I...?”

Although Carla shook her head, dissatisfied by Thane’s suggestion, Thane himself did not understand why she could not refuse the incoming requests.

Furthermore, if Carla was receiving appropriate compensation, then it must mean that her clients were satisfied with the work that she was doing. The fact that the spouses were reconciling and not ultimately getting divorced should thus not be a problem either.

Carla took advantage of every opportunity to make fun of how inflexible Thane was, but she herself did not seem to realize how unnecessarily honest she was at times.

She is so strange, he thought once again.

“Okay, enough about this! Look, we’re almost there!” Carla shouted.

Thane was caught by surprise—for no sooner did she say that than the trees made way to a clearing before them. There, where the grove and the underbrush broke off, was a water hole surrounded by lush, green grass.

It seemed to be filled with spring water, but it was too large to be called a pond or a spring. Thane found himself astonished, not having expected to encounter such a place in the middle of a dense forest.

“A swamp... No, a lake?” he muttered.

“They say it’s a small lake. But it’s much deeper than a swamp, so I don’t

recommend you swim in it.”

“It’s not even summer. Why would I swim in it?”

“Gosh, you know what I mean.”

It was small for a lake, but even so, one would have to row for quite some time in order to reach the other side by boat.

Carla, however, proceeded to the edge of the water and looked up at the sky.

“It’s just about time,” she said.

When, drawn by her voice, Thane followed suit and looked up, he saw that a full moon was beginning to peek through the gaps among the trees.

As it rose higher, the bright light of the moon shone on the surface of the water, almost like a single pathway.

“All righty, Thane. That lantern is powered by magic, so it won’t go out until morning. I hope you can have a pleasant time until then!” Carla said.

“Wait, this isn’t Lakebell?” Thane asked.

“It’s just beyond here. I told you only witches can enter, didn’t I?”

“No, but there’s only a lake—”

As though to cut him off, Carla lifted her hands up toward the sky.

When she did so, the moonlight gathered in her palms, blended with her magical power, and formed a thin thread that wove a small boat on the surface of the water.

“What...?!” Thane exclaimed.

“Oh, Nettie and the others are here too,” Carla remarked nonchalantly.

Hearing her as she stepped into the boat woven from moonlight and magic, Thane looked up. It was then that he saw witches flying toward them on brooms from all corners of the forest. From them, too, magical power the color of moonlight extended—all pointing toward the center of the lake.

In that moment, Thane heard the ringing of a bell somewhere.

As he looked around startled, Carla laughed lightly and told him that the

sound was coming from the lake itself.

“That’s why we call it ‘Lakebell,’” she said to him.

Thane could not see the expression on Carla’s face as she stood with the moonlight behind her. He could only hear her voice, which sounded almost as though she were singing.

“The others by sky, I by boat. I cannot save you were you to drown, so Thane —be sure not to fall too deep.”

“...You don’t need to worry about such a thing.”

“Aha ha, jeez, you’re such a brat!”

When Carla faced forward, the boat on which she rode glided along the path created by the moon lighting the surface of the water. Like the end of some luminous rainbow, all the magical power from the sky gathered at the center of the lake, where a column of light had formed.

One after another, the witches entered it from the sky.

A special space that opens by the magic of witches, huh...?

Thane did not realize that he was transfixed by the sight before him.

The column of light eventually drew in Carla as well, as though making her one with it. The ringing of the bell stopped. All that was left were the full moon and the stars...and the light of the magical lantern in Thane’s hand.

5. The Terms of the Exchange

As the morning sun lit up the forest, Thane sat against the trunk of a large tree with his eyes closed.

Carla lifted her hand to tap on his shoulder—but Thane grabbed her hand instead.

“Whoa! You were awake?!” Carla exclaimed.

“You’re finally finished?” he responded with a question.

The expression on Thane’s face, as he watched Carla crumple into a sitting position from surprise, was clearly one of irritation. Although he himself had said he would wait, spending the night in a forest must have felt long. Thane pursed his lips moodily, glancing at the craft witch Nettie, who had returned along with Carla.



“Oh my, such a sour face that certainly does not suit this beautiful morning.

What? Were you chased by a boar or something?” Carla asked.

“Never mind my face. No boar came—in fact, not even a squirrel showed up. Y— Carla, you look pale yourself. This isn’t time to be asking about me.”

“Wow, you’re way more talkative than usual. Were you hungering for conversation? You must’ve really had nothing to do.”

“Shut up.”

Carla was talking as usual, but as Thane had pointed out, not only did she look sallow, even her cheeks were sunken. Before he could ask her what was wrong, however, Carla began speaking—words that caught him off guard.

“Ange said she’s the one.”

“Huh?” Thane asked back.

“She said that the Baron of Howell—your father?—once asked her to read his future for him.”

Thane did not know what to say. When he leaned forward to hear more, however, Carla brought her hands out in front of her, indicating for him to calm down.

“But you see, I only heard a little bit from her, but it sounded like her story didn’t quite line up with yours,” she explained.

“What are you saying? What element of the story, where someone is deceived by the foresight witch and dies, could possibly not line up—mg!”

As Thane spoke with anger, Carla used her magic to extend some plants growing nearby in order to restrain him. While she was at it, she also covered his mouth with a large leaf.

“Will you shut up and listen? Argh... I used just a tiny bit of magic, but I still feel like I’m gonna die...”

As the power that she could not control continued to flow out of the tip of her finger, Carla breathed heavily, her shoulders heaving. Because she was currently in the worst of conditions, even using the slightest bit of magic exhausted her.

“Why are you so energetic this early in the morning? That’s why knights with so much stamina are super annoying... Please don’t make me use any unnecessary energy. I feel super sick right now,” Carla murmured.

“Carla, just give up and drink your stomach medicine,” said Nettie.

“Dang it... I guess I have to. I was doing my best not to eat anything today. But they just piled it on...”

“Aha ha! You didn’t manage to refuse any of it! You poor kid. Let your big sister Nettie try to make you feel better,” Nettie said, patting Carla on the head.

“Don’t treat me like a kid too, Nettie...”

“Hey,” Thane spoke. Even though his binding should not have been loose, he had removed his dagger and simply cut through the various plants and vines to free himself.

“You cut through it already? Wow, you sure are a knight through and through. Your response is totally different from Prince Abel’s—he just sat there all tied up,” Carla recalled.

“The prince doesn’t have any actual combat experience, so he—wait, that isn’t the point!”

“Oh, right, right. Thane, do you have any water to drink?” Carla asked.

“I do, but...”

Carla took the water jug from the Thane—who had been mildly thrown off his game—and reached into her bag to take out a small packet of medicine. After pouring its powdery contents into her mouth, she sipped some of Thane’s water. In the next moment, she turned even bluer than before and crouched down on the ground, barely breathing.

Gaaah! This tastes gross! It’s super gross! Dear teacher, I’m so sorry to have made you drink something like this!

The first time Carla had made this stomach medicine, her teacher Varne had drunk it herself to confirm its efficacy.

She had commented then that the medicine “tasted like having a boot that someone had worn for three days be shoved into your mouth,” but now Carla

was learning firsthand that Varne had been absolutely correct.

Every time Carla had made medicine, Varne had complained but tried it nonetheless. Continuing to apologize in her heart to her virtuous teacher, Carla waited patiently for the disgusting medicine to take effect.

Why in the world would stomach medicine make me want to throw up...? I feel like crying right now.

If the medicine did not work, she would have been able to abandon it with no lingering feelings. Yet all the medicinal products that Carla made had fantastic efficacy. It really was such a shame that her talents manifested in odd and unfortunate ways.

I want to get this thing working so that I can hurry up and escape this torment...!

Carla crouched into a little ball, concentrating all of her magical power to the area around her stomach. She then focused her energies in order to make the medicine take effect faster. Doing this increased the medicine's efficacy significantly. In its stead, though, Carla's resistance and defensive functions decreased, making her completely vulnerable to any external impact. Her body would become so weak that even getting stepped on by a cat would leave bruises. Right now, however, Nettie—who knew all about Carla's condition—was beside her. Carla was thus able to devote herself to healing.

Seeing Carla curled up and suffering on the ground, Thane panicked. "H-Hey, Carla. Are you...?" he began to ask.

"Oh, careful not to touch her. It's medicine, not poison, so she's okay. She's just writhing in agony because it tastes so bad," Nettie explained to him, laughing. "If Carla's medicine didn't have these darn side effects, it would be good enough to get her a storefront in the best part of the capital. Oh, do you want to try some too, young knight?"

"I decline."

"Well, that was fast! Though I admit I wouldn't want to drink it either!"

As Nettie continued laughing, Carla half opened her eyes and protested, saying, "Shush... I like that shop in the back alley. Even if I became a billionaire, I

still wouldn't move."

"Oh, you're alive. That was fast, as usual," Nettie remarked.

"I just stacked up my power... Gah, that was rough!" Carla mumbled, wiping the sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. She then sat up and breathed deeply several times. She proceeded to drink from Thane's water jug until it was empty. As she returned it to him, she managed to say, "Oh, Thane, thanks for the water."

"Sure..." came his only response. Thane furrowed his brows, but he did not complain about the fact that she had drunk all the water in his jug.

"Okay, you seem fine now. In that case, I'll go back first and make the preparations," said the craft witch.

"Thanks, Nettie. I appreciate that."

"I'll be sure to tweak things, so you can look forward to it working great!" Nettie responded cheerfully, then sat upon her broom and ascended with momentum.

Thane must have never seen a witch fly away so close up before. As he looked up into the sky, unable to hide his shock, Carla gave him a sidelong glance while waving to Nettie and shouting, "See you later!"

"What in the world...?" he managed.

"Okay, so, where were we?" Carla asked, trying to gather her thoughts as well. "Oh, right. So Ange said she's willing to meet with you—but on one condition."

"Condition?"

"Yup."

Even as Thane grimaced with suspicion, Carla continued, trying to remember what Ange had said to her.

"The condition is to help with the divorce of one of Ange's clients."

"...Huh?"

Right?! That's what I said!

As Thane's eyes went wide in surprise, Carla looked at him bitterly.

"But that's your work, not mine," Thane said, confused.

"Exactly! As in, she's telling *me* to work! How did things turn out like this?"

"How should I know?"

To be precise, the condition that Ange had set was "to solve the problem of a client." Hearing the details, however, it was clear that the matter was most suited to being resolved by a divorce agent who used transformation magic.

"So the condition isn't for me to pay some price, but...to help her client get a divorce?" Thane confirmed.

"Yup."

Thane must have thought that he, like his father, would be made to pay some large sum of money. Nodding at the knight, who seemed taken aback by the turn of events, Carla began to explain the details.

"I've mentioned this before, but Ange is the 'fortune-telling witch' now. And many of her clients are nobles. One of her regulars apparently is a wife who wants a divorce but can't get one for some reason—so Ange wants me to take her place and make the divorce happen."

"I'm not following."

Just like Thane had done to show his suspicions, Carla, too, puffed out her cheeks and moodily said, "Listen until the end. The thing is—"

Fortune-telling, Ange's principal occupation, was built on trust and word of mouth. Given that Ange worked primarily with nobility, that tendency was even more marked. The level of satisfaction that her clients felt determined everything.

The client in question had been coming to see Ange regularly for several years. Her family was related to the family of a marquess. Ange only stood to gain from helping to resolve this woman's problems, as she had a vast social network. Yet for that to be so, Ange had to be able to resolve the client's issue.

The reason Ange had brought the case to Carla was that it was a matter that could only be resolved by someone who was an apothecary *and* could use

transformation magic. Ange had never made a request like this of Carla before, so it seemed like she was worried enough about the woman's condition that she would now ask urgently for Carla's help.

Once Carla had finished explaining, Thane looked as though he understood—but also did not.

Thane had always been critical of fortune-telling, and not only that, this was a request made by the foresight witch. It was understandable that he would not agree to the idea.

"The wife in question had a political marriage, but she and her husband still had a good relationship. It seems that lately, though, her husband has been acting strangely," Carla continued.

"Acting strangely?"

The first incident had occurred about half a month ago. The wife, who had awoken in the middle of the night, noticed that there was light coming from her husband's private room, which was attached to the couple's bedroom.

The husband was supposed to spend the night elsewhere that evening. He had contacted her to let her know that, having encountered a friend from his school days while being out, he would be staying at the friend's house.

Perhaps he had changed his mind and returned home. If that were the case, she wanted to tell him good night before she went back to sleep. Yet when she reached for the doorknob, she heard her husband speaking to someone—most likely her father-in-law. In that moment, she hesitated.

"Why did she feel the need to hesitate? She has a good relationship with her husband, does she not?" Thane asked.

"She doesn't get along with her father-in-law though."

Her father-in-law, who lived with the couple, was very strict. He also cared deeply about appearances and outward presentations. He intimidated his own son—her husband—as well. As for the wife, earlier in the couple's marriage, the father had coincidentally seen her walking down the hallway in her nightgown. He had severely reprimanded her for that. He had also taken to frequently uttering unkind words about the couple not having children despite having

been married for two years.

The father-in-law had separated from his own wife many years ago. There was thus no one in the household who was capable of putting a stop to the patriarch's actions. Thinking that it was better to just let the two men be, the wife had decided to return to bed that evening.

"They apparently continued talking for a while, and the wife got tired of waiting and fell back asleep. But when she woke up the next morning, she was the only one in bed. When she asked one of the servants about her husband, they told her that he hadn't returned since the previous evening."

"He hadn't come home?"

"Right. The husband had stayed over at his friend's house, just as he had sent word that he would. He returned that day around lunchtime. The former classmate that he'd stayed with saw him home and told the wife that they had been together that whole time."

"If that's the case, maybe she was half asleep and just dreamed the whole thing."

"Yeah, apparently that's what she thought too...then, at least."

The next evening, however, yet another strange incident occurred. On that day, the husband and wife were each attending a different soiree. The husband returned home later than the wife.

When the wife awoke to some noise as she had the previous evening, it was roughly midnight. This time, too, her husband and her father-in-law were speaking in the next room. She could not make out what the muffled voices were saying through the door, but they sometimes sounded as though her husband was criticizing her father-in-law, who was speaking excitedly. Other times, it sounded like the other way around.

"But when she asked her husband about it in the morning, he said he didn't know anything about it—that he had come home drunk and fallen asleep on the sofa before he made it to bed. A servant also told her that her father-in-law hadn't come out of his room all night. So the wife was now completely confused."

Because the father-in-law frequently made demands even in the middle of the night, the servants remained stationed near his room without sleeping—and during the previous evening, the father-in-law had not called upon them. Since the couple's room and the father-in-law's room were situated far apart, it was also difficult for anyone to travel between the two rooms without being noticed.

"Plus, it seems the husband acts strangely during the daytime too. Apparently he writes things in secret, and when he notices that his wife is there, he rushes to hide them."

"Hmm..."

He also forgot the names of servants who had been working in the mansion for over five years, and he failed to remember where commonly used items were kept.

"There are apparently moments when she's talking to him, but she feels like she's talking to a complete stranger," Carla added.

The wife, suspicious about something being amiss, casually brought it up to her husband. Yet he insisted that she was imagining things and was unwilling to take her seriously.

When she mentioned to him that she had heard him speaking to his father in the middle of the night, however, she noticed his attempt to hide his panic.

The wife could not believe that what she saw and heard was all a dream. She had decided, therefore, that she would open the door the next time she heard voices.

"And then what happened?" Thane asked.

"Well, from that evening, the wife became unable to wake up during the night."

On the evening she had confronted her husband, after finishing dinner, she was overcome by an overwhelming malaise. She nearly collapsed into her bed. Although she could not even lift a finger, her mind remained perfectly clear. Her condition was very strange indeed.

Unable either to fall asleep or to stay awake, she eventually heard the clock strike midnight. She soon heard two voices from her husband's room once again. Yet because she could not move, she was unable to confirm anything.

"That is a strange story," Thane murmured.

"Right? And the husband keeps sneaking around during the day, and the voices keep coming from the husband's room during the night."

Because the wife continued to find herself in the condition of remaining half-awake all evening, she was unable to rest either physically or mentally. She grew more and more exhausted.

The father-in-law, too, seemed to have his own concerns. He was in an even worse mood than usual. The instances of him taking out his frustrations on not only the servants but also the couple increased. The mood in the mansion thus only worsened.

"Her husband doesn't believe her, and the servants say they don't know what she's talking about. It wasn't something she could talk about with her friends or family, either—so she went to get advice from Ange," Carla explained.

"Ha! As if fortune-telling can solve a thing like this."

"Don't take fortune-telling lightly."

Although Thane's expression flashed to skepticism upon hearing the word "fortune-telling," fortune as told by a witch was something to be reckoned with. There was also the simple fact that talking with someone enabled one to sort through their memories and feelings.

When Ange read the woman's fortune, she pulled the card that meant "an unseen truth becomes clear through the past."

"You can interpret that however you want," Thane remarked. "That's the most conventional trick of a con artist."

"Look, sir—I thought I told you to listen until the end!"

The card was suggestive, but the wife could not think of anything to which it might refer.

The husband and wife had had an arranged marriage of political strategy.

Because of this, both of their common behaviors and social networks had been investigated before they had wed. They also had mutual acquaintances, so if something were going on, she would hear something.

Although he did not have any outstanding qualities, her husband was gentle and honest. She did not know of any problems he had had in the past; she, too, had none.

“What’s common in these situations is for someone to be having an affair, but since he’s talking to her father-in-law at night, it’s a little different.”

“That seems to be true.”

“To be honest, I wouldn’t mind if the husband’s strange behavior or conversations at night were all the wife’s hallucinations,” Carla said. “But there’s one thing that really concerns me.”

“What’s that?” Thane asked.

Pointing her index finger and glaring at it, Carla—wearing the face of an apothecary—said, “To not be able to move her body but to be awake, and for multiple nights in a row... How is that possible? Either she’s being drugged, or like what happened with Lilith, someone is casting a spell on her using a strange magical tool.”

Hearing Carla’s hypotheses, which were spoken reluctantly and with a sigh, Thane—who had seen various cases as a member of the knights’ brigade—had to agree.

“There is that possibility,” he replied, equally reluctant.

“Ange thought that might be what was happening too.”

Ange, however, was not familiar with medicine the way Carla was. And if it were a magical tool, she would not be able to deal with it the way Nettie could. Given these factors, Ange had brought the case to the two other witches.

“The wife is completely at the end of her rope. She’s saying that she’d rather get a divorce and leave the house than continue this way,” Carla explained. “But you know that divorce among nobility isn’t so simple.”

Even if the spouses did not occupy high ranks such as crown prince and

daughter of a duke, as Abel and Patricia had, marriage among nobles was very often a form of business alliance. Just as had been the case with the couple in question, the relationships were often based on political convenience. Unless one of them was clearly at fault, it was difficult to even petition for a divorce.

"And that's where you and your transformation magic come in," concluded Thane.

"That's right. If it were me, even if someone tried to poison me or cast a spell on me with sorcery, I'd be able to see right through it. I'm supposed to pretend to be the wife, sneak into the bedroom, make sure she's not in any danger, confirm the facts behind the midnight meetings, and gather all necessary evidence. And if I can catch the suspect red-handed and go straight into divorce mediation, so much the better."

If Thane's request had not been involved, some other compensation—such as a part of the reward that Ange would receive—would have been presented to Carla. The timing thus worked out well for everyone.

Thane, however, looked sullen as he brought his hand to his chin and asked, "You tried to do the same thing before and failed, didn't you?"

"Ugh!"

Carla knew what he was referring to—the case with Abel and Patricia.

Dissolving their engagement had seemed like a foolproof endeavor. Both parties had insisted on parting ways. Everyone in their surroundings had also acknowledged their wishes. And yet the two had gotten married as originally planned.

Carla had done just as she had been told, transforming into Patricia—and even into Marie, the duchess. And yet, just about everything had backfired.

Still to this day, Carla struggled to understand what had gone wrong.

"They're absolutely gonna get divorced for sure this time. At least I think I'll be able to get them to separate with divorce down the line," declared Carla. "I mean, it's weird, no matter how you think about it! Even if your relationship with your spouse isn't bad, you wouldn't want to stay in a house like that."

“Carla, you said that the case of the crown prince would be a piece of cake as well.”

“I-I didn’t say it would be a piece of cake. I’m pretty sure...”

She had *thought* it, but she was pretty certain she had not said it out loud.

I really don’t need him bringing up a past failure when I’m about to embark on a new case!

Even with the more recent case she had taken on as a divorce agent, Carla had been unable to accomplish her mission, and the couple had gotten back together.

The difference in the level of excitement between Carla, who had been about ready to quit her work as a divorce agent, and the client, who had visited her with a beaming smile to thank her, was quite astonishing.

Carla would feel differently if her clients had requested she help them reconcile with their husbands in the first place. The wives who stealthily visited Carla’s shop, however, always originally hoped in earnest to get a divorce. Carla simply could not understand what was going on.

That they changed their minds because of my poor work...can’t possibly be what’s happening!

“Uh, in any case...” Carla mumbled, resetting herself. “Once I get back to the capital, I’m planning to get ready and head straight for the wife’s residence. Whether it’s drugs or sorcery, it’s better to deal with it earlier rather than later. And once this case is closed, then we’ll arrange for a meeting between you and Ange—what, Thane?”

Once they had concluded their discussion of the circumstances as Ange had explained them, Thane—although he had just finished making fun of Carla—began contemplating with a serious expression on his face.

“Is that all?” he asked.

“Huh? Yeah—this is pretty much all I heard from Ange.”

“And what reward will you receive?”

“Reward? I just told you that these are the terms of the exchange for you to

meet Ange."

"So you're telling me that you yourself aren't receiving anything?" he asked. "Are you...an idiot?"

"Hah?"

Being so suddenly insulted, Carla, despite having just recovered from her stomachache, immediately felt ill again.

As she glared at him, Thane shook his head and sighed deeply, as if to say, "You don't understand at all."

"To accept such a condition—I suspected that you might be a fool, but it turns out you really are one. What's in it for you in all this?" Thane asked.

"Excuse me?! Why are you saying that?" Carla shouted back.

"You said yourself that transformation magic takes a lot out of you."

"Well, yeah, it's not easy. But I'm used to it, and I'm good at it... Hey, wait a minute, Thane. What are you trying to say?"

Seriously, what's with this guy?

Even though his word choice was insulting, he spoke in such a bewildered, apologetic voice. He was throwing her off.

Though she could not fully see his face because he was holding his palm to his forehead, it seemed he even had a meek expression for a change. Carla was even more confused.

"I know I have no right to say this regarding the present case, but you are too much of a pushover. Unless you learn how to say no, you'll always end up getting the short end of the stick," said Thane.

"You seem to have misunderstood," began Carla after a pause. "It's not as though I accepted this case for you—okay?!"

"But of course you did. This is all about me and that witch. There's no reason for you to get involved."

"What...?!"

Thane was making it seem as though Carla was going out of her way to accept

Ange's request for his sake.

That was simply outrageous.

It may, in fact, appear as though Carla was not receiving any compensation for her work. However, Carla had decided ahead of time to become involved with this case regardless of the question of any reward.

"I-It's not like I'm doing this for you! Setting aside the condition for your meeting, I'm getting involved as an apothecary! Because I'm worried that maybe some strange poison is being used!"

"As an apothecary?" Thane repeated.

"It would be a problem if it were some illegal drug, right? If there's some suspicious medication going around, I'd be bothered too."

"A drug... Yes, that is true."

As Carla argued with much force, Thane returned somewhat to his usual mood.

This guy is driving me crazy!

"Besides, it's not like I'm going at it alone. There's a possibility that it's a magical tool rather than poison, so Nettie's been asked to get involved as well. And of course, you're gonna have to work on this case too, Thane. If they're using dangerous sorcery or medicine, make sure you capture them on the spot."

"Obviously."

Even if Carla managed to see through what was happening, she could not arrest the culprit. Moreover, she was dealing with a noble from a privileged household. She was planning to record evidence using Nettie's magical tool, but having a knight of the royal guard on the scene with her would be an incredible asset.

"I don't need you to serve as a bodyguard like last time, so don't you worry. I'm pretty sure that we're not gonna be attacked or have the place erupt in flames at a normal house," Carla said.

"Who knows? It seems like your previous cases never went according to plan

either," replied Thane.

"Don't say ominous things like that. This time for sure, I'm gonna get all the evidence, get the wrongdoer to confess, and finalize the quickest, most amicable divorce ever."

"You are already ignoring the fact that you've managed to overturn a completely prepared setup in the past," said Thane, quick to remind her of her precedent.

"La la la, I cannot hear you!" sang Carla, covering her ears and turning her back to him. "Anyway, that's what's going on. So let's get back to the capital and go see this lady in question!"

And with that, Carla began walking toward the stagecoach stop in the center of the village. If they could manage to depart in the morning, they would arrive back at the royal capital around noon.

Carla had to return first to the apothecary, then meet up with Nettie in order to finalize their preparations. Only then would they be able to set off for the residence of Ange's client.

"You mentioned that the wife was a noble," Thane remarked. "Won't you be turned away if you show up unannounced?"

"Yeah. Right? It seems the father-in-law is the really vigilant type, so he refuses to see anyone that he doesn't already know. That's why Ange prepared a letter of introduction for us. She said she'd also send a letter to the wife in the morning so that she'll know to expect us too."

Even with such efforts, however, because the father-in-law maintained exclusivity in his social connections, meeting with the family as a "witch" would be difficult. Therefore, Carla and Nettie were planning to pay their visit while disguised as merchants.

This, too, was part of the reason Carla had been tasked with this request. Ange, whose appearance was quite eye-catching, would never be able to pass as a merchant, no matter how many disguises she piled on.

Ange already had this letter of introduction prepared. She was probably planning to ask me and Nettie to work on this case in the first place.

As she finished speaking, Carla rummaged through her bag and took out an envelope. When she handed the letter of introduction to Thane, he saw the addressee and stopped in his tracks.

“Florence Marsden?” he read out loud, with slight surprise in his voice.

“Do you know her? I heard that the Marsden family had the rank of a viscount.”

Thane came from a baron’s family. He had been in the knights’ brigade since before he was an adult. Although he himself said that he had not maintained any relationships with other nobles, it would not be a surprise if he had acquaintances who were nobles through his family background.

His expression, however, did not suggest any close relationship with the Marsden family name. Before Carla could inquire further, Thane replied in a bitter voice, “The family of the Viscount of Marsden is where I was sent to investigate the recent case of theft.”

“Theft... Oh, the one you mentioned at the apothecary? Where nothing was stolen, but you’re supposed to keep watch because a thief definitely broke in? Where the patriarch is super stubborn?”

“That’s right.”

“Now that you mention it, you said that the wife was bedridden when you were talking with the members of the household... Oh, I see. Yeah, I gotcha. The father-in-law in Ange’s story sounded like a troublesome guy too!”

That, apparently, was the Viscount of Marsden—and that meant that the woman into whom Carla was to transform was the wife of the son of the viscount.

But wait. If that really is the case, something smells fishy here...

Conversations at midnight between the husband and the father-in-law that only the wife could hear. A husband that seemed to be hiding something from his wife. A father-in-law who seemed bizarrely wary of thieves.

“There seems to be something going on with the Viscount of Marsden or his son,” muttered Thane with a grimace, voicing out loud the suspicion that Carla

herself had just had.

“Seems like it. Well, I guess we’ll find out once we get there,” she said.

“Why, you... You seem so pleasantly nonplussed about this. Has anyone ever told you that you don’t think things through enough?” Thane asked.

“And has anyone ever told *you* that you overthink things? And don’t call me ‘you,’” she replied as she looked away and continued walking.

When the two took their seats in the corner of the stagecoach headed back to the capital, Thane continued thinking in silence, with a stern expression on his face. Next to him, Carla, once again, fell into a deep sleep.

When they arrived at the capital, Nettie was waiting in front of Carla’s apothecary carrying a large bag.

“Good job, you made it back on the dot,” Nettie said, patting Carla on the head as the apothecary witch stretched her waist and back, which had stiffened while riding the coach.

Even if Carla frowned in protest, it had no effect on Nettie, who called herself Carla’s big sister. “Quit treating me like a child, Nettie,” Carla insisted nonetheless. “Anyway, what’s with that giant piece of luggage?”

“The costumes Ange gave us take up a lot of room,” Nettie explained casually.

“Costumes?” Thane asked, a look of suspicion on his face.

Nettie, however, only glanced at him over her glasses and turned instead to Carla to ask, “Did you manage to tell him everything?”

“Yup. We’re gonna have Thane help us too. Turns out this guy knows the father-in-law and the husband.”

“Oh, I see. Sure is a small world,” Nettie replied.

“Well then, Thane, you’re gonna go back to your dorm, change into your knight’s uniform, and...meet us in front of Nettie’s store in three hours,” Carla declared.

“Huh?” he asked.

“Don’t worry. It’s an easy and simple plan that even a meathead like you can follow.”

“Hey, what are you talking about?”

“Aha ha! In that case—see you later, young knight!”

Leaving behind Thane—who clearly had more questions to ask—Carla and Nettie disappeared into the apothecary.

§

In the early evening of that same day, Carla and Nettie, having sent word that they were merchants specializing in the sale of imported goods, visited the house of the viscount.

Carla disguised herself as the female head of a merchant family and wore a wide-brimmed hat that covered half her face. She also wore a dark-blond wig, the same hair color as Madam Florence's hair.

Nettie, wearing the outfit of a servant, was posing as Carla's assistant. Nettie stood behind her supposed employer and carried a trunk that appeared to hold various types of merchandise.

These outfits had been prepared by Ange, who often socialized with nobility and knew their practices and expectations well.

Although Thane had seemed surprised when he and the two witches reconvened, he did not say that they looked odd, which must have meant that their appearance did not arouse suspicion.

Their plan for the evening was for Carla to trade places with Madam Florence in order to confirm various suspicions and collect any necessary evidence. However, no matter how good Carla was at transformation magic, she could not turn herself into someone she had never met. Since they had been told that the madam was roughly the same height as Carla, they planned to visit in attire that hid Carla's face as much as possible. She would later swap clothes with the madam and surreptitiously trade places with her.

This was actually the first time Carla was disguising herself without using magic. She was rather enjoying the whole experience.

After Carla and Nettie parted with Thane and arrived at the viscount's residence ahead of him, they immediately encountered an issue at the front doorstep.

Carla had with her a letter of introduction, and the madam had already received word that she would be entertaining visitors.

However, because of the recent fuss about the robbery, the viscount had set strict limitations on admitting visitors to the mansion. Having been threatened with punishment if they disobeyed the viscount's command, the servants were unsure how to respond to Carla and Nettie's visit. Although they attempted to confirm the visit with the viscount, he himself was away from the mansion at the moment.

When the servants began to disagree among themselves about whether to let the visitors enter, Carla sent a clandestine signal behind her.

It's just as we expected... Thane—we're counting on you!

Just as the discussion seemed about to come to a standstill, a knight of the Royal Guard "just so happened" to appear. It seemed he had come to ask some questions about the recent robbery to the young madam of the household, given that he had been unable to do so during the original investigation.

With the fortuitous appearance of the knight, Carla—dressed as the female merchant—suddenly brightened her expression and said, "In that case, how about we ask Sir Knight to be present in the room when we introduce our products to the lady of the house? That way, the viscount will know that we are not suspicious individuals, and none of the staff of the house will be reprimanded either."

"Ah, that is a wonderful idea! Though, how does Sir Knight feel about this proposal?" asked one of the servants.

"That should be fine," Thane responded.

And with that, the door to the mansion was finally opened to the three of them.

"Do witches also act as con artists?" Thane asked in a whisper.

"How rude. What part of me claiming that I'm a merchant when I'm coming to perform transformation magic makes me a con artist?" Carla replied.

After all, the group had been asked to come by Florence, who was one of the masters of the house. They should not have been refused entry in the first place. In fact, Carla wanted someone to give them credit for not forcing their way into the mansion by way of magic.

“Thane, you also said that you needed to ask the lady some questions,” added Carla.

“Tch,” was his only reply.

“And here we managed to resolve that issue peacefully too. I don’t appreciate your attitude.”

“Aha ha! It’s so fun watching the two of you. Do it some more!” Nettie egged them on.

“Nettie, you would say such a thing too?!”

As they walked down the wide hallway side by side, mumbling among themselves, they finally arrived at the drawing room.

Madam Florence Marsden greeted them, her pale complexion indicative of her poor health. She had dark-blond hair, just as they had been told, yet her hair—perhaps due to her various worries—lacked any kind of luster. She also had very dark circles under her eyes.

Hmm, the lady seems worse than I was expecting. She seems about to collapse any minute.

Her dress was made from a fabric of a cool tone that made her skin appear even paler. As an apothecary, Carla could not help becoming concerned.

Knowing the knight of the Royal Guard had agreed to monitor the situation, the servants seemed to take their leave from the drawing room with relief. When just the four individuals who knew the true situation were left in the room, the madam finally exhaled the breath she seemed to have been holding.

“It is a pleasure to meet you. I...” she began.

“We heard the story from Ange. I’m the apothecary witch Carla, and this is the craft witch Nettie. Madam, first and foremost, you should take it easy. In fact, you can even lie down on this sofa here.”

Carla, wearing her professional expression of an apothecary, lifted the brim of her hat to show her face clearly. She then smiled to further put the woman at ease.

When she noticed that the woman’s gaze was directed uncertainly toward

what was behind her, Carla turned around to looked at Thane and said, “Oh, that man there is an actual knight of the Royal Guard. He’s also an acquaintance of Ange, so you can trust him.”

“Oh...! I had no idea.”

Thane appeared to be somewhat annoyed by being described as “an acquaintance of Ange.” The statement was not wrong, however, and given that some of the anxiety disappeared from Madam Florence’s expression at the mention of Ange’s name, he refrained from denying the statement and instead just nodded awkwardly.

“He also came to investigate the attempted robbery the other day,” Carla added. “You sure have had to deal with a lot of things lately.”

When Carla brought up the recent case, Madam Florence lowered her gaze, almost apologetically.

“I was not even able to greet you on that occasion,” she said to Thane. “And I must apologize to you about my father-in-law as well, especially given that nothing was actually stolen.”

“Not at all. I was told that you were not feeling well that day. It is all a part of my duties, so please do not be concerned with what happened in regards to your father-in-law,” replied Thane.

“You really don’t have to worry about anything with this guy. He just loves his job so much. I brought him along today to serve as our doorman,” Carla piped up.

“Hey.”

“That is a cold, hard fact.”

It was true that the presence of the knight of the Royal Guard had made it easier for Carla and Nettie to enter the mansion. Carla knew, though, that if she made light of the fact, the atmosphere in the room would become more comfortable.

“Thank you so much, every one of you. In this household, my father-in-law is in charge of everything... I sincerely apologize for the fact that we have given

you trouble already.”

Holding the letter of introduction from Ange to her chest as though it were some precious item, Madam Florence seemed much relieved—so much so that she almost began to cry.

Her blue eyes seemed lifeless and sunken in. Her cheeks, too, seemed hollow. Her face, with its already delicate features, seemed so worn out that those around her surely could not help but feel sorry for her.

She seems to have taken things really hard...but it doesn’t seem as though it’s all just from anxiety.

Carla had heard that the madam had not been able to sleep, but she also seemed to have other symptoms, such as fever and nausea. Carla almost wanted to prioritize the treatment of those symptoms over the discussion of her potential divorce.

In this room with furniture that was splendid but also overly formal, Carla and Nettie were asked to sit down on an old-fashioned sofa. Thane stood in front of the door.

“Madam, since you seem unwell and we also don’t have a lot of time, I’m just going to cut to the chase. I’ll say this first, though: if possible, please avoid tea and alcohol, as well as things that are cold. It would be great if you can try to have soup with soft vegetables or things that are easy to eat and digest,” Carla stated.

“Oh? Uh, yes, of course.”

“Do you drink herbal tea?”

“Um, I do prefer chamomile tea.”

“Let’s take a break from that as well. It’ll be better for you to have ginger tea or hot milk instead.”

Madam Florence seemed taken aback by the sudden dietary guidance, but she nodded in assent nonetheless. Carla, also nodding, returned to the original topic of conversation even as she continued looking at the madam’s pale face.

“We heard the story from Ange. Do you still wish to get a divorce from your

husband?" she asked.

"Yes. I no longer feel that I have the confidence to continue being a part of this household," the madam replied, hanging her head low. Even her shoulders seemed so frail they might break. She did not dislike her husband, but she appealed desperately that everything had become too difficult to bear. The story she told was the same as the one Ange had previously shared.

"Then, I'll undertake the task of laying out a path for your divorce, including confirming the facts of the goings-on at midnight. I should note, though, that you don't seem to be affected by any type of sorcery," said Carla.

"S-Sorcery, you say?"

"We had thought that perhaps the voices that only you could hear at night and your poor health were caused by sorcery or some kind of poison. Did you happen to recently buy an accessory with a magic stone or start taking any new medication?" Carla asked.

"No, I have not," the madam replied, shaking her head with an expression that seemed to suggest she could not believe what she was hearing.

Letting the magical power she had focused in her eyes for her inspection scatter and dissipate, Carla turned to Nettie and asked, "How does it look with your glasses, Nettie?"

"Mmm, it doesn't look like there's any magic circle or magic stone that's operating at the moment. I'm not picking up any traces, either, so I'm pretty sure it's okay—but just to be sure, we should probably check later whether there isn't anything that's been set up on the bed," Nettie responded, narrowing her green eyes behind her glasses and touching their frame with her finger.

"Okay, got it." The two witches thus agreed that the possibility of sorcery being involved seemed unlikely.

If that's the case, it's highly probable that she's being poisoned, huh...? I would've felt better if it had been a case of sorcery. Jeez, how annoying! No one should be going around using medicine for something like this!

Medicine was an extremely personal item meant to treat the symptoms of

illness. To use it without letting the person know was absolutely inexcusable.

"I was told you always feel unwell after dinner. You feel fine after meals during the daytime, though, is that correct?" asked Carla.

"Yes. It is only at night that I feel strange. I cannot bring myself to move, so I lie down—and yet I cannot actually fall asleep. To the servants and Nigel...my husband, that is, I appear to be in a deep sleep."

"Ah, that's the first I've heard of that. So does that mean you have your eyes closed?"

"Yes. I cannot move my eyelids, and I cannot speak either."

Carla nodded at the woman's response and asked, "Then is there anything that you always eat at dinner?"

"Always...perhaps just the aperitif and the tea after the meal. Mead is a specialty of the territory where my family is from, so I always have that before my meal."

Madam Florence explained that she only drank one small liqueur glass, since she could not handle too much alcohol.

"Ever since I began feeling unwell, though, I have found the taste to be disagreeable. The last several days, I really have only taken a sip. The tea I take after my meal, too, is always of the same brand."

"Do your husband and your father-in-law also have the same drinks?"

"No, they do not care for sweet liqueur, so I am the only one that has the mead. And the other two have coffee rather than tea."

"I see."

Carla and Nettie looked at each other. Thane, too, seemed to have thought something similar, because when Carla turned back to look at him, he was furrowing his brows with his arms crossed.

If someone were using poison, the mead or the tea seems suspicious... If it's put *in alcohol, they can just put it in the bottle, but if it's put in tea, do they mix it in every time? Oh, but you could also tamper with the tea leaves. Hmm, then that would mean that there's a possibility that a servant might also be involved.*

The servants had even argued with each other over Carla's group's visit. The viscount, who was technically the stubborn master of this house, must have been managing people so strictly that the servants followed his orders only and not orders from the son and his wife.

That would be yet another reason to recommend divorce in this case.

Carla turned to the woman and said bluntly, "I'm going to have you take refuge at Nettie's house tonight."

"Take refuge?" the madam repeated.

"Let me take over from here," said Nettie, poking Carla's shoulder as though to deflate her mounting frustration with the situation. The apothecary witch sat back down on the sofa. Nettie then leaned forward to continue the explanation.

"First of all, you'll be able to see from my house what's happening in this mansion while you and Carla trade places, so you don't have to worry about that."

"I shall be able to see what is happening in this house, even while I am away?" the madam asked.

"Yes. We'll be using this invention of mine."

"It is...a mirror, yes?"

What Nettie took out of the merchandise trunk was a dressing table outfitted with a mirror.

It was of a normal size, such that one would be able to see one's upper body. Although the craftsmanship was quite lovely, there seemed to be nothing out of the ordinary about it. The woman tilted her head quizzically.

"There is the exact same dressing table at the house where you'll be staying. If we use that, we'll be able to not just see what's going on but also hear voices."

"Oh my, I did not know that such a thing was possible!"

The colored stones fitted into the four corners of the wooden frame were actually not mere ornamental glass but rather magic stones. The surface of the mirror itself had also been treated with magic by Nettie. The dressing table

before them and its twin at Nettie's house were, in fact, magical tools that could be synchronized with each other.

They would be placing it in the room next-door—the couple's bedroom. It was meant to record evidence in case anyone attempted to rig something in the bedroom. If the door was opened wide enough, it would also be able to reflect the husband's private room as well.

It would have been ideal to place the mirror in the husband's room—the site of the nightly conversations. Since the sudden appearance of an unfamiliar object would only arouse suspicion, however, it was decided that the mirror should go in the bedroom instead.

In addition to the dresser, Carla would also be using the customary magical tool of the evidence-recording pendant.

It now had the new function of sending information to the mirror, making it possible to see the images that the pendant was capturing on the mirror located in Nettie's house as well.

As a side note, the dresser with the mirror was a tool with special abilities that could only be utilized by a witch. Although Thane kept looking at it with much interest, it was not possible to use it for missions of the knights' brigade. Too bad for him.

"I've also made improvements so that we can speak by voice through the pendant," continued Nettie. "If you notice anything suspicious, you can let us know, and Carla will hear it at the scene. We thought that perhaps you might want to stay here in your house and confirm things for yourself, but this time —"

"N-No. No at all! Please, I am so afraid at night...!"

Because the father-in-law believed that a woman should stay in her own house, although she was permitted to leave for short periods during the daytime, she was not allowed to spend the night elsewhere. Florence—who seemed to feel trapped—shared that because she was not even permitted to return to her own family's home, she could not escape, no matter how much she wanted to.

As she continued to repeat that she was fearful of the night, Carla furrowed her brow and asked, “Even though you are feeling so unwell, do you not tell your husband any of this?”

“Nigel worries about me very much,” replied the madam after a moment of hesitation.

“And the doctor? Surely, a viscount’s household must have their own family physician or apothecary. Have you had an examination or consultation?”

Madam Florence shook her head sadly in response to Carla’s question.

“My father-in-law opposes the idea of me seeing a doctor. He said that being unwell is the result of having a slack disposition and that it would be a disgrace to call a doctor for such a minor issue. It seems also that my father-in-law was displeased by the family physician recently, and ever since then, he has not been permitted to step inside our house.”

“Huuuh? What a bigoted old fart,” Carla said, speaking her thoughts out loud.

“Carla, we can hear you,” Thane cut in, immediately chiding her.

“It’s the truth though.”

Nettie was grinning as she watched the exchange, but Carla felt that this was no laughing matter. No one became ill or injured because they wanted to. Carla hated people who called such undesired circumstances a “disgrace”—directly to the afflicted individuals, no less.

Whether one was able to begin treatment early could make all the difference in the prognosis. What was the point of refusing to get treatment when one had access to a doctor—and instead risking the danger of being too late?

There are even people who want *to get treatment but can’t.*

There were cases in which one lived in a remote area and had no access to a doctor or an apothecary. There were also those who could not afford treatment. Such realities were not be denied. The house of Marsden, however, was no such case.

Moreover, the act of intimidating others into submission was incredibly bothersome to Carla, who had not been raised with such pressures.

“Regardless of what the patriarch says, the husband needs to step in and stand up for the wife. No matter how worried he is, if he’s all talk and no walk, then of course you’d want to divorce him.”

Carla’s approval of the idea of a divorce put a lonely and self-deprecating smile on the woman’s face, and she said, “My father-in-law has not always been this bad. And of course, I know that I am at fault as well. I became unable to trust my husband, and I told him not to say anything unnecessary.”

“Trust—ah, you mentioned that he seems like someone you don’t even know.”

“Yes. There are simply times when he seems like a completely different person. It is strange though, is it not? His face and his voice are the same as always.”

She had casually brought up to the servants the changes she had detected from time to time in her husband. As with the question of the late-night conversations, however, they had not supported her in the observation.

She shared that she had begun to feel even more depressed, thinking she was the only one going crazy.

“Madam, on what kinds of occasions does he seem different to you? Are there certain places or times, or even situations when he seems that way?” Carla asked.

Madam Florence placed a finger on her chin and thought for a moment.

“Let me see... When we are at parties or out socializing, I believe that he is the same as before. It does not feel odd to me when he is escorting or dancing with me.”

“Then what about when you are at home?”

At Carla’s suggestive question, the madam suddenly turned pale.

“Now that you mention it, there are moments at home when my husband seems to avoid touching me. Or he seems overly sweet, but at other times, he does not even look at me...”

“I see. So you’re saying that his behavior seems inconsistent.”

“It’s this house. This house must be causing all this...!”

Madam Florence, now white as a sheet, hugged herself and rubbed her arms. A tear fell down her cheek, as though to indicate that she was no longer able to stand being in her own home. She seemed, in short, no longer able to take any more mental or emotional damage.

When Carla cast a furtive glance at Thane, she saw that there was now a hint of pity mixed in with his usual sour expression.

“In that case, let’s first get you away from here. Since we’re running out of time, Thane—I need you to turn around for a minute,” Carla declared.

“Why is that?” he asked.

“Because there’s no screen in this drawing room. Or does Sir Knight really want to watch a lady change her clothes?”

“Huh? H-Hey!”

No sooner had she asked her suggestive question than Carla whisked off her hat and began to undress. Thane, startled and also struck by mild fear, turned his back toward her with surprising speed.

“Nettie, can I ask you to help the madam?” Carla asked.

“Sure thing. All righty then, let’s have you take off your clothes as well.”

“Um, lady witches?”

“People will grow suspicious if our ‘negotiations’ take too long. Let’s continue our discussion as we change.”

Carla and Nettie smiled brightly at Madam Florence, who also looked at the two witches, bewildered.

“Well then, madam! It’s time to switch places!”

6. The Residence of the Viscount of Marsden

That day, Madam Florence purchased a dresser from the female merchants who visited the residence of the Viscount of Marsden.

Almost at the same time as the arrival of the merchants, a knight of the Royal Guard also visited the mansion to ask additional questions about the robbery case from the previous evening. Madam Florence, who had been feeling ill of late, must have been exhausted by having to receive multiple visitors. She left more than half of the dinner that she had asked them to bring up to her room and went to bed soon after.

Just as her husband, Nigel, was about to check in on his sleeping wife, her father-in-law—the Viscount of Marsden—also returned from his assembly meeting.

The viscount's loud voice as he complained about Florence not coming to greet him echoed up to the second floor. Carla felt mildly disgusted by it.

Wow, he's even more intimidating than I'd expected. Having to go through this when you're not feeling well must be rough...

Nigel had rushed down to the entrance hall to try and assuage his father but to no avail.

Carla did not delight in commenting on how others ran their households. She could not, however, stand the idea of having someone abuse his powers at home just because he held a high position within the House of Peers.

Once the loud nagging of the viscount grew faint, Carla heard a set of tired-sounding footsteps ascend the stairs and enter the room next to the one she was in. Just as Florence had predicted, it seemed that Nigel was going to sleep in his own room tonight as well. He must have grown tired after dealing with his father. It seemed like he was not going to come to the couple's bedroom.

It must be about time.

Night had fallen long ago. After biding her time, Carla slipped out of bed and faced the mirror that sat on a chest of drawers. She then touched one of the magic stones embedded in its frame and let her magical power flow into it from the tip of her finger.

“As always, Nettie’s handiwork is amazing,” she murmured.

Carla felt no resistance from the mirror as was common in other, less sophisticated magical tools. Instead, her power passed smoothly into the magical stone.

Once enough power had collected in the magical stone, the mirror’s surface—which had been reflecting the dimly lit room—momentarily swayed. In the next moment, a different, more brightly lit room appeared in it. When Carla peered into the mirror, she saw reflected an excited Nettie and a still nervous—though considerably less pale than before—Madam Florence.

With the magic now fully activated, Carla on “this” side and Nettie on “that” side beamed. As they began to speak to each other, they returned to their senses and both brought their index fingers up to their lips.

Carla heard soft whispers coming from the other side of the mirror.

“Carla, can you see us? Can you hear us okay?” Nettie asked.

“Yeah, it works great, Nettie! So, uh, the viscount came home a little while ago. Sir Nigel just got settled in in his room next door, I think.”

When Carla, too, whispered her response, Nettie raised her arms to signal a large “O” above her head, to indicate that everything was in outstanding order.

“It completely seems as though I am there in my room... Lady Witch, I feel very strange seeing you like this.”

“Even the servants haven’t caught on to anything, so you have nothing to worry about,” Carla reassured her.

“Oh my, I feel as though even I would mistake you for me.”

Carla smiled and said, “Now we’ll just leave these two mirrors connected. If anything comes up, please let me know.”

“Yes, I shall. Thank you so much.”

Carla and Nettie nodded at each other as well. When Carla next touched the magical stone, the mirror rippled again like the surface of water and returned to reflecting the room that Carla was currently in. The only thing that was different about the mirror was that the magic stones in the four corners of its frame now glowed, giving off a dull light.

In this state, the magical tool seemed nothing more than a simple mirror at a glance—yet what it reflected would also be displayed on the other mirror located in Nettie's house. Nettie had explained to Carla how the mechanism worked, but Carla had not understood a single word she said.

"I guess now we just wait to see how the husband acts," Carla muttered to herself.

Next to the dresser was a wedding photograph of the married couple. Although Carla had not yet seen the husband, the photo showed him as a man with a gentle face.

He does seem like a nice guy.

His hair, which appeared fine and soft, was golden while his eyes were gray. He was twenty-three years old—a year difference in age from his wife. He enjoyed reading books and playing tennis. Setting aside his recent strange behavior, he was an incredibly ordinary person.

He seemed to be an honest and rather mundane man who had absolutely no enemies and was not complicit in any kind of crime. Although one could say that he was unable to stand up to his own father, judging from the father-in-law's yelling from earlier, the husband seemed to be displaying obedience in order to minimize the harm of his father's behavior and protect his wife from it.

That's probably why the madam was feeling extra anxious. Anyway, the mirror is all prepped. Next...oh, I have to wear the pendant.

Carla quietly opened the large window that faced the veranda. She then set a lamp down at her feet.

As she was fastening the pendant with the white magic stone for recording purposes around her neck, she felt a presence at the window. When she turned around, she saw Thane wearing his navy knight's uniform, which was nearly

invisible in the dark of the night.

“Whoa, that was quick. This is the second floor. Could it be that you’re used to doing home invasions?”

“Get out. You’re the one that’s making me act like a thief.”

The two immediately began their customary back-and-forth—though in very soft whispers.

“Oh, come on—think of it as part of patrolling the mansion. You’ve just gone from the garden to indoors.”

“That’s what some would call a quibble.”

“But I speak no lie.”

Thane had left the mansion once in the evening, but using the regular patrolling that he had promised as an excuse, he had reentered the grounds of the viscount’s mansion.

Even as he carried out his surveillance of the area, he had been on standby in a spot from which he could see this room, waiting for the signal of Carla’s lamp.

“And besides, don’t you think that in this situation, you’re less a thief and more an adulterous lover?” Carla asked, teasingly.

“What?! Why, y—mg!”

It was just the two of them, in a bedroom at midnight, with Florence—though it was really Carla—wearing nothing but nightwear made of light fabric. Thane only realized when Carla mentioned it: it looked like the scene of an affair, no matter how anyone looked at it.

As he nearly let out a yell, a hand moved quickly to cover his mouth.

“Shhh... Do you want me to use my magic to shut you up?”

“J-Just put something on!” he begged.

“It would be strange for a sleeping person to be wearing a jacket,” Carla said.

“L-Lady Witch, there is a gown in the chest over there, in the second drawer! Please do put it on!”

“Oh, madam. In that case, I’ll go ahead and borrow that. Yeah, this communication method is really excellent.”

Thane, too, opened his eyes wide in surprise when he heard the voice of Madam Florence coming from the pendant.

“Oh, this? Nettie modified it for me,” Carla said, noticing Thane’s expression.

“We made it so that it’s possible to do voice chat while recording audio. It’s pretty cool, right? Expect nothing less from the great Miss Nettie!”

“Aha ha, we can hear your voice just fine too, Nettie,” Carla responded.

“This is unbelievable...” mumbled Thane.

There was a team within the sorcerers’ order at the palace that specialized in magical tools. Its members were currently working on making a smaller version of an audio recording device, which at present was so large that it was literally an armful.

Seeing that the craft witch was leaps and bounds ahead of that magical tool production team—which boasted that it was the cutting edge leader in the field within the kingdom—Thane could not help but press his palm to his forehead.

Even if the tool was made specifically for use by witches, it was clear even to an outsider that its technical capabilities were on a level of its own. If it could in fact be used by anyone, then it was difficult to imagine just how much a thing like that would cost.

And the challenge that such an impressive tool was being used for...was to reveal the truth behind the conversations between a husband and a father-in-law. What an anticlimactic scene indeed. Thane furrowed his brows even further at the thought of it.

“I feel like we’re using a cannon to get rid of a mouse...” he whispered to himself.

“Thane, do you have a headache or something?”

“It’s nothing. Anyway, Carla—did you find any poison in the dinner that was served?”

Thane seemed finally able to look her way after she had thrown on the gown

from the chest of drawers. Carla responded softly, saying, “Oh, that. Yeah, it was in there.”

“Was it the alcohol after all? Were you all right?”

“I spit it out without drinking, so I’m fine. Oh, but I did keep what was left in the glass as evidence,” she said. “But you know—it’s kind of strange.”

“Strange?”

Carla had tried a little bit of every dish that was served for dinner. She had found that it was an entirely ordinary meal. The only thing that contained poison was the mead.

The poison left a bitter taste that was not a part of the wine’s original flavor. Once it was mixed in with the alcohol, however, it would not be detectable without prior knowledge. The amount of poison used must have been very little.

Carla’s expression, however, remained clouded.

She gripped the pendant tightly so that Nettie and Madam Florence could not hear her voice. She then made Thane lean in slightly and brought her mouth closer to his ear.

“It seemed like a sleep medication, but it wasn’t anything I recognized.”

“It’s not like you know every single medicine out there, Carla.”

“That’s true too, but...”

When she had passed her magical power through the mead in order to perform a simple analysis, she had found that the main effects of the medicine were sedation and hypnosis.

An ingredient that gave off a slight reaction had caught Carla’s attention, however. Her gut instinct as an apothecary told her that this medicine was dangerous.

“The madam had said that she’d only taken small sips. I’m really glad that that was the case.”

“Is it a dangerous drug?”

“Once I’ve done a full analysis, I’ll let you kn—”

Carla closed her mouth when she heard a hollow sound, as though something had come loose. The noise was coming from the husband’s room next door.

Pricking their ears, the two crept silently over to the door that connected the two rooms. Within moments, they heard a muffled conversation between two individuals. Although they were trying to keep their voices down, it sounded as though one of them was refusing while the other was pleading.

—but we can’t continue any longer—

—don’t say that, please—

Yup, I can’t tell who’s who! thought Carla.

Come to think of it, Carla had never heard the voices of the husband or the father-in-law clearly. The two had been quarreling in the hallway earlier, but they had been far away and behind a closed door. Plus, voices for yelling and voices for conversation were two different things. Carla beckoned to Thane with her hand to come closer.

“Which is which?” she asked.

“Hah.”

When Carla asked Thane honestly because she did not know, he became exasperated. His sigh, unnecessarily deep, felt slightly irritating to her.

“What do you want me to do? I can’t tell,” Carla protested.

“The viscount seemed to have the habit of overemphasizing his consonants,” he told her after listening for a moment. “So it sounds like the one pleading is the viscount, and the one refusing is the son, Nigel... No, that’s not right.”

“It’s not?”

“It’s not the viscount. It’s someone else.”

As Thane made his declaration with a sullen expression, Carla found herself surprised.

“You mean it’s not an argument between father and son?”

“One of them is most certainly Nigel Marsden. But the other—his voice is

similar, but he's not the viscount."

"I see... You're sure of that?" Carla asked, narrowing her eyes as though to confirm his conclusion.

"Yes."

"Okay, I trust you."

"Hey, what—?"

"You come in from the hallway, all right?"

As soon as she had spoken, Carla reached for the doorknob and—before Thane could stop her—opened the connecting door wide with a loud bang.

"—so we can't be drugging Florence anymore!"

"Look, I just need you to help me—"

"Good evening, dear. There is something I must speak with... Wait, huh?"

The two men, who had been arguing with each other across a desk, turned in surprise as the door to the bedroom suddenly opened.

Unless she imagined it, Carla also heard through the pendant the sound of someone drawing her breath.

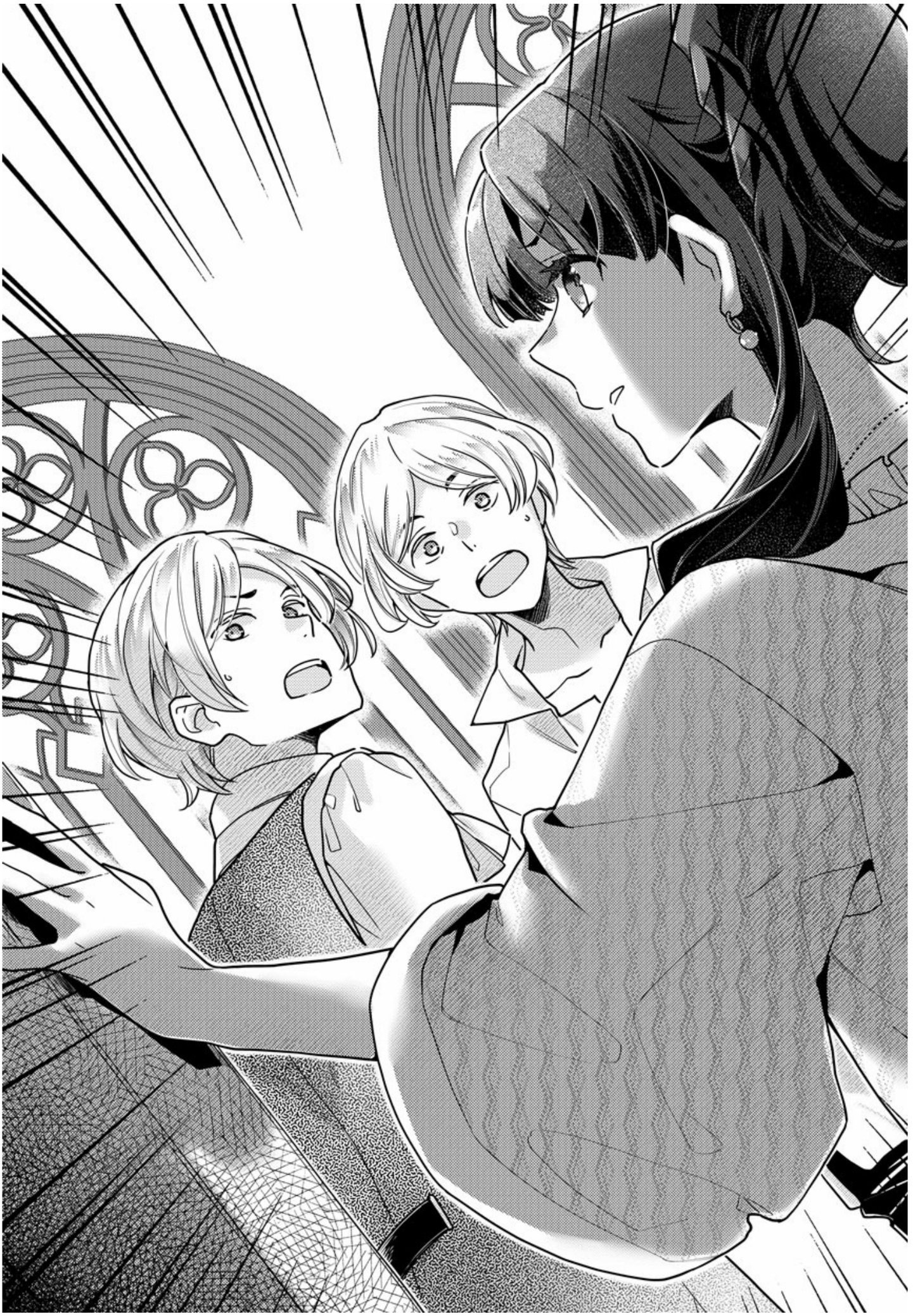
Wh-Why...are there two of them?

Carla, in the form of Florence, gulped down her words as her blue eyes opened wide in shock.

The same golden hair and gray eyes as in the photograph, but one man was wearing a fashionable blouse and vest, while the other wore a more relaxed shirt. Two men with *the exact same face* were standing there, looking at her in shock.

"...Um..."

An awkward silence fell over the three of them.



The first to move was Carla in the guise of Florence, as the two men remained

unable to process the situation. She lifted her finger and pointed at the two men one at a time and said, “Twins?”

The two men finally came to their senses. As the one in the vest stumbled toward her, his face now pale, the man in the rough shirt dejectedly pressed his palm to his forehead and hung his head.

“F-Florence! Please, let me explain!”

“Darn it, we’ve been discovered...”

“Wait, you two are actually twins? Huh?” Carla exclaimed.

Wait a minute. This is all news to me, madam!

The madam seemed to have read Carla’s mind. From the pendant she heard Florence mutter softly, “I had no idea either...”

Wait, if that’s the case...

“I...thought that you had been acting strangely lately, but it can’t possibly be that you two were switching places... I mean, there’s no way such a thing would happen in real life—”

The shoulders of both men twitched violently upon hearing Carla’s muttering. She seemed to have hit the nail on the head.

“So such a thing *did* happen in real life.”

If that were the case, then Florence’s explanation that “he has the same face, but sometimes he looks like a different person” made perfect sense.

Because he was, in fact, a different person.

With the pieces now falling oddly into place, Carla absentmindedly looked down at the man kneeling before her, clinging to her nightwear.

“Florence, I really am so sorry! I beg you, though—please don’t tell Father!”

“No, I mean, I wouldn’t tell him, but... Um, can you introduce us, perhaps? I’m a bit confused at the moment.”

“Th-This is my younger brother, Angus. We’re twins.”

“You two look exactly alike, I’m sure that must be true. But...I really am

surprised," Carla continued.

"Nigel, is she all right? Don't you think you should have her sit down?"

"Oh, y-you're right!"

Just as the younger brother—who seemed to have calmed down somewhat—expressed consideration for Florence, there now came a knock at the door to the hallway. The two men nearly jumped in surprise.

"Yes, do come in," Carla said, responding to the knock.

"Florence? Why are you answering?! Wait—what if it's Father...?!" let out a flustered Nigel.

"Whoa, this can't be good!" shouted Angus.

Before the younger brother could crouch down and hide behind the sofa in a panic, the heavy door opened.

In came Thane, who had walked out to the hallway from the bedroom in order to enter the husband's private room from the hallway, pretending to have just come in from the garden.

Nigel sighed in relief upon seeing a knight of the Royal Guard rather than his own father, the viscount. In the next moment, however, he came to his senses and returned to panic mode.

"Please excuse my visit so late in the evening. I came to report on today's patrol," Thane announced.

"Oh, uh, thank you for your hard work! Ah, F-Florence, I don't think that attire is..."

Nigel swung around to look behind him, flustered now at the sight of his own wife wearing only her nightwear.

"Oh, I don't mind. Sir Knight is here on business. Of course he has no questionable motives. Besides, I'm even wearing a dressing gown."

"Yes, but *I* don't like it... Jeez!"

Even as he spoke, the husband was already forcing Carla to wear his jacket, which had been draped over the back of a chair. Furthermore, Nigel stood in

such a position as to block his wife from Thane's view. No matter how one looked at it, he was acting like a man who was terribly in love with his wife.

Hmmm?

"Madam, look at this. You're so loved," whispered Carla into the pendant.

"B-But...I mean, why...?"

A soft, confused voice came from the pendant. It seemed that behind Florence, Nettie was making a big fuss about the discovery. For the moment, Carla sympathized a bit with Madam Florence.

Carla, however, pulled on the husband's sleeve as he stood before her as if to protect her. Nigel spun around and turned to his wife. With Florence's face, Carla smiled and, looking intently at both Nigel and his brother, said, "This is perfect. You and you—you'll of course tell us *everything*, and honestly, won't you? Let's have Sir Knight serve as our witness."

As Carla declared this with no room for the men to argue, the twins, having turned blue with fear, nodded their heads in unison.

§

Nigel and Angus were born as twin brothers into the family of the Viscount of Marsden.

They were identical, and yet their personalities were exact opposites. While the older brother, Nigel, was quiet and shy, Angus was wild and free-spirited.

Angus and his father, the viscount—who firmly believed that children should be obedient—fell into conflict at every turn. When the twins' mother, the viscountess, was with them, the family managed to maintain a modicum of peace. When she left after her divorce, however, the distance between father and son grew.

It was seven years ago when the relationship between Angus and his father finally fell apart under the strain of many years.

Having been forced to enroll at the academy, Angus had refused to attend

classes at all. He declared that he would absolutely not walk the path that his father had laid out for him. As a result, the viscount severed all ties with his younger son and banished him from the family.

“If my father hadn’t said it first, I would have slapped him with a letter declaring my wish to cut ties with him instead. So that wasn’t bad in itself. But I caused a lot of problems for my older brother.”

“That’s not true at all. You’d spent so many years thinking and preparing for that. Plus you wouldn’t have been happy even if you stayed in this house. Since I wasn’t able to stop Father, all I could do was see you off...”

When they sat next to each other, the two brothers truly were identical in looks as well as voice.

At first, Angus had gone to live with his mother, and the two brothers had remained in contact with each other in secret.

“Father deleted all traces of Angus from our lives and even forbade us to mention his name. He didn’t even include it in the document that we exchanged when you and I were married, Florence...though I myself told your father directly. Your father already knew of my father’s temperament, so he just smiled and forgave me for it.”

“I see...but, I do think it was quite regrettable that you did not tell *me* anything about it.”

“I didn’t know what my father would do if you accidentally mentioned Angus’s name in front of him. I truly apologize for that though.”

Well, I guess I can believe that.

Angus eventually met a troupe of traveling entertainers who came to the territory and left to go on tour with them.

“I’m the type who can’t stay in one place for terribly long. Plus my work as an actor was so much fun. I felt like I’d found my calling.”

He had kept to himself the fact that he was from the family of a viscount. Having avoided the education meant for nobles, Angus did not know much about manners and etiquette either.

Even so, it seemed that the noble air about him that came from his upbringing had combined well with his distinctly wild personality. Taking the stage name of Andy Blood, he became a popular actor in no time.

He must have truly enjoyed his life. When he spoke of the theater, Angus's eyes sparkled. Nigel, sitting next to him, also looked as though he could not be more proud of his younger brother.

"Our troupe is called the Farlan Theater Company, and we're starting to get a lot of recognition. We even got invited to perform at a theater in the royal capital."

"Oh, how marvelous," Carla said with sincerity.

"Isn't it? We all celebrated with a toast when we heard the news."

The theater in the capital was located in the city center. Despite its relatively small size, it was famous for the fact that all of the productions that it staged went on to become quite popular. It was a theater of enough renown that even Carla, who had little interest in trends or the entertainment industry, knew about it. Performances at that theater were used as a stepping stone for many actors to earn a permanent spot on the bill at the royal theater. Productions there also had a higher chance of premiering in other countries as well.

In fact, the troupe Lilith had talked about may have been performing at this very theater as well.

"Once we entered the royal capital as part of our tour, I got in touch with Nigel. But then—"

"Then?" Carla asked.

This was supposed to be a celebratory occasion, yet Angus's voice suddenly grew somber.

"He told me that our father doesn't have much longer to live."

"What?" Carla blurted out in shock.

"I'm sorry, Florence. I've kept it from you as well, but it's the truth. Doctor Vector told us... Father had been acting particularly unreasonably of late, even toward you. It's because he learned of his illness, and he's quite shaken about

it. I suppose even he doesn't know what to do," explained Nigel.

"Is that right..."

Fortunately there were no strong subjective symptoms. The doctor and Nigel had thus discussed whether to share with the viscount the name of the illness as well as how much longer he might have to live.

When the viscount suspected that something was amiss, however, the doctor had explained the situation to him with trepidation. It was then that the viscount had screamed at the physician and told him to never step foot in his mansion again.

His increasingly tyrannical ways must have manifested against the backdrop of his attachment to what little he had left of his life, as well as his anxieties about the near future.

Though I still don't like it when people take out their negative emotions on others!

One could not possibly be allowed to hurt others just because one was in pain. Yet Carla also understood that weakness often led people to act that way, and this was even more so if one was left with little peace of mind, having to deal with the pain and suffering that came with being ill.

Carla, right now, was transformed into Florence; she was not her usual apothecary self. She remained silent, listening without sharing her opinions. Thane, too, must not have expected the conversation to take such a turn. Although his expression appeared to be the same as usual, there was an overlay of awkwardness to it.

Resuming the story, Angus continued, "I still dislike my father, but I felt like I should see him one more time... The leader of our company also started his career after having had a huge fight with his parents. But before he was able to see them again, they passed away. He told me that he really regretted not having gone to see them while they were still alive."

"I think I understand what you mean," Carla said in response.

"But knowing him, if I just showed up all of a sudden, he'd probably just become furious and then die right there on the spot. If I made him die sooner

than necessary, he'd hold a grudge against me forever. And I really wouldn't be able to take that."

"Please allow me not to comment on that," Carla muttered. Thane looked even more awkward. Nigel was nodding deeply.

How would he be able to see his father in peace? Was it all right to show his face to his father in the first place? The brothers had apparently been discussing such questions for days.

"I have rehearsals during the day, so I'd sneak in at night. This mansion has old, hidden passageways, so I used those to come and go. It felt so nostalgic to go through them—I felt like I'd gone back to my childhood," explained Angus.

"I couldn't tell you, because I didn't want to get you involved," Nigel said to Carla. "I'm so sorry to have made you anxious, Florence."

Nigel had even snuck into his father's private room in order to find some key to the possible conciliation between his father and his younger brother. Yet because he had forgotten to return an item that he had moved, there arose suspicions that a thief had entered the mansion—thus leading to the predicament of having to report the "incident" to the police. It became such a large issue that not only the police but also the knights of the Royal Guard had come. Nigel shrank in on himself as he recalled how he felt like he would nearly have a heart attack because of it.

Hearing this, Thane, too, donned an expression of surprise.

"That's why, no matter how much you investigate, you won't be able to find either the thief or the item that was stolen," Nigel confessed.

"I see..." mumbled Thane in response.

There were occasions when Angus had traded places with Nigel in order to attempt to interact with his father during the daytime. Given the fact that the viscount was often away from the house, however, the timing never seemed to match up.

Nigel's wife, Florence, unsurprisingly detected that something was amiss and became suspicious of her husband. There were many servants to beware of as well. With the increasing threat of having their plans discovered, Nigel had told

his brother to put a stop to the whole charade.

Oh, so that's what it was!

"Florence almost discovered us having our conversations late at night... Since I couldn't have her learning about Angus, I resorted to using sleep medication even though I felt terrible about it. But then she grew increasingly ill, and I began to get scared. So I was just telling Angus that we needed to stop all of this."

"I see... But even if you have a reason for it, you absolutely cannot have someone take medicine without getting their consent," said Carla resolutely, being neither willing nor able to give in on this point. The two brothers nodded solemnly.

"By the way—is that medicine really just sleep medication?" she asked.

"Of course. It's one that's made by a skilled, traveling apothecary. It wears off by the next day, and there are no side effects, so we use it in our troupe as well. I felt bad making my brother lose sleep every night, so I gave it to him, thinking that it would be great if he were able to get some sleep during the day."

Angus shared that, because their daily schedules were often chaotic given travel and performances, the actors in the company often used sleep medication. They were looking for one that strained the body as little as possible, so they ended up trying many different kinds.

"But for the mad—for me, it did have negative effects," Carla declared.

"Maybe it was a poor choice for you, then. If this medicine is the cause of your ill health, then I sincerely apologize," said Angus.

"No, it probably isn't the only cause," Carla replied.

"Huh?"

"Oh, no, it's nothing. Regardless, I don't think you should take this medicine anymore either. Please tell your friends in the company to stop taking it as well."

"I understand. I won't take it anymore then."

To her surprise, Angus obediently listened to Carla's—his sister-in-law

Florence's—advice. He must be an honest person at heart. She was glad that she was able to have him promise not to use the medicine anymore. However, she wanted to go one step further: to ascertain its source. Carla made furtive eye contact with Thane and then continued.

"Did you buy it directly from the traveling apothecary?"

"No, a peddler that I recently met brought it to me. Does it worry you by chance?"

It was not Carla who reacted to Angus's response but rather Thane.

"There has been an uptick in criminal acts by those buying and selling medicinal products without a permit. We are thus ramping up our surveillance. I would like to confirm some of the facts with you, if possible."

"Seriously? Then of course. I may not be in a staid occupation, but I believe in never performing bad deeds. If there are any connections to illegal acts, please tell me. I'll also let my colleagues know not to get involved ever again."

Thane asked Angus about the characteristics of the seller and noted them in his pocket book. This should help take care of the issue of the drug.

The concern that remained was how to arrange the reunion between the viscount and his younger son. The two brothers in the room had already returned to discussing the topic.

Hmm? Whatever happened to the investigation that I took on, that was supposed to lead to a divorce...? But wait, the madam must have heard the whole exchange, so maybe this is the optimal solution for now?

The man that the husband was meeting with was not his father but rather his younger twin brother. The reasons for his mysterious behavior, as well as the cause of the fuss regarding the supposed theft, had become clear. Although the wife had been getting drugged, the origins of the drug had now also been found. She had been repeatedly apologized to as well.

Last but not least, the husband seemed to be quite in love with Florence. If she asked for a divorce, he might become very, very depressed.

I guess the rest is up to her...

There had been no sound from the pendant for quite some time.

Even for Carla, who was a complete outsider, much of this information was completely unexpected. For Florence, who was the concerned party, the situation must have been perplexing at best, disturbing at worst. Either way, there seemed to be little that Carla could do at this point.

Based on her previous experiences, she could not say that she did not expect somewhat grave results for her work as a divorce agent.

A bad feeling settled quietly in the pit of her stomach.

It can't possibly be...that even a case requested by a fellow witch would end in failure. I absolutely refuse such an outcome, from the bottom of my heart!

Even while Carla contemplated the results of her mission, the brothers seemed unable to make up their minds. Perhaps because they now felt relief at no longer having to hide anything, they were engaged in a full-on debate about what to do and what not to do. As she was gazing at them, though, an idea suddenly came to Carla's mind.

Why not? It'll let me get out of here at the least.

Raising her hand to interrupt the argument that seemed to be going nowhere, Carla said, "So basically, the goal is to have my proud and authoritarian father-in-law acknowledge Sir Angus's work as an actor—is that correct?"

"Yes, if we could do that, that would truly save us! Do you have an idea perhaps, Florence?"

"I may not, but I believe that a friend of mine may be able to help. Would it be all right for me to go and consult with them?"

Smiling brightly, Carla had Angus return to his lodging, then left the mansion in a group of three, with the husband Nigel and the knight Thane.

The group headed to Nettie's store in a carriage.

As it was midnight, even the main street of the royal capital was deserted. Stopping the carriage under a street lamp by the store, Carla got out along with Thane, who was performing the role of her escort.

Nigel, however, leaned out of the carriage door and refused to let go of his wife's hand. Although Carla had told him to wait at the mansion, he had insisted on coming along. Now he was clearly sulking.

"Florence... I can't help but be worried," he said.

"Oh, dear. But I've told you so many times—the other person doesn't feel comfortable around men, so I have to go in by myself. You understand, don't you?"

"But it's so late at night," he insisted.

"We've returned from soirees even later than this. It'll be just fine. I'm only asking her to get in touch with someone."

"But..."

"I'm even having a knight of the Royal Guard accompany me inside."

I feel like I'm talking to a kid that's being left behind by his parents...

Carla slipped her hand out of Nigel's and gently ruffled his hair. Although his golden hair appeared soft, it turned out to be more coarse than she had expected.

"Please be good and wait here for a little while," she said to him.

"All right... I will, Florence."

Nigel finally closed the carriage door, though only after reiterating that she must absolutely come back. The husband's piercing gaze continued to stab Thane's back as the knight left the carriage with the woman that Nigel believed to be his wife.

"It doesn't seem like he'll divorce her," mumbled Thane.

"Oh, shut up... Hmm? Thane, why are you mad? Are you getting sleepy?"

“Huh? Who, me?”

“Oh jeez, you’re supposed to be a grown adult, and you can’t even recognize your own mood?”

Carla shrugged at Thane, who was not even bothering to hide his annoyance. She then reached up and casually stroked Thane’s hair.

Thane opened his eyes wide, surprised by the feel of Carla’s hand on him. Then a full moment later, he realized what had happened and staggered backward.

She could not see clearly because of the dark, but his face—which always had a look of displeasure when he was around Carla—now had a look of panic instead.

“H-Hey! What do you think you’re doing?!” Thane stammered.

“When I touched the husband’s hair earlier, it felt pretty coarse. I just wondered if all men’s hair is like that,” Carla replied.

“Hah?!”

“Plus, I just thought that maybe you wanted to be petted,” she said, smiling. This time, she clearly felt his sense of agitation.

“Y-You, wha—?”

“Stop calling me ‘you,’” Carla simply said, cutting him off.

Well, I feel slightly better! I can’t believe he would say something like, ‘It doesn’t seem like he’ll divorce her.’ Seriously!

From under her hooded coat, Carla pulled out the magical tool shaped like a pendant. Speaking into it, she asked, “Nettie, can you hear me?”

“Yup. Sounds like you all have something interesting going on there,” came Nettie’s response.

“We’re not trying to entertain you, you know,” said Carla, grimacing. Then, following Nettie’s instructions, she and Thane walked around to the back of the store.

Just as they stood before the back entrance, the door unlocked.

“Lady Witch!”

Florence greeted them when they opened the door as though she had been waiting impatiently for them. Carla stepped inside and, without even bothering to sit down, took off her coat and put it around Florence’s shoulders. They were done switching places; Carla undid her transformation magic and returned to her regular self.

It truly was an incredible transformation. Even though it was her second time seeing it, Florence nonetheless watched with wide eyes, genuinely mesmerized.

“Madam, were you able to listen in on our conversation back at the mansion?” Carla asked.

“Y-Yes, I was also able to see everything very clearly,” Florence replied. “Um, Lady Witch, I...”

Even as she hesitated to articulate her thoughts, Florence’s gaunt face blushed a healthy pink.

Sensing the words that might come next, Carla smiled and interrupted Florence, saying, “You must have a lot on your mind, given all the unexpected truths you heard tonight. There’s no need to rush—please take your time to think everything over.”

After a long, fruitful pause, Florence replied, “Yes—I shall do that.”

“I believe the fortune Angie told was, ‘an unseen truth becomes clear through the past.’ It turned out just as she said,” remarked Carla.

As the face of the fortune-telling witch she trusted so much came to her mind, Florence brought her hands to her heart. The madam then took Carla’s hands and, with tears in her eyes, looked at Carla and Nettie alternately and said, “Yes, you are right... Thank you so much, both of you.”

Behind Florence sat a small dresser identical to the one in Florence’s bedroom as well as an empty soup bowl. Nettie must have prepared a late-night snack for Florence.

I hope she’s gotten some of her appetite back, Carla thought, looking at Florence once again.

Concentrating her magical power in her eyes, Carla scanned Florence from the top of her head down to her toes—then returned her gaze to the middle of her body and stopped there.

Okay, good. There doesn't seem to be any residual effect of the drug.

As they gripped her own, Carla could feel that Florence's hands were still warm. The fever probably would not go away for quite some time.

As Carla smiled warmly, Thane interrupted her, saying, "And, Carla? You talked as though you had an idea of some sort. What are you planning to do?"

"Oh, right. Thane, I have a favor to ask you," Carla said.

"Me?" he said questioningly.

"Can you contact Prince Abel and Princess Patricia?" Carla asked.

"Th-The Prince?!" cried Florence.

"I see," mumbled Thane after a slight pause.

In contrast to Thane, who appeared as though he had an inkling of what Carla had in mind, Florence seemed flabbergasted by the mention of the crown prince.

Carla winked at her, bringing her index finger up to her lips to indicate the secret she was about to share.

"It's a cheat that I can use once, and only once. Now, let's take down this stubborn old man!"

The three others listened intently as Carla, grinning widely, explained her straightforward plan.

§

In front of the viscount's family carriage, which had been stopped by the side of the road, Nigel was pacing back and forth as he waited for Florence. When he saw his wife's white coat out of the corner of his eye, he ran toward her, unable to wait any longer.

“Florence!” he exclaimed.

“Oh, dear. You could’ve waited inside the carriage,” Florence said.

“How can you expect me to take it so easy under these circumstances?”

“O-Oh, is that so...?”

Florence blushed through her surprise, as Nigel told her he had been so worried that he could barely stand still. He hugged her shoulders and drew her close to him as if to confirm that she was safe.

As the husband and wife looked into each other’s eyes and were about to retreat into their own world, Thane cleared his throat very loudly.

“Please excuse me. I shall be taking my leave,” said the knight.

“A-Ah, yes. Thank you for your work,” replied Nigel.

“I cannot thank you enough, Sir Knight,” said Florence.

“Not at all. A pleasant evening to the two of you.”

The handsome but sullen-looking knight left, his expression exactly as it had been throughout the exchange. Nigel then led Florence into the carriage.

Once the carriage took off, Florence was perplexed by her husband, who sat next to her rather than across from her as he usually did.

Nigel placed his hand apologetically on her cheek, which Florence worried had lost its dewiness after nights of inadequate sleep.

“Um, dear?” she asked, hesitatingly.

“I’m so sorry. I wanted to tell you everything, honestly, but I’d kept it a secret for so long that I didn’t have any courage...and because of that, I caused you unnecessary concern,” Nigel told her.

“Oh...” Florence let out.

“About my father too. I should have been the one to stop his abuse, but once I learned that he didn’t have much longer with us, I couldn’t bring myself to be stern with him.”

“No, that can’t be helped.”

“But it’s undeniable that I neglected you as my wife. That’s not something that can be forgiven.”

He apologized to her with sincerity inside the swaying carriage.

Florence’s face no longer reflected the sorrow that had plagued her before. After a moment, she said to him, “We can talk about all these things later. More importantly, about the matter with Sir Angus and my father-in-law...”

“Th-That’s right. So, um, were you able to get in touch with that helpful individual you mentioned?”

“Not yet. But I believe everything will be fine. I must ask—would it be possible to request a few hours of your father’s time at some point in the near future?”

“By all means.”

“Oh my. That’s very reassuring.”

Florence told her husband that she could not yet tell him the details of the plan because she was still waiting to hear the response from the other party—yet throughout the conversation, her husband refused to let go of her hand.

Has he always been like this? The same question that had plagued her for days crossed her mind, though with a different meaning. What Florence felt now was not cold suspicion but rather a warm love.

I must thank Lady Ange, who brought me to the Lady Apothecary Witch and the Lady Craft Witch.

“Um, dear,” Florence began.

“What is it, Florence?”

Feeling a bit overwhelmed by her husband, who leaned even closer to her as though to not miss a single word she said, Florence blushed, not entirely displeased, and stammered, “Um...so. I am not yet certain of this, but...”

You see, madam. This is my best guess, but—

Florence had been in mild shock while hearing about the plans to reunite father and son. Yet since hearing the words Carla had whispered to her as they parted, Florence’s heart had not stopped beating loudly.

There was sleep medication in the mead, but I have a feeling that, after the first day, you didn't take enough for it to affect you, Carla had said. *So rather than being a side effect of the sleep medication, I have a feeling that the symptoms, including the malaise that you've been feeling, may be...*

If that's the reason, Florence thought, *then the fever I've had and the heaviness of body I've felt are because...*

Florence placed her hand—the one that Nigel was not holding—gently on her lower abdomen.

There was no confirmation yet. The witch had avoided making any definitive statements, telling Florence to speak with a doctor.

Florence, however, felt that the witch spoke the truth.

I wonder when Lady Witch realized it.

Probably from the very beginning. The witch had given her advice about her diet even during the first meeting.

Florence raised her head, which she had kept lowered for quite some time. When she saw herself reflected in her husband's gray eyes—narrowed slightly now out of concern—she saw that she was smiling for the first time in a long while.

"It may be...that we have a baby on the way."

It was only on the first night of feeling ill that she had actually drunk the mead containing the medication. On subsequent nights, she had only taken the smallest of sips. Carla had shared with her that her poor health may not have been the result of the medication but rather of morning sickness combined with the psychological effects of having experienced the medication's effects that first day.

The witch had said that a person's heart was strong but also sensitive—as was the body that housed it.

Nigel appeared to have heard, but not understood, what he was told. Several seconds later, however, he opened his eyes so widely in shock that his eyeballs almost seemed to fall out of their sockets. He opened his mouth to respond, but

he could not articulate any words.

“That’s why,” Florence continued, “even if my father-in-law were to be upset, I would like you to call Doctor Vector... Um, dear?”

It was before sunrise. When it arrived at the viscount’s mansion, Nigel stepped out from the carriage carrying his wife in his arms.

With smiles on their tear-stained faces, he said to her, “Right away,” while she said to him, “We must at least wait for the sun to rise.” The servants tilted their heads in wonder at the way the couple returned, but they watched as husband and wife ascended the stairs to the second floor, their retreating figures brimming with happiness.

§

Hearing the sound of the Marsden family’s carriage grow faint, Thane returned the way he had come.

When he opened the back door of the craft witch’s magical tool shop, he saw both Carla and Nettie sitting at the table. They had started having a drinking party.

“Oh, Thane. Welcome back,” Carla said.

“Having a banquet at this time of night? I don’t know if I ought to be appalled or impressed,” commented Thane.

“Nettie’s the only one drinking. Care to join us, Thane?” Carla said.

“No thanks.”

“Well then.”

Carla sat with a half-filled bowl of soup in front of her. She appeared to be completely at ease, relaxing as though she were in her own home.



The room in which they sat, however, was filled with magical tools and

current works in progress. Although it was a common combination of kitchen and living room, it was one that was far from what would be found in any “normal home.”

Across from Carla sat the craft witch with one foot up on her chair and her leg bent at the knee. She was munching on a piece of cheese, holding a wine glass in one hand and resting her cheek on the other fist.

“But anyway, it was tough having dinner while pretending to be the madam,” Carla said with a sigh.

“Aha ha! It’s not as though you can fully enjoy a meal that you suspect is poisoned,” Nettie laughed.

“I guess it’s okay if it’s medicine or poison, but they’d be suspicious if the lady of the house who hasn’t had much appetite finished everything on her plate all of a sudden. I couldn’t decide what I should leave uneaten.”

“There’s no way it’s okay for you to consume poison,” said Thane.

“I’ve built up a pretty good tolerance for it, though. Plus I have antidotes and neutralizers and things,” she responded.

“That’s not what I’m saying.” Hearing yet another comment from Carla that seemed to not take her own safety seriously, Thane’s temple twitched.

Carla, on the other hand, let out a large yawn and put her spoon down.

“Carla, are you all done with your soup?” Nettie asked.

“Mmm... I’m getting sleepy.”

“I figured as much. You should stay over,” Nettie told her.

“Thanks, Nettie. I’ll do that. Good night then, Thane. I’ll see you later.”

“What? Hey...!”

Rather than responding to Thane, Carla simply waved goodbye to him and Nettie, then ascended the stairs without even a second glance.

Thane had not spoken with Carla yet about meeting with Ange, the foresight witch. As he seemed about to click his tongue, Nettie spoke, as though she knew what he was thinking.

“You don’t have to worry about the arrangement with Ange. We don’t know if those two will end up getting a divorce, but we’ve already taken care of the request that Ange made of us.”

“Can you trust her?” he asked with some hesitation.

“I mean, *you* don’t have to trust her, but the only thing you can do is wait. If that’s the case, isn’t it better for you to enjoy some peace of mind?”

Her somewhat irritating way of speaking seemed so expected from a witch. But she was not wrong about the fact that he had no other hand to play—as frustrating as that was.

“Carla’s really had a rough couple of days. Plus she used transformation magic. Do let her rest,” Nettie said to Thane.

“Though she was falling asleep just about anywhere, anytime,” Thane muttered.

Carla had told him that transformation magic consumed large quantities of her magical powers. When Thane commented that Carla slept whenever she could squeeze in a moment, however, Nettie raised her eyebrows in surprise.

“Anywhere, anytime?” she repeated.

“Yes.”

Come to think of it, this is the first time I’ve actually had a conversation with the craft witch, Thane thought to himself.

Thane knew almost nothing about Nettie, whom Carla often mentioned in their conversations. The only impression he had of the craft witch was that she was skilled at making magical tools, and that she was a senior witch that seemed to enjoy taking care of Carla.

Nettie’s age was about the only thing that Thane could take a stab at—but then again, she appeared similar in age to him, but also about the same age as Carla.

In other words, he really could not tell.

Realizing, however, that he was sitting down and having a conversation with a “witch”—something he had previously made every effort to avoid—Thane

found himself surprised.

“Where, for example?” Nettie asked him.

In response to Nettie, who seemed to care very much about Carla’s sleeping habits, Thane said, “I really do mean anywhere—in the stagecoach headed to Knockridge, or in a field once we got there. And she was sound asleep every time.”

Not only that, on the day of the incident at the academy, she slept at the knights’ brigade—no, even while he was carrying her.

Although at that time, she probably really had run out of magical powers, he thought.

Even if Carla were the type to not care much about where she slept, she truly did seem to be sleeping far too much in front of Thane.

“Hmm, sound asleep, huh...?”

As though her interest had been piqued, Nettie lifted her cheek off of her fist. She narrowed her eyes and grinned, as though to tell Thane that she knew something he did not. Throwing back her head, she polished off the wine that remained in her glass. Placing the glass back on the table with a slight clang, she reached for the bottle once more. Then as the red liquid filled the glass, she raised both corners of her mouth with satisfaction.

“I see. It sure took plenty of time, but it seems Varne’s troubles weren’t for naught, huh? Though I’m pretty sure she never thought of them as troubles,” she mumbled, with an expression of both nostalgia and pain on her face.

“What does that—?” Thane began.

Nettie, however, cut him off and asked, “Carla sometimes seems like a cat that refuses to get attached to you, doesn’t she?”

“A cat? Well...I guess that doesn’t seem too far off.”

Thane nodded, despite the fact that Nettie’s remark was a sudden figurative description that failed to address his attempted question. He also almost laughed as he pictured Carla as a cat with her hair standing on end, trying to intimidate him. The cat in his mind was not managing to threaten him at all.

“That kid was super shy when she was little,” Nettiei continued. “I mean, she talked normally, and it wasn’t like she would look away or anything. You could touch her hand and hair and she didn’t seem like she disliked it. So at first glance, she seemed pretty normal. But...she never let anyone in.” Nettie mumbled the last part almost as though she were reminding herself. She then emptied her glass once again.

“Hey, craft witch—”

“Are you really planning on meeting with Ange?”

Interrupting him once again, Nettie managed to smoothly change the subject.

“What are you trying to ask?” he asked after a pause.

“Precisely what I asked.”

She spoke once again in that irritating manner, as though she were implying something. It was the characteristic of someone who knew something but was not sharing. Her question of whether he truly wanted to meet the foresight witch seemed to indicate neither concern nor sorrow, however. The only thing he detected was pure interest.

A pair of eyes of a deeper green than Carla’s blinked on the other side of Nettie’s glasses with a gaze that seemed to be inspecting a prototype that she had made—as though she was looking at an object rather than a person.

“What you want to know is the story of what happened before Ange started calling herself the ‘fortune-telling witch,’ right? If you wake a sleeping child, you might end up having to deal with some inconvenient truths.”

The craft witch, huh?

She seemed friendly enough, but he could tell that she was shrewd. She reminded him of a certain someone he knew.

“It doesn’t matter,” he replied curtly, thinking of his colleague—the one who had entered the knights’ brigade at the same time as he and who seemed like he would remain in his life even if Thane tried to cut him out.

Inconvenient or not, the fact that his father had died would never change. Thane simply wanted to know what the foresight witch thought about that very

fact.

What was the truth for one party may not be the truth for another.

Having seen numerous cases as a member of the knights' brigade and even having worked with Carla to handle the case of Abel and Patricia, he knew that that was true. This latest case was also no exception.

When Thane made his declaration, Nettie once again placed her glass on the table.

"I see. In that case, I'll let you know when Ange contacts me," she said. "And now I think I'm gonna call it a night."

"Sure."

The craft witch waved at him as Thane left to return to the knights' brigade dormitory. Locking the door with her magic once it closed behind the knight, Nettie gazed at the chair Carla had been sitting in until just a bit earlier.

"So she can finally sleep by someone who isn't a witch, huh?" Nettie murmured.

When Varne had first adopted her, Carla was the kind of child who would wake with a start if even a single book fell over on the bookshelf in the middle of the night and curl up to protect herself. Even after she had grown, she had most likely harbored such vigilance in the bottom of her heart—especially toward other humans.

To think that Carla, who disliked even the act of sleeping itself, would fall asleep outdoors.

And next to a knight of the Royal Guard, no less.

"Are you seeing this, Varne? If you want to make fun of her, now's definitely the time to do it! Aha ha ha, cheers!"

Laughing lightly, Nettie raised her glass.

7. The Foresight Witch

It was several days after the incident at the viscount's residence that Carla contacted Thane regarding a meeting with the foresight witch.

It was sooner than Thane had expected, but perhaps the other party also wished to end the matter as quickly as possible.

Once he was actually set to meet her face-to-face, Thane was surprised to realize that he had not thought for a moment that the "witches" he was dealing with would renege on the terms of their exchange.

And here I had always thought that witches were not to be trusted.

He could not guess as to the reason his thinking had changed; all he could do was accept that fact.

For the time being, though, he had to set aside his messy feelings as he left the knights' brigade dormitory.

Carla's apothecary had been specified as the meeting place.

It seemed that the foresight—now the fortune-telling witch, Ange, was a cautious individual. It was not the kind of conversation they could have in a place that might have any number of people around. Even so, she most likely did not want someone like Thane to step into her house. She also probably wanted to avoid going into what could be construed as Thane's territory, such as the office of the knights' brigade.

Thane pushed open the old wooden door in the back alley quite a bit earlier than the time that had been indicated to him.

"Oh, aren't you a bit early?"

When the doorbell gave off its familiar ring, Carla, wearing her white coat, poked her head out from the back of the shop.

"Don't worry about it," he responded.

"It's fine by me, but Ange isn't here yet... Oh, but since I've finished the analysis of that sleep medication, I'll go ahead and tell you about it."

She asked him to hang on while she retreated to the dispensary. She then returned, carrying an old book, a small glass bottle with the medication sample, and several sheets of paper.

After the incident had concluded, Angus had provided a sample of the sleep medication that had been used in the house of the Viscount of Marsden. Half of it was given to Carla, and the remaining half was given to the plant laboratory at the royal castle in order to conduct analyses of it.

“You finished looking into it?” Thane asked.

“I ran some tests that took a while to yield results, so it took longer than usual,” Carla replied.

Even if it was a product made by a traveling apothecary and sold by a sales representative without an actual storefront, as long as the requisite permits had been issued, the sale of the medicine itself was not illegal.

This sleep medication, however, did not even have a name registered for it. There had been no application submitted to do so either. It had supposedly been created by a traveling apothecary, and no one knew their identity. Because of that, the knights’ brigade had decided to look for the person who had sold it while also investigating whether any illegal substances had been used as ingredients.

“I know you’ve asked the specialists at the castle to do the same thing, so make sure you compare the two results, okay? I’m sure they’re using reagents that I don’t have access to and stuff.”

“Sure.”

The staff at the lab had told Thane that it would take at least half a month to complete their analysis. Of course, he had not yet received the results from them.

Perhaps Carla had finished her analysis first because she had no other urgent projects to work on. Although against his wishes, Thane could not help but have doubts about the abilities of the researchers employed by the kingdom. He was also once again overcome with the odd feelings he had had the other day when he saw the magical tool created by the craft witch.

Paying no mind to Thane and his conflicted emotions, Carla placed her report on the counter.

Written with concision and in neat handwriting, the report contained concrete numbers and formulas. It was simpler than what would be produced through a request with the palace laboratory, but Carla's report also contained no fluff in its conclusions.

When Thane took the chair that was offered, Carla began her explanation, pointing to the report.

"First of all, the main ingredients are the same as are used in common sleep medications—valerian extract and others like lemon balm and hawthorn."

"Are those common herbs?"

"I don't know how well-known they are, but they're all plants that have existed for a long time. You don't feel drowsy the next day, and there's no concern about developing a dependency, so you can use them without much worry," Carla answered smoothly, even as she said that nothing was absolute given that there were personal differences.

"But you shouldn't take them with alcohol. That's probably one of the reasons it had such a strong effect on the madam on that first day."

Nigel, Florence's husband, was someone who rarely got sick, not even with a common cold. He had very little knowledge of medicinal products. He had most likely added the sleep medication to the mead thinking he would be able to mask its taste.

"He shouldn't be giving people medicine without telling them in the first place. It's a good thing there were no effects on the baby, seriously."

The Marsden couple had told them that Madam Florence was pregnant when they provided the sample of the sleep medication. It seemed that the madam's poor health had also partially been due to morning sickness. Florence did not seem to have recovered fully yet, but her expression had seemed very lively. She had seemed to want to move around, making her husband—who had now turned excessively overprotective—very nervous indeed.

"It seems the husband and wife are doing very well together," Thane

commented.

“Don’t tell me—I already know! It’s a good thing, so I’m happy for them!”

“It seems, then, that your mission went unaccomplished this time as well.”

“Oh my goodness, you are seriously an awful human being.”

Interrupting her report on the results of the analysis, Carla slumped over as though to bang her head into the counter.

Thane felt an odd sense of satisfaction at seeing how the case had turned out. Carla, however, seemed very bitter.

“How?! Every. Single. Time?!” Carla shouted.

“The madam said that she would visit later to bring you your reward,” Thane replied nonchalantly.

“She already came! But that’s not it—what I want is achievement of success, not money!”

“So you’re saying, Carla, that you don’t need money.”

“No, I do! I’d be in trouble if I didn’t get money!”

Carla puffed out her cheeks in dissatisfaction, making a fist on the countertop. She should have known how things would turn out—how was she so unwilling to give up? Thane could not help but wonder.

“The matter between the younger brother and the father is yet to be settled though,” he remarked.

“That’s unrelated to being a standin for the divorce, so I’m not much concerned about the outcome. I just wanna give a blow to that arrogant, stubborn old man’s ego. So I’m only interested in seeing him in shock.”

“You’re just acting as you like, as always,” sighed Thane. “And? Is that all the results of the analysis?”

When Thane brought the conversation back on topic, Carla’s facial expression changed as though she remembered something important. She pointed to a section of the report with her index finger, which was tinged with reagent.

“The amount isn’t terribly much, but this, here—there was an ingredient I

couldn’t figure out.”

“What do you mean, you couldn’t figure it out?”

“As in, I didn’t know why it was in there. It didn’t have a specific purpose, like to neutralize the bitterness or to enhance the medicinal effect.”

Thane peered at the piece of paper and read out loud the name of the ingredient.

“...Amllium? Is this an herb?”

“It’s a poisonous plant. There’s poison in its flower and roots.”

Hearing the word “poison,” Thane’s expression turned severe. Although Carla, too, spoke as usual, her voice had a heaviness to it.

“Its toxicity itself isn’t terribly strong. With the amount that was in the sleep medication, even if you were to drink the whole thing, the most it would give you is an upset stomach,” she said. “But the root of the amllium plant is addictive. Even with a small amount, there’s a high probability that the person taking it will develop an addiction.”

“So it’s a drug, huh? Was the poison from the root used in this sleep medication?”

“No, it wasn’t,” Carla replied, shaking her head. Even so, her expression remained serious. “A poisonous plant isn’t rare. Poisonous mushrooms are everywhere, and even flowers that kids use to make wreaths can sometimes contain poison. But this amllium plant is different.”

“How so?”

“It went extinct nearly a century ago.”

“Huh?”

“Right?! That was exactly my reaction too.”

Carla explained that the environment for the plant’s growth was fairly particular, and that the species had had a small population in the first place. She also shared that it was not a plant that could grow in the Kingdom of Selvaster.

The one area in a faraway kingdom where the plants had grown had been lost

in a fire when a nearby volcano erupted. Ever since then, Carla had not heard of the plant having been rediscovered.

The only way Carla had been able to identify the plant was because the specimen had a unique chemical composition—one that matched that of a plant in an old botanical encyclopedia.

Unfortunately, botany was not Thane's specialty; even with Carla's explanation, what she showed him did not make much sense to him.

"Is it possible that...the plant managed to survive somehow, rather than become extinct?" he asked.

"Amllium is propagated by bulbs, but their roots don't run very deep. It's written here that it was completely lost when it was all burned by flowing lava."

"I see."

"Besides, if anyone wanted to publicize that a plant that was thought to be extinct had been rediscovered, it wouldn't make sense to mix it into something so secretly like this. No one would notice anything this way."

And, as if talking to herself, Carla asked, "There are plenty of other poisons around. Why does it have to be amllium...?"

That was a perfectly reasonable question.

Had the root of the plant been used, one could imagine that the purpose was to create addicted enthusiasts and then sell the plant while gradually hiking up the price. But the part that had been used was the flower, which had no addictive properties. Moreover, what had been added to the medication was only a very small amount, far from a lethal dose.

There seemed to be some kind of deliberate intent—but what that was remained a mystery.

All of a sudden, the traveling apothecary whose face Thane did not even know became incredibly suspicious.

"In any case, this is about as much as I can say. I'm sure that the queen has more specialized references and information, so it'd be great if you can share the report with her," Carla concluded.

“Got it.”

Feeling as though he had been given a homework assignment, Thane took the documents and the small bottle containing the sleep medication sample.

Just then, the doorbell rang behind him. Without uttering a word, Thane drew in his breath.

“Oh, Ange,” said Carla.

“Did I keep you waiting?”

Upon hearing a woman’s low, slightly husky voice, Thane’s shoulders shook involuntarily. When he held his breath and turned around, the figure of the foresight witch, whom Thane had been searching for for years, unceremoniously entered his field of vision.

This is the foresight witch...?

Long hair of white gold and eyes of red. A dress of deep purple that revealed the contour of her figure and a robe of matching color. A voluptuous beauty whose appearance fit precisely the image of a witch—someone who seemed entirely out of place in the drab apothecary.

In the light of day—rather than in the insufficient candlelight of night—Thane truly saw Ange’s face for the first time.

The witch before him seemed only a few years older than Thane himself. She was most likely not much different in age from his older brother.

What in the world is going on...?

Thane felt like someone had taken the wind out of his sails.

He had thought that perhaps there had been a relationship of lovers between his father and the foresight witch, but fifteen years ago, she would have still been a child.

Ange, meanwhile, had not even looked at Thane as he stood up from his chair. Letting her shoes make loud, echoing noises against the wooden floor, she proceeded straight to the counter and set down the basket she had been carrying.

“For the space,” she said brusquely.

“Thanks. Do you want me to leave you two alone?” Carla asked.

“Why in the world do you think I set the meeting to take place at this shop? You stay too, Carla,” she replied, narrowing her eyes and glaring coldly.

Carla simply shrugged her shoulders and asked, “Is that okay with you, Thane?”

“That’s fine,” he responded.

“Okay, then,” Carla said. “Ange, there’s a chair there for you.”

“No thanks. I don’t intend to stay long.”

And with that, Ange left the sweet scent of her perfume to linger as she retreated toward the entrance of the shop. She placed her index finger on her cheek and tilted her head slightly. Looking at Thane with absolutely no warmth in her eyes, she sighed as though relieved.

“You don’t take after your father. Thank goodness,” she remarked.

“My appearance seems to have come more from my mother’s side,” he said after a pause. “But what do you mean, ‘thank goodness’?”

“If you had looked like him, I would’ve gone straight home.”

Her words alone suggested insolence. Her voice, however, seemed to reveal genuine relief. Thane furrowed his brows slightly. When he looked at her more closely, he realized that Ange, who stood with her back to the entrance, crossing her arms as though to hug herself, was trembling.

Is she...afraid?

She seemed only to be wearing a light layer under her robe, but the temperature was not such that she should feel cold. It was perfectly warm inside the apothecary.

When Ange noticed Thane looking at her, she smiled ironically and asked, “And? What is it you wanted to talk about?”

“The facts of what happened fifteen years ago. I want to hear from you directly what happened between you and my father, Jude Howell.”

“How much of it?”

“Everything.”

After a long pause, Ange began to speak. “What brought about our first meeting was a trading company. I had just gotten started as the ‘foresight witch’—”

—Fifteen years ago, Ange had been a fledgling witch.

She had excelled in exercising her foresight through magic that used mirrors and water basins to foretell the future. The extent of what she was able to see depended on how much magical power she used.

The fortunes she told were quite accurate. If the client took concerted action, then the fortune might change. Otherwise, things happened exactly as Ange foretold them.

“Having my magic reflect the ‘correct’ answer about the future gave me so much happiness and joy. And I was good at it. That’s why I told fortunes about whatever people requested—the weather, the sex of a child being born, the results of horse racing.”

“Horse racing?” Thane repeated.

“That’s right. And cards or board games or anything. I never thought of anything as taboo.”

When Thane’s eyebrows twitched slightly at her remark, Ange shrugged her shoulders. Ange herself had no interest in gambling, but as long as she was given remuneration for her work, she never refused to use her power of foresight. After all, the wins and losses of gambling had nothing to do with a witch.

“Most of my clients were women. And even when I say gambling, it was more for entertainment in someone’s salon.”

Ange had not had a storefront, the way Carla had an apothecary and Nettie had a magical tool shop. She took clients at cafés owned by people she knew well, or she was invited to display her magic at the homes of nobles and wealthy merchants she met at those cafés.

Aside from foresight, Ange did not have other magic that she particularly excelled at. All she could do was to tell the truth of what she saw with her magic. She had also not yet been skilled in the art of conversation.

She would distract people with simple light magic, then surprise them by predicting a bit of the future—the color of the clothes worn by a soon-to-arrive guest or the winner of an ongoing card game. In other words, she had often been invited merely to provide entertainment.

“Even if my foresight was correct, people made light of me because of the fact that I was a young girl.”

Then, one day, she had been called upon to go to a relatively large trading company.

She had thought she would be made to perform similar magic as before, but when she was shown into a room, it was not madams who sat there but rather the plump owner of the company and a pale, thin man.

In contrast to the carefree atmosphere she was used to at the salons, the room had been filled with an oppressively heavy air.

“A thin man...” Thane murmured.

“That was the Baron of Howell. It seemed he owed quite a debt to the trading company,” Ange said.

The territory of the Baron of Howell had purchased feed for livestock and seedlings for planting from that trading company. The management of the territory, however, had been in the red for years. The loan that the baron had taken out from the trading company had ballooned to a considerable sum. Unable to receive approval for a loan from the bank, the baron had nowhere to turn. All this was explained by the owner of the trading company, even though Ange had not even asked.

As the company owner went on and on about the matter in a condescending fashion, the baron simply sat there, almost as though trying to make himself disappear.

The trading company, too, would have taken a loss if the baron failed to pay back his debts; the owner thus wanted to at least secure the income from that

year's harvest. Those were the reasons the owner gave for having made Ange come.

"He said that they wanted to avoid a bad harvest at the very least. The request he made of me was to foretell the weather so that they would be able to match the timing of the planting. But there was still a while until the harvest, so he also told me to make the baron win some money through gambling, since he would need to make loan payments in the immediate future as well."

"And?" Thane asked.

"I did what I was told. That was all I could do."

It was not uncommon for the creditor to make the debtor themself the subject of the debt collection. If the debtor was a commoner, the creditor could overwork them and then take their wages or even make them perform questionable work. With a noble, however, such treatment was less likely.

"Neither the trading company owner nor the baron seemed to believe in my power of foresight. At the time, I assumed they needed to pose as having taken action to reduce the debt," Ange continued.

The owner of the trading company had said he took an interest in Ange when his wife told him about having seen her fortune-telling work at some salon or another.

Regardless, feeling resentful because she was rarely taken seriously as a witch, Ange had used her magic without a second thought. Using every ounce of power she had, she had foreseen the days of late frost and hail and also named the horses that would win at the races.

Both elements of Ange's foresight had hit the mark—and the baron immediately became addicted to gambling.

There was no need to work hard or to predict the performance of financial speculations. With gambling, cash could be made on the spot. It was thus inevitable that the baron—whose every effort until then had backfired—would be sucked into the vice, especially knowing he could win with certainty.

"He started coming to me every single day, asking me to use my power of foresight for him."

Seeing the baron come to her day and night to ask for her foresight, his obsession with her powers growing stronger and stronger—Ange had begun to feel afraid.

“Even when I left my friend’s café to set up shop elsewhere, or when I went to another town far away...the baron always showed up. My magical powers aren’t infinite. When I told him that I wasn’t able to use magic in that moment, he’d wait for hours, watching me. I got so scared that I didn’t want to have anything to do with him. I tried to increase what I charged for my services, but it didn’t work.”

Once, when she tried to run away from the baron, he had grabbed her arm so forcefully that it had dislocated her shoulder. At least on that occasion, she had managed to use offensive magic to surprise him and escape further harm. After that incident, however, Ange had been determined to cut all ties with him.

“When I refused to have anything to do with him and said I would no longer use my magic for him, he suddenly attacked me,” Ange said.

“Wha...?!” Thane started.

“He wasn’t normal before that either, but in that moment, he was an entirely different person.”

Thane’s jaw twitched.

No trace remained of the meek and quiet baron that Ange had first seen at the trading company. She somehow managed to escape from the baron, who in his fury swung around the knife he carried with him for some unknown reason. Ange had rushed to take shelter in the house of a fellow witch.

The next day, the baron’s body had been found in a river.

“I don’t know if it was suicide or homicide. I wanted to know for myself whether the baron had in fact passed—that was why I went to his mansion on the night of his funeral. It was there that I saw the owner of that trading company, sauntering in with a bunch of seedy-looking men.”

When she had been spotted by the trading company owner, he had forced her to join the group of people who had claimed they were creditors.

From the bits and pieces of conversation among the men who tried to ruthlessly collect debts from the wife and children left behind, Ange had gleaned that the troubles that had befallen the baron had all been set up.

“The gambling hall that the baron had frequented had a bad reputation. Now the gambling hall and trading company that started it all are both gone,” she explained.

The purging of the upper echelons of the knights’ brigade that took place soon after Thane entered it had also led to the exposure of those who ran backdoor businesses tied to wrongdoings. Both the gambling hall and the trading company had closed down during that process.

The trading company and the gambling hall had been in cahoots; from the very beginning, they had been planning to take everything the baron had.

“What a fool he was. He was deceived by that guy from the trading company. And I was used too.”

A fool who was deceived.

The same words he had heard then now took on a different meaning.

How can this be?

As Ange recalled her past and bit her lip, Thane managed to voice a single question.

“Is that...the truth?”

“That’s *my* truth. And I don’t give a damn whether you believe it or not.”

Thane and his older brother had only had the bits and pieces of information the creditors told them to make sense of what happened to their father. They had not known what the truth was.

Ange’s story, which she told calmly as though she was suppressing her emotions, may have had her subjectivity mixed in with it, but did not, however, sound as though she was trying to trick him.

Ange, perhaps tired from having to tell such a story, lifted her hand to run her fingers through her hair. Her gesture caused the sleeve of her robe to slide down her arm—revealing on her pale skin a long, thin scar.

That...

Ange said that she had escaped from the baron, who had been wielding a knife. The side of the arm tended to be an area that was prone to injuries when one was trying to protect their head.

Thane furrowed his eyebrows at the scene he could imagine all too easily.

“In any case. I learned my lesson that foresight is dangerous in a lot of ways. It would’ve been better if I had known it from the start,” Ange said.

“Is that why you changed your name to ‘fortune-telling witch’?”

“That’s right. I’m sick and tired of having me or my powers of foresight taken advantage of.”

Ange shared that now she capitalized on her position as a witch—who had no entanglements tied to social status—to serve as a sort of counselor with fortune-telling as her aid.

“I’m working more as someone people can talk to rather than revealing the future to guide people. Married noble women tend to have things they can’t so easily talk about with others. Fortune-telling takes a lot of care to perform too, you know? I wouldn’t want to be too dead-on and have people become dependent on me again.”

The last word weighed a bit too heavily on Thane’s ears.

“Plus the future changes based on your actions. My foresight may be correct, but nothing is absolute. Nothing should be.”

Ange exhaled, deeply and slowly. She then looked around the apothecary.

“That’s about it. Are we done here?” she asked.

“Yes. I apologize.”

As he spoke those words, Thane stood upright and bowed deeply toward Ange.

“H-Hey! What is this?!” Ange demanded.

When Thane raised his head slowly, his eyes met Ange’s red ones—now opened wide in shock—for the first time.

“You kept everything quiet for us,” he said.

The fact that the baron had died, mired in debt, had been a scandal. Had it come to light that he had also used a knife to attack a young witch, suffering disgrace would have been the least of the family’s concerns.

The person Thane had resented had been a victim herself.

I can’t stand how narrow-minded I’ve been.

The witch had had no need to fear retaliation from her assailant after his death. The reason she had remained silent and not denounced the baron was for the sake of the children who were left behind.

“I want to apologize on behalf of my father. We can still make this public and —”

“Stop it. That would be even worse. I just want to forget about this,” Ange declared.

“But that would—”

“If you ever go and tell this to someone, I’ll resent you for the rest of my life. Don’t you dare underestimate the curse of a witch.”

Thane could sense in Ange’s expression an earnestness as she glared at him. Thane, looking as though he was having to swallow a large piece of lead, nodded reluctantly.

“I understand,” he finally agreed.

“And that’s a promise. Also, Carla,” Ange said, turning now toward the apothecary witch, “thanks for taking on the case with Madam Marsden. Now she owes me one.”

“I’m not happy about that at all. She ended up not getting divorced.”

Carla—who had been watching the conversation between Thane and Ange in silence until now—pouted with dissatisfaction.

Seeing Carla behaving like her usual self, Ange smiled for the first time that day.

“Oh, speaking of which. Carla, maybe the reason your magic doesn’t work

well is the same as mine," said Ange.

"What do you mean?" Carla tilted her head at Ange, who seemed to have suddenly thought of something.



“I seemed to have been in such shock after I was attacked by the baron that

for some time I wasn't able to use my magic."

"What...?!" Carla exclaimed in surprise.

"I couldn't even perform basic light magic. Once my wound healed, magic slowly returned to my body...but even then, I continued to not be able to use my power of foresight."

Carla listened intently as Ange shared that it had taken her years to be able to use her foresight magic again.

"So it might be that there's some trigger or cause for your condition too, Carla. After all, you can do a bit of other magic just fine, and the medicine you make is perfectly effective."

"But I can't think of any cause," Carla murmured.

"Oh, but you've lost your memory. Maybe it's just that you haven't realized the reason."

"You mean, something from that long ago? I was such a kid that it seems even less likely." Carla placed her hand on her chin as she considered the possibility. Then, even as she continued tilting her head in curiosity, she turned to Ange and said, "But thank you, regardless. I'll look into it."

"You do that," Ange said in return. "All right, Carla. I'll see you on the night of the next full moon at Lakebell. Be sure to come flying through the sky then."

"Oh, now even Ange is being mean to me!" Carla groaned.

"Just keep at it... You too—though I imagine I'll never see you again."

Ange looked at Thane one last time, then turned to walk away.

Thane watched Ange as she walked out the door. He did not move even after the ringing of the bell on the door had faded away.

§

Inside the basket Ange left were pies: payment for using the apothecary as a meeting space.

Ange, surprisingly enough, was the best chef among the witches.

Her appearance, including her long beautifully manicured fingernails covered with red nail polish, made it difficult to imagine this. However, even her current lover had begun a relationship with her after she completely captured his heart by way of his stomach—with her home-cooked meals.

If the food everyone brought was like this, I'd be excited to eat it too...

Peeking in the basket, Carla recalled the last witches' gathering. Venomous-looking purple soup, steak of a fluorescent color... Carla was quite done with having to eat items off her fellow witches' "magical power gain" menus, which tasted as questionable as they looked.

When Carla looked up from the basket, she noticed Thane was still gazing at the front door of the apothecary through which Ange had left.

It'll probably take some time for him to sort through his feelings, huh?

Not only had he met the person he had resented for fifteen years, he had also learned facts he had not known.

Perhaps not everything Ange had said was the truth. What actually transpired may also have been different.

Thane, however, accepted Ange's story as being correct. If that was the case, then for him, in this moment, it must be the truth.

"Thane, have a seat," Carla said to him. "We might as well enjoy the food."

"Huh...?"

Rather than responding to Thane when he turned around, Carla entered the kitchen to slice and serve the pies. She returned with servings for the two of them.

Although he still did not appear to understand what was going on, Thane sat down at the counter. Carla blended tea leaves and prepared tea in front of him.

I hope this can help soothe him a little.

She added chamomile and cornflower to the tea leaves. It was similar to the blend she had served Patricia at the duke's mansion, but she changed the tea leaves so that the drink would have a stronger flavor.

There were two slices of pie on each of the plates—one a pumpkin pie with a scent of cinnamon, another a meat pie packed with delicious flavor.

Carla skipped the honey and poured the tea into cups, setting them next to the plates of pies. The two then ate in silence.

"It's good," Thane finally said.

"Isn't it? Ange's really good at cooking."

Although Thane muttered his comment with a bit of surprise and even more reluctance, he continued bringing forkfuls to his mouth.

She had thought this before, but each bite he took was large. She had cut him slices much larger than hers, but they were already about to disappear.

I guess I'd kind of missed this.

When Varne's old friend would come to the apothecary, the three of them had often eaten together like this. Carla recalled such scenes from the old days as she and Thane now sat across the counter from each other, eating.

"Hey. Do all men eat that much? Or is it more because you're a knight?" asked Carla.

"It's more that you don't eat enough, Carla. Though I think knights do tend to eat more quickly since we never know when we'll be called for duty."

"Hmm, I see. Then maybe Ted didn't eat that much because he was a grandpa."

"Ted?"

"Yeah, Ted—um, Theodore Hamilton. Did I never tell you about him? He's my teacher's old tea-drinking buddy, and he used to be a knight of the Royal Guard. When Ted still lived in the capital, he used to come and visit us a lot."

When Thane heard Carla's lighthearted response, his fork froze.

“He retired about half a year after my teacher passed and moved out to the countryside. Have you at least heard of him before?” she asked.

“Y-You...!”

“He’s got short hair, and he’s got a scar on his cheek around here,” Carla continued, indicating a spot next to her right ear. “Oh, you do seem to know him. Well, I guess he *was* a veteran in the knights’ brigade.”

Thane looked at her in disbelief and shouted, “Heard of him?! He’s the former vice commander of the knights’ brigade!”

“Oh...uh, does that mean he’s maybe kind of a big deal?”

“It’s a position second only to the commander!”

“Oh, no way. He even said himself that he was just a plain ol’ member of the group responsible for patrolling the town.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

Theodore Hamilton—he was, along with the current commander of the knights’ brigade, one of the knights Thane unquestionably respected.

As the blood drained from Thane’s face from shock, Carla stared at him blankly and said, “Oh, really? But here, he was just a regular, sweet grandpa. My teacher always put him to work, even.”

“I can’t believe this...” Thane let out, heaving a deep sigh.

Theodore was someone that even Lionel, the current commander of the knights’ brigade, looked up to. Even in his later years, the way Theodore wielded his sword—fiercely and unwaveringly, unimaginable from his gentle appearance—overpowered those around him.

He looked after young apprentice knights like Thane and Tobias as well. Not having the backing of a high social status, however, Theodore had made enemies of the former commander and executives of the knights’ brigade. Because of that, he was often sent to provide support for conflicts in dangerous locations. He had gotten the scar on his cheek on one such occasion.

“He was a master swordsman who once upon a time was feared as a god of war. Aside from his age on paper, he had absolutely no reason to leave the

knights' brigade."

"Oh wow."

"You're not taking this at all seriously, are you?"

Carla was somewhat surprised to hear that her old friend was someone of such great standing. Seeing her attitude completely unchanged, however, Thane looked at her with a sullen expression on his face.

"But we used to do the dishes together, and he repotted herbs and took care of weeds for us too," Carla said.

"Hey, just what were you making the vice commander do here, exactly?"

"That's what I'm saying—here, he was just a regular grandpa. He rarely wore his knight's uniform. I even thought he was just someone from the shopping district at first. Oh, and he was also the one that taught me how to sew. He was really good at doing patchwork, and his favorite design was small floral patterns in pink."

"I did not need to hear that."

"You don't have to be so shocked by it."

"Just shut up already," Thane mumbled, his head in his hands.

Carla seemed to have destroyed the image Thane had had of the previous vice commander, but people often had different impressions of the same person. It was simply that Carla's "Ted" and Thane's "Theodore" were *quite* different.

He was even good friends with my teacher—though they denied it whenever I said that.

Ted would simply laugh and listen nonchalantly to Varne's various complaints. He was also capable of gently getting the better of her when they had arguments. Varne and Ted, who had seemed to enjoy their unbridled quarrels, truly had been great matches for each other.

He did not exude the typical intimidation of a warrior, so Carla had assumed he served as a counselor or a liaison in the knights' brigade. He was also the only knight with whom Carla did not have to be on guard.

“Remember how earlier Ange mentioned that there might be a reason my magic doesn’t turn out well?” Carla asked. “I just remembered that Ted once said a similar thing to me.”

“The vice commander did?”

Thane seemed to have collected himself once he had some tea, but he raised his head with a look of surprise on his face.

“It was a long time ago, and at the time, what he said didn’t really click with me. I might have written it down in the business log, so I was thinking of looking for it later.”

“You’d write something like that in a business log?”

“It’s kind of like a diary, really.”

It was customary to write down records—of dispensation or consultations with patients—in the thick notebook that recorded a year’s worth of events. Ted had often visited on days when business was slow at the apothecary. Because there was not much to log in terms of prescriptions, young Carla had often written down what was shared in small talk as part of her practice of writing letters.

“The old logbooks are in the library upstairs; I should look for them,” she said finally.

“You mean the library in that devil’s den of a second floor...” murmured Thane.

“You seem to be imagining something rather rude, but the library only has books, and I keep it very clean.”

“After I’ve seen your room with only potted plants and no bed, I am not convinced.”

“M-My room is pretty tidy too!”

“That joke is not at all funny.”

“Jeez!”

Carla quarreled as usual with Thane, who was also back to his usual self. The

meek version of him had felt fresh, but it was probably habit that made her feel more at ease with his more disrespectful attitude.

The Baron of Howell that Ange had spoken of was difficult to recognize as Thane's father.

The baron kept trying to take the easy way out, and he lost his life.

Carla could not even imagine what kind of a life he had lived to finally reach the point to let things slip from his hands—the family name that he had inherited, as well as his wife and children.

Ange said that having foresight was dangerous.

That was true. There were few people who could come out victorious against the temptation to know the future.

"Thane, do you ever feel like you want Ange to use her power of foresight for you?"

"What are you asking, all of a sudden?"

Thane froze at Carla's sudden question, his cup of half-drunk tea held in midair.

"Well, you know, because we get curious about the future. I just wondered if it was normal for people to want to know, if they could."

"Not really. Well, no—if I could find out where Sadler was hiding, I would like to know, but..."

Carla had to think for a moment to figure out who Sadler was, but she remembered that he was the former member of the sorcerers' order who had made the suspicious bracelet Lilith had been given, and he was currently on the run.

"You'd like to know, but...what?" she asked.

"The moment I find him, he'd probably run again. And if it was just that I'd learned his whereabouts through foresight, then I wouldn't be able to chase after him. So there'd be no point."

"Oh, I see. In that case, foresight is just a onetime cheat, huh?"

“I don’t know if it’s a cheat, but I’m pretty certain it’s not a direct attack or a planned attack on a weakness.”

“I see... It’s impressive that you make all these efforts, Thane.”

When Carla spoke her honest thoughts, Thane opened his eyes wide for a moment—then made a show of scoffing at her.

“I don’t know how I feel about hearing such a condescending comment—from an apothecary who can’t improve her magic no matter how hard she works at it.”

“Oh wow. I was trying to compliment you, and that’s how you respond? I might just have to serve you Miss Carla’s specialty drink.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me. I would never drink that thing.”

“You don’t even know how effective it is.”

“This is enough.”

“Huh?”

Saying so, Thane brought the tea—which he was still holding—up to his mouth.

“This is your specialty blend too, isn’t it?” he asked.

“I-It is, but...”

Wait, huh?

Carla felt strange.

Although it most definitely was not that he was complimenting her, something tickled inside her heart—but just then, the door to the apothecary opened with a loud bang, shaking the doorbell violently, and there stood Lilith and Tobias.

“Carla, get this! The tickets for that one theater troupe I mentioned—oh my gosh, Sir Thane?!”

“Oh, Thane, here you are! We just got the investigation report submitted to us, so let’s get back to the brigade.”

“You guys are so noisy,” Thane said in exasperation.

“Oh, you two are having something that looks super tasty! Carla, where’s my plate?”

When Lilith ran up to the counter, she noticed the pieces of pie that remained on the plates with her keen eyes. For a moment, Carla felt relieved that Lilith had pleaded for her share of pie with enough momentum to forcibly interrupt whatever was happening between Carla and Thane.

Perfect timing, Lilith and Sir Tobias! I don’t really know why, but I somehow feel like I’ve been saved!

Carla, able now to take her mind off of her interaction with Thane, managed to catch her breath and say to Lilith, “I’ll serve you some.” Then, turning to Tobias, she said, “It was a gift from someone else, but would you like some too, Sir Tobias?”

“Is that okay? That would be great!”

“Hey, Tobias. Didn’t you just say we need to get back to the brigade?” asked Thane.

“But this looks delicious.”

As Tobias gleefully took back his previous comment, Thane very obviously clicked his tongue.

“There’s still plenty more, so it’s fine. Or, what, Thane, did you want the pies all to yourself? You’re so greedy,” said Carla.

“Shut up,” Thane retorted.

“Oh, Carla! There aren’t enough chairs!” shouted Lilith.

“Hang on, I’ll go get some,” Carla replied.

“Isn’t this the first time there aren’t enough seats in this apothecary?” Thane asked.

“Well, you all aren’t customers. Go home after you’ve eaten,” Carla snapped.

“Oh, come on. Let me stay until someone comes to shop,” returned Lilith.

“You’ll end up being here until closing time,” remarked Thane.

“Oh wow, do you think so too, Sir Thane?” said Lilith.

“Both of you. Shut your mouths if you don’t want me to kick you out this very minute.”

“Sorry! I’m just kidding, Carla!” Lilith said, defending herself.

“Aha ha! You two never learn, do you?” laughed Tobias.

The apothecary in the back alley, which had become rather noisy of late, greeted the approaching evening in a very lively manner.

8 At the Theater

Several days after Thane had his meeting with Ange, the man selling the sleep medication was found.

Thane's prediction about the whereabouts of the peddler, made based on testimonies about where he had been seen, was correct. A member of the police who was on patrol spotted the man who was wanted as a key witness.

The entire process of bringing the peddler into custody and confirming his identity went smoothly, all thanks to the cooperation of Angus, the younger twin of the Marsden family.

Not only had he described the peddler's appearance in detail, he had also been able to produce a portrait that resembled the man very closely. Furthermore, Angus perfectly reproduced the peddler's characteristic posture and manner of speaking. There was no question that he was a top-notch actor.

When asked about the medicine, the peddler testified that he had bought it from an apothecary he had just happened to meet, and he said he had not known the specifics of its ingredients.

However—

"Hank Newman? You mean..."

"That's right, Thane. The peddler was the same Hank that followed *those guys* around obsequiously."

Upon hearing Tobias's bitter reply, Thane grimaced even more.

"Those guys" referred to the former commander of the knights' brigade and his cronies in its upper echelons, who had been committing various forms of fraud around the time Thane entered the brigade. Hank, who was one of the lower-ranking knights, had always tried to curry favor with them.

Hank himself had frequently let brute force do the talking, starting various violent incidents. He had never received any severe punishment, however, managing to get away with merely a fine and an eventual discharge from the

knights' brigade.

In a situation in which so many had been charged with more serious crimes—and even sentenced to death and exile—the memory of Hank had grown hazy. To have a perpetrator from fifteen years ago reappear, however, stirred complicated emotions in both Thane and Tobias, who themselves had been victims of corrupt behavior in the brigade as apprentice knights.

"I'm curious about what Hank had been up to since he was discharged, but were you able to gather any information about the apothecary?" asked Thane.

"That's a problem too. You'll be shocked to hear this, Thane."

"Hurry up and tell me, Tobias."

When Thane glared at him, Tobias looked down at the report in his hands and said, "The information about the appearance of the apothecary from whom Hank purchased the sleep medication states: age around forty, dark-blond hair, reddish-brown eyes, medium height, and medium build."

"You could find about twenty people who fit that description just by walking around the city for half an hour. What's the name?"

"Paul Tedler."

"What?" Thane exclaimed, furrowing his brows at Tobias's very simple response.

"Paul Tedler" was the pseudonym that Peter Sadler—former vice commander of the sorcerers' order, currently on the wanted list—had used for anonymous assignments.

Although his pseudonym was only technically known by the higher-ups of the knights' brigade and the sorcerers' order, there was no gag order about the fact either. Those who knew about it might not be few, but they would be limited nonetheless.

"Could it actually be him? I suppose Sadler could make sleep medication, but..." Thane wondered.

"He was a frequent visitor to the lab as well," Tobias agreed.

His appearance also matched those characteristics indicated in the testimony.

Although there was a desire to assert that Sadler was in fact the apothecary in question, there was also doubt about whether a key witness on the run would use a pseudonym that did not even buy him much time.

“Did Hank know that Sadler was the apothecary?” asked Thane.

“There doesn’t seem to be any statement to indicate that. But it’s been over ten years, and plus, Hank is a real meathead. He probably doesn’t remember the faces of people from other divisions. Sadler, on the other hand, no doubt realized that he was dealing with Hank.”

“You’re probably right about that.”

Sadler had the tendency to be sly, cunning, and overprepared. Carla had described the creator of Lilith’s bracelet as being “insidious” and having “one horrible personality.” Thane had to agree with that sentiment.

When the knights’ brigade and the sorcerers’ order had conducted joint investigations, Sadler continuously alluded to long-forgotten—by others—minor errors or missteps.

If it is Sadler himself, what’s his ultimate purpose?

Thane could understand if Sadler was making and selling medicine to fund his escape. He could not, however, comprehend why Sadler would mix unnecessary poison—especially from an herb that had gone extinct—into a sleep medication.

“Why does it have to be amllium...?”

Carla’s voice when she had raised the question suddenly echoed in Thane’s mind—and with it, the message from the fortune-telling that Ange had given Florence.

An unseen truth becomes clear through the past...was it?

One could interpret it a million different ways, and it would apply to anyone. It was a common trick of fortune tellers.

It was also true, however, that elements of the “past” were coming up quite frequently in recent discussions.

Thane’s father’s death and Ange’s foresight. The trading company and the

gambling hall. The purging of the knights' brigade. Hank, who had escaped severe punishment. Sleep medication with trace amounts of poison...

The fire at Carla's family's house was also about fifteen years ago...

Thane felt like he was overlooking something. The pieces that seemed to connect, and yet did not, gnawed at him like a small fish bone caught in his throat.

I don't have enough information. I need to go through and review everything one more time.

As Thane remained deep in thought, a sullen expression on his face, Tobias spoke up, saying, "We also can't eliminate the possibility that someone who wants to put the blame on Sadler is using his pseudonym."

"That's possible as well," replied Thane.

"According to Hank, that apothecary was leaving the country to do some business abroad. We're tracking his steps as we speak," Tobias said, then added, "but, sorry—it's time you got going."

Glancing at the clock with a start, Tobias tried to wrap up the conversation in a hurry.

"In any case, we're planning to transfer Hank to the capital and continue questioning him. I'll let you know once we've managed to get his testimony. Sorry I kept you. You're going to serve as the escort for the crown prince and princess, right?" asked Tobias.

"That's right. I'll be off, then."

Switching his mind to prepare for the next task, Thane left the administrative office of the knights' brigade.

§

The Central Theater on the main street of the royal capital was, in contrast to its impressive name, a rather diminutive building.

Despite its small size, however, all productions the theater staged became quite popular. Many up-and-coming actors and directors were discovered there as well.

The new production of the Farlan Theater Company, which traveled throughout the kingdom, was a comedy that boldly reimagined a classic masterpiece. With innovative staging and the main character performed by the top-billed actor Andy Blood, the performance was sold out on multiple consecutive days.

Even on this day, which was in the middle of the performance period—where enough time had passed since the opening but the excitement of closing was still far off—the theater was packed with people who had come to see the show.

“Why must I come to a place like this?! Plus, you are making me sit in the general admission area?!”

“This is a small theater, so there is no separate seating area for nobles, Father.”

“Well, those seats there look like they are free!”

“They must be reserved.”

Among the throngs of audience members who had come looking forward to the performance, there was one pair that seemed to be an older, domineering man with an endless litany of complaints and a younger man who appeared to be his son.

“Nigel, I came because you insisted—”

“Yes, I truly wanted you to see this company’s performance. I wish that Florence had been able to join us as well.”

“To be feeling unwell—she is simply failing to take care of herself.”

“This is an important time for Florence, so I cannot have her overexerting herself. She told me how much she wanted to join this outing with you. It is a truly popular production, after all.”

“Hah! It is nothing but a riotous commotion. A play that would please lowly commoners cannot be anything but rubbish.”

“I’m not sure if that’s accurate. In fact, see there, Father.”

“Quiet, you! It must be...th-the crown prince?!”

The noise of the audience grew loud for a brief moment—then quieted down just as quickly.

When the father and son turned in the direction everyone else was looking, they saw the crown prince and princess entering the theater, guided by the manager of the house. Once the accompanying knight of the Royal Guard had completed the inspection of the seats, the royal couple sat down with the manager.

With their sudden appearance, everyone's gaze was fixed on Prince Abel—in his dignified aristocratic clothing—as well as the beautiful Princess Patricia.

After the couple exchanged a few words with the knight who was serving as their bodyguard, the black-haired knight—Thane—moved to stand in a side aisle where he would be able to see the entire theater.

Seeing the joyful and happy couple as they waited for the performance to begin, the audience members, as if on cue, erupted into applause. Everyone's expectations for the pending performance seemed to rise as well.

"I-It cannot possibly be that the royal couple would come to such a lowly place..." muttered the older man.

"If the crown prince is here to see the show, it must certainly be good. Oh, it's starting."

"Hnnh?! Nigel, that actor playing the main character—"

"Yes, that's right. He's your son and my younger brother, Angus. He is truly magnificent, isn't he?"

"Wh-What?!"

"Shhh. Father, please keep quiet. You'll disturb the prince and princess."

"Hgmm!"

Nigel let out a soft laugh as he watched his father attempt to suppress his indignation.

Good. That shut him up!

Seeing the interactions between the Viscount of Marsden and his son from

afar, Carla—watching the show from the standing-room area—made a small fist of victory.

The viscount viewed status as very, very important. Seeing him take a scornful attitude toward those he deemed to be lower than himself was irritating; and yet, it was also very easy to understand.

All we have to do is show him someone he can't go up against, so it actually ended up being kind of easy.

If the royal couple enjoyed a theater production that starred his unworthy son who had run away—the viscount would not be able to reproach it, even if he himself thought the performance vulgar.

Although it had not yet been made public, Abel was to be away from the royal capital for some time, by the order of his father, the king. It seemed Abel had wanted to see Carla because he wanted to ask for the witch's help: he wished to go on an incognito date with Patricia before he left. He had been planning to make Carla an accomplice by having her use her transformation magic to help him sneak out of the castle.

Please don't try to involve a mere apothecary in such risky business!

In the end, Carla had asked the prince to switch the plan to going on a theater date accompanied by a guard instead.

Although Abel had not been a fan of the idea at first, when she explained to him the idea that would turn the authoritarianism of the Viscount of Marsden on its head, Abel had willingly agreed and said, "This sounds rather amusing."

Abel eventually became so invested in the plan that he even agreed—if the production satisfied him—to visit backstage after the performance and offer words of praise and encouragement to the actors.

Patricia had smiled wryly as she watched the interaction between Abel and Carla, but she seemed excited about the prospect of a theater date as well. Even if she was accustomed to performing official duties in the capital, she probably enjoyed personal outings in a different way.

In any case, they seem as lovey-dovey as ever. You can even tell from this far away!

Some time had passed since the performance began; it was about time that Abel looked at the stage, rather than at Patricia.

I can't believe they were planning to call off their engagement, given how much they love each other...

Recalling the outcome of that case, Carla frowned—then looked back at the Viscount of Marsden and his son. The viscount seemed to be trying to divide his attention between Abel and Patricia in the audience and his own son standing on the stage.

Although he had been busily looking in two directions at first, the viscount began to focus only on the stage as the play's story gradually gained momentum.

Oh, he laughed...but now he's realized it and is trying to play it off by frowning. He's hilarious!

Carla chuckled as she watched the viscount awkwardly clear his throat.

Although it was up to the older brother, Nigel, to convince the viscount to see his son Angus after the curtain fell, seeing them, Carla felt that the trio should not encounter any problems.

When she looked back at Abel and Patricia, she also caught sight of Thane's face in profile.

Being tall, he seemed to be standing in a cramped posture, trying not to get in the way of the other audience members.

Although it was a fun-filled performance, with frequent cheers and laughter, Thane—prioritizing his duties as a bodyguard, as always—seemed to not be watching the play at all. He was as serious as usual, but that was probably also what made him a true member of the Royal Guard.

He doesn't stand out since the knight's uniform is a dark color. I guess that turned out to be a good thing.

A knight's uniform of pure white would have drawn attention in a theater even with its lights dimmed. That might add more prestige to those being guarded, but it would be nothing but a nuisance for the other theatergoers.

Carla hoped the change in the uniform of the knights of the Royal Guard had been useful, even in a small way.

When the audience gave a thunderous applause, Carla, too, clapped her hands.

If that's the case, that would make me feel... Huh?!

When she turned her head because she felt someone looking at her, her eyes met Thane's.

Carla drew in her breath.

Thane, wearing his navy blue knight's uniform, was lifting one corner of his mouth and smiling with confidence. As the surprised Carla took a moment to blink, he returned to his former vigilant posture as though nothing had happened.

Huh? Wh-What was that?!

Carla had told him beforehand that she would be somewhere in the theater. Given the popularity of the show, however, even the standing room was very crowded. Carla had gotten her ticket arranged through Ange, so there was no way Thane would have known where Carla was.

That...scared me. How did he know? Is it like a beast's...I mean, a knight's instincts?

Pressing her hand to her chest as her heart beat wildly, Carla turned back toward the stage.

More cheers and laughter came from the audience. Abel and Patricia, as well as the Viscount of Marsden and his son, were laughing happily.

No matter how hard she tried, Carla—for some unknown reason—was unable to concentrate on the play for the rest of the evening.



Afterword

Hello, this is Kosuzu Kobato. Thank you for choosing to pick up the second volume of *The Apothecary Witch Turned Divorce Agent*. I am thrilled to have been able to deliver this continuation of the previous volume.

In this second installment, we touched upon more episodes that dealt with witches themselves—including a witch friend other than Nettie, a gathering of the witches, and a new magical tool in addition to transformation magic for Carla's work as a divorce agent. I hope you enjoyed it alongside scenes of Carla's cultivation magic as well.

Carla and Thane both seem to be behaving as usual in this volume, but I do feel like we were able to see a slight change in their relationship... Yes, I'm pretty certain that I was not imagining that.

With that said, why there aren't more sparks flying between these two now that they can speak with each other so frankly and even have moments of physical contact...is a mystery even to the author, who is a writer of romance novels.

Rather than the situation being a result of their airheadedness or oblivious personalities, though, I feel there may be an unseen power at work...or, perhaps, this is just the pace and sense of distance appropriate for the two of them.

I would be ever so grateful if you would continue to watch over the two of them—as Carla continues with her ever-unsuccessful practice of medicine-making and her work as a divorce agent.

I would like to take this moment to give my acknowledgments.

Yasuyuki Syuri-sensei, who has continued to provide the illustrations for this second volume as well: thank you so, so much for the beautiful cover and the in-text illustrations. The characters appear to be so alive that they seem about to leap off the page. Just as with volume one, I so admire the compositions of

all the images; I could stare at them all day.

To my editor—the rock and unsung hero of this series—and the entire editorial department, as well as everyone working in various areas of production, I give absolute thanks for all the work you do to give form to a novel, which is but a string of characters, so that others can pick it up in their hands.

And finally, to all the wonderful readers who are reading these sentences: thank you so much. My only desire is that you were able to enjoy the time you spent reading this text.

A manga version of the *Apothecary Witch* series is also in the works. I am grateful for all the continued support as we work to make it possible to enjoy the story in a different form.

I look forward to seeing you all again soon. Thank you again from the bottom of my heart.