

Charlotte M Underwood's collection of letters, notes and relevant excerpts related to the incident now known as 'A Dash of Belladonna'. Compiled by Ashford Vachal, Commander of the Order.



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9<sup>th</sup> of March

Dearest Snu,

I know. I've been gone for a week yet it feels like a millennium to you. However, without an ounce of exaggeration, my yearning for you equates to double, quadruple your own sorrow. If not in quantity (if such a thing can be measured), then in rich volumes of viscosity.

It certainly didn't help that our reunion was short and bittersweet. It feels as if I've only given you a hug before I was yanked away by the scruff of my neck and thrown in the plane to the end of the world. I am still puzzled as to why Ma ~~requested~~ demanded my immediate return from my education; all I know is that Master Seo gave her my six-month report of my studies and she terminated my mentorship. She explained I had nothing else to learn from him and I am left wondering if perhaps Master Seo misused 'whom' and 'who' in the correspondence and earned her ire.

I briefly toyed with the idea of reporting her to the Order for unreasonable removal of a student under a Master's care, but I had spent five years under Master Seo and I knew our tutorship was coming to an end. I just didn't expect it to be in the form of an airplane ticket with a simple message of 'you're coming home now'.

Master Seo agreed too quickly and he was happy to give me my certificate of completion despite Ma's arbitrary outburst, so that was that.

I've no doubt Ma prepared my next teacher before the ink on Master Seo's letter even dried. I was only home with you

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for a flitter of a moment before she waved the letter of acceptance in my face and kindly expelled me out of the house. If that letter hadn't been a formal invitation to become the one and only Mikaere Tahuriorangi's student, I would have stood my ground and refused to leave. The phrase 'I'd kill to be his student' was a motto for every young apprentice, and as soon as that letter arrived I knew I had five minutes to decide before I was found floating in a stream with a knife in my back.

Ma had doubts. Not about Mikaere of course, but because she was paranoid about the recent news of a missing child who had been sent away for an apprenticeship. I gently reminded her of my superior capability and my long history of self-sufficiency. Before I could show her my vast collection of poison, she waved her hands and said, "Yes, we get it, you're not a child anymore!"

As I write my first letter to you in the air, atop the flimsy plastic tray with excessive cold air blowing through the vents, I've decided to make it a habit to write of my day-to-day events in the hopes of easing my yearning for you. I know not if you will read these heavy pages brimming with every shade of emotion. I know not if you will hurl them into a fiery pit or simply devour them. But your grace and patience will be rewarded, my friend. I will record the magical, fantastical and bizarre into these letters. On top of that, I will also send you interesting things I find in my Master's country of New Zealand! All within reason of course—I hear that pigeons, no matter how many chin-ups they are capable

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of, they can carry 32 grams at most.

I wonder if their protein shakes will be bread crumb flavoured.

Oh, I just heard the announcement welcoming me to New Zealand, otherwise known as the land of the long white cloud: Aotearoa.

Your Beloved Best Friend

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Dear Loretta Underwood,

Charlotte has been graded from 1 to 5 during the past six months under my tutelage. Please find below.

Charlotte's ability to grow plants: 1

locating where the poison is in plants: 5

memorizing recipes in her head: 3

identifying danger signs in plants: 2

using animal hide as ingredients: 3

Her curiosity: 1

deciphering weather, and what they mean: 5

finding which leaves are dangerous: 4

Coming to own decisions and solutions: 1

Kind regards,

Seo Yoshikazu.

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9<sup>th</sup> of March

Dear Snump,

There are two moments in my life I cannot describe without being blinded by memories. One was when I first tasted my very own potion at the age of eight. Brewed in secret and consumed in a locked wardrobe, I still remember how the stars shattered in my eyes with the first sip.

Meeting Master Mikaere was my second. I spotted my new mentor in the crowd. The short black hair and dark skin I've seen in the pictures. I felt like a halo formed behind his magnificent head and a hush fell over the wave of people. He spotted us and his smile broke over his round face. Without hesitation he shot his hand up into the air and waved with such energy he earned sharp glares from the men in front of him. He sheepishly grinned at them and said "sorry bro," cheerfully. He wasn't a towering rugby player like I'd seen on the screens of the airplane, but he was a head taller than many and his broad shoulders swayed as he strode forward.

"Haere mai Lottie, welcome to New Zealand." He smiled like the sun. His voice was warm and soft.

"Haere mai," he said and shook Dad's hand. He shook powerfully and came towards me to reach for my luggage, but I stepped back and bowed.

"I am perfectly capable of carrying my own luggage, Master." I performed the perfect curtsy and smiled like a child beauty pageant queen. The luggage was heavy and my hand was getting clammy, but I was determined not to appear

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like a useless child.

“That’s cool, let me know if you want to rest though,” he said, and as expected didn’t pursue the matter further.

Dad and I climbed into Master’s car and we drove for an hour in a car that smelled of spring. He had his radio humming a slow guitar melody and he introduced the streets and small buildings excitedly. Soon the paved road turned into dirt and pebbles and the car bumped so much I was being tossed from one side to another, the stones rattling like popcorn, ping-pong off the metal underneath my feet.

Before too long, we came to his house.

His two-storey house had a blue roof complete with a kiwi weathervane. Blue became my favourite colour. What I immediately took a liking to was his wild yet perfectly tame garden. The herbs he grew! The smells! The insects! Every inch was devoured by the green, the hairy and the beautiful. Rosemary grew between rustic bricks; liverworts hugged the walls; and oh so many types of ferns!

His smile I approved of.

His garden I loved.

After I exited the round tunnel of arbour complete with daphne, raspberry, snapdragon, jasmine and hops, my eyes held the beautiful sight of *she*, clad in purple and death, resting gingerly among the treachery of green.

I crouched and was a moment from caressing the soft petals of purple when a black shape blocked the sun. I looked up and saw a hauntingly beautiful woman dressed head to toe in black and purple. Her black eyes met mine.

Master’s voice came from behind me and I turned around.

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“Hey, student, don’t touch the belladonna,” he said. When I turned back to the belladonna, the woman had disappeared as if she never existed.

I thought it was perhaps a trick of the light, a mirage or even lack of sleep.

“You can touch the nightshade, but not the belladonna,” Master said again and approached the garden.

After staring at the empty spot, I registered his words. “Are they not the same, Master?”

“Kind of. I’ll tell you later. I believe the belladonna will change to nightshade tomorrow.”

I frowned. Those names were just different names for the same plant. Before I could question further, I stopped. I was a foreigner in his house, his country. I was here to learn, not force my knowledge on others. I nodded.

“Come in and unpack first. I’ll serve you my best tea.”

He flashed his perfect teeth, and I decided to hold my judgement until tea was served.

I’m sitting at his kauri dining table that looks like it was a slab of the magnificent tree cut vertically. I can see the lines and the swirls and even the cracks. There is also a cat without a collar sitting on the table, sleeping contentedly in the sun. I am sure I saw another cat in the garden so I am left wondering if Master Mikaere owns multiple cats. I’ll ask him when he gets back. Dad and Master are now touring the greenhouse and the potion room, but I know that they are actually having the ‘talk’ that the parent has with the new Master: of rules and thinly veiled threats related to my safety and wellbeing. I’m happy to play the innocent child of course.



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It gives me time to write to you and report my findings. Ah, I see them returning. I will write again soon.

I'll also send you a copy of the apprenticeship letter he sent me when I get the chance.

Your Smitten Soul Sister

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Dear Charlotte Underwood,

Kia ora, my name is Mikaere Tahuriorangi and I'm a registered potion master working in New Zealand. I'd like to offer an apprenticeship to study, work and most importantly, earn your Potion Master Certificate.

I'm not too worried about the date, I haven't had an apprentice in a while, so feel free to pop over sometime around autumn.

On average my students require three years to receive my recommendation.

If you're wondering about sheep, I don't personally own livestock, but there are farms nearby where you can see all sorts if you want.

I've never had the pleasure of working with your previous mentor, Yoshikazu Seo, but I've heard of his reputation with poison. Heard he could make a dandelion into a weapon. Is that true? If it's true, please don't show me how it works.

His recommendation letter only said, "Lottie studied under me and she is good." And from what I hear, that's a standing ovation.

Your application letter made me feel we'll get along as well. I'm really looking forward to having great laughs with you.

I know you are interested in toxins and antidotes but I believe trying other branches can't hurt your progress. Although I've dabbled in toxins, my real interest is botany, horticulture, edaphology and herbology.

If you're still interested, just write me a letter, don't worry too much about the stuffy registration forms. A phone call

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from you and your parents will do.

Let me know by the end of this month.

Thanks,

Nāku iti noa, nā.

Mikaere Tahuriorangi.

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D

Deadly Nightshade –

belladonna

Hi, Snu, I  
some of the herbs I  
also known as  
meaning beautiful  
belladonna to dilate  
true that it can do  
it also makes it  
have not know the  
Nightshade

A book in  
century herbalist  
dangerous, you shouldn't have it around you. Uh-huh. I'm sure he didn't mean it. Who in their right mind  
would want to banish something beautiful as the belladonna?



thought I'll share you some herb lore on  
come cross! Let's start with Belladonna,  
Deadly nightshade! The name Belladonna,  
woman, was given because women used the  
their pupils to make them seem bigger! It is  
this due to the alkaloid atropine inside, but  
pretty... poisonous. Back then they must  
belladonna's other name, Deadly  
(*Solanum Mortale*).

Mikaere's study by a famous in the 16<sup>th</sup>  
called John Gerard wrote that it's so

Also, the chemicals in the belladonna is used as a sedatives in certain medical practices nowadays, and  
we use in a lot of potions related to flying, seeing visions and astral travelling. (Most of those potions are  
out of fashion though...)

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9<sup>th</sup> of March

Dear Summer of my Heart,

How does this sound?

“Salutations and honour be yours, dear Master.

My name is Charlotte Minerva Noir Underwood. I have turned fourteen this previous moon.

I take pride in my ability to grow healthy herbs and brew poisons and the fact I possess maturity and determination advanced for my age.

My shortcomings, although many, include fascination with lethal poison and limitless curiosity.

Some say my perfectionism is a flaw.

Did I also mention I possess a great sense of humour?

Out of the three mentors I am to have before obtaining my licence as a potion master, I have already served under Master Yoshikazu Seo for five years in Japan. My previous Master gifted me with a wealth of knowledge on detoxification, eating manners, and expertise on the Koto. I wish to continue my pursuit of poison and detoxification. My goal is to become a great virtuoso in these fields.

News of your esteemed accomplishments have travelled far (and rightly so), and I am overjoyed and honoured that you have agreed to take me as your apprentice.

I respond best to constructive criticism with a dash of kindness.

I promise to work hard and diligently, and become a student you can be proud of.”

It'll take some time for me to memorize all this, but I think I have the important things down. What do you think? Do you think he'll like it? Dad told me I should prepare an introduction while we were on the flight, but the chilly air rendered me useless. Hence why I am hiding in the bathroom, the pen dancing a furious tango on the paper. I believe the pigeon should be delivering multiple letters at once.

Oh, I hope he doesn't hate me or ask me to go back. I've heard of some masters sending their apprentices back for having a voice they didn't like! That cannot happen to me. I cannot un-see his beautiful garden!

Then there is Master Mikaere. He was the youngest person to get his licence, and he only required one master. He also resigned from the Order at the age most people would start there! There are even rumours that clients from all over the world seek his potions ranging from the Queen of England to the King of the Beggars! I remember Ma telling me Master was behind the flying reindeers when I believed in Santa! Even if I didn't believe a man to climb down chimneys once a year, I believed in Mikaere Tahiriorangi. Snu, what if he hates me? What if I sneeze the wrong way? Blink in the most offensive way possible?

Maybe I should act cute and impressionable. No, although creating a façade is a simple task, maintaining one would be arduous.

I absolutely must study under him. He is the potion master that will rocket me to success. Just imagine, after studying with him, I will be the best potion master in the world! People will queue from all over the world to have a drop of my potions and newspapers and magazines will be filled with my stories.

I can almost smell the modern and beautiful apothecary I will build in the islands. The garden and the greenhouse will smell of roses, rosemary, frangipani, chocolate cosmos, wisteria, jasmine and everything else! Don't worry. I'll make sure they build a private mansion just for you.

Oh no, Dad is asking if I'm okay in the bathroom! Why does he have to yell! Ahhhhhhhh

Your Panic-Stricken Pal

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10<sup>th</sup> of March

Dear Sunlight after the Rain,

Yesterday was like being in the eye of the storm and I could only pick up the pen today. I apologize about the delay.

After hearing the speech I painstakingly memorized, Master replied with, “Oh.” Pause. “Cool.” Period. He then added: “Don’t call me Master.”

I could’ve drowned inside out from the tears I had held back. And yes—be proud, for I did not shed a single tear in front of Master. I smiled politely and sat down at the table and half-listened to him explaining the year’s curriculum to my father.

I thought he was displeased with me.

Was it my height? Was it the speech? Was there a freckle in the wrong place, a hair out of line, what if my eyes are the shade of an ex-lover’s from a turbulent relationship? All these thoughts raced in my head.

Lottie Underwood would not stand for expulsion. I would show him how capable and amazing I was! I slammed the table.

“Tell me of this offence I have caused you and I will rectify it!”

He turned to me with his eyes wide as saucers, feigning innocence.

“I am most desirous of staying here and benefiting under your tutelage. I can think of little else but of my thirst for your enlightenment. You also have a sublime garden,” I proclaimed.

“Lottie,” Dad said and cleared his throat.

“I will study from moonlight to morn if you desire it. I will even consider cooking and cleaning.”

“Lottie, darling—” Dad’s smooth and patient voice supported me as I stood on the wooden chair.

“Well,” Master finally spoke. “If you really want to.” His grin grew to his ears. “What’s your best potion?” he asked.

As you know, there are many things I boast of. Yet when asked forthrightly so, I drew a blank. Every second nudged me towards the end of a long, dark corridor.

“I can make a potion that will make a pig fly!”

Dad spat out his tea.

Master didn’t even bat his eyes as Dad apologised a storm and proceeded to vanish the stain from the wall.

“That’s pretty cool,” he said, but his expression didn’t change.

*Did he believe me?* I incredulously thought. My heart threatened to burst. Out of my overabundance of skills that could’ve given credibility to my talents, I had told a fat, rotten lie.

In the crushing silence I furiously wove a web of excuses and equations in my head. Thoughts entered and exited my mind in a flurry.

If he asks me to prove it, what should I do?

Should I smile and say it was a joke?

Should I laugh and say it was metaphorical?

Should I strap a rocket on a pig and send it flying into space?

Damn the animal rights, my life was at stake here, I decided.

“In that case,” he said, and stood up. “I have a task for you.”

Oh no, Master is calling me for dinner. I will continue my correspondence in the next letter!

Your Loving Lottie

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Report #545

Agent Ashford Vachal

██████████ has been in contact with the group: True Alchemists, after he had assisted apprentice ██████████ in avoiding capture. The regional agent ██████████ in Oita prefecture only responded to the attack after they were notified through the police. ██████████ is now ██████████ in ward Z.

Upon questioning, ██████████ failed to provide any leads to the group despite previous contact dating back to last year.

The house had been restored and searched for any clues. It confirmed the location of the cell in ██████████ to be in the southern islands but otherwise yielded no fruitful results. As for the aftermath of the fight, we have advised the noma government to declare the incident as a gas explosion from the kitchen.

It is worth noting that several potion masters who are sympathetic to the group's cause have been providing their apprentice's details and blood as payment. A ban on all potion masters requesting their apprentice's blood is to be issued and severe punishment is to be followed to those who break it.

The apprentice in question is now under care of a new master in ██████████ and the Order has approved the transfer for 7<sup>th</sup> of March. Past actions of the group suggest they will target a different apprentice once met with resistance. Warning letters of vigilance have been sent to all registered potion masters in the world. Will request more agents in ██████████ for ██████████ months for the safety of the apprentice.





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11<sup>th</sup> of March

Dear Snub,

I offer you my utmost sincere apology for neglecting our correspondence. I trust you have been eagerly awaiting the nature of the task my master bestowed on me.

The trial that determined my future rested on a small basil plant.

When I received the basil plant housed in a brown pot, snug in soil dark with moisture, I thought I was supposed to make this plant fly. However Master said, "I want you to look after this guy until next week."

Its leaves were fresh and healthy—nothing out of the ordinary. The task didn't seem to amount to what was at stake here. Sniffing the plant, I was somewhat disappointed to find the plant smelled just as a normal, healthy basil would smell.

"It's pretty simple. As long as it's not withered in the next two weeks, you pass."

There had to be a much darker, deeper meaning to all this.

Fearing this was some sort of courage test, I hastily accepted and carried the bundle of my dreams up to my room.

The room prepared for me is a thousand times better than a childhood treehouse hut, a million times more exciting than a secret underground hideout.

It's located on the second floor of the house, with the wooden ceiling hugging one side of the triangular slope, fitted with sturdy frames across the wall like that of a cabin. Fairy lights hang across the beams and one particular beam has a hammock chair hanging by a thick rope.

As I write to you now, light is filtering through the large window above the expansive slab of wooden desk, spanning across the entire wall. The edges are raw and it curves in odd places, but it's spacious and smooth. You couldn't ask for a better letter writing desk. Next to it are floating shelves perfect for my books and jars of button collection.

The shaggy rug on the ground looks like moss, and the smell of pine and sunlight makes my lungs tremble with excitement.

Sparklers have lit my mind aflame and I don't think I can sleep tonight with all the ideas I have of transforming this room with my personal touch.

Your Lovely Lottie

P.S: Oh, and I ended up asking Master if he has seen a woman with skin as white as the moon and dress as dark as the night sky in his garden before. I asked if it was a customer of his. He replied that it could be a spirit in his garden. Rest assured his house isn't haunted—he was meaning spirits of the world sometimes visit his gardens. Spirits, Snu. Spirits visit his gardens!

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12<sup>th</sup> of March

Dear My Precious Friend,

Dad left this morning. I trust he's back on the island now. He gave me a big hug and asked me to call Ma often. He wished me luck with the basil and gave assurance that I'd do well, but I wish I could share his optimism.

There was nothing more I wanted to do than to solve the enigma of this basil guardianship, but alas, our lessons took precedent.

To be certain the basil isn't a decoy for a different kind of test, I've painstakingly recorded every detail of the lessons.

For our first lesson he wanted us to create a Potion of Sweet Dreams. It is one of the first hundred potions to be learned in the first year of apprenticeship. He went out to the garden and examined the leaves of lemon balm. He held each leaf up, turned it this way and that, passed the sunlight through them, and only then did he pluck the leaf and put it in his basket.

When he was picking the passion flower's wriggly corona tendrils, he stroked each strand with his fingers from top to bottom before taking them into his ingredient basket. Same with the white chamomile flowers; he brushed them with the back of his hands and I'm sure the flowers leaned into his touch.

We then took our ingredients to the potion room, where the wind picked up the sweet and bitter smell of the drying herbs, garlic, and flowers hanging from the ceiling. Master allowed me to check the ingredients with the books from the bookshelves and you would be proud to know I was the epitome of delicacy; my fingers weaved through the bottles of potions and empty flasks without making a sound.

We both used the same sized stone mortar, pestle and pot to make our potions.

While we waited for them to boil, he told me that it was very important to interact with the plants that were going to be used in the potion.

"Even if a noma followed the exact method of our potion, it won't produce the same effect. Two potion masters can produce different potencies as well."

(Oh, Snu, I'm unsure if you could tell the difference between us potion masters and noma. I can't tell to be honest—but we call humans without magical abilities 'noma'.)

"How does one make a potent potion?" I asked.

"There are many factors, but I would say it has to do with how you care for and treat your plants. Show them respect and allow them to absorb your scent, your energy, before they are harvested. Then of course, it all depends on your faithfulness to the recipes."

My previous master, Master Seo, also said plants were more powerful if they were carried around the body of a potion master. Now I understood why.

"We emit a source of energy?"

"Something like that. It's all in your blood, but I hear children can emit a lot more of these energies than adults."

I received two bottles of the Potion of Sweet Dreams and was told to try them, to see how different they would be.

I noted nothing out of place during the lesson or the rest of the day. I combed the study notes and the homework but it yielded no clue as to what he wished for in an apprentice. He didn't even take a drop of my potion for evaluation. I'm beginning to think maybe the basil really is the centrepiece to this mystery.

Your Faithful Friend

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13<sup>th</sup> of March

Dear Snugsnug,

I've done it.

Master solemnly swore that the test was about the basil plant and nothing else. I also have it in writing. I was tempted to ask him to sign it with blood but I managed to rein in my enthusiasm. So without a wasted second, I poured my love and devotion into this plant.

If there was a saint for basil guardianship, 'twas I. The basil took priority over everything and anything. Not only did I guard against pests, disease, over-watering and excessive sunlight, but I had to be extra vigilant against the shrewd cats that hung around the house. Not one of them are owned by Mikaere, yet he gave them free rein to go wherever they please. So far they don't seem interested in my basil but if I could get one thing about cats right, it was that they were the epitome of fickle.

Ma called. At first I was touched by her unnecessary concern, but the warm feeling quickly cooled when she went on about how I was going to get kidnapped and killed if I wasn't careful, and that I would be the shame of the household if I died in such a way. I wasn't sure what to be offended at: The fact that she dismissed my death in such a cruel way, or the fact that she thought I would behave with her attempt to scare me.

Master came and went. When he was home, he was visited by customers who sought his potions and when he was out, he was at the clinic working as a doctor for the noma. But I wonder why he works, since it doesn't seem to be for income. One day I saw him giving the Potion of Happiness in exchange for a sweet cake called Pavlova! Those potions have real gold in them! When I asked him about this mistake, he laughed and said the Pavlova was delicious. Granted, it was divine, but it made me question just how many fortunes were traded for sweet pastry until now.

With the money he does take from clients for his potions or at his noma job, he buys the strangest things. The house is visited three times a week by the delivery man dropping off boxes and packages for us to sign.

Once it was a magical monocle that made you sprout a moustache, one was an impractical potion bottle that changed shape every week, and just this morning, it was a ladle that looked like a dinosaur.

Strange thing is, despite his cavalier attitude towards his finances, he only seems to own a few pieces of clothing. No matter the occasion, he always wears a t-shirt and shorts with jandals (New Zealand term for sandals). If the morning or the evening gets frosty, he throws on a sweater or a hoodie; dressed like that, he greets all patients and customers.

Upon closer observation, Master seems to meet any news with a shrug and multiple nods. When the postman rode into the letterbox and his bike flew across the sky, all Master said was: "Cool." Of course, after that, he realized someone was hurt and ran out to help him. Every word seemed to tumble out of his mouth, and actions slipped out by chance. Yet his tea never spilled and the bottles on the kitchen table never clinked when he walked by.

He can make plumbing a toilet look like some sacred ritual performed by swans.

He doesn't seem like a man likely to deliberately sabotage me, or have any malice in his heart, but prudence can't hurt.

He also mixes this country's indigenous language in his vocabulary and I have gotten familiar with a few words. Kia Ora is hello, Mōrena is good morning, and uh... what was the other one... he says it whenever he gives me a thumbs up, so I'm assuming it means I've done well. Then again maybe it's 'I'm going to crush you using only this thumb.' I should look it up. It may give me clues to my test!

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I connected the first letter of every sentence with alphabet crackers. Both English and Maori. One spelt a strange Hungarian word for a type of rooster and another a Korean slang word meaning a rude dismissal. I researched code breaking and delved into linguistics.

Nothing.

I looked at his body movements. I mapped and measured his house, greenhouse and the garden. I even made a colour map of all the furniture and looked into the feng shui of the house. I marked and numbered all the plants in the greenhouse, yes, even the ones up on the roof. I took the colours of the mismatching door knobs in the house and mixed them all together–no dice.

Maybe Master was testing to see what I would do to the plant like some personality test. You know those ones, the ones where if you choose red instead of maroon, you turn out to be a psychopathic killer.

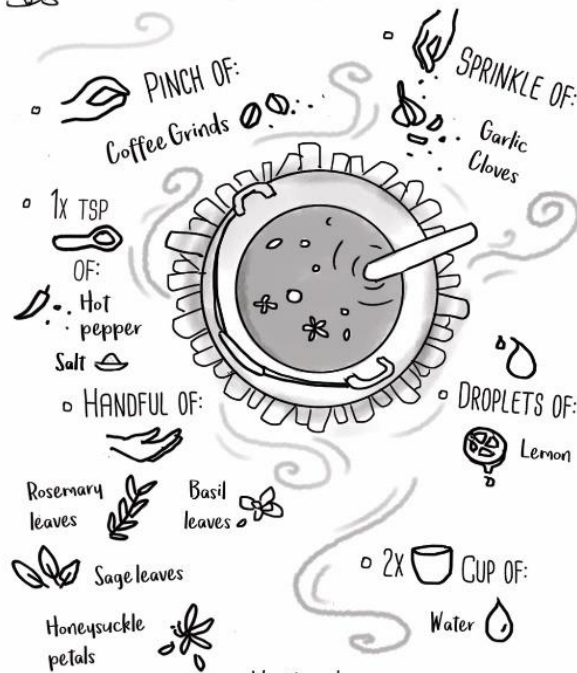
He keeps asking if I would like a hand with anything despite my numerous and polite refusals. It makes me more determined to show I can do this without anyone's assistance.

Your Loving Lottie

Potion of

# Plant Protection

Wear silver



## Method

Wear a piece of silver while collecting the ingredients.

Gather the honeysuckle, rosemary, basil and sage in this order.

Drop the lemon juice in the powdered hot pepper and add salt and coffee grounds.

Add two mixtures together in stone mortar.

Use the minced garlic cloves to make a horse shoe pattern on the top of the ingredients, and leave it in the afternoon sun for two hours.

Add water to the mixture and blend until liquefied.

Once potion turns purple, and smells like lavender and mint, pour into the potion bottle.

\*if flowers sprout from the concoction, plant it in your garden and start over.

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15<sup>th</sup> of March

Dear Sweetie Pie,

It's a disaster.

I require assistance that only the divine, supernatural kind can provide. Oh, how I wish you were here with me! I sincerely hope you are sitting when you read this letter, for the content carries grave if not horrifying news.

Had I known my life would dive straight into oblivion, I would never have opened my eyes this morning from the blissful dream of me passing this test with flying colours.

Not two, not three, but four leaves have withered from my beloved basil plant! I cannot fathom this. They were gleaming in the moonlight just last night. I am tearing my hair out. I am gnawing away at my fingernails. I am glaring at every furry creature that lingers around my window.

As I write to you I feel I'm an inch away from becoming an insane person.

I was one step away from kicking down Master's door and declaring there has been a deliberate sabotage of my plant and the perpetrator must be caught. However, I stopped my feet just a few centimetres from his door. Would he deem my now forty-four-leafed basil plant a failure? Asking for help was out of the question.

He clearly said I had to keep the plant alive.

Sure, I was greedily hoping that I would get his respect and his approval by keeping the plant at its peak condition. (I was also hoping I could turn it into a unique colour but that required some exotic bat blood.)

I decided to control my hysteria and keep a vigilant watch over the plant. With five rulers, sixteen sharpened pencils and countless rubber bands, I devised a contraption to alert me of any presence near the plant.

Ugh—the furry beasts from hell just set off three of the traps as I am writing this letter. I'll have to untangle them from the super glue and the glitter before Master comes upstairs to see what the yowling and hissing is about. I would like to believe I am a humanitarian sort, yet I have to selfishly admit that I am more of a narcissist than I give myself credit for. Nothing will get in my way of learning under my master!

Your Lovable Lottie

P.S: I delved into the Ministry of Spirit archives online to see if there was a spirit that could heal sickly plants. Alas, it seems I would have better luck getting help from a rock than having a spirit's assistance. Even if they frequent certain areas, plant spirits haven't aided humans in years, and they generally want nothing to do with us.

It seems my original plan of capturing one in the garden with a vacuum cleaner is forfeit.

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18<sup>th</sup> of March

Dear My Best Friend,

It is the collapse of everything that is good and just in this world.

It is so awful I fear that writing it down here will cause the paper to blacken and disintegrate and spread plague and disease throughout the land.

But as your curiosity will push you to madness, I will attempt to write this in a way that will not harm your eyes.

Not just one leaf, but half the plant has been corrupted with decay and destruction. As if to laugh in my face, the blackened leaves that fell to the floor made a pattern of a smiley face. My plant is being taken away to a faraway, cold, lonely place.

I don't know what to do. I have three days.

I haven't told Master for he may prematurely fail me.

Perhaps this is a challenge. Perhaps he sabotaged this plant in order for me to revive it.

I am now frantically searching for a concoction to revive dead plants... There is a promising one I've found in Master's study, but I must acquire fresh goat's blood.

I am searching for another recipe that guides goats to a peaceful, painless slumber. When he awakes, he won't even notice 600ml of blood missing. I will also bake him cookies.

Now... I must acquire a goat.

Wish me luck!

Your Lamenting Lottie

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19<sup>th</sup> of March

Dear Snubear,

Goats are hard to find in New Zealand.

I've asked Master if there were any goats that could be delivered using his shopping contacts. He shook his head and offered to buy miniature goats that could be stacked on top of one another. I humbly declined.

I have heard sheep and goats are interchangeable and a plethora of sheep loiter nearby. Luckily for me, our neighbour lets his sheep graze in a paddock near our home. They were blissfully ignorant of my analysis.

There are only ten green leaves left on my lifeline.

As fluffy and adorable as these creatures are, I am not going to get kicked out of this country to find another master who would surely have a sub-par garden and hold sub-par credentials compared with Master Mikaere. It would be like holding a candle to the sun.

With lack of frogs and time, I've decided to use ethanol. Simply put, good old inebriation. I'm sure the sheep will have fun. Drunk adults most often laugh until they're red in the face. Perhaps I should prepare an anti-hangover potion for the sheep.

I only need about 600ml of blood... If things turn sour, I shall blame it on the sheep vampires.

Your Loving Lottie

P.S: Master asked how the basil was 'going'. I couldn't decipher his tone but he hinted that if I was having any problems, I could ask him.

He said it was okay to ask for help. I smiled and politely refused.

"You sure? It won't affect your test, I promise," he said.

"I'm okay, no, I am better than okay. Leave this to me."

He gave me a thumbs up.

Although I returned the gesture, I can't help but wonder if his question was too well timed... Do you find this suspicious?



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19<sup>th</sup> of April

Dear Snumoo,

Yes, it has been a month since our last correspondence. Take heart; the reason lies within a punishment I received from ~~Master~~ Mikaere. Let me explain what has transpired in the last month.

Being the opportunist I am, I took the first sheep that wandered over to the fence. It was a curious thing, so easily separated from its group. It then trotted over to eat the freshly grown grass from our property.

As soon as it bent down to commence the blissful snack I had laced with a sleeping potion, I injected a small needle into the beast's back to draw its blood. It took an awful leap into the air and bolted down the field, taking the needle, my arm, and myself still attached to its back. I couldn't let go. Death was approaching my basil with a spring in its step that didn't belong to an old man.

In the end, ~~Master~~ Mikaere found me clinging to the furious animal, caked with mud and blood. He put me on safe ground and discovered the needle half-filled with the beast's blood. My tears flooded out and I couldn't see his expression through my blurry vision.

I was prepared for a severe scolding, expulsion, perhaps some torturous punishment. What I received was a crooked smile. He sent me off to have a bath, then prepared hot chocolate with bits of chilli in it.

He asked me why I was playing rodeo in a paddock full of sheep with a needle deep in an animal's back. I explained without a thread of a lie the reason for my behaviour. I didn't mix in my passion for staying under his tutelage. I deemed it a lost cause.

I told him the bitter truth about the basil plant then offered to pack my bags.

Before I turned around, he burst into laughter. I pulled my eyes off the floor and looked at him.

My initial thought was that he was happy to rid himself of a burden he never wanted.

"The basil was losing its special properties we use for potions, and was becoming a normal basil plant rather than being a royal herb. But it didn't want to let go of being a royal herb. And with everything in life, when you refuse to let something that should go, go, it will turn into poison. There was no saving it."

His explanation made no sense and I had no energy to understand. All I knew was that he had made this cruel task to render me without an excuse for my expulsion.

"I'll go pack my bags," I said, needing big gulps of air between the words.

"Lottie, you're not going to get kicked out of here."

The tears welling in my eyes froze. That's what it felt like, anyway.

"I wanted to see how you did when faced with an impossible task," he said, sipping his tea. "You didn't pass the test, since you never asked for help, probably because you thought I was going to fail you if you did, but that's the opposite. I need you to trust me and to ask questions when you're stuck."

I wanted to retort, but I bit my tongue.

"If you don't ask for help, then you won't ever learn. I hope next time, you ask me. Not to do the whole carrying for you, of course, but to at least help you achieve what you need. That's what my role is." He then reached out and tousled my hair. "And thank you for telling me the truth in the end."

"So... I'm still going to be your student?"

~~Master~~ Mikaere shifted uncomfortably and stroked his invisible beard. "You were already my student when you replied to my acceptance letter, Lottie."

He never said I would be kicked out if I failed... "You could have just told me this!" I yelled, feeling myself turning bright red.

He laughed. "Sorry, you really seemed like you wanted a test! What's a better way to teach than through experience, eh?"

His apologies were met with a concrete wall. If I thought about the heartaches and the sleepless nights, I couldn't bring myself to be happy about the turn of events.

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“You can have the stacking goat dolls as a prize?”

“I deserve a belladonna plant at least!”

“If you stop calling me ‘Master,’ I will get you one sooner?”

I have to admit, it wasn’t a welcomed lesson. As you know, I dislike showing a gap in my knowledge. Asking questions only leads to frustration, people being annoyed at you or worse, people lauding it over you.

I understand Mikaere isn’t the sort likely to do any of that, but if I can do things myself, I would rather keep others out. How else will I learn if I don’t find the answers for myself? However as promised, I will think on it and ask for help from Mikaere if I’m absolutely stuck.

So I received the collection of wooden goat dolls, and after a good night’s sleep, my first assignment was to apologize to the farmer next door for hurting his sheep. ~~Master~~ Mikaere offered to go with me, but I refused. It was my decision to use the sheep, so it was my responsibility. Another major part of being an adult is to take responsibility for my actions.

I explained to the farmer next door that I scared his sheep and in its mad panic it hurt itself. I braced myself for the finger wagging, yelling and questions of my upbringing, but he just shrugged and said it was fine. He offered me cookies his wife had baked. I tried to give him my two weeks of allowance but he laughed. He must’ve assumed I was a small child that hides behind an adult’s back, and I was determined to show how wrong he was. I refused to leave his land until we agreed that I’d buy his sheep for three weeks of allowance with ~~Master~~ Mikaere’s blessing.

When I explained to ~~Master~~ Mikaere about the sheep, he seemed surprised but agreed after learning how much the guilt would eat away at me if I didn’t take responsibility.

“Well, if it makes you feel better,” he said.

So it looks like the sheep and I are here to stay. I named it Fiona. I originally wanted to name it Blood Sample #001, but ~~Master~~ Mikaere wouldn’t let me.

Other than that, I have already learnt the plant names in his garden and met with some of his clients who come personally to buy his potions. So far, numerous and various, but no Queen of England.

One client of interest was a man dressed in black, his face covered in a black veil, dark as the endless night. He said nothing as his driver did the talking with ~~Master~~ Mikaere. I asked ~~Master~~ Mikaere what he sold to them, but he simply smiled. He told me I would know when I started making them too.

I will write more as soon as I get the chance.

Don’t worry Snu, my love for you cannot ever be ebbed away by a fluffy creature.

Your Lovely Student of Mikaere W Tahuriorangi’s, Lottie M Underwood

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