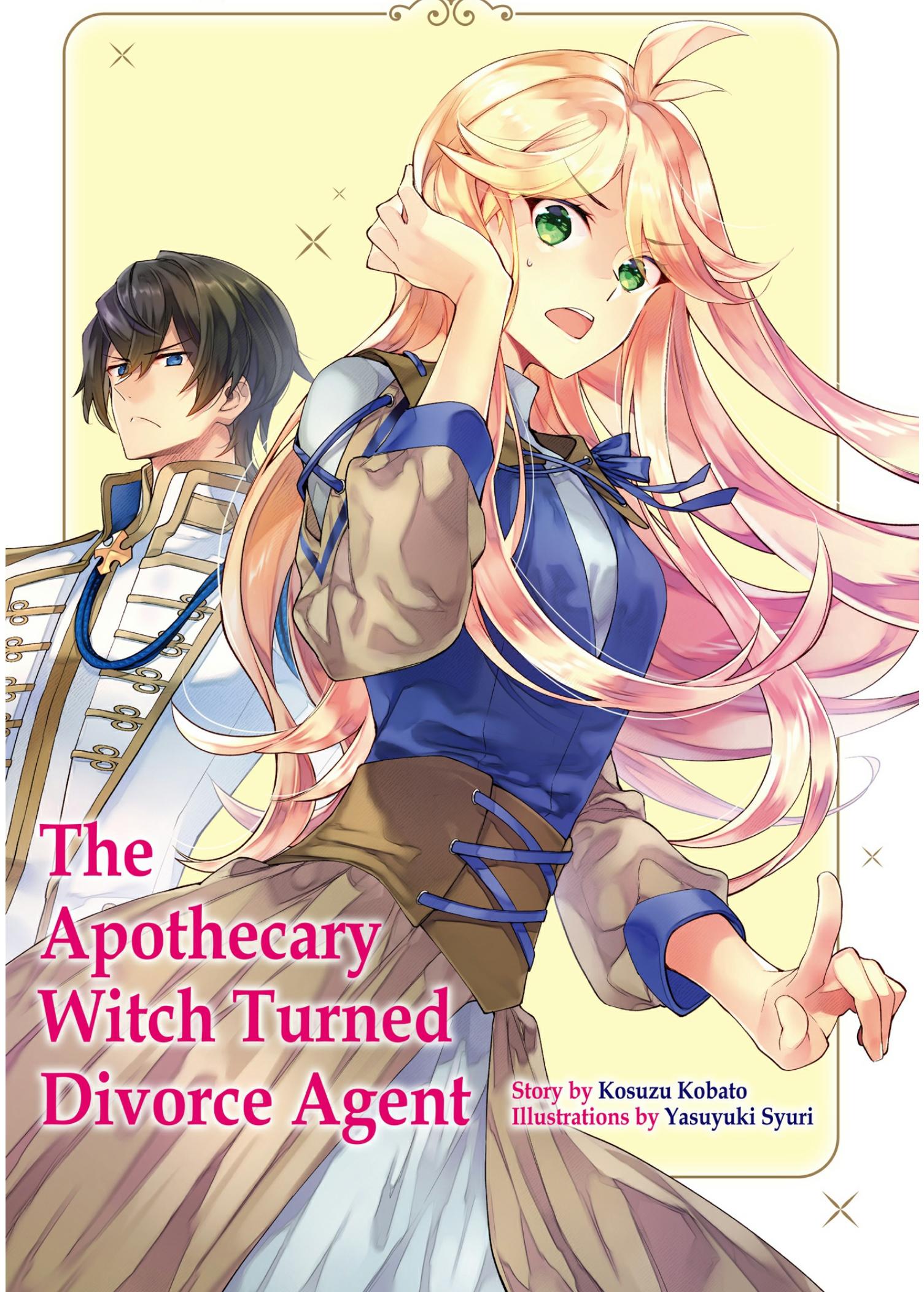


Story by Kosuzu Kobato
Illustrations by Yasuyuki Syuri



The image features a blonde woman with long, flowing hair and green eyes, smiling and looking towards the right. She is wearing a blue and pink layered outfit. To her left, a man with dark hair and blue eyes, wearing white and brown armor, looks towards the camera. The background is a bright blue sky with white clouds and green foliage. The title text is overlaid on the bottom left of the image.

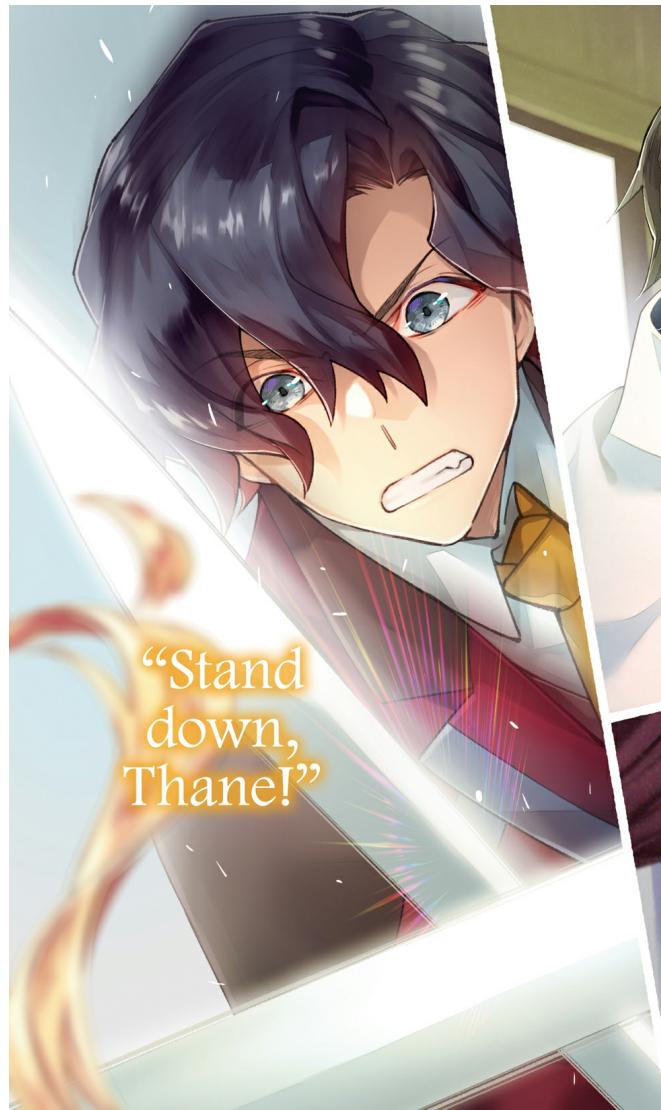
The
Apothecary
Witch turned
DIVORCE
AGENT



The Apothecary Witch Turned Divorce Agent

Story by Kosuzu Kobato
Illustrations by Yasuyuki Syuri







"Jeez,
that's hot!
Wait,
aren't you
putting
yourself in
danger
too?"

"I-I don't
even matter
anymore!"

A fire started
from each of
the spots where
a magic circle
had been
and quickly
transferred to
the wooden
gazebo.

Unlike a
normal fire,
fire spread by
sorcery spreads
quickly. In a
matter of
moments, the
elegant gazebo
was enveloped
in flames.

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1. Carla, the Apothecary Witch

In a back alley lined with soot-covered stone walls, on the outskirts of the royal capital, a certain noble lady was nervously looking around her surroundings.

She had a long, hooded cape covering her face and a luxurious dress, but no servant accompanied her. She looked up at the old sign that read “Apothecary,” pushed open the wooden door, and slipped inside.

“Welco—”

“Carla!”

The noble lady ran up to the counter before the shopkeeper, Carla, could even raise her face at the sound of the bell hanging on the door.

“Oh Carla, thank you! I couldn’t have done it without you!” she exclaimed.

“I-I’m delighted that I could be of service, madam,” replied Carla, opening her pale-green eyes wide, her long, light golden hair swinging as she raised her head.

The noble lady took Carla’s hands and pressed a small leather bag into them, saying, “This is the reward, as promised. I apologize that I forgot to give it to you then.”

“Ah, aha ha! Th-That’s right!” Carla said.

As the two remembered what had happened *then*, they both blushed simultaneously.

“And, so...the fact that I had made this request of you...” the noble lady began, tentatively.

Seeing the inquiring gaze under the hood, Carla brought her hands to her chest as if in prayer and smiled. “There is no need to worry,” she answered. “In the name of the goddess Lisandra and my teacher Varne, I swear that I will never tell another soul.”

“I am relieved,” the noble lady said after a slight pause. “Well then, Carla,” she continued, “I’m sure we’ll not meet again. May the light of Lisandra also shine upon you.”

Incanting the name of the goddess of love and fertility, the noble lady left the shop as if walking on air.

Once the door had taken its time to close, Carla peeked inside the leather bag in her hand.

“Wow, gold coins. And five of them to boot?! Countesses sure know how to do it right!” Carla exclaimed. With this much in hand, it would be possible to make all the payments that had been put off.

Nonetheless, even as she knew she had been saved, Carla sighed and slumped over the counter, a dull expression on her face.

“If only I could use more magic, this shop would thrive more, and I wouldn’t have to do a side gig like this,” Carla muttered.

This apothecary had belonged to the witch Varne.

When she passed the year before last from old age, Carla—Varne’s adopted child and only apprentice—had inherited it.

But Carla did not have the same skills as Varne, who had been renowned as an apothecary witch. Because Carla could only make limited types of medicine, the shop’s many clients had slowly left for other suppliers. Thanks to that, the shop was currently experiencing a new low in sales every month.

Although strengths and weaknesses were normal, a “witch” was supposed to be familiar with all types of magic and able to perform any necessary task well. But Carla was a failure as a witch. Her performance in magic was mediocre at best no matter how much effort she put into it.

It was not that Carla did not have talent. She displayed astounding levels of skill in two different types of magic in particular.

The first was cultivation magic, employed to grow healthy flora. But in order to use this to lead to a steady income, it was necessary to own a large plot of land. And of course, it was not possible to have a garden in the capital, where

real estate was expensive. Carla had considered moving to the countryside, but she did not want to leave behind this shop that held so many memories of Varne.

The second magic Carla excelled at was transformation magic.

I was sure that it wouldn't lead to any real profit, but...who knew there would be such a demand for it? thought Carla.

It had all started when a woman had come to the shop complaining of a certain malaise.

As Carla began asking the woman about her symptoms in order to prescribe her the medicine she needed, the woman—Rita—had broken down in tears, telling Carla she wanted a divorce.

Rita shared that her husband had absolutely no regard for their home life. They had had an arranged marriage a year ago, but ever since then he cared only for his work and returned home late every night. Her mother-in-law, who lived with them, kept telling Rita to have children, but the few times they did see each other, her husband was quick to retreat to his room. They had not had any conversation much less any kind of contact—or so Rita had shared, as she poured her bitter heart out to Carla.

Carla had been eighteen years old at the time, with no husband, mother-in-law, or relation of any kind. While she was unable to understand the agonies of someone in the position of a wife, she did—even if a bit bewildered—nod at the parts with which she could sympathize.

With no energy left to try to face her husband, Rita had lamented, “If only I could know what my husband was thinking.”

It was then that Carla had an idea and blurted out, “Would you like me to ask him for you?”

Who could've guessed that would be the end result, thought Carla.

The following evening, Carla had transformed into Rita to confront the husband in question. Speaking as Rita, she said to him, “Given everything, I want a divorce.”

"R-Rita?" the husband stammered in shock.

Carla had thoroughly discussed with Rita all the questions she was to ask. Her practice rounds had gone perfectly. Addressing the husband, she continued, "You asked me to marry you on the first day we met at our arranged meeting. That's only proof that you were fine marrying just about anyone, isn't it?"

They were in the couple's bedroom, although the couple had never used it. Several paces away, out of the husband's line of sight, stood Rita herself hidden behind the curtain. Carla wanted to ask all the questions before the divorce, so that Rita could hear all her husband's answers.

"I only wanted you to, uh...have a life where nothing was denied you," the husband offered.

"Oh yes, and thanks to you I am treated like some decorative object that's always in the way of someone," said Carla, in the form of Rita. "So much so that I would prefer to be a flower that was thrown away once it wilted. At least then someone would look at me with some tenderness."

"Y-You can't mean that," the husband implored.

"In place of my indifferent husband, my mother-in-law tells me every hour just how much she wants grandchildren. Apparently the fact that you come home late and that we are still without child is all my fault," Carla continued.

Carla was also using a magical tool for recording proof. It was a special item in the shape of a pendant, created by one of Carla's witch friends. Rita was paying the rental fee for it.

"The doctor suggested that I was only having headaches and dizziness due to 'emotional instability.' He even told me I was faking the symptoms," said Carla.

"What? Rita, you aren't feeling well?" he asked nervously.

"You had no idea, did you? You have no interest in me, after all," she said.

The husband seemed to be in shock after hearing how his wife had truly felt all this time. His face was pale with worry.

"I'm sick and tired of this life, of your mother's scolding, of you!" Carla exclaimed.

At that, the husband fell silent.

Hey, say something! I don't have much time left! Carla began to get anxious. Her transformation magic, which flawlessly altered not only appearance but also voice, had a time limit. Although she had aimed to transform herself at a suitable hour, because the husband had returned home later than usual, there was little time left before her magic ran out.

"Are you listening? Oh, I see. My words do not even warrant a response from you," Carla remarked.

Although Carla and Rita had come up with this plan in order to hear the husband's true intentions, he himself was doing nothing but panicking. It was just as Rita had said: conversations between the husband and wife really did not go anywhere.

The wife, who was ordinarily quiet, submissive, and not prone to demanding conversation, was making pointed declarations with unprecedented momentum. Did he not have *anything* he wanted to say to her?

I guess there's nothing left to do but to say that she's leaving...

Glancing down at the valise she had placed at her feet, Carla heaved a dramatic sigh. In that moment, the husband, who until then had been silent, his head bowed, gave a start and his shoulder quivered. He suddenly grabbed his wife's—as in, Carla's—wrist.

"What—?!" she said in surprise.

"Rita. I love you," the husband declared.

"Excuse me?!" Carla responded.

With bloodshot eyes, the husband approached Carla with intention. He continued, "I don't want that. I won't accept a divorce."

"I'm the one who doesn't want this!" Carla said.

"I was busy because...I wanted to buy us a house," the husband said.

"Huh? A house?"

"Yes—a house, just for the two of us. Rita, please. Reconsider. It was love at

first sight."

"I-I'd never heard that!" Carla said.

"I fell in love with you when I saw you working the stand at the Flower Festival three years ago. I pulled all the strings I could and begged the head of the trading company, just to get an introduction with you," the husband confessed.

What in the world? This is news to me, Carla thought. Hearing the shocking confession, Rita stepped out from behind the curtain.

Things could get bad if the husband turned around now. If he found out about the plan, there would be trouble. But then, since he was grasping Carla's hands, thinking she was his wife, and coming closer and closer, that probably was not going to be an issue.

"We were finally able to get married, and I was so happy and so nervous, and then I ended up drinking too much, and then by the time I realized, it was already morning...no, noon..." the husband continued in an outpour.

"And that's why you stood me up for our first night as a married couple?! Are you stupid or something?!" Carla shouted.

"That's right, I am stupid. I thought I'd upset you."

"Well of course I was upset! Plus you haven't shown your face at all since then."

If there was a bride that would not be upset at such a turn of events, Carla would like to meet her. It was either that she was very generous, or she did not love her husband. One or the other.

"I'm not good with words, so...I bought you a present, to apologize," he said.

"I never received it!"

"When I saw your face, I thought that there was something even more suited for you. But I haven't been able to give you anything."

"What's with that?!" Carla exclaimed, not understanding at all. But Rita, whose face she could see over the husband's shoulder, was blushing, her eyes glistening.

Carla did understand *that*: it was the face of a maiden in love.

"I'd gotten you a ring and a hair ornament and a lace handkerchief. I'd gotten them all for you, but I couldn't give you any of them," said the husband, bowing his head in defeat. With no strength left in him, he released Carla's hands.

"It's too late to tell you all this... I'm sorry. I didn't even realize you were in bad health. But...I don't want a divorce. I love you," he said.

"...Really?"

"I swear in the name of the goddess Lisandra," he insisted.

"I don't believe you. Look what happened the last time you swore at the altar."

"R-Rita..."

"If you're going to swear, swear to *me*."

And when the husband looked up, the woman he saw was not Carla—it was, instead, the real Rita, who had switched places with Carla when the husband had let go of her hand.

Seeing his wife, red in the face and turned away from him with feigned anger, the husband began to cry in earnest.

"I swear to you, Rita. I love you. I'll never make the same mistake again," he said.

"This is the only time I'll forgive you," Rita replied.

"I know. When dawn comes, let's move. I've finally finished moving in all the furniture."

"See, it's things like that! Why don't you talk to me about these things?!" Rita said in frustration.

"I-I'm sorry! I wanted to surprise you."

"I am surprised...you idiot."

"Rita...!"

Whoa...! I think it's time for me to get out of here...!

Her magic having reached its time limit, Carla ran out of the room, leaving behind the now embracing couple who was emitting all sorts of sweet and romantic vibes.

When Rita came to the shop several days later, her complexion was much improved. She looked almost like a different person. After thanking Carla numerous times with a happy smile on her face, Rita left a reward of a considerable sum and returned to the new home she now shared with her husband.

Ever since then, women who had heard about the incident from Rita stopped by Carla's shop, telling her that they, too, wanted a divorce—

I don't get it. Why do they all get back together? Carla asked herself.

In the two years that had passed, the number of cases in which Carla had served as a standin for the wife and led the couple to a successful divorce was—an astonishing zero.

In terms of serving as a standin, her clients always thanked her and gave her a reward of a higher sum than what was originally agreed upon. But as long as the result was the opposite of the initial request, Carla could not feel that she had accomplished the mission.

"Jeez, I really am a failure..." Carla said out loud. Just then, the deep sigh she heaved overlapped with the ringing of the bell on the shop door. When Carla looked up, a military uniform immediately jumped into her sight.

A knight...the royal guard, no less?

The knight's uniform—a jacket and slacks of matching pure white, embroidered in gold, lined with a fabric of deep blue and decorated with an aiguillette of the same color—was unmistakably that of the royal guard. The crest on the mantle that the knight wore over his jacket was that of a dragon on a shield. It was the symbol of the honorable party tied to the founding of the kingdom of Selvester.

This land, located on the western side of the continent, had long ago been nothing but a stretch of barren and desolate land, turned so by a dragon that was cursed by an evil spirit.

Then one day, there appeared a party of heroes and saints who had received the blessings of Azhdanel, the god of wisdom and war, and Lisandra, the goddess of love and fertility. The party freed the dragon from the evil spirit, and the children of men founded a kingdom upon the now peaceful land. It was a story, told and retold like a fairy tale, that even young children knew.

But the knight that stepped inside seemed out of place at the small apothecary in a back alley. He had lustrous black hair and eyes of lapis lazuli blue. He was tall and muscular, with a face that seemed excessively handsome.

Carla blinked at the knight, who came forward while looking around the shop suspiciously. Then, out of nowhere, the knight said, “Tch, what a shabby place.”

“Excuse me?” asked Carla, in response to the knight’s extremely rude remark. Her voice was much lower than she expected.

Shabby... Did he just say “shabby”?! About my dear, precious shop?! What’s with this guy?! And he even clicked his tongue!

It was true that the shop was old. Carla had been told Varne’s own teacher had opened it. That was roughly seventy years ago, and most of the fixtures had remained unchanged since then. The shop stood in an area that had been overlooked in the redevelopment of the capital, so its exterior was not much to look at either. It was also true that the interior was somewhat drab.

But its simplicity, with not even a painting to adorn the walls, was the result of having emphasized the utility of a shop that handled medicinal products. From the floor to the ceiling and even the shop counter, all the building materials had been ordered specifically to fit the shop. And even if there were no clients, Carla cleaned the shop every day, keeping both the storefront and the dispensary in the back maintained in a condition of spotless cleanliness.

In other words, no one had any business calling the place “shabby.”

If he wants unnecessary decorations and opulence, he can just head over to a fancy store or a bar! Carla thought in anger.

Carla was an orphan.

When she was four years old, the house in the suburbs outside of the capital in which she had lived with her parents, older brother, and older sister, burned

in a fire. Carla had been the only one who survived, and it was Varne who, through ties of fate, took her in after that.

Because she was young, Carla did not remember the life she had lived before she came to the apothecary.

Varne, who was old enough to be Carla's grandmother, was a strict teacher with a curmudgeonly personality. But to Carla, Varne was a guardian she adored, and this apothecary—both the shop on the first floor and the living space on the second—was a home she truly loved.

How dare he... Even if he is a knight, he's being incredibly rude! Carla thought.

The knights of the royal guard, because of their proximity to the royal family, had to be both skilled at the sword and come from nobility. They also had to be blessed with good looks. To someone born into a wealthy family who grew up with want for nothing, this shop certainly must appear shabby.

But a heart that allowed you to say that out loud with no hesitation at all is even more impoverished, Carla thought.

It seemed, however, that Carla's outburst, brimmed with antagonism as it was, had not reached him. The knight looked around the shop once more and, stopping with a clang of the metal fittings on his boots, turned toward Carla as he said, "It seems only the shop assistant is here. Hey, you there, is the witch who owns the store out?"

"Huh...?"

Plus he seemed to assume that Carla was merely a shop assistant.

The definition of being a witch was simple: whether one could use magic. Neither appearance nor age mattered. Yet for some reason, many assumed that a witch was either a voluptuous beauty or an old woman bent at the waist. Being young and plain-looking, in addition to not wearing a black robe typical of witches, there was a high probability that people saw Carla as an ordinary person simply attending the shop. It also did not help that her abilities as a witch were quite sparse.

"What type of medicine are you looking for?" Carla asked him with no intention of correcting his misunderstanding by telling him that she was the

witch he was looking for. Witches returned courtesy with courtesy, arrogance with arrogance.

When she asked him without even getting up from her stool behind the counter, a look of irritation crossed his handsome face, and once again, he clicked his tongue.

What is with this guy? Don't knights at least try to keep up appearances?

Carla could not tell if it was because he was a knight or because he was a man that he felt no need to hide his ill will. His attitude—of not once questioning his own superiority in the shop—seemed to Carla like he was mocking witches and, more importantly, Varne. It annoyed her.

“I wish to speak with the witch, not with you,” he said after a pause.

“So you did not come to buy medicine?”

“Ha! As if I would. How can I trust medicine made by a witch who reeks of disrepute?”

“In that case, there’s nothing I can help you with.”

“What did you say?”

“Please take your leave.”

When Carla shrugged her shoulders and motioned toward the door, the knight slammed his hand—which was fitted with a leather gauntlet—violently on the counter. Carla furrowed her eyebrows at the knight’s clear attempt to intimidate her.

Oh jeez. He started it himself, but he’s all bothered just because I talked back. He’s so immature.

The knight was most likely older than Carla’s twenty years, though he did not seem to have reached thirty yet either. Regardless, given that Carla had never concerned herself with the ages of others, she could not know for sure. His lapis lazuli eyes, burning with cold anger under his black hair, glared down at Carla as though he were faced with a sworn enemy of his family. He had a beautiful face that any woman would admire, but his expression completely ruined it.

“Are you threatening me?” Carla asked.

"What?" the knight asked in response.

If Nettie finds out that I talked back to a knight, she's gonna give me a scolding, thought Carla, picturing in the corner of her mind the exasperated face of her friend, who was also a witch. But Carla could not stand to hear either her shop or witches looked down upon.

Carla met the knight's eyes with her own pale-green ones. Raising her index finger, as if to show off her fingernails, which were stained by magic potions, she smiled very deliberately and said, "Oh my, for such a strong man with a sword to threaten a defenseless girl. How admirable—as expected of a knight of the royal guard, a true role model for the people."

"Why, you..." the knight seethed.

"'A sword to protect the royal family; a shield to protect the kingdom.' The royal charter even says that the pride of a knight is their integrity and fellowship. Though, I suppose it's nothing new that these titles and descriptions are in name and on paper only," Carla continued, not backing down. She articulated each phrase and imbued it with sarcasm.

The knight's hand that was on the counter closed into a fist and began to quiver with anger. Reciting the knight's royal charter seemed to really do the trick. She had read about it in one of the many books she had gone through while waiting for customers who never came. *Hooray for trivial knowledge!*

The royal guard—which was under the direct authority of the royal family—placed particular emphasis on discipline and respect among its knights. They were expected to be on model behavior even when they were off duty. If they were involved in a scandal while they were still in their uniforms, the punishment would be much more severe than a simple reprimand.

Though I'm sure it'll just get swept under the rug before anyone hears about it, Carla thought to herself.

Any incident with a commoner—and a witch at that—would most likely be ignored. There could be no expectation for any kind of punishment for the knight. In fact, if she were to physically attack him out of anger or even verbally abuse him, it would be used against her; she could be forced out of her own shop.

But against her expectations, the knight did not seem like he was going to take any action.

I see he has some amount of self-restraint, thought Carla. Perhaps he had pride about his role as a knight. To think that he was hiding his boiling rage behind his handsome face and knight's uniform—

"I still dislike knights," Carla muttered.

"What did you say?" the knight demanded.

"Nooooo-thing. The exit is right that way," she said instead, averting her gaze from the knight's white uniform and pointing toward the door once again. She picked up one of the books stacked up next to her and began to read: a clear indication that she had nothing more to say to him.

The knight stood there glaring at Carla, his displeasure on full display. After a while, however, he sighed heavily. He took something out of his breast pocket and placed it on the counter. When Carla raised her gaze slightly, she saw a stately envelope.

"And that is...?" she asked.

"An order for Carla the apothecary witch, from Her Majesty the Queen. Even an assistant like you must know that this is ruled by the pact between the royal family and the witch. Refusal to comply will not be accepted," the knight declared. "As soon as the store owner confirms the letter, I'll have her accompany me to the royal castle."

"Oh, I see. You're a messenger from the castle," Carla responded. She closed the book in her hand with a soft *thump*.

In this kingdom, the use of sorcery and magic was managed by a system of permits. Since it was possible to study and acquire the abilities of sorcery, there were schools that taught it, enabling the kingdom to keep a record of existing sorcerers.

Magic, on the other hand, depended solely on the abilities of the individual. It was not tied to blood or age. It was therefore not rare for someone to discover they were a witch because one day they were suddenly able to use magic. Because magic itself was beyond human comprehension, the kingdom was

unable to understand or manage the existence of witches who held such power.

Witch hunts had been carried out in the past in an attempt to control magic and witches. Those were bitter moments in history, difficult times for both witches and the kingdom. Because of that, witches and the kingdom now had a neutral but inextricable relationship—witches made declarations of their powers to the kingdom and, by entering a pact of mutual nonaggression, were permitted to continue using magic.

Carla was no exception; she, too, had made her declaration of magic to the kingdom.

There was also an optional component to the pact—that the witch “accept up to three requests made by the royal family.” The knight was apparently a messenger who had brought a request as indicated by the pact.

Carla had actually had an inkling that he might be such a messenger—even if this was the royal capital, there was no reason for a knight of the royal guard to come as a client to a shop in a deserted back alley—but she had chosen not to ask why he was there because, well, his behavior was simply unpleasant.

“If that was the case, you should’ve just said so,” Carla said.

“It’s an order coming directly from the queen. I can’t tell just anyone! Anyway, I’m going to wait until the witch Carla returns.”

“That’s fine, but...if you weren’t a customer, then I shouldn’t have forced myself to be so polite.”

“What was that?”

“Oh, nothing.”

Such requests were usually for tasks that were only possible by witches—such as wishing for happiness at a wedding or easing the pain in the hearts of those left behind at a funeral.

It must have been a few years ago, when the younger sister of the king was expecting, that Nettie bestowed the “blessing” magic upon Her Royal Highness, Carla recalled. Carla had also heard that another witch had once been asked to provide relief from insomnia.

Because of the magic performed during such requests, it was not uncommon for a witch's magic to be ridiculed with the phrase "It's the thought that counts." But in truth, it was because magic had such great efficacy that the pact between witches and the royal family continued to this day.

There had also been somewhat violent requests in the past—but in those cases, witches tended to cast oddly elaborate curses or impose complicated conditions for the success of the magic. In the end, the royal family recognized that requests related to the use of brute force were more efficiently carried out by knights, soldiers, and sorcerers, and such requests eventually ceased coming to the witches.

In any case, to have the messenger of my first request be this guy... I have zero luck, thought Carla. Did they have no one else to send but a knight who clearly felt a raging hostility toward witches? Carla could tell from the insignia on his collar that he held some kind of an official position in the royal guard, and she felt bad for the subordinates who had to deal with such an irritable superior.

Carla gave the knight a sidelong glance. He sat in a chair in front of the counter with his arms crossed. She let out a small sigh, and while reaching for the envelope on the counter said, "I see. A request as part of the pact, huh?"

"Wait! That letter is enchanted!" shouted the knight.

"Yeah, it sure is."

Carla's powers may not have been great, but she was still a witch. She knew just by looking that the envelope was enchanted with sorcery. Ignoring the knight who leaped out of the chair to stop her, Carla held her hand out over the wax seal. A magic circle suddenly appeared, and its bright light became reflected onto Carla's palm.

"Get away from that!" he shouted.

"It's fine—"

As the knight was about to leap over the counter, a panicked expression on his face, the magic circle dissipated with a sound like the ringing of a bell. The envelope then opened on its own.

"Wha...?!" the knight stammered.

“—because I’m the witch it’s addressed to.”

“Y-You are?!”

Seeing the knight’s face, his shapely eyes rounded in shock, Carla felt a small sense of victory.



The sorcery the letter was enchanted with ensured that only the addressee could open it safely. If anyone but the addressee attempted to open it, the letter would explode, automatically sending a moving image of the scene to whoever had enchanted it. It was an advanced sealing sorcery that was used to exchange confidential documents and could only be undone by designated individuals.

The ability to use that level of sorcery was limited to those of a higher class than even many of the royal sorcerers were at. The request came from someone who had status that allowed them to instruct such sorcerers—in other words, it had to come from the royal family.

And given that only the addressee was able to open the envelope, there was no need to confirm Carla's identity as this knight had done. Even if someone else opened it and became injured, it would be their own fault—for not checking whom the letter was addressed to and not realizing that it was sealed with sorcery. The messenger would not be blamed.

Perhaps the knights' manual indicated the need to hand the letter directly to the individual to whom it was addressed, but the practice was frankly a waste of time.

He's a knight of the royal guard, isn't he? He must have other things to do than to sit and wait here. He's so inflexible...or maybe he's just too serious?

What was more, this knight had tried to save Carla from an explosion.

He doesn't even seem to want to be here, but... What a weirdo.

While still unable to figure out his motives, Carla opened the letter. Meanwhile, the knight awkwardly continued making excuses, mumbling, “A little brat like you is a witch...?”

“Well pardon me for not wearing a black robe. Or for not being a beauty or an old woman.”

The knight's face grew even more sullen when Carla showed zero contrition.

Even if I don't seem like a witch and can't use that much magic, I'm still a witch! Oh no, I'm getting sad saying that myself...

The witch Ange, who could use even less magic than Carla, managed to grow her noble clientele based primarily on her beauty and smooth talking. She now owned a mansion in one of the best neighborhoods in the royal capital.

Carla knew that her low status as a witch was based not only on her magic skills but her inability to get by in the world—but she could not very well change her personality.

“No, but, a witch like this...? Seriously...?” the knight continued mumbling.

“Will you shut up for a minute?” Carla said.

What do you mean by “a witch like this”? Carla thought. But deciding not to pursue the matter, she ignored the bewildered knight and turned to the letter.

But the letter contained no details about the request.

All it contained was a confirmation of the pact, a single sentence that read, “Come to the castle with the knight who brought the message,” and the signature of the queen.

Huh? It’s not about the celebration of the crown prince’s wedding?

Carla, her head always filled with thoughts about her apothecary shop as it continued its steady course to crashing and burning, knew very little about what was going on in the world around her. But even so, she at least knew of the upcoming marriage of the crown prince. His fiancée, to whom he had been engaged since childhood, was the daughter of a duke. Carla assumed that a request coming just ahead of his marriage must be related to it.

Then what is it that she wants? Well, I guess I’ll find out if I go...

At Carla’s skill level, depending on the type of magic called for, she might need the assistance of magical tools and magic stones. If she could get some information in advance, she would be able to prepare for the meeting.

“If you’ve read the letter, then we’re heading to the castle. Follow me,” said the knight.

“Right,” replied Carla, half-heartedly. Following the knight, she came out from behind the counter. As she walked, she grabbed two sachets from one of the shelves. Just as the knight stepped through the door, she called out to him and

said, "Here you go, Sir Knight."

"What is it?" the knight asked, stopping in his tracks. When he turned around, Carla half forced the sachets of herbs into his hand.

"Deodorizers. Just put them in your shoes and gauntlets after you take them off," she said.

"What are you...? Hey!"

While he was distracted by the objects in his hand, Carla slammed the door in his face and immediately turned the lock.

"Witch?! What is the meaning of this?!"

The knight's pounding reverberated against the door, but of course Carla was not going to open it for him.

"You may not be aware of this, Sir Knight, but having the witch go to the royal castle doesn't appear anywhere in the pact," Carla said.

"Huh?!"

"In other words, shouldn't the person who has the request be the one to make the trip?" she put forth, using her magic to send her voice through the door.

"Why you...! What irreverence!" came the panicked response from the knight.

"And by the way—before you talk about reeking of disrepute, check out those gauntlets of yours that you never take off."

Carla could almost hear the knight's shock.

Carla pointed her index finger and, using magic, made the door to her shop disappear, as if blowing out a candle. She also made sure to shut out all noise from the outside. The shop returned to its usual silence.

Carla stretched and then let her hands remain above her head in a triumphant pose.

"Aha ha, I told him! I drove him away!" Carla shouted, the image of the knight's face turning bright red with anger lifting her spirits slightly. But in the

next moment realization dawned on her and she said to herself, “Oh shoot. I gave him those deodorizers for free.”

Drooping her shoulders, Carla confirmed once again that she disliked knights—and returned to her spot behind the counter.

2. Thane, the Knight of the Royal Guard

“Hey, open the door! What are you...? Huh?! The door disappeared?”

Thane Howell, the knight of the royal guard, was visibly upset. The wooden door to the apothecary, on which he had been pounding, disappeared in the blink of an eye. His raised fist landed on a stone wall covered in soot. The sign that had hung above his head also disappeared.

“Magic, huh...?” Thane whispered, gritting his teeth as he felt the rough texture of the stone against his hands.

I should have known not to give the witch any chances...

Not only were witches not bound by common sense, they also did not necessarily need to rely on magic circles or incantations when performing magic. Because of that, their actions were difficult to predict.

Thane had let his guard down because, contrary to his expectations, the witch in question turned out to be a young, normal-looking girl. As a result, he had been completely done in.

And he knew that his behavior had been childish.

After all, Thane disliked witches. One could even say that he detested them.

He had had no intention of becoming involved with one during his life—but if asked by the queen herself to serve as a messenger to one, there was no way he could refuse. He had tried to suppress his irritation as it continued to well up, but his look of displeasure had probably been even worse than usual.

But when he had finally roused himself up and entered the old apothecary, there was only one girl—barely an adult—sitting by herself at the counter. He almost felt like he had been faked out in a fight.

He had not expected the girl to be the witch herself. But for her to continue to be defiant even after learning that the message was a request tied to the pact—witches truly were irreverent.

Even so, duty was still duty.

Wanting to take the witch to the castle as soon as possible and put an end to the loathsome task, he had walked out of the shop—but the moment he had done so, he was met with rejection.

He was infuriated by his own naivete as well as the witch's cunning.

"Tch..." Clicking his tongue bitterly, Thane pounded on the wall once again, as if to confirm one final time what he already knew.

Witches, too, were human—but they lived according to a different logic. Their position in the kingdom was a bit complicated. Although they were citizens, they were not the king's subjects, maintaining a kind of sovereignty. In other words, they were not people for whom royal decrees had any binding power.

Thane understood that much. But they were able to enjoy life in the kingdom because they were beholden to the pact. They had no option *not* to comply.

"Shouldn't the person who has the request be the one to make the trip?"

He could still hear the witch's voice, which felt like it had passed through the door and been blown directly into his mind.

For her to attempt to summon the queen... There is a limit to how imprudent she can be.

Thane had a debt of gratitude to the royal couple.

The king and queen had once offered to serve as the guardian of the family of a fallen baron—Thane's family. They protected his family until Thane's older brother reached adulthood and officially inherited the title. They even arranged for Thane to be able to become a knight. If not for them, both Thane and his brother would most likely have found themselves buried underground by now. In both name and fact, the king and queen were their saviors.

That was why Thane had absolute trust in the king and queen. Their order was but a forecast for him to turn into reality.

Plus this task was the first direct order Thane received since being promoted to the position of vice commander of the First Battalion of the Knights of the Royal Guard. Although he objected to the request—or, rather, to the selection

of the individual receiving the request—he had to carry out the order without delay. Even if the witch had no obligation, she was still not permitted to refuse a summons from the royal family.

It did not matter that she was a plain-looking girl or that she had clear, pale-green eyes. She was still a witch, living beyond the reaches of common sense. That was all it was—and yet it left a bitter aftertaste in his mouth. Not only that...

“My gauntlets reek, she says? Why...” Thane muttered, irked even more by the fact that he could not outright deny what she had said. But when he raised his fist that clenched the deodorizers she’d given him, a soft, clean scent wafted toward him. The refreshing scent gave him the illusion he was standing in the middle of a forest of young greenery; it immediately calmed his heart.

For something made by a witch, it was...to be honest, to put it modestly...not bad.

I guess there’s no need to throw them away here.

Thane stored the sachets, which were made with unbleached fabric, in his breast pocket. He turned and walked out of the back alley where the apothecary should have been.

§

When Thane returned to the royal guard’s building on the castle grounds, he saw Tobias, the vice commander of the Second Battalion, at his desk in the administrative office.

“Oh, welcome back, Thane. Hmm? Where’s that pleasant smell coming from?” Tobias asked.

“Never mind that. More importantly, Tobias—come with me,” Thane said.

“Right now? Well, I just finished the inspection, so I guess it’s fine,” Tobias responded.

A bit of exercise was best for clearing the mind. As Thane lifted his sword to indicate his intentions, Tobias—still sniffing for the source of the scent—gave a bothered response even as he eagerly began to put away his paperwork.

Thane and Tobias came from similar circumstances.

They were both second-born sons of families headed by barons. They were of the same age, both entering the knights' battalion as apprentices at the age of ten. They were also promoted to the rank of vice commander at the same time. Because of this, many often compared the two, calling them rivals. But these similarities were not fate or destiny; they were simply coincidence.

Tobias was soft in both looks and personality, which was the exact opposite of Thane—a hard-liner through and through.

They both had a reputation for their skills with the sword, and each respected the other as the only one in the knights' brigade with whom he could spar without holding back. And perhaps *because* of the differences in their personalities, they both felt they could call the other a close friend.

"I'll go get ready, then. Would you mind putting these back on the shelf?" asked Tobias, indicating a wooden box of equipment.

"Sure thing," Thane replied.

Tobias was in charge of managing the supplies of the knights' brigade. Thane watched Tobias leave for the armory room. Lifting the box, Thane saw that it contained medicine and bandages for first aid treatments. Recalling the negotiations at the apothecary that had ended in failure, Thane grimaced once more.

Tobias eventually returned, having completed his preparations, and the two made their way to the training grounds attached to the building. As they sparred, Tobias asked Thane the reason for his ill humor. Thane told him what had happened—though even Thane himself did not know the details of the request made by the queen. As he explained where he had gone, Tobias opened his eyes wide.

"Wait. To the witch in the back alley? Really?" Tobias asked.

"Why would I lie about a thing like that?" Thane responded.

"Her Majesty must know how much you dislike witches. Boy, she has no mercy—as usual."

“That’s irreverent.”

“Oh jeez, you’re so scary.”

The knights’ swords, swung down at the same time, crossed near the sword guards. The other knights, who had been training before Thane and Tobias arrived, relinquished the grounds to watch the two spar. They were all afraid of the two vice commanders, who seemed to be chatting even as they engaged in fairly serious combat training. Their conversation, however, could not be heard over the clashing of their swords.

“But you know, even though we don’t have that many witches in this kingdom, if you keep trying to avoid them, you’ll probably encounter problems later on. Maybe it was a good opportunity,” Tobias said.

“Perhaps,” Thane replied after a pause.

Becoming vice commander meant that he would have to deal with external parties more often. Thane could not pick and choose the people he had to meet with, and it was not realistic to think that he could refuse to work with certain individuals just because he did not care for them. He understood that—at least in his head.

“And? Did you take care of what you needed to?” Tobias asked.

“She refused to come to the castle,” Thane replied.

“Huh?”

“She said she had no obligation to make her way to the castle.”

“Aha ha! Yeah, that sounds like something a witch would say!” Tobias laughed.

“It’s nothing to laugh about, Tobias.”



Although Thane reprimanded Tobias, the witch's response had indeed been very witchlike. That much Thane agreed with.

She only thinks about herself... She's just like that woman, Thane thought.

Thane's father had taken favor upon a certain foresight witch. Neglecting both his family and his territory, he had ended up spending much of the family fortune in exchange for her services. In the end, his father had become involved in various troubles and had passed away.

Thane's sickly mother had also passed amid the hardship and despair. Before he was even ten years old, Thane—and his older brother—had been thrust into a life running and hiding from creditors.

The witch herself had not had any remorse at all. In fact, she had renounced any responsibility by calling his father "a fool who was deceived." While it was true that his father had been foolish, those were not words that the woman who was the root cause of the foolishness was permitted to speak.

The foresight witch and the girl Carla he met today did not look at all alike. But they had their irreverent attitude in common.

Meanwhile, Tobias—who had laughed that Carla acted very much as a witch might—suddenly donned a more serious expression. "Thane, I'm pretty sure you wouldn't do this, but...did you go to the apothecary in your knight's uniform?" Tobias asked.

"Of course; I went while I was on duty," Thane replied.

"Oh, yikes," Tobias said.

Bringing his attention back to the present moment, Thane smoothly parried Tobias's sword. Tobias skillfully regripped his sword and shrugged his shoulders.

"That's probably the reason your meeting didn't go well—your uniform. Just because you dislike witches, doesn't mean you can fail to do your research," Tobias said.

"I don't understand what you mean, Tobias," said Thane, furrowing his brows at his exasperated colleague.

"That Miss Witch of yours dislikes knights...or, well, she probably dislikes

knights too, but more than that, the knight's uniform is itself a taboo with her," Tobias explained.

"The uniform is a taboo? What does that mean?"

"The area including that back alley is currently my battalion's jurisdiction, right? I learned about it when I stepped into this position, but if you wear your uniform to the apothecary, apparently it puts her really on guard. But as long as you're not wearing your knight's uniform, it's fine—so if you need to go there for any reason, you're supposed to wear your regular clothes."

"Huh?"

Even as he continued blocking Tobias's attacks—which rained upon Thane mercilessly despite the relaxed way Tobias explained the situation—Thane could not help questioning what he heard.

"I heard that she has a bad memory about it from childhood," Tobias continued.

"A bad memory—about knights?"

"Yeah, and about the royal guard, specifically. I think they said it was about fifteen years ago. And you know, back then *he* was still the commander."

"Right, *him*."

As Tobias lowered his voice, Thane nodded deeply, knowing exactly whom he was talking about.

Roughly fifteen years ago, when the two of them had first joined, the royal guard had been in a rough state of affairs. The commander at the time had been someone far from the embodiment of integrity. He was so sly and insidious that even a ruffian mercenary would have been an improvement. Even Thane and Tobias—who were apprentice knights at the time—could never forget all they had had to endure in a royal guard rampant with violence and bribery.

The ones who rebuilt the knights' brigade, bringing to light the wrongdoings of its commander and purging its upper echelons of rotten elements, were the current commander and the king and queen—who had been the crown prince

and princess at the time. Thane's trust in the royal couple also stemmed from this incident.

The former commander had also had ties to organizations in the criminal underworld, which meant that his evil deeds were not contained within the brigade. In the end, many individuals had been punished, and there were also noble families who had been stripped of their titles.

Many of the people outside of the knights' brigade who had been negatively affected by the commander's acts had been nobles and wealthy merchants. It was unlikely that a small shop like the apothecary would have been his target, but it was possible that he had refused to pay for medicinal products or had used threats and intimidation in some way. The former commander and his entourage had been the types of people who derived pleasure from harassing and causing pain for young children and the elderly.

"You know, our knight's uniform hasn't changed at all, so it probably triggers memories," Tobias continued. "Our memories from childhood tend to be pretty powerful."

If that witch felt for knights a disdain similar to what Thane himself felt for witches, he could understand why she would recite the knights' royal charter with such contempt. When he replayed in his mind the memory of his visit to the apothecary, he felt like he saw the witch's pale-green eyes wavering. Perhaps she had been afraid.

"So yeah, if a knight suddenly showed up in his uniform, Miss Witch would probably have been like, 'Whoa!' Plus if you had your usual irritated expression and were all overbearing to boot, then of course the meeting wouldn't go well," Tobias said. Attitude aside, he added, had Thane not worn his uniform, she probably would not have kicked him out.

"You were probably lucky she talked to you at all," Tobias concluded.

The petite witch was much shorter than Thane. He was not good at estimating women's ages, but he was certain that she was younger than he was.

It was childish of me to act that way, thought Thane, as guilt suddenly attacked him and stabbed him in the chest.

Hearing Tobias's explanation did not change the fact that he detested witches. But he was willing to admit that the day's failed encounter was the result of his failure to do his research ahead of time.

"You're gonna go back, right? Make sure you wear your regular clothes," Tobias said.

"I'll do that," Thane replied.

"And if that doesn't work—whoa!"

With a loud, dull sound, Thane's sword fell from his hands.

Tobias opened his gray eyes wide in astonishment and stopped the sparring. "Whoa, I'm sorry!" he exclaimed.

"No, that was my mistake," Thane replied.

They typically did not hold themselves back, but they were also rarely injured in training. Thane had not prevented the hit because he had been distracted by their conversation.

To lose my focus with something as small as this—I'm still not where I need to be.

When he took off his gauntlet, he saw that the base of his thumb was swollen. It was a good thing they had been using protective gear and training swords. As Thane moved his thumb, seemingly unconcerned by pain, Tobias let out a moan and made a face.

"The bone seems to be fine," Thane said nonchalantly.

"No way, it looks painful! Make sure you put some ointment on it. Boy, I'm glad Morgan just came by with a shipment."

"That's right, there was some ointment in the box I just put away."

Morgan was a supplier who worked with the knights' brigade. All the medicinal products he carried were very effective. Although they were a bit on the pricier side and the amount available even through wholesale was not terribly large, the products he sold worked much better than those from the other suppliers. They were indispensable for the knights' brigade.

"Let's stop here for today. Make sure you take care of that as soon as you can," Tobias said.

"Will do."

Leaving Tobias, who said he was going to do a training session with his subordinates, Thane headed for the administrative office and took out the medicine box. When he opened the jar of the ointment for bruises, he smelled its distinct fragrance. It reminded him of the apothecary in the back alley—with its storefront that was so tidy it looked almost bleak.

The shop barely had any products on the shelves...

Although there were cabinets with locks on them, most of the shelves were empty, and there were only one or two items on them at best. There were apothecaries that prepared products once an order was placed rather than having them sit on shelves—but even then, it was normal for a shop to have *something* on display.

Even in the royal capital, the heart of the kingdom, there were few doctors. Consulting one often came at a high price, and medicine prescribed by a doctor was also expensive for commoners. So most residents went to apothecaries rather than seeing a doctor.

But during the whole time Thane had been in Carla's apothecary, not a single customer had come by. If there were few products and even fewer customers, it meant that the shop was not doing well—which meant that Carla must not be a skilled apothecary.

A question arose in Thane's mind.

Even if there was a pact, it was not the case that any and all witches received royal requests. Although the number of witches in the kingdom could be counted on two hands, there were still witches who never received such a request.

Would Her Majesty call upon someone who didn't have a certain level of skill? Plus her breaking of that sealing sorcery was...

It was unlikely the queen would err in her selection.

There were also other factors that stuck out in Thane's mind.

Thane had been present on several occasions when letters that were enchanted with sealing sorcery were opened. It was rare, however, for a magic circle as vivid as the one he saw today to appear. The color and brightness of magic circles indicated the power of magic held by both the one who cast the spell and the one who undid it. The apothecary witch was clearly someone with a great deal of magic within her.

Then, why does she have no customers?

The witch had pale skin, as if she had not eaten well in some time. Her lusterless, light golden hair; her dry, thin fingers—the image that came to him overlapped with that of him and his older brother after their parents had passed. Thane shook his head to get rid of both.

“It has nothing to do with me,” he muttered to himself.

The coolness of the ointment wiped away the heat and pain in his thumb. Like the other times he had used it, he would be healed completely in a matter of hours—as if there had been no bruise to begin with.

Thane skillfully wrapped the bandage around his hand as he wondered whether the door to the apothecary would return by the next day.

§

When Carla heard the bell of the shop door ring, she poked her head out of the dispensary and found the knight from the day before standing in the entrance.

Oh jeez, he's here again! Wait. He's wearing...regular clothes today? Carla noted curiously. Though the knight had his sword with him, he was not wearing his knight's uniform. He did not have on his gauntlets or his boots either. Instead he wore a simple shirt and jacket.

As Carla stared intently at him without saying a word, Thane turned to her with a disgruntled expression and said, “I apologize about yesterday. I came to ask once more for you to accompany me to the royal castle to fulfill the pact.”

“Okay,” Carla replied.

“Even if you refuse— Huh?” Thane stopped midsentence. “You’ll come?”

“I won’t if you don’t want me to.”

“N-No! It’s not that. It’s just...your behavior is entirely too different from what it was yesterday.”

“The same goes for you,” Carla replied.

At that, Thane could do nothing but seal his lips tightly.

She would meet arrogance with arrogance, and if not that, then whatever it was that was called for. Even though he was clearly unhappy to do so, the knight was apologizing. Since that was the case, Carla had no intention of continuing to make a fuss. If he was going to rectify his behavior, Carla could do the same—though, truth be told, Carla’s change of heart was the result of having been scolded by her witch friend Nettie. The other witch had just popped into Carla’s house for a visit when she had sensed in the ether that something had happened.

Jeez, it’s all Nettie’s fault! Carla thought to herself.

Witches did not become chummy with each other just because they were witches. What mattered was whether they got along or their interests aligned, simple as that. With Nettie, it was the former. Carla had formed her friendship with Nettie soon after Varne had adopted her.

Being particularly skilled at creating magical tools, Nettie was known as the “craft witch.” The two frequently visited each other—Carla going to Nettie’s house that also served as her workshop, Nettie coming to Carla’s apothecary.

Nettie—who was a childhood friend and also like a relative—had shown up out of nowhere the night before, a bottle of wine in hand. When Carla explained to Nettie, who in fact called herself Carla’s surrogate older sister, what had happened during the day, Nettie cupped her head in her hands in frustration.

To summarize Nettie’s long scolding: First, Carla’s method of driving away the knight lacked skill. She should have done so more elegantly, trying to lead him to think he wanted to leave of his own volition.

Carla, agreeing, genuinely reflected upon her errors.

Second, upsetting a knight or a queen would cause problems later on. It was fine if they took it out on other witches, but what if they came after Nettie as well? Carla really ended up getting an earful from her friend on this point.

To make up for her blunder, Nettie said, Carla should accept the request with all the solemnity she could muster. If Carla could not promise that, she would no longer let Carla borrow any of the magical tools she made. That last remark by Nettie proved to be too much for Carla.

Nettie's magical tool for recording conversations was now indispensable for Carla's side gig. The magical lamp that she had special-ordered was also essential for growing herbs on the second floor of the apothecary. Not being able to use those tools would create far too many problems for Carla.

So she begrudgingly vowed to Nettie that she would go to the royal castle the next time a messenger came.

I didn't think he'd come back this fast, though. I was planning on doing prep work for making medicine today.

Even so, a witch's vow held absolute power. In fact, it was more binding than even the pact with the royal family. The best course of action now was to go swiftly and conclude the business swiftly as well.

Heaving a deep sigh, Carla looked at Thane. He still could not manage to hide his distrust of Carla from his handsome face, but he looked a slight bit more agreeable than the day before.

This messenger's role was to take the witch to the castle for a meeting with the queen. Seeing as he came himself, he seemed to have been unable to pass the role over to someone else.

"You're not wearing your uniform today," Carla said to him. "Is it your day off?"

"I'm on duty," the knight replied. Then he said, after a pause, "I heard that you...disliked it."

"Oh really." *So he strategized, huh?* Carla thought.

The old knight from the knights' brigade who was in charge of patrolling the capital had been an old friend of Varne's. They had often had tea together. Since Varne had passed and the old knight himself had retired from the brigade and left the capital to live with his daughter and her family, Carla of course had not seen him. But perhaps he had told his successor that the sight of a knight's uniform made her uncomfortable.

Although she was not entirely happy that information about her was being passed around, she was not exactly hiding her feelings on the matter either—so it was probably wrong for her to complain about it. It really was true that her heart was made restless every time she saw that white uniform.

Well, not that it matters, Carla thought, as she retreated to the back room. She took off the white coat she wore whenever she prepared her medicinal products, then she picked up the small bag she had already prepared. Slipping past Thane, who was still standing awkwardly at the entrance, she opened the shop door.

Turning back to look at him—unmoving, wearing an expression marked by skepticism—she asked, “Aren’t you coming?”

“Of course I am!” he shouted in response.

As Thane rushed out of the door, it closed behind him and locked on its own. A key appeared out of nowhere and, floating, settled in Carla’s hand.

“How convenient,” Thane murmured.

“You think so? It’s pretty normal,” Carla replied.

Nettie and the other witches all protected their homes with magical locks. It was a common practice among witches. Carla then took off, walking briskly, leaving Thane behind as he mumbled about how such a lock was not, in fact, normal.

“Hey, wait! Don’t go off on your own without permission!” he shouted again.

“We’re going to the castle, right? I know the way, so I don’t need anyone to guide me,” said Carla, pointing toward the royal castle standing on a hill in the distance.

"Wha...? That won't do. Besides, it'll be troublesome if you try to run off on our way there," Thane responded with a sour look on his face.

"Oh, I wouldn't do that. Probably," replied Carla, looking away from him.

"Probably?" Thane asked, furrowing his eyebrows further.

Carla continued walking with intention, but...only for a short while. Before she had gotten terribly far, she was already out of breath.

Looking down at her in her sorry state, Thane mumbled, "So slow..."

"Sh-Shut up...!" Carla retorted. *Wait, isn't this kind of far? Was the castle always this far away? When I went by it last time, I felt like I got there a lot more easily!* Carla could still see the castle in the distance, but no matter how much she walked, she felt like it was not getting any closer.

Even as she breathed, her shoulders rising and falling melodramatically, Thane stood next to her, not at all affected by the trek. It was probably a given that, with his job as a knight, he had stamina. But seeing him not even breaking a sweat made Carla feel like she had somehow lost to him.

"I just thought of this," Carla started after pausing for breath, "but don't you come get the person on horseback or with a carriage in a situation like this? Why are we walking?"

"I had one prepared yesterday. You were the one who refused to come. I didn't think that you would agree to come so easily today," Thane replied.

"W-Well excuse me!" Carla shouted. She had no energy to argue any more with Thane, who added that he had only come by today to apologize and to scope out the situation.

I know I refused to go yesterday! But I just didn't want to! He was right that it was her own fault she ended up having to head to the castle on foot, but she could not help stomping her feet at her past self.

Seeing Carla tired out so early on their way to the castle, Thane looked at her pityingly and said, "To be out of breath just by walking... Just what kind of a life do you lead?"

"I don't...specialize in...physical labor," Carla managed to say.

"You seem like you won't even be able to climb the stairs."

"Not...at...all!" she gasped.

I...I can barely speak...! Of course, there was no way she could ask to take a break, like some spoiled brat. Even if Carla's apothecary was in the back alley, it was still within the royal capital. It was not terribly far from the castle; even a child could walk there without a problem.

The brusque conversation between the two ceased, and Carla decided to focus on nothing more than simply putting one foot in front of the other.

All of a sudden, there was a piece of fruit held out in front of the exhausted Carla. Looking in wonder, she saw that it was the flesh of a sweet melon at the peak of its season, served on a skewer. Popular among adults and children alike, it was a staple of the street food stalls and a favorite among the citizens of the royal capital.

To find the source of the fruit, Carla looked up—only to find Thane, his expression impossible to see because of the light shining behind him. She stood there frozen, not understanding his intentions, until he thrust the piece of fruit closer to her face and said, "We have no time to stop and rest. Eat as you walk."

He must have bought it somewhere while Carla walked with her eyes glued to her feet. Never imagining he would do such a thing, Carla was flabbergasted.

Seeing the piece of juicy fruit before her eyes made Carla swallow hard. Carla had thought that she was only going to the royal castle to hear about the request: she had not brought her wallet with her.

Thane stood looking suspiciously at Carla, who still had not accepted the fruit he offered her.

"I don't have any money," Carla finally mumbled to Thane.

After a moment of silence, Thane replied, "I can't take those deodorizers of yours for free."

"Oh, in that case," Carla said, her hesitation gone. If it was as payment, there was no need for her to be polite about it. When she bit into the fruit, it gave a satisfying crunch and filled her mouth with its sweet nectar.

Wow, how sweet! It's so good!



Come to think of it—how long had it been since she last ate a piece of fruit?

Varne had taught Carla not only about magic and medicinal plants but also how to properly do housework. Carla, therefore, knew how to cook. She even had herbs for cooking and small fruit trees in the plant pots on the second floor of the apothecary. But those plants rarely appeared on her dining table.

Yesterday...I must have picked at the cheese and walnuts and things that Nettie brought over. Before that...hmm, when was the last time I had a piece of bread?

Food, when eaten alone, had no taste. Cooking for just one person was also too much of a hassle. Adding to that the fact that her income was unstable, Carla had fallen into the habit of skipping meals. *Maybe the next time Nettie comes, I'll cook something. If I buy dried meat, it should keep.*

As Carla continued coming up with such ideas, the fruit in her hand eventually disappeared. Satisfied, she exclaimed, “Wow, that was so tasty! The melons this year are really good.”

“O-Oh. Are they now,” Thane replied.

“You’re not having any?” Carla asked, realizing that she was the only one eating.

After another pause, Thane turned away from her uncomfortably and answered, “I’m fine.”

Carla was pretty sure that there was no prohibition against knights buying and eating food. He may have been on duty, but he was not wearing his uniform; it was unlikely anyone would hold it against him. *Is he really just a serious guy who can't be flexible about anything? I'm pretty sure I'm not gonna get along with him*, Carla thought.

Although Carla regained a bit of her energy, the same scene with the fruit played out twice more before the pair reached the royal castle.

3. At the Royal Castle

When they arrived at the castle, Carla was taken to the Indigo Palace—the building used by the queen for official business. It was a separate wing of the royal castle, and even court nobility or those who had an audience with the royal family did not typically step into it. Carla followed Thane in through a private entrance.

The only people inside the building were guards, maids, and busy-looking civil officials. Carla sighed with relief that she would not come into unnecessary contact with pompous nobility. She looked around the palace and thought, genuinely impressed, *Wow, how elegant.*

True to its name, the color indigo was used everywhere—as an accent color on the white marble floor, as the main color for textiles such as tapestries. Its beauty gave a cool impression; in the summer it must help visitors fight off the heat.

Decorations such as paintings and ceramics were few, but water had been drawn to the courtyard, where a fountain and surrounding green foliage presented visitors with a place to take a quiet moment of rest.

Oh, rue and costmary. It's just like Nettie said. In the small garden, medicinal herbs were mixed in with ornamental flowers. Carla had heard that the queen, in addition to carrying out her official duties, conducted research on pharmaceuticals. The splendid greenhouses and medicinal herb gardens of the royal castle were known in other countries as well. To see such plants growing even around the building where the queen conducted official business meant she actually engaged in research, rather than just posing as someone who did.

Her Majesty must be busy... It's amazing what she still manages to do, thought Carla as she arrived at the drawing room, impressed with the queen's engagement with her study of medicine. She was then told by an elderly maid to wait there until the queen arrived. Exhausted from all the walking she had done, Carla let her body sink into the sofa. As she reached for the tea that had

been prepared in advance, she turned to look at Thane, who stood unmoving from in front of the door.

"Aren't you gonna sit down?" Carla asked.

"I'm not a guest," Thane responded.

"Oh, right," Carla said, looking back at the table in front of her and realizing that only a single teacup and saucer had been set—for Carla's use.

"You're right; you're on duty. You aren't wearing your uniform, so I forgot that you were a knight," Carla said.

"Oh my, Lady Witch," the elderly maid said, laughing at Carla's comment.

Carla could not help shrugging her shoulders and said, "I mean, I only met him for a little while yesterday."

"Dear me," said the maid. "To the Lady Witch, even the most handsome young man in the knights' brigade doesn't stand a chance."

"Madam maid..." Thane said. Even as the maid—who looked old enough to be his mother—teased him, he merely looked awkward; he did not seem angry at all. Instead, he looked at Carla with an exasperated expression and muttered, "You really are only judging by the clothes..."

"Hmm? What did you say?" Carla asked. Her attention was already drawn to the sweets laid out before her, so not even half of Thane's mutterings reached her ears.

"Nothing," Thane said. Even though Carla asked him once more, he only pierced her with his glare. "More importantly," he continued, "don't sit down just as soon as you're shown to a room. You need to learn a thing or two about etiquette and restraint."

"Oh, be quiet. Jeez, you're like a never-ending stream of criticisms."

"Never-ending? When did I ever?" Thane shot back.

"Even when I was eating earlier. You kept saying how I was gonna drop my food or how I was opening my mouth too wide or what have you."

As part of their duty protecting the royal family, Thane and the other knights

of the Royal Guard came to the Indigo Palace on a daily basis. Thus, the maid who had prepared the tea for Carla knew them well—they had been working together as colleagues for many years. While Thane was on duty, even if she spoke to him, he only gave the minimal response necessary; they never had an actual conversation.

So seeing Thane speaking to Carla without shrouding his emotions, the maid could not help but stare in astonishment. Watching the two bounce words back and forth between them like Ping-Pong balls, her expression gradually turned into a smile.

“You’re just like a meddlesome mom,” Carla said.

“Wha—?! Why, you...!” Thane started—but before he could make a comeback, a door adorned with a beautiful carving was opened reverentially. It was not the one Carla had come through.

Queen Sylvia Marié Selvester appeared. She was dressed in a magnificent dress the same color as the palace.

“I’ve kept you waiting,” she said as she entered. With her golden hair elegantly done up, the queen’s beauty made it difficult to believe that she was nearing the age of forty. Not only was she beautiful, she exuded dignity and commanded presence. It was said that some praised her gallantry by remarking that she was more kingly than the king himself.

Sweeping aside the hem of her dress with a soft rustle, the queen stopped and stood in front of Carla. She then turned her blue-gray eyes—so full of intellect—toward Carla and said, “So you are the witch.”

Though until that moment she had been relaxing like she was in her own home, Carla stood and, bowing, said, “Greetings, Your Majesty. I am Carla, the apothecary witch.”

Behind her, Thane too straightened his posture and bowed.

“At ease,” said the queen to the two of them.

“In that case,” Carla said, quickly returning to sink back into her previous position on the sofa.

"Hey!" Thane hissed at her in a panicked voice.

No longer able to contain herself, the elderly maid let out a stifled laugh—at Thane, who was acting not at all like the knight that he usually was.

"What?" asked Carla.

"What do you mean, 'what?'?!" Thane demanded.

"Leave her be," the queen said to Thane, "for witches should not be humbled by royalty." Staying Thane's hand—which was already reaching for his sword—she sat down across from Carla and, smiling, waved her fan in a leisurely manner.

"We do not give special consideration to witches who are not our true subjects. However, neither do witches bow down to royalty," said the queen. "That is the relationship we have. It was decided long ago."

"I see," Thane said, begrudgingly.

"Ha. You are much too serious, Thane," said the queen.

"Not at all, Your Majesty," he said, looking down at his feet upon hearing the queen's lighthearted comment about him.

Carla, on the other hand, raised her voice and asked quizzically, "*Thane?*"

"Apothecary Witch Carla," the queen spoke, "this knight that I sent to collect you is Thane Howell, the vice commander of the First Battalion of the Knights of the Royal Guard. What?" the queen asked, turning to Thane. "You did not even tell her your own name?"

"Th-That...!" Thane stammered.

Carla realized only then that he had never told her his name—nor had she asked him for it herself. Thane seemed to be panicking, but Carla did not know of any rule that said that a messenger had to introduce themselves. She also did not find such a rule to be necessary. Shifting her gaze from the obviously uncomfortable Thane to the queen, who was looking at her with much interest, Carla said, "Oh, it's fine. I didn't have any problems even if I didn't know his name."

"I see. The way you speak—it's just like Varne," the queen replied.

“You knew my teacher?” Carla asked, surprised at the sudden mention of her teacher’s name.

The queen smiled in amusement at Carla’s reaction—but her expression quickly returned to one of seriousness.

“I am happy to be able to meet her adopted child, but if you are anything like your teacher, then I’m sure you have no fondness for idle chatter. We shall reminisce about the old days on a different occasion—and speak now instead about the question at hand,” said the queen.

“Oh, yes. Uh, so the request for the pact is related to the marriage of the crown prince, correct?” asked Carla.

“That is correct,” said the queen.

“Would you like to go with the blessing magic? Or maybe prosperity magic or friendship magic?” Carla asked, as celebration magic had many types.

Yet the queen shook her head. She replied, quietly but clearly, “No, we shall have no need for those types of magic.”

“Oh, not those...?” Carla asked, puzzled. “Ah, then maybe more along the lines of slim body magic or beautiful skin magic?”

“The brides of the world would be delighted to hear of the availability of such magic,” the queen said.

“Not those either? Hmm, the only other thing that might be of concern is the weather...but we can’t really change that, even with magic,” Carla said. “We can certainly try to predict the weather with fortune-telling or make flower petals fall from the sky, though,” she offered.

“I wouldn’t think to use the precious magic of a witch for mere entertainment,” said the queen.

No matter what Carla suggested, she could not get it right. In the end, all Carla could think of was that maybe the king had thrown out his back and found attending the ceremony difficult. Giving up, Carla decided to wait for the queen to give her the correct answer—but what she heard was unexpected.

“I want you to play a part in their separation,” the queen said.

“Huh?” Carla said.

“The engagement itself was a mistake. We are not going forward with this marriage.”

Carla was not the only one whose eyes widened in shock at the queen’s request. The maids, too, stood frozen in place, as if they had been struck by lightning on a clear day.

“Uh...so, you are not requesting magic to celebrate the wedding...?” confirmed Carla.

“That is correct, Carla.”

Everyone in the room remained frozen, their mouths agape. Thane—the first to recover from the shock—took a stumbling step forward, saying, “B-But, Your Majesty! Exactly—”

“Silence, Thane. I am speaking to the witch,” commanded the queen.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Thane mumbled after a pause, as the queen did not seem to be joking at all. Her blue-gray eyes remained focused on Carla’s pale-green ones.

With surprise still clear on her face, Carla tilted her head in wonder. Then, as if ruminating on what she had heard, she nodded several times. Finally she said, “Huh...is that so? I see.”

“Ah. So you will not ask the reason why?” asked the queen.

“If I ask for the reason, can I choose to not accept the request?”

“Why, you...!” Thane exclaimed.

“Okay, Sir Kni—uh, Thane, just be quiet. Well, I am a bit disappointed. It seems I had no need for any of the tools I prepared.” Carla glanced at the bag she had brought, seemingly downcast. She had gathered everything she had—magic stones, canes, and the like—that seemed useful for magic related to celebrations.

“I made you waste your efforts. Forgive me. I could not very well write this in my letter to you,” the queen said.

"It's fine. I did it myself."

Carla continued speaking as calmly as before, bordering on coming across as disrespectful—she did not seem at all affected by the quiet dignity of the queen herself. Thane wondered where a petite girl like her kept such courage hidden; he could not help but be astonished by her.

"So, I don't much care about the reason, but I do want to know the details of the request. Basically you want the crown prince...?" Carla started.

"As you may also know, my son Abel is engaged to the daughter of the Duke of Hemmings. The ceremony is just around the corner," began the queen.

"It sure is."

Prince Abel Ains Selvester and Patricia, the daughter of the Duke of Hemmings, had been engaged since they were very young. The two, who were of the same age, both attended the Royal Academy, this year being their final year. They were to wed upon their graduation from the academy.

The cathedral for their ceremony, the invitations for guests, the dress for the reception, the palace for their life as newlyweds—everything had been decided for years.

"Patricia is as intelligent as she is beautiful. She has every quality to make her the most fitting crown princess," the queen said. "But my foolish son's change of heart is causing her to suffer."

"I see..."

"It seems Abel has taken a liking to a commoner he met at the academy. He has gone as far as to treat Patricia coldly numerous times in front of others."

"Why don't you simply admonish the prince or somehow get rid of the commoner girl?" Carla asked.

"It would be simple if that were possible. But the academy does not permit any investigations to be conducted by the palace, and my son has failed to give a satisfactory explanation to his attendant or the messenger that we sent him," the queen said.

Although the academy was a royal institution, it operated on the principle

that education should maintain separation from both political and secular forces. Unless an incident occurred, it refused any kind of intervention by external entities.

In other words, it was a place that even the power of the royal family could not reach.

“Heartbroken by Abel’s repeated betrayals, Patricia has finally left the dormitory of the academy and returned to live in her family’s duchy.”

“Ah, to get the attention of His Majesty?” Carla suggested.

“That girl would never do anything so shallow as to manipulate her fiancé,” said the queen. The maids also nodded at the queen’s remark. Patricia seemed not only to have the trust of the queen, who was to be her mother-in-law, but also to have left a positive impression on the maids.

Citing health issues, the duke’s daughter had taken a leave of absence from the academy—but it seemed the prince had not even bothered to write a single letter to her.

The queen pressed her hand to her forehead, lamenting that her shameful son could not maintain a modicum of courtesy toward his official fiancée.

“Patricia is the only daughter of my dear friend Marie and her husband, the Duke of Hemmings, the younger brother of the previous king,” the queen continued. “She has a strong relationship with her parents. Yet she has refused to see even them and has not taken a single step outside of her room.”

“Wow, that does sound pretty serious.”

Carla’s responses to the queen—who spoke with a somber expression on her face—sounded too lighthearted, but they also seemed to make it easier for the queen to tell her story. Carla then asked, “You have no intention of calling the prince back from the dormitory to the palace?”

“When he entered the academy, we took an oath based in sorcery that we would prioritize his wishes during his time as a student as long as his life was not in danger,” the queen replied. “I cannot force him.”

“Aha ha, so he has the upper hand. I see,” Carla said, amused.

“Don’t make such light of it, witch,” said the queen, heaving a deep sigh and leaning on the armrest of her chair. Seeing the queen’s obvious worry, the maids and Thane showed concern in their eyes.

“I myself have taught Patricia to become a crown princess. I know she is second to no daughter of a commoner. But...I received a letter from her,” the queen continued. “She said she wanted to step down from her position as fiancée and that she also wanted to leave the academy.”

“Hmm. But there’s no need to have the parties actually agree to a marriage like this, correct?” Carla asked.

Family title, political background, financial status. The balance and compatibility of such factors had to be considered for marriages of those with power—especially members of the royal family. The temple now exerted less power than it once had and thus no longer had as much influence over such matters. However, there was still a tacit understanding that marriages were simply business alliances in disguise. The will and desire of those actually getting married were given low priority.

Even then, there were exceptions.

In fact, the woman sitting before Carla’s very eyes, Queen Sylvia herself, had not cleared such conditions of marriageability. The current king had fallen in love with her—just another daughter of another noble—and despite the opposition from his senior vassals, worked to have his love reciprocated and bear fruit in the form of a marriage. Their marriage, in fact, was famous for having been the first based on love within the royal family.

The queen, who had thus been able to wed for love, furrowed her eyebrows as if in pain and said, “The royal family must be an ideal for the people.”

“If they’re going to end up being a married couple only in name and not in actuality, they shouldn’t marry at all. Is that what you’re saying?” Carla asked.

“That is not. But I do not wish for Marie’s daughter to be unhappy,” the queen replied, her voice tinged with remorse.

The Marie in question—Patricia’s mother—had in fact been the primary candidate to wed the current king, yet against everyone’s expectations, Sylvia

had become the queen instead. Marie ultimately married the Duke of Hemmings—the current king's uncle.

The marriage of the former candidate for queen, still young and beautiful, to a duke who was more than a decade her senior, became quite the topic of conversation at the time, eliciting mainly unsavory speculations.

Sylvia and Marie were childhood friends. Yet Sylvia had ended up taking from her dear friend Marie what really should have been hers—the seat of the royal queen. Perhaps because of this history, Sylvia had thought to have Marie's daughter wed her own son in order to make her the next queen. And fortunately, Patricia had matched the prince in both title and age. She also had talent in many areas.

But because of the sudden appearance of this newcomer, the plan for Patricia to marry the prince could go up in smoke... Is that it? Still curious, Carla asked, “In that case, are you going to have the commoner girl marry the prince?”

“That won’t be possible,” the queen said flatly.

To marry the prince—and one day become queen to the people—one needed not only admirable personal qualities but also a title to match. A rank of marquess or above was desirable, and it was not permitted for an individual to be adopted into a family in order to rectify the difference in social status.

Frowning slightly, the queen waved her fan. “After calling off his engagement to Patricia, he will not be allowed to leave the castle for some time. After that, he will simply become engaged to a new fiancée,” the queen said. “We will have to start again from the step of selecting someone and then gather the approval from the nobility. It will take time. Even then, a commoner’s daughter will not enter into the royal family.”

This kingdom did not permit the taking of a concubine or a second wife. The queen made clear quite calmly that the prince and the commoner had no future together, but Carla could not help but wonder at the situation.

In that case, doesn’t removing Lady Patricia from the picture make no difference?

The prince seemed to be smart. Even if he had gotten tired of the fiancée that

had been decided for him, he must have understood that a new one would simply be chosen for him.

That was not the only part that seemed off to Carla.

All the stories she had heard about the prince and the daughter of the duke said that their relationship was a strong one. She had never read anything that suggested they did not get along. In fact, the prince had seemed like he was in love with Patricia. If that were the case, would he really have such a change of heart—and so easily?

But...they do say that love is blind. And newspapers and magazines can print a bunch of lies.

Maybe the crown prince had lost sight of himself with his “first romance.” Even the press, unless it was some tabloid intent on rubbing people the wrong way, would want to avoid printing news that was unfavorable to the royal family for fear of being punished for it.

Public opinion was but a construction. Only the parties involved knew whether the information being circulated was true.

In any case, to call off an engagement where the marriage itself was just around the corner was sure to have a great impact on everyone concerned. Many of the invited guests were from other countries. There must also be many merchants and commodities on the move because of the affair. It was certain that many individuals, not just the officials of the royal castle, would end up suffering from stress-induced stomach pains and sleep deprivation.

If that were the case, the apothecary could expect a surge in demand.

Thinking that this was a business opportunity not to be missed, Carla began to think of the allocations for her herbs—but then immediately rejected her own idea, thinking, *The medicine I make wouldn’t cut it...*

Carla had knowledge, but she could make only a few medicinal products that were good enough to be sold. She was particularly—devastatingly—bad at making oral medicine. Her headache medicine dealt with the pain but made the person strangely sleepy. She made cold medicine that cured the cough but then caused terrible nausea. They all had some kind of an unfortunate side effect.

The recipes for the combinations of herbs came directly from Varne and Varne's teacher; their efficacy was already proven. Of course, this meant the issue lay with Carla's inability to use dispensation magic. No matter how much she practiced, Carla could not fix the problem. In the end, even Varne had given up on her.

Carla was trying to make ends meet by making medicine that was not taken orally, such as ointments, deodorizers, and herbs to be added to the bathwater. Yet the fact that she could not make painkillers or cold medicine, the moneymakers for any apothecary, was the true reason for her difficult financial situation.

What are you doing, increasing someone's appetite with medicine to treat constipation?! Oh no. I'm getting sad again with my own thoughts...

As she was starting to feel salty about a past mistake she recalled, Carla realized that the queen was coming to a stopping point in her story.

"We shall need both parties present in order to dissolve an engagement that has already been pledged. However, Patricia has firmly declined to come out of her room, and my son also has been ignoring us, not seeming to understand the gravity of the situation," the queen explained. "We therefore have yet to make arrangements with each of them."

"I understand your concern," Carla said.

Although for commoners it was only necessary for the individuals involved to break up in order to end an engagement, the matter was different for a prince and a duke's daughter: it became an affair of the kingdom, where numerous people would be affected. People high up had it rough.

But then, all I have to do is fulfill the request as part of the pact—so it doesn't much concern me. With that thought, Carla inquired, "In that case, shall I use tranquility magic or oblivion magic for you and Lady Patricia? To protect your heart and body from various troubles and the sadness of heartbreak?"

"It was a mistake on the part of myself and the king when we decided to forge this relationship. I must right this wrong. That is the only way by which I can make amends to Marie and Patricia," the queen answered.

Hmm? Carla found something amiss about the queen's comment—the conversation itself was not quite making sense.

"So, um. This is a request for me to use magic to ease the mental and emotional stress that comes with calling off the engagement, correct?" Carla asked.

"Listen to the explanation until the very end, witch," the queen responded.

When Carla glanced behind her, she saw that Thane, who was watching over the whole conversation between her and the queen, did not seem to understand either.

"As I said before, Patricia is not the type to shy away from a rival in her relationship with my son. There also hasn't been a convincing explanation for my son's actions, which are unforgivable for a crown prince. To dissolve the engagement with so many suspicious factors left unresolved will not settle the matter," the queen declared.

"Uh, perhaps that's true."

But that has nothing to do with me, does it? As Carla listened, she imagined question marks floating around her own head. Then the queen leaned forward and, bringing her face closer to Carla's, whispered, "I heard about you from Countess of Beckett."

"Huh? Wha...?!"

Th-The countess? The woman who gave me the five gold coins? Why is the queen suddenly bringing her up? I mean, I did take on the request to stand in for her divorce, but I messed up, and they ended up not getting one! They were practically making out at the end of it all!

The earl and the countess had been on the brink of divorce. However, it had been the result of a perfect storm that had brewed out of the husband's misunderstanding and the wife's reticence. The earl had not had any lover on the side, while the countess had not known that her husband thought she was afraid of men. Just as in Rita's case, it was simply that the two had not truly communicated with each other.

Once they realized that they were, in fact, very much in love with each other,

the couple decided in their excitement that it was time for a “do-over of their honeymoon.” It was just last month that Carla, still stunned from the turn of events, had seen the couple off as they left for a villa by the sea.

Carla had predicted that their belated honeymoon would turn into a long one. When the countess came just the day before to pay the fee for the divorce, Carla did not think that the payment was late at all—especially given that, in the end, Carla had failed to fulfill the request of helping the countess get the divorce she wanted. Carla had gone into the negotiations on behalf of the wife with much enthusiasm, thinking that she would finally have success. But she had been disappointed with the results once again.

“I-I have a bad feeling about this... May I go now?” Carla asked, already getting up from the sofa.

But the queen reached out to hold firmly on to Carla’s wrist, saying, “Certainly not.” Carla could not escape. She felt cold sweat drip down her back as the queen narrowed her blue-gray eyes and said, “I have been told that you are very skilled at transforming yourself using magic.”

Carla felt her breath catch in her throat. *No way! And she was the one that told me so many times to keep everything strictly confidential!* It dawned on Carla that the countess told the queen about Carla’s failure as a witch in achieving the divorce. She felt her mouth twitch in panic.

The queen then said in a solemn voice, “Witch Carla. Transform yourself into Patricia and sneak into the academy. Investigate the circumstances surrounding the relationship and lead us to a successful dissolution of the engagement.”

“Nooo! That’s what I was afraid of!” wailed Carla.

“It is for the peace of the kingdom. How convenient, this pact that does not allow you to refuse,” the queen said, now laughing heartily—the exact opposite of the seriousness she had exuded a moment ago. Those in the room could barely keep up with her.

The queen then turned to Thane, who seemed confounded by the various pieces of top secret information he had heard, and said, “I order you to accompany this individual for the time being.”

"Huh?! Uh, I mean, y-you can't mean...me?!" Thane stammered.

"I want to minimize the number of individuals who know of this matter. I've already spoken with the commander. I won't accept no for an answer," she said.

"Y-Yes, Your Majesty," said Thane, as he reluctantly—truly reluctantly—brought his arm to his chest to accept the queen's order.

"Wait. He's coming too?!" yelled Carla, pointing indignantly at Thane. The queen wore an expression on her face that said the decision was obvious.

"He may have tarnished his reputation with this particular incident, but my son is quite skilled with the sword. There are few who can block Abel's attacks with certainty. The commoner's daughter, too, was offered special admission to the academy for having exceptional aptitude in sorcery," the queen stated. "You must ignore your likes and dislikes and be practical, witch."

"Why are we operating on the premise that I'll be attacked...? Hey, wait! Could it be that the duke's daughter felt like her life was in danger, and that's why she left school and is holed up in her room? That's it, isn't it?!"

"Well, you're quite the sharp one," the queen said.

The queen did not even reprimand Carla for forgetting to speak to her with deference. In fact, she smiled as if she had achieved certain victory.

"Patricia has not come out and said it so forthrightly. However, we must bear such possibilities in mind," the queen stated.

"I want to do this less and less!"

"Oh, I see. You do not wish to take on this request," said the queen. "To think that a witch would defy an order she once accepted. If Varne heard this, I cannot imagine what she would say." The queen then sighed very, *very* deeply and muttered, "What a shame."

"Wha...?! Leave my teacher out of this!" Carla exclaimed, her shoulders quivering in anger.

The queen placed her fan down and, with a slow and graceful movement, retrieved a small pouch from out of nowhere. When she shook it before Carla's

eyes, it made a heavy sound of coins jangling inside. “I realize that this request is unusual for the pact we have between us,” she said. “Therefore, rather than the customary reward or letter of thanks, I prepared an allowance for you to take on the task, in addition to a contingency fee for when you successfully fulfill the request.”

After a slight pause, the queen asked Carla, “But perhaps you have no need for such monetary reward?”

Oh wow, she is unabashedly taking advantage of me! It was obvious to anyone that Carla’s apothecary was in the red every single month. With the queen hitting her where it hurt most, Carla closed her eyes tightly.

“Jeez... All right, fine. I’ll do it!” Carla snapped. She then grabbed her bag and stood up, walking briskly toward the door. When the maid rushed to open it, Carla stopped and turned around. Incanting the name of the goddess of love and fertility, Carla shouted in frustration, “May the light of Lisandra shine upon you!”

“Ha. And may Azhdanel be your guide,” the queen laughed slightly, calmly incanting the name of the god of wisdom and war in response to Carla’s farewell.

Opening her eyes slightly in surprise, Carla turned and stormed out of the room.

“Go with her, Thane. I’ve sent word to the Duchy of Hemmings to welcome the visit of a witch and a knight at any time. Be quick, at all costs,” said the queen, tossing the bag of coins to him as she spoke.

“Y-Yes, Your Majesty,” he said, catching the bag in his hands. He bowed hurriedly to indicate his leave-taking and managed a quick “Please excuse me” before rushing out in pursuit of Carla.

4. The Residence of the Duke of Hemmings

The air in the carriage was stifling.

Seriously! How did things turn out this way?!

After Carla stormed out of the drawing room, she was quickly captured by Thane and forced into a carriage. She did not need to ask where they were going: they were headed straight for the Duchy of Hemmings.

Carla could not very well transform herself into someone she had never met. In other words, she could not fulfill the queen's request if she did not at least meet the girl first.

Besides, the only things that transformation magic altered were appearance and voice. If Carla were to serve as a model for a painting, such superficial transformation would suffice. But to impersonate someone, Carla needed to match their speech and gestures. She also needed a certain amount of information from the person. The queen, having heard about Carla from Countess of Beckett, must have known all this. The queen did not seem like the type to waste time. So Carla did not question being sent straight to the duke's residence. However...

"This was supposed to be an easy job, where I'd just go to the castle and do my magic," Carla sighed.

"I, too, thought my task would be done once I'd brought you to the castle. I didn't imagine not being able to return to the knights' brigade and having to accompany a witch, of all things," Thane replied.

"Don't act like you're the victim here," Carla said. "If I had a choice, I would've refused your company."

What does he mean, "a witch, of all things"?! He's a knight of the Royal Guard himself!

Even as they glared at each other, both clearly unhappy, they both understood that they really had no choice in the matter. Having received the

same unexpected command, they simultaneously let out a deep sigh of resignation.

“Tch... In any case, it’s an order directly from the queen,” Thane said, first to raise his face. “Despite my extreme reluctance, the only thing for us to do is to complete the task as quickly as possible.”

“Seriously?” Carla asked, still looking sullen as she shifted her eyes to glance at Thane.

“Hey, you! Why are you always so...?” Thane started.

“I’m not ‘you.’ My name is Carla.” She corrected him with a frown on her face. She hated when anyone called someone else “you.”

Thane furrowed his eyebrows, obviously displeased. After a long pause, he said, “Car... You...”

“I’m gonna start saying, ‘Oh my gosh! Sir Thane!’” said Carla, using a high-pitched voice to call his name as she clasped her hands together in front of her chest. She guessed that he would hate her doing so.

“Stop it, Carla,” said Thane, immediately calling her by her name, apparently shaken to his core.

“See, you can do it,” Carla said. As long as it was not “you,” Carla did not mind being called “witch” either. She had suggested her name because she assumed he would dislike that option most. Seeing him predictably disgruntled, Carla—having gotten a bit of revenge—felt a little better.

As Carla sat there mentally pumping her fist, Thane spoke, saying her name uncomfortably.

“You...Carla. You can use transformation magic?”

“I’m so good at it, you’ll be shocked.”

“Is that so? I’m surprised that you’ve been able to remain safe all this time.”

Carla, who had gone back to gazing off into the distance, heard the unexpected seriousness in Thane’s voice and turned to look at him. He still wore a sour expression, but his lapis lazuli eyes now hinted at both concern and admiration.

"Well this is unexpected. I was sure you didn't care at all about witches," Carla remarked.

"I don't, to be honest."

"You're so honest, it's downright unpleasant. Your lack of any and all delicacy must make you very unpopular."

"That's none of your business," said Thane flatly. "What I wanted to say was, just that there aren't many who can use transformation magic, so..."

She knew what Thane wanted to say. Transformation magic was convenient—especially for criminals and those in power. One could use it to transform into important individuals and carry out nefarious tasks or ensnare others in vicious schemes. It was true that in witch hunts of the past, many had attempted to take this power from witches for themselves since it was impossible to gain through sorcery.

Being a member of the knights' brigade, Thane was probably also wary of the fact that Carla's transformation magic might involve her in criminal activity. However—

"People don't really seem to know this, but magic isn't the kind of thing you can just tell someone to do, and then they can," Carla explained. "Even if someone ordered me to, I wouldn't be able to use my magic if I didn't want to."

"Is that right?" Thane asked.

"Magic isn't a physiological phenomenon. It isn't about magic circles and incantations. We initiate our magic through our own will. That's why we don't—we can't—do anything we don't want to do. You too—your legs wouldn't just start running when you didn't want to, right?"

After considering her last remark, Thane replied, "I see."

That had been the failure in the witch hunts of the past. No matter how much they tried to force witches or manipulate them with drugs or sorcery—it was not possible to control witches' magic so conveniently. The magic that was forcibly dragged out of them ran rampant, engulfing everyone in their surroundings and causing devastating damage. That was the reason witches and the kingdom established an inviolable relationship with each other.

Now that time had passed, the memory of those hunts had waned. Witches were now described as being “strange people with strange powers.” However, many still continued to avoid witches—those associated with memories of fields burning, one right after the other.

“We don’t take instructions from others. That’s us witches,” Carla said finally.

It was a common characteristic of witches to be stubborn or to have a strong sense of self—but that was, in some ways, inevitable. If they were the type to be pushed along by the flow of things, they could be taken advantage of. They would not be able to live—or survive—as witches.

“But now, from the queen...” Thane said, hesitating.

“Well, the request was kind of a pushy one, but it was part of the pact. Plus I’d already accepted it. But if it had been something like, ‘Go transform into the duke’s daughter and kill the commoner girl,’ then I would’ve definitely refused.”

“It seems you managed to maintain your common sense after all,” said Thane.

“How rude,” Carla said, though she noticed Thane’s relief at her reply. It was not possible to use magic with anything but one’s own will, so there was no need to worry.

What came as more of a shock to Carla was the fact that the queen had heard about Carla’s work as a divorce agent—and that such failure made her think Carla would be useful. Carla was not happy about that at all. Who would delight in having people know that one was unable to handle not just their day job but even their side gig?

It was not that Carla thought her clients should get divorced no matter what. If both parties agreed, then of course they should remain a couple. But the fact that Carla had been unable to fulfill the requests she had received had slowly but surely chipped away at her motivation.

Her clients were coming to her saying that they wanted a divorce, and she was doing everything according to their wishes. So why was it that her clients all ended up not divorcing their partners? Carla just could not understand.

How must Lisandra, the goddess of love, feel when there were so many people clinging to her, saying they wanted a divorce—but then they all just changed

their minds? Oh well...this time, for sure!

Although with this request Carla was trying to dissolve an engagement rather than a marriage, if it went well, she could finally count it as a success. Even if it was a side job that she had started on a whim, she did want to get it on the right track as soon as possible.

“But it’s such a bother to have to be a daughter of a noble,” Carla said, thinking about the current request. “And it even looks like her life is in danger!”

“That’s something we’ll have to confirm,” Thane replied. “The academy enrolls royalty from other countries, not just the prince and Lady Patricia. Its security must be top-notch. I can’t imagine the students encountering any danger.”

“Hmm. Maybe it’s that security is only for suspicious people coming in from the outside, and they don’t deal with altercations among students?” Carla suggested.

“If that were the case, they would be doing a very sloppy job,” Thane said. Adding that he was unfamiliar with the academy’s practices because he had never been a student there, he frowned and crossed his arms.

It was true: if there were an incident involving weapons and injuries at the best educational institution in the kingdom, it would not only be a scandal—the prestige of the academy would go down the drain.

But rather than the intricacies of the security system, Carla was more concerned with the prince himself. “So is it really true that Prince Abel is that good with the sword?” she asked. “I know he’s famous for being smart, but I’ve never heard anything about his swordsmanship.”

“It is true. Most knights were no match for the prince even before he reached the age of ten. The commander of the knights’ brigade himself gives him lessons,” Thane replied, eliciting a look of surprise from Carla.

Many knew about the strength of Commander Lionel of the knights’ brigade, as well as the ruthless training he gave to his subordinates. Carla, too, had often heard about it from the old knight who was Varne’s tea-drinking buddy. The commander’s hazi—training technique was known to make even adults throw

up. Was it possible that he had used it on the prince as well? He probably had.

“He had great mastery of the sword even from the time he was young. When he returned to the castle for winter recess, I had the opportunity to serve as his sparring partner. As he had grown in height, his strength had increased as well. Even the commander was giving up one hit out of three.”

“No way,” Carla muttered.

And it seemed the prince had once let it slip that he wanted to become a knight rather than to succeed the throne. He was probably hardcore knight material.

“Given that there are no major conflicts at the moment, it is probably more beneficial to let the people know of his abilities as a ruler. It is better not to let talk of his swordsmanship overshadow that.”

“I see. So I get that he’s good with the sword. What about sorcery?”

“When it comes to sorcery, he is...less proficient.”

“Oh, thank goodness. If he was smart *and* skilled at the sword *and* good at sorcery on top of that, it’d be like the gods gave him way too many gifts,” Carla said, then looking at Thane, asked, “What? Is there something on my face?”

Thane, who was intently returning her gaze, narrowed his eyes and said in a mocking tone, “You look like you’d be blown away just by the swing of a sword, even if it didn’t touch you.”

“A-Aren’t you supposed to be there to prevent precisely that?!”

“You’re far too weak and puny to begin with. I can’t help it if you cause your own demise,” Thane scoffed.

Carla could not say anything in response. It was absolutely true that just the walk to the castle had exhausted her.

After Carla sat there glaring at Thane for a while, she suddenly remembered something and asked, “Hey, is the queen always like that?”

Thane seemed taken aback by her out-of-the-blue question. Frowning, he leaned in to look Carla in the eyes and asked, “What do you mean, ‘like that’? You’re being irreverent yet again.”

"She was making such an impossible request; I can't help it if that makes me wanna be irreverent. As in, she was talking like there was something going on that she wasn't telling us. Are people higher up always like that?"

There was something there that I couldn't quite put my finger on, Carla thought. The queen's vibe had reminded Carla of Varne whenever she taught Carla magic—giving her an assignment and then expecting her to make other connections that would finally lead to a new and different answer. It had been Varne's way of telling Carla, "Think for yourself."

She never gave me any hints... Jeez. And now I'm remembering all this stuff.

Varne had been strict. She rarely gave Carla any praise. But despite being exasperated with Carla and her inability to improve her dispensation magic, Varne stuck with her patiently. When they both recognized that Carla would not get any better, Varne drilled her so that Carla could perform what magic she *could* do more than perfectly. And she herself had tried out the various medicinal products that Carla made. For that alone, Carla could not thank her enough.

Medicine for indigestion that tasted truly awful or sinus medication that made a rainbow appear in front of her eyes... I know she had remedies ready at hand, but still—I can't believe she tried them all for me.

On the rare occasions when Carla succeeded in the dispensation of a particular medicine, Varne would lift just one corner of her mouth—and then that day she would fill the dinner table with Carla's favorite dishes.

Stubborn and curmudgeonly—that was Varne. But despite saying she disliked children, she took in Carla, who had lost her family. More than anyone else Carla knew, Varne had a deep well of love that she could tap into when she so chose. Although she never permitted Carla to call her "mother" or "grandmother," the time they spent together in that small apothecary was a treasure for Carla.

"The way she was talking, huh? No, I don't think it was particularly different from usual," Thane replied.

"I see. That's fine, then."

What Carla saw deep in the queen's blue-gray eyes had been the color of determination. It was similar to what Carla had seen among women who had come to her saying that they wanted a divorce.

Even if it's about her child, maybe she feels like it's about herself too. Or maybe, rather than with her son Abel, she was empathizing with Patricia, who was to become her daughter-in-law. Either way, for someone like Carla who did not know what an ordinary family was like, it was an unfamiliar feeling.

"What's with that strange look on your face?" Thane asked after several moments of silence.

"How rude, saying I look strange. I just thought the chair was awfully stiff for a castle carriage."

"Who's being rude now?"

As their conversation carried on like this, the carriage eventually arrived at the ducal residence. Carla and Thane's visit seemed to have been announced ahead of time by the ever-prepared queen. The luxurious and sturdy-looking gate to the residence opened for them immediately. After passing through the beautifully manicured front garden, Carla and Thane were let out of the carriage in front of the entrance.

As the footman opened the front door and Carla stepped inside the mansion, her mouth fell open as she looked around her, taking in its splendor.

Oh, wow... They have paintings and flowers, but they also have sculptures.

The royal palace was a castle; given that they often entertained guests of honor from other countries, it was understandable that it was gorgeous. But a noble's house was also very luxurious. In comparison, Carla's apothecary must seem like a rabbit hutch.

Even so, I still wouldn't want to live here, Carla thought.

"But with a staircase that long, I feel like I'd be able to hang dry as many herbs as I'd want on the banister," Carla mumbled.

"I never thought I'd hear such a plebeian comment when I came to the mansion of one of the three most respected dukes in the kingdom," said Thane.

"No way. Can't you understand how useful it is to have a drying area that isn't affected by the weather? See, this is why I don't talk to meatheads."

"A meathead, you say?"

"Lady Carla the Apothecary Witch, Vice Commander Howell of the Knights of the Royal Guard. Welcome."

As the two stood arguing in the beautiful entrance hall, a servant in a high-quality uniform approached quickly and respectfully bowed his head. The middle-aged man with the clean and neat appearance was named Scott. He introduced himself as the mansion's butler. "Please allow me to show you to the room. Right this way, please," he said, adding that though the duke himself was away on business, the duchess, Marie, was to meet them.

Patricia, whom Carla was to transform herself into, was currently holed up in her room and refusing to meet with anyone. So it seemed that they would be hearing the story from the guardian first.

When they arrived at the drawing room, Madam Marie was already there waiting. Although she was put together, she seemed unable to hide her haggardness. When she saw Carla, a relieved smile brightened her face.

"You're the Lady Witch! It's such a pleasure to meet you. I am Marie, the wife of the Duke of Hemmings."

"I am Carla."

"And thank you, Thane, for coming as well," said Madam Marie.

"Of course," replied Thane.

With introductions out of the way, the duchess urged them to take a seat. As Carla sat down with her usual lack of hesitation, she looked at the duchess intently.

Wow, she doesn't look at all like she has a daughter old enough to be nearly an adult.

Madam Marie was very beautiful—not at all surprising, given that she was formerly the primary candidate to become the wife of the then crown prince.

In contrast to the queen, who possessed a dignified beauty, Madam Marie

had a soft and ephemeral air about her. She was the type of woman that one wanted to protect and shield from harm. Her expensive-looking dress and accessories were classy and suited her. She gave off an aura of living an elegant lifestyle.

Yet the duchess, who seemed like she had never known unhappiness, showed clear signs of distress. With her hand held to her cheek, she heaved a deep sigh and said, “I have been waiting ever since I heard from Sylvia—the queen—that Lady Witch was coming. Truly, I do not know what to do.”

“If I may be direct—your daughter refuses to speak with her family at all?” asked Carla.

“That is correct. She simply repeats that she will not go to the academy and that she can no longer go through with the engagement or the marriage,” replied the duchess.

“And she won’t say what happened at the academy?” asked Carla.

“We’ve heard from our maid who accompanied our daughter to the academy. We also spoke with the parents of her classmates. But we haven’t heard anything from our daughter herself.”

The duchess prefaced her story with the caveat that she had not confirmed it with her daughter—but what she shared regarding the happenings at the academy matched what the queen had described.

With the testimony of the maid who had observed the situation up close, it was clear just how bewildered and exhausted Patricia was—and just how much condemnation was being directed toward the crown prince and the commoner girl. Even then, there was no new piece of information to be gained from the duchess.

At the moment, Patricia had locked her door from the inside and made it impossible for others to enter.

“Is she taking her meals?” Carla asked.

“We do have them carried to her room, but she barely touches them,” Patricia’s mother replied.

“But she does accept them, then?” Carla confirmed. Though the duchess seemed to be at a loss, as long as Patricia was willing to accept her meals and the minimal amount of care, then physically she was still not yet in a critical state. Mentally, though, it was a different question.

“I had thought that she was a strong child, but it seems that a broken heart really is difficult to bear,” the duchess said.

“That seems to be spoken with true feelings,” said Carla.

Carla, who had never known anything to do with love, was unfamiliar with the pains of heartbreak. When she responded thus to the earnest comment made by the duchess, the duchess rushed to backpedal and change the subject.

“O-Oh...uh, though I cannot deny that my daughter’s engagement does have political aspects, I had believed as a parent that she and Prince Abel truly cared for each other. You would agree, wouldn’t you, Thane?”

“That is true. Whenever I saw them, they always seemed to get along well.” Having been turned to for agreement by the duchess, Thane nodded, recalling the times he had served as a guard for Patricia and the prince.

Everyone who had been around the couple agreed: the prince had suddenly had a change of heart and taken a liking to the commoner’s daughter.

“Was there ever a time when your daughter and the prince had a fight or a difference in opinion?” Carla asked.

“Of course; they have known each other for many years. But it was always playful banter—they had gotten each other the same gift for the Thanksgiving Festival or one of them had bested the other in an exam. They were always back to their usual selves in no time.”

She must have remembered the time when their relationship had been strong and steady, for the duchess had a gentle smile on her face. Based on these sources, it seemed this was not a case in which frustration had mounted over the years and finally exploded.

“In that case, did there seem to be any problems in Lady Patricia’s life at the academy? Not just with the prince but any troubles with her friends? Including any illnesses or injuries?” Carla continued.

“As far as I am aware, nothing in particular.”

Though, even if there had been, she probably wouldn’t have shared everything with her parents, thought Carla.

This was probably all she would be able to gather from a third party. The queen had told Carla to go to the academy to investigate the matter as well. As expected, Carla really could not do anything until she heard the story from Patricia herself.

“Lastly,” Carla said, turning to the duchess before getting up from her seat, “do you and the duke agree with the proposal to dissolve the engagement between your daughter and Prince Abel?”

“Yes,” the duchess replied after a pause, “as that is what my daughter wishes. I respect her will. A marriage that is not wished for can be a painful thing.”

A shadow crossed Madam Marie’s beautiful face. Hearing the duchess’s sad voice, the butler standing behind her also let out a soft sigh.

After a moment of contemplation, Carla said, “I heard that you and Her Majesty have been friends since you were both young.”

“Yes—we have been best friends since childhood.”

“Did you ever feel jealous or frustrated by the fact that your best friend took the queen’s throne away from you?” Carla asked.

“I’m sorry?” Hearing Carla’s question—which was both out of nowhere and unarguably rude—the duchess opened her violet-colored eyes wide.

“Hey!” shouted Thane, shocked at what Carla was asking and rushing to stop her.

“Did you ever feel that you wanted to be queen yourself?” Carla pressed, ignoring Thane’s attempts to interrupt her.

“Oh my,” the duchess laughed, her eyebrows furrowing. She then looked straight into Carla’s eyes and said, “No, never. I am in love with my husband.”

“From the beginning?”

“Yes, always.”

“Is that so,” Carla said, nodding at the duchess, who was smiling and looking cheerfully proud of her response. Thane cast a suspicious glance at Carla for stepping back so easily after asking such an impolite question. Carla decided to continue ignoring him and simply said, “Then I shall head over to meet Lady Patricia.”

“I must warn you that my daughter may reject even you, Lady Witch. But I admit that if I accompany you, she may become even more stubborn. I believe it would be better if I stayed behind.”

“That’s not a problem at all,” Carla replied lightheartedly as she left the drawing room behind.

With the beloved daughter of the house holed up in her room, the ducal residence had taken on a gloomy air. But down one of the quiet and somewhat dark hallways, accompanied by the butler, a very out-of-place pair talked noisily as they walked.

“Hey you, that was unacceptable, even coming from you,” said Thane.

“It’s not ‘you,’ it’s ‘Carla.’”

“Never mind that now! Even if it is the order of the queen, you shouldn’t ask the duchess such a—”

“It’s not like I’m asking because I want to,” Carla said, cutting him off. “I have zero interest in the fight over the queen’s throne or any gossip about it.”

“Then why did you—?”

“Pardon me, but we have arrived,” said the butler with a bit of hesitation to interrupt them. “This is Lady Patricia’s room.”

The pair stopped arguing when they heard the butler’s voice. Giving a sidelong glance at Thane—who still looked dissatisfied—Carla knocked on the door.

“Hello, Lady Patricia. I’m Carla, the apothecary witch. I came on the queen’s orders,” she said without an ounce of formality.

The brass doorknob was locked from the inside. There was a slight sound on

the other side of the door, as if something moved—but as expected, there came no reply.

“I wanted to talk with you about your engagement with Prince Abel, but you...won’t open the door, will you? Of course not. In that case, I’ll just go ahead and let myself in.”

“Hey, Carla,” said Thane, suddenly nervous.

“I’ll count to ten. If you’re in your underwear, please be sure to put on a robe or something. Here we go now—one, two...”

“Lady Witch? L-Lady Patricia locked the door from the inside...” stammered the butler.

“...three, four...”

They could sense the bewilderment coming from inside the room. Even as Thane and the butler continued to murmur behind her, Carla went on counting.

“...nine, ten. Now, open!” she said finally, grasping the doorknob and sending her magical power into it. As a soft, shimmering light enveloped the entire door, the knob unlocked with a light click.

“M-My goodness!” the butler exclaimed in astonishment as the doorknob turned with ease. Thane seemed surprised as well, but he had seen sorcerers at the royal palace perform similar feats. As if to confirm, he asked Carla in a low voice, “Was that magic?”

“Yup. I had the door cooperate with me,” Carla replied.

“The door?”

“This door cares about the house and its people, so unlocking it wasn’t that hard,” she said.

“Is that so...” he muttered.

Many people thought of witches’ magic as a series of mysteries. It began, however, very simply: a witch using her own magical powers to work with various entities—animal, plant, mineral, or whatever else.

In magic, each and every witch had what could be described as an affinity,

which determined her specialty. There were various styles and methods to magic as well, but even a failure of a witch like Carla could get a door to unlock itself.

Because the source of magic was different from that of sorcery, which could be controlled as long as one studied it, magic was not as easily understood. Thane looked like he wanted to know more, but Carla was ready to start her mission. "Pardon my intrusion," she said, as she opened the door.

Lady Patricia's room was a suite of two connected rooms. On the sofa in the front room sat a silver tray, its cover still on, and a stack of carelessly piled books.

The duke's daughter, however, was nowhere in sight.

"Um, uh, Lady Witch..." said the butler, hesitatingly.

"Please take up any complaints with the queen," Carla responded, making her way freely through the large room. Just then, there was a slight movement in the second room. "There you are!" shouted Carla cheerfully.

"What, why...you...!" exclaimed the girl.

It seemed she could not make up her mind whether to stand, sit, or hide. The duke's blond-haired daughter was frozen in an awkward position beside the bed. Her eyes met with the three people who had mercilessly invaded her room. The young lady's face turned red with embarrassment.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Carla, the apothecary witch."

"I-I'm Patricia, the daughter of the Duke of Hemmings...!"

"How lovely. I wished even a smidge of your manners would rub off on that Sir Royal Guard Knight over there."

"Hey."

As flabbergasted as she was, Lady Patricia—whose appearance suggested an age older than the eighteen that Carla had been told—introduced herself to Carla, who was a suspicious stranger to her. What discipline.

It was also possible to sense the bewilderment—very appropriate for her age—she must have felt at the surprise attack on her self-isolation. Lady Patricia

did not give off any sense of excess pride that might be conjured up by the description “daughter of a duke and future crown princess.”

She must have gotten her bright, golden hair and sharp features from her father. Her violet-colored eyes, however, she must have gotten from her mother. Her capable air seemed almost to have come from Queen Sylvia.

“I’m glad to see that you aren’t bedridden,” Carla said.

“It’s not as though I’m ill,” Patricia said after a slight pause.

“Sickness of the body comes from sickness of the heart, as they say. It’s good that you don’t seem terribly weak or malnourished.”

There were bags under her eyes, and her cheeks looked unnaturally sunken in. But then, it might be safe to say that Madam Marie could be suffering from even more exhaustion than her daughter. Patricia may not have been getting enough in terms of food and sleep, but being young, she certainly had more stamina than her mother. If she was awake at this hour and even properly dressed, she was doing just fine mentally.

Scott, the butler, seemed overcome with relief at seeing Patricia for the first time in so long. “I am so glad that you are all right,” he said, dabbing at his eyes and nose.

“It’s a bad move to cause concern for your family and your butler,” Carla said to her.

“Leave me alone,” Patricia mumbled in return.

Even as she tried to put up an obstinate front, she looked away from the butler awkwardly. She even seemed slightly happy to hear that they had been worried about her.

Good. It doesn’t seem like we’ll need any medicine here.

Being an apothecary, Carla could not overlook someone being ill. Carla’s medicine did not sell because of its pesky side effects, but it was effective. However, she could not stand the thought of making the beautiful daughter of the duke grimace by taking her awful-tasting medicine. It was probably better not to use the medicine at all.

"In any case, I was told by the queen to find a nice way to dissolve the engagement between you and Prince Abel," Carla said.

"That's a terrible explanation," said Thane, his expression bitter as he put his hand on his forehead.

"Thane, you keep your mouth shut," Carla responded, feeling there was really no other way to describe the situation. Turning to Patricia she said, "I'm sure you wouldn't want us asking you all sorts of questions. I don't wanna be bothered either, so let's just get this over and done with."

"Lady Witch, what do you mean, 'bothered'?!" exclaimed the butler in shock.

"No need to stay standing. Let's have a seat and chat," continued Carla.

"That, too, isn't something you should be saying here," Thane said.

"Gosh, you two... You're both so meddlesome." Carla waved off their comments, turned to Patricia—who was two years younger than she was—and smiled warmly. She pulled up a nearby chair and, sitting down, motioned to Patricia to sit down on the bed as well.

"The queen read my letter to her, I see," said Patricia, after some hesitation.

"You mean the letter asking to call off the engagement? She seemed very regretful about your decision."

"I thought they would send some kind of a civil official. I never thought they'd send a witch," said Patricia.

It seemed Carla's tendency to march to the beat of her own drum—and to not really want to do anything terribly enthusiastically—got through to Patricia. The duke's daughter sighed as if drained of any energy to resist and sat down on her bed.

"I was surprised too. I thought I was being called to the castle to perform magic to celebrate the wedding, but then it was the complete opposite," said Carla.

"I'm sorry about that," muttered Patricia.

Carla then proceeded to describe what had happened so far as well as plans for how to move forward. When she explained that she could use

transformation magic and that she was going to go to the academy in Patricia's stead to investigate the matter—and to get Abel to explain himself—Patricia's expression hardened and she raised her voice to say, "N-No, you can't do something like that!"

"Aha! So you *were* in some kind of danger!" Carla shouted.

Patricia drew in her breath as she brought her hand to her mouth, but Carla was not going to let her off so easily. Carla looked at Thane with an expression that said, "See?" and Thane took over the conversation.

"Please excuse me. Lady Patricia, can you tell me the specifics about the harm that was done to you? Where did it happen and when? Under what kind of circumstances did it take place? Were there any witnesses?" he asked, one question after the other.

"Oh my goodness, you sound like you're interrogating her," said Carla.

"Keep quiet, Carla."

Carla could understand that he was acting out of habit from his job, but still—he should mind the way he phrased things. This knight sure was handsome, but he lacked any sensitivity whatsoever. When Carla mumbled "This is why you're so unpopular," he glared at her.

"We cannot overlook the fact that danger runs rampant in a place of education—much less an academy, which should be its very model! Please, Lady Patricia, bear witness," Thane urged.

"Um, uh, well..." Patricia stammered.

"I insist!" said Thane, raising his voice and taking a step forward.

As if overwhelmed by the force Thane exuded, Patricia answered in a flurry, saying, "Th-There wasn't danger like that! I mean, there *was* danger like that, but, uh...!"

"Lady Patricia, please be specific," Thane pressed.

Patricia was turning red, hastily reacting to Thane's questions. It seemed to Carla the time to prepare some herbal tea to help her calm down.

"P-Prince Abel pointed his sword at me and told me not to come near him,

and Miss Lilith also attacked me with sorcery, but...things like that do not matter!" shouted Patricia.

"Wow, that's way more dangerous than I was expecting!" exclaimed Carla.

They were not merely "things like that." Carla was certainly surprised, but even more startling was the rage now coming from the butler standing behind Carla. Of course, earlier he had teared up upon seeing Patricia safe and unharmed. He truly was a servant who cared about his master.

Without even bothering to hide his indignation, Thane closed in on Patricia. "Lilith is the name of the student who was given special admission to the academy, who has a relationship with the prince, is that correct? But who would have thought that the academy's security system was such that it would allow for such violence to go unnoticed? Just who is responsible for this?" Thane asked, the latter part mainly to himself.

"N-No, the security is just fine. It's just that...it is difficult to reproach the prince. And Miss Lilith is particularly skilled at stealth sorcery, so I doubt anyone has noticed."

"My dear Lady Patricia...!" The butler, no longer able to contain himself, shoved Thane aside and knelt at Patricia's feet. He looked up at the daughter of his master with tears in his eyes and exclaimed, "If you had told us, we would have all come to help you! The master and the madam as well!"

"You're right," Patricia replied after a pause. "Perhaps that's what I should have done. But it all happened when no one was around... Plus, you know this, Scott—I'm quite good at defense sorcery. I honestly haven't been injured at all," she said.

"Even so!" Scott replied.

"Uh, may I cut in?" Carla asked. She understood Thane's anger toward the faulty security at the academy as well as Scott's frustration at not having realized the danger that Patricia had been in. But Carla was more concerned about something else.

"Lady Patricia, earlier you said, 'things like that do not matter.' If that's the case, what *does* matter?"

"Th-That..." Patricia started, hesitating.

"No secrets allowed now. We've come this far. We might as well get it all out," Carla said.

All the women who had asked Carla to serve as a divorce agent all carried inside them unspeakable complaints.

Although the details of such complaints varied, one thing the women all had in common was that none could move forward until they had let out all the things that they had let stew deep inside for so long.

Patricia must have calmed by the time she heard the matter-of-fact way in which Carla spoke to her. She opened her mouth and said, timidly, "I saw...the prince and Miss Lilith, um, just the two of them..."

And her voice grew smaller and smaller, until it was barely above a whisper, as she recounted her fiancé's infidelity.

Even as she watched the butler burn with rage given this newfound fuel, Carla had to ask another cutting question. It was, after all, important to confirm information that would influence how they were going to move forward with the dissolution of the engagement.

"I see, so you saw him cheating on you. By just the two of them—what were they doing?"

"There's a gazebo behind the school building in a corner where very few people pass by. And...Miss Lilith was sitting there next to Prince Abel, and she...k-kissed him on the cheek," Patricia managed to say.

"A kiss, huh? It wasn't someone that just looked like him?" Carla asked.

"I only saw him from behind, but there is no way I would mistake him," Patricia replied, nodding at Carla's confirmation. Even before that, Patricia explained how Lilith walked around the academy with her and the prince's arms linked or how she ate lunch with him, just the two of them. Basically, Lilith had been doing whatever she wanted despite Patricia's presence.

"Miss Lilith came in during the middle of the school year, but at that time, the prince and I only spoke of what an excellent student had joined the academy,"

Patricia explained. "He and I talked about how great it would be if she became a sorcerer of the royal palace. That was it..."

Lilith had been the one to approach the prince.

The prince was always wary of those who tried to become unnecessarily familiar with him. But before Patricia realized it, Lilith had managed to slip into his bosom, and the two—together—began to exclude Patricia.

Tears fell from Patricia's violet-colored eyes as she said, "I no longer wanted to see Prince Abel, who had changed so much. I..."

"And that's why you said you didn't want to go to the academy. I see. Lady Patricia, you must really be in love with the prince."

With Carla's simple statement, Patricia drew in her breath and, raising her voice, began to cry in earnest.

It was not as though other women in the past had not tried to grow close with Prince Abel. But Patricia was the beautiful and intelligent daughter of a duke. She was, in addition, the prince's official fiancée, already publicly recognized. Since on top of that she had a strong relationship with Abel, there was no way anyone could try to sneak in between them.

Several determined daughters from noble families had attempted to get close to him, holding on to a sliver of hope, but they all soon realized that they had no chance at winning him over and quickly gave up their pursuit.

And, of course, Patricia, putting into practice the social skills she had learned from the queen, restrained herself as she judged the other girls' character, pulling them close into her social networks to manage them that way.

But even that was only possible in cases when Abel did not respond to the approach made by the other woman. If cracks arose in that foundation, the situation would change very quickly.

Abel's love for his fiancée was very well known. All male students were afraid to make eyes at Patricia for fear of catastrophe. This was because even though their marriage seemed at first glance to be mere political strategy, it was in fact the fruit of Abel's labor. He had fallen in love with her at first sight and did his best to convince the duke and the duchess to permit him to marry her.

Patricia, who had always been shy and gentle, had been reticent about the engagement at first. But Abel, like the current king, was not stingy about expressing his love. As Abel showered her with affection—so much so that she felt she might drown—Patricia developed positive feelings toward him as well. And that eventually grew into love.

“Lady Patricia is the only daughter of the Duke of Hemmings. She should take a husband from a rightful family and inherit the title—not marry the crown prince,” said Scott.

Having calmed down a bit, the four of them now sat around a table set out with cups of tea in the front room of Patricia’s suite. Scott the butler was there by Patricia’s request. Although she still found it difficult to see her parents, she seemed to find relief in having someone from her own house there. Carla, too, was relieved that Patricia seemed to be opening up more from her self-imposed isolation.

“But now look what he’s done, despite all the unreasonable requests he made!” Scott, a servant of a duke who bled loyalty, held none absolute in his heart—neither the royal family nor the kingdom—but the Hemmings family. He had been unhappy about Patricia’s engagement to the prince from the very beginning, and now he did not hesitate to tell Carla so, breathing angrily out of his nostrils.

If Abel had not fallen in love with her, Patricia would have remained her modest self. She would have married a harmless husband that her parents would have chosen for her, and she would have been able to continue living her gentle and uneventful days in the duchy.

It was true. Rather than marrying into the royal family and becoming a queen, remaining in her father’s house would have been much more comfortable, and the family would have been at peace as well.

But even so, Patricia had decided to take Abel’s hand.

Even after they became engaged with an oath of undying love and affection, Patricia cried many times, nearly crushed under the weight of the strict education meant for the future crown princess. Yet each time, she and Abel—who, as the prince, also grew up with the rigorous training—encouraged each

other and, taking each other's hand, managed to move forward together.

Who Patricia was now, sophisticated and independent, was entirely the fruits of years of her effort—all carried out in order to be able to stand next to Abel.

And yet—

"Cheating on you in this last minute, when the ceremony is right around the corner. That's terrible," Carla said, pouring tea from the pot.

"I-I...think so too!" Patricia said. Although she had stopped crying, she buried her face in her handkerchief and began sobbing again.

"Carla. Be more careful about how you put things," said Thane.

"Huh? I don't wanna hear that coming from you," Carla said.

But really, such a sudden change of heart from absolutely doting on her... This really is quite the request.

In her previous cases as a divorce agent, there had been instances when infidelity was suspected as well. But even then, they were neither this sudden nor this blatant. The only relationship Patricia had ever been in was with Abel. To be treated by him in such a way—it was not surprising that she would feel so shattered.

Contemplating such thoughts, Carla handed Patricia the tea she had just poured.

"What a lovely fragrance," Patricia said, breathing in the aroma of the tea.

"I've added chamomile and cornflower to the tea leaves. Oh, and the honey is made from borage," Carla explained.

I didn't need the cane or magic stones after all, but I'm glad I brought the tea with me.

When using magic, it was less effective when the person receiving the magic was on guard. Magic used on objects—such as opening or locking doors—could be in broad strokes, but magic used on humans required not only magical powers but also a certain amount of finesse. As with dispensation, Carla did not have absolute confidence in performing such magic.

She had prepared tea leaves that help people calm down just in case she was asked to perform complicated magic. Carla was glad the bag she had prepared had not gone to waste. She almost felt like she had been rewarded for the time she endured walking while carrying the small but heavy bag.

“It’s a special witch’s blend, isn’t it?” Patricia said.

“It’s not bad,” Carla reassured her.

“You’re right; it puts me at ease.” Patricia smiled as she blew on the cup and tilted it. Carla smiled in return.

Even as Scott the butler took the cup from Carla with a smile on his face, Thane alone stared at the liquid in the cup with a look of distrust on his face. The hot water and the teacup were provided by the duke’s residence, and she had brewed the tea before his very eyes. There was nothing to be suspicious of. Thane nonetheless was.

Jeez, I’m going to make just his tea grow cold! But wait, right now we’re trying to resolve the issue with the prince. We’re for sure gonna have to confirm the details, but...

“Hey, Lady Patricia. When I go to the academy, do you want me to use nightmare magic on the prince and Lilith? It’ll be on me—I’ll keep it a secret from the queen,” Carla said.

“Th-That might leave me with a bad aftertaste, so I think I’ll decline,” said Patricia.

“Oh wow, how merciful of you! You’re like the goddess Lisandra,” said Carla.

“Truly! Our dear Lady Patricia is far too precious!” Scott concurred.

“P-Please stop, both of you!” Patricia insisted, as Carla and Scott—who seemed disappointed by Patricia’s response—both sat there worshipping her. To reject an idea for revenge that was offered for free—Patricia was so pure of heart, it was shocking.

If I were the one who was cheated on, I wouldn’t hesitate at all to treat him to magic like that. But I guess a nightmare wouldn’t be enough. I mean, it’d be over when they woke up. Oh, maybe I should try that one—the one where

snakes and poisonous insects fall out of their mouths every time they talk!

“Carla, you’re speaking all your thoughts out loud,” said Thane, stopping her. “You’re frightening the lady.”

“I-If they were to scatter insects around, it would be more troublesome for the people around them,” added Patricia.

“Would it? Then shall we make it so that he has really bad breath? All right! The noble pretty boy will be ruined!”

“That, too, will cause more damage for the people in their surroundings. It won’t do,” said Thane.

While he seemed exasperated by Carla’s ideas, Thane sat there mumbling, “What if we break his dominant hand...?”

That seemed like a more violent idea than any that Carla had come up with. But chattering such nonsense seemed to have positive effects as well: the expression on Patricia’s face softened just a bit more than before.

“Well, revenge aside, I think it’s a good idea to call off this engagement. Everyone’s in agreement, and even the prince seems set on it. So if that’s the case, then the only things left to do are the investigation and official paperwork.”

As Carla continued with a hearty “Let’s get right to it,” Patricia again lowered her gaze, her eyes filled with sorrow.

“I’m causing so much trouble for everyone,” she said after a long moment of silence.

“You shouldn’t feel guilty about any of this, Lady Patricia. Clearly the other party is at fault,” Carla said.

“That’s right!”

Despite Carla and Scott’s forceful protestations, Patricia understood just how much preparation everyone around her had done for the marriage between herself and the prince. “But...” she started, furrowing her eyebrows in a melancholic manner.

“Not to worry. People who complain won’t switch places with you or take on

your burden for you. They also won't take any responsibility for your life. You can just ignore them," said Carla.

"Yes...perhaps you're right," said Patricia as she smiled for a moment, her expression tinged with loneliness. It paralleled her mother's expression. Although both Patricia's features and expression were strong, perhaps this was her true self.

And, perhaps, she had been pushing herself and putting up a strong front until now.

Pulling her attention away from Patricia—whom she struggled to take her eyes away from for that brief moment—Carla raised a cheerful voice and said, "And? What happened in that incident, where you said earlier that 'Prince Abel pointed his sword' at you?"

"Well...Lord Abel and Miss Lilith became very close, and they even became partners in the swordsmanship class. I couldn't bring myself to attend class one day, so I was sitting in the gazebo instead."

"Oh, the scene of the affair?"

"Ggh..." came a stifled grunt from Patricia.

"Carla..."

Carla's slip of the tongue ended up further damaging Patricia's psyche. Carla knew she often lacked consideration and was unaware of other people's feelings, but she could not quite stomach the fact that Thane was admonishing her.

Patricia coughed slightly to clear her throat, then continued her story.

The gazebo behind the academy building was Patricia and Abel's meeting place for their rendezvous.

They would bring their lunch boxes and eat there together, or they would meet there after classes and spend what little time they could together before they had to return to their dormitories. Although the gazebo was not used much in general, the other students began to stay away from the area even more once they learned about the couple's meetings there.

Hurt by Abel's behavior after he suddenly grew cold toward her, Patricia sat by herself one day, resting in that place filled with so many memories.

It was then that Abel—who was supposed to be attending swordsmanship class—passed by unexpectedly and threw his practice sword at one of the columns of the gazebo, just inches away from Patricia.

"The gazebo is fairly far from the practice field. It's also not on the way to and from the dormitory. Even then, he suddenly appeared and simply flung his sword... Not only that, he said to me, 'Don't bother staying in a place like this. Go back to the duchy.' I'd never seen such a scary look on his face before," Patricia said.

"Huh? Was he basically telling you to quit the academy?" Carla asked.

"He didn't say so explicitly. But he did tell me not to come anywhere near him," Patricia replied.

"Jeez. That's so selfish of him," Carla said.

Patricia and Abel were in the same class. To tell her, "Don't come near me. Go home." was practically the same as telling her to withdraw from the academy.

Hearing that Abel had not only been overly friendly with another girl but that he had also turned to threats—the butler Scott was seething, his veins popping at his temples.

"And what about you getting attacked by Lilith with sorcery?" Carla asked.

"There were several times when I tripped where there was nothing or things fell off shelves onto me. I thought it was strange. But one of the times, just as I was about to fall down the stairs, I noticed Miss Lilith hiding in the shadow of a column nearby. She said, though not in a voice anyone could hear, 'Hurry up and give it up.'"

"Well that's one fine personality," Carla mumbled.

Patricia had been able to determine the culprit thanks to having learned to read lips as part of her education to become the future crown princess.

"Th-The stairs?! Lady Patricia, were you injured at all?!" Scott asked in dismay.

"I was fine, Scott. It was just two steps, and I was able to suppress the impact from the landing with sorcery."

"Uh, no, it's not fine," Carla said. "Even just missing one step can give us quite a shock."

"She's right," said Thane, in rare agreement with Carla. "If you had fractured any bones, it also would have affected your wedding ceremony next month. It may even have been postponed. Though it is also possible that that was her aim."

It was a silver lining that the incident had not led to any major injuries, but the veins on Scott's temples were becoming more and more prominent. Carla worried that his blood vessels might burst, but she gathered herself and said to Patricia, "You mentioned that this Lilith girl was good at stealth sorcery."

"It's only a rumor, but I've heard that she is researching magic circles that can become transparent," replied Patricia.

"Transparent... That could be bothersome," Carla muttered. Meanwhile Thane, as if realizing something, held his chin in his hand and thought deeply.

Lilith had a high level of magical powers, and she was quite skilled at handling the various types of sorcery that she learned upon entering the academy. The magic circles that she produced in class were so conspicuously vivid and magnificent that even her instructors were left dumbfounded.

After graduation, she was set to work for the sorcerers' order. Lately it had been rumored that she was working with the palace sorcerers to develop transparent magic circles, as well as spells requiring extremely short incantations—close to not even needing one.

"Collaborating on research, huh? Thane, haven't you heard anything? The sorcerers' order and the knights' brigade both work for the castle, don't they?" Carla asked.

"We do occasionally have business that requires us to work with the sorcerers' order, but they tend to be secretive and only share the most minimum information necessary. They especially won't reveal anything about projects that are still in development," he replied.

"So you haven't heard anything yet, huh? Well, the sorcerers who work for the palace do seem sly and sinister."

"That's saying a bit much," Thane replied.

"Aha! But you aren't gonna deny it, huh?" Carla quipped back lightheartedly. Thane just sealed his lips tightly and frowned.

Seeing their reactions, Patricia said with concern in her voice, "That's why it's better not to go to the academy. We can't possibly know what will be done to you. It's far too dangerous."

"Hmm. But Lady Patricia, the reason you returned home from the academy isn't because it was dangerous—it was because you didn't want to see the prince anymore. Right?"

When Carla hit the nail on the head, Patricia's hand slipped, her cup clinking against her saucer. Carla looked into Patricia's violet-colored eyes even as they swayed with emotion, and smiled.

"I'm a witch," Carla said, "and I can't be shirking from a danger that a normal girl was willing to face. Even if it is transparent, if a magic circle is there, a witch can always tell. So it's actually quite safe for me! Though, I guess even if we headed to the academy now, classes would be over for the day. We'll just have to go tomorrow."

"B-But..."

"Lady Patricia...you really are so kind," Carla said.

She's the daughter of a duke, but she still cares about a random commoner—and a witch, at that. That's lovely for a regular person, but I can't say that trait is terribly suited for a ruler, thought Carla.

The House of Peers existed as the functioning parliament of the kingdom, but the ones who ultimately had to make decisions—however severe or consequential—and take responsibility for them were the king and queen.

No matter how capable Patricia was, she was, at heart, very kind. Even having only met her today, Carla could not help wondering whether the position of queen would not be too much of a burden for Patricia.

On top of that, if Abel—who was to be Patricia’s better half, someone with whom to share mutual support—really was as he was being described, then even if she were to marry him, her future would most likely be full of hardship.

It was thus understandable that Madam Marie and the queen, who both knew Patricia well, were willing to call off the engagement despite the time and effort that had gone into both the relationship between Patricia and Abel and the education and training for Patricia to become the queen.

But if that’s the case, then it really is important to make sure that this engagement gets dissolved successfully! Though I’m pretty sure this time it’s gonna be a piece of cake.

The queen was to handle the official aspects of the dissolution of the engagement. The only thing Carla had to do was to go to the academy and investigate...as in, she had to confirm the facts surrounding the relationship, then grab Abel by the scruff of his neck and drag him to the palace so that he could complete the procedures that required his presence. The actual, physical task of securing the prince’s person would most likely be Thane’s job. Carla simply needed to set up the occasion.

Carla had confidence in her transformation magic. She considered that it might even be a good idea to cause a dramatic scene in front of a large crowd of students. That way they would be able to have eyewitness testimonies, and the prince would not be able to retract his statements. To do that, time was of the essence. Carla was determined to complete the mission by the end of the following day. She not only had to prepare her various medicinal products, she also had to take care of all the plants growing on the second floor of the apothecary. She could not afford to waste time in fulfilling this request.

Turning to Patricia, who still looked concerned, Carla grabbed Thane’s arm and thrust him toward the girl.

“Not to worry,” Carla declared. “Sir Knight here will be there with me as well. He was boasting that he’d be able to block the sword of someone like the prince, no problem. So really, there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Hey, when did I ever boast?” Thane demanded.

“Who knows? Well then, Thane and Mr. Scott. Lady Patricia and I are going to

have some secret girl talk, so please give us some privacy,” said Carla.

“I beg your pardon?” Scott asked.

“Don’t be ridiculous. There’s no way that I would leave a witch alone with the daughter of a duke,” said Thane, raising his voice in protest. He must have seen himself as serving more the role of surveillance rather than guard. Patricia, too, seemed unable to process the sudden proposal.

Carla’s request, however, was actually for Patricia’s sake as well. “Look, Thane,” Carla began. “Do you understand that, if I’m to transform myself into Patricia flawlessly, it’s necessary for me to study the target of my transformation very, *very* thoroughly?”

“There should be no problem in you doing that here, with all of us present,” he said.

“Even if it means lifting up Lady Patricia’s skirt?” Carla asked.

“Wha—?!”

Transformation magic was not one wherein magic was used to analyze and reconstruct the target. Carla was using magic in order to reproduce what she herself “saw.” That was why the parts that she could not see—undergarments and socks among clothing items, for example—often lacked detail. For example, even if someone had a mole on the inside of her elbow, if Carla did not know about it, she would not be able to recreate it.

At the academy, there would be not only the prince and Lilith but the peering gazes of many other students. Not only that, she would be confronting them during the daytime. Even small differences would be difficult to cover up.

“If a strong wind lifted my school uniform, revealing to everyone a commoner’s underwear—our cover would be blown,” Carla stated.

“Uh...! Wh-Why, you...! What...?!” Thane stammered.

“It’s not ‘you,’ it’s Carla,” she said to Thane. Then, turning to Patricia, she asked nonchalantly, “Oh by the way, Lady Patricia. Does your uniform call for bare legs? Or do you wear tights? What color is your garter belt?”

Just in case she had to make any kind of contact with someone while

transformed into Patricia, it was necessary for Carla to see what Patricia's skin was like in order not to arouse any suspicion.

During her first case with Rita, Carla had not been so careful—which was why she had panicked when Rita's husband grabbed her wrist. Because Rita and her husband had not had much contact with each other, Carla managed to get away without having her transformation noticed.

For Patricia and the prince, however, the situation would be different. Having attended many parties on official business and having danced together numerous times, they would no doubt remember each other's hands, arms, and even shoulders. Carla listed off such body parts that she suspected would make men feel embarrassed. It seemed Thane was in fact unaccustomed to such a discussion: the tips of his ears turned red, and he started looking uncomfortable. He simply opened and closed his mouth without making any sound.

Oh my, I suspect he has no immunity to women. He's handsome, but as I've already said...

Turning away from Thane, who remained silent but was obviously agitated, Carla looked at Scott and said, "If you don't feel comfortable having me and Lady Patricia be alone together, then it would be fine to have a female maid present as well."

"No, I have been told by the queen, as well as the duke and the duchess, to grant any request made by the Lady Witch. As long as Lady Patricia agrees. Please do as you desire," said Scott.

"I-I'm fine being alone with the witch...with Carla." Patricia nodded hurriedly, taking her attention away from Thane, who was still acting unlike himself. Even though she had interacted with him as he served as a guard, Patricia had probably never seen him so flustered.

"You hear that? What are you gonna do, Sir Stubborn Knight?" asked Carla.

"Tch...fine," said Thane, clicking his tongue loudly. He gulped down his cold tea and stood up.

Behind him, Carla shrugged and smiled as she saw him off.

5. To the Academy

Carla ended up spending the night at the duke's mansion that evening.

By the time she had finished discussing with Patricia the details of her uniform and other relevant matters, the sun was well on its way to setting. Carla thus accepted an invitation to dinner.

She had intended to decline, of course, but Patricia, who had been in self-isolation since returning from the dormitory, had finally stepped out of her room and said that "if Carla was with her," she would be willing to join her family at the dinner table. It seemed Patricia had regained some of her animated spirit by sharing what had been weighing heavily on her mind. The fact that Carla was a complete outsider to the situation also seemed to have helped nudge Patricia toward stepping out of her room.

Seeing the expression on Patricia's face as she nearly clung to her—as well as the hopeful look from Scott, who would do anything for his Lady—even Carla could not bring herself to say no.

But Carla, being a commoner who lived by herself, had no idea that dinner among the nobility began late and also ended much later. Since Carla had to transform into Patricia in the early morning the next day, it was decided that Carla would simply spend the night at the duke's residence.

I was supposed to just stop by the royal palace really quick. Who knew I'd end up staying over at a duke's house? If only I could read cards and the stars like Ange can. Maybe I would've been able to know this ahead of time, Carla thought.

Ange, who was one of the witches living in the royal capital, specialized in divination. Since customarily one did not tell one's own fortune, this may have been a moot point. Carla, nonetheless, would have liked to go back in time to this morning to tell her past self, "You won't believe what's going to happen to you today."

I wonder if the shop is okay, wondered Carla, unable to help worrying about her apothecary in the back alley. At least the convenient magical tool crafted by Nettie automatically watered the herbs growing on the second floor. The building, too, was guarded by the protection magic cast by the first owner of the apothecary. Thus, there was no need to worry about anyone breaking in.

I guess there isn't anyone coming to buy medicine, so even if I'm gone for a day or two, it won't be a problem... No, wait, what am I saying?! That itself is a problem!

Carla was starting to feel depressed again, but it was the truth: she believed that the only reason Rita had come to the apothecary—perpetually deserted, with only tumbleweeds rolling by—was to get back at the doctor who, despite telling her that she was faking her symptoms, charged her an unreasonable sum of money. It was not that Rita had sought Carla for her skills as an apothecary.

Holding back tears inside her heart, Carla sat down on the soft, downy bed in the luxurious guest room. She then recalled the extravagant dinner she had just had.

The duke and his wife, moved to tears because their daughter had stepped out of her room after so many days, thanked Carla numerous times. The kitchen staff, too, went overboard and prepared three different types of dessert. Had Carla been eating at a restaurant, she would have spent a month's worth of her grocery budget on that single meal.

The duke and his family were probably being polite when they told Carla that she did not need to worry about her table manners. Being a witch, however, Carla took them for their word and enjoyed the delicious meal without worrying about offending the noble family.

When the duke and the duchess finally heard from their daughter about what happened at the academy, they at times expressed anger, at times sympathy. But in the end, they told Patricia to do what she thought was best.

Although Thane also joined the family for dinner, he returned to the knights' dormitory for the evening. Since he was going to accompany Carla to the academy as her bodyguard the following morning, he needed to retrieve the knight's uniform that he was not presently wearing.

Just before he left, Thane told Carla multiple times that he would come in the morning to pick her up, and that she was not to act irresponsibly in the meantime. Although Carla fully intended to complete the request as soon as possible, she was not so diligent or eager to do her work as to head off to the academy by herself. When she told Thane that he had nothing to worry about, he only looked back at her with mixed feelings.

And finally, the morning arrived wherein they would carry out Carla's mission of taking Patricia's place. Thane, who had arrived right on the dot of his previously announced time, was greeted by the duke, his wife, and Lady Patricia.

"Thank you for your services today, Thane," said Patricia.

"Certainly," he responded as he bowed to Patricia, who was wearing her school uniform. He then took a quick look around his surroundings.

"Who are you looking for?" Patricia asked.

"Where is that...? I mean, I wondered where Carla was," he replied.

The only ones in the entrance hall were Thane and Patricia, the duke and the duchess, and the butler Scott. The only other individual present was the maid who carried Patricia's school bag.

He had heard that Carla's transformation magic had a time limit. That was why they had decided that she would perform her magic after Thane had arrived, just before leaving the mansion.

But Carla herself was nowhere in sight. Thane did not think she had backed out of the mission at the last minute, but he did not see her on the staircase toward the back either.

When Thane began to show suspicion, Patricia smiled at him slowly.

"Oh my, Thane. There is no need for you to worry. Carla is right here."

"I beg your pardon, but—where?" he asked.

"Right here."

Just then, the Patricia standing before him smiled as she placed the back of her index finger diagonally against her beautifully shaped lips. It was a gesture

that Thane had seen Patricia do from time to time.

In Patricia's violet-colored eyes, now narrowed in delight, Thane saw a mischievous light sparkle. Still confused, Thane paused for a long while and then uttered, "Huh?"

"What do you think of my transformation magic, Sir Knight?"

The lady standing before him—who looked like Patricia no matter which angle you saw her from—was Carla, transformed.

"Huuuh?!" Thane shouted, realization finally dawning.

"Mwa ha ha! That's right, I am Carla!"

Indeed, Patricia would never open her mouth so ungracefully wide and laugh like this. Even the duke and his wife standing behind her were nodding, seemingly satisfied. Thane, however, responded with a stunned "N-No, but, even your voice," still unable to believe his eyes.

"It's perfect, isn't it?" Carla asked.

"I'm so sorry to surprise you, Thane," said the plain-looking maid carrying the school bag, as she smiled and stepped timidly before the flabbergasted Thane and the triumphant Carla. Or rather, it was—

"Lady Patricia?!" Thane exclaimed.

"Even I look like a different person, don't I?" Patricia asked, laughing softly. She now had brown, bobbed hair with thick bangs. She also wore glasses with black frames. She shared that her hair was a wig and that she had put on makeup a shade darker than her skin tone; she had also added some freckles.

Madam Marie stood happily next to Patricia. She revealed that even she had helped with some of her daughter's transformation. "You can look so different with just a bit of makeup. I'm so surprised," the duchess said.

"Lady Patricia is beautiful to begin with. Even if you try to make her look plain, she's still so lovely," Carla said.

"Oh, Carla. Don't be silly," replied Patricia.

As Thane stood there still stunned while the women before him talked giddily,

Carla—looking like Patricia—turned to him and said, “See, Thane—Lady Patricia and I have similar height and hair color, right?”

“And what of it?” he had to ask.

“I feel like I can stay transformed as her for a pretty long time.”

Although Patricia’s hair was of a more brilliant color and in curls, both Patricia and Carla had blonde hair of about the same length. They were of a similar height as well, coming up to about Thane’s shoulders. Although Carla was thinner, the length of their limbs and their overall frame were also quite similar.

Naturally it required more magical power for Carla to transform herself into someone who looked very different from her. The fewer parts there were for Carla to modify, the less magical power she had to consume—and as a result, the longer she would be able to maintain the state of being transformed.

In terms of time, transforming herself into Countess of Beckett had been the most demanding. The countess had black hair, and she was much taller than Carla. It really had been a race against time. This time, however, things were different. If there was no incident, Carla would most likely be able to remain as “Patricia” comfortably for about half a day.

“We decided that if that were the case, then we should try out just how long I’d be able to stay transformed. Hence the last-minute change in plans,” Carla explained to Thane.

“I apologize for making it seem like we were testing you. To tell you the truth, my husband and I couldn’t tell at first either.” When Madam Marie commented apologetically, Thane could not stay angry that Carla had suddenly changed their original plans. Therefore, he decided to swallow his complaint.

When the two Patricias had first stood next to each other, even her parents could not tell which was which. Seeing as how Scott, too, was nodding in frustration, he must not have been able to see through the transformation either.

It seemed Carla had managed to grasp many of Patricia’s characteristics in just a single day; even her gestures uncannily mimicked Patricia’s. So those closest to Patricia gave the stamp of approval, saying that not even Prince Abel

would be able to tell.

"Heh heh, if even Sir Knight can't tell the difference, then we're off to a good start!" said Carla.

"Don't celebrate in such a vulgar manner when you look and sound like Lady Patricia," Thane admonished.

"Hey, hey, Mr. Thane, are you gonna be okay going back to work tomorrow? I sure hope you don't mess up who you're supposed to be protecting," Carla teased, grinning.

"That's none of your business," Thane responded, glaring at her. But suddenly realizing something, he paused for a moment.

Originally, they had planned to have Patricia stay behind at her parents' mansion. She was, however, now dressed in the attire of a maid of the duke's residence.

It was not rare for a servant of a high-ranking noble to accompany a student to the academy. In fact, it was almost natural for a guard and a maid to join Patricia upon her return from a long absence. Patricia, however, had said several times that she wished not to face Prince Abel—

"I beg your pardon. To have Lady Patricia dressed this way, does it mean...?" Thane started.

"Yes, I will accompany you to the academy as well. Would that be all right?" Patricia asked.

"Yes, no, I mean..." Thane said.

The duke's daughter, who had been holed up in her room, had not only come out but also made the decision to return to the academy that she had been reluctant to go to. It was a welcome change, and her parents were happily watching her.

Despite the feeling of happiness, however, if what Patricia had shared yesterday was true, then she was most certainly in some kind of danger.

The order that Thane had received from the queen was to accompany Carla—to protect her, in other words. At the same time, the duty of a royal guard was

to protect the royal family and the nobility of the kingdom. It was not impossible to protect both Carla and Patricia at the same time. However, Thane would be up against a prince—whose swordsmanship skills were more than a match for even the commander of the knights' brigade—as well as an overly capable sorcerer. If Abel and Lilith attacked at the same time, it was highly possible that even Thane would allow some kind of an opening.

Seeing Thane caught between the queen's order and his rightful duty, Carla smiled fearlessly and said, "Given how impressive he is, Sir Knight over here should have no problem even if he had one more person to protect, right?" She then turned to Thane and continued, slightly more seriously, "Well, if something does happen, make sure you prioritize Lady Patricia over me, okay?"

"Carla?" Thane looked at her in surprise.

"Because I'm a witch. I can't lose to a sorcerer," she said, pursing her lips and blowing on her index finger. Even though they were the same finger and lips from earlier, this was decidedly not a gesture of Patricia's but of Carla "the witch."

Though even then, I'm still a failure of a witch! But it's good to bluff once in a while. Otherwise, Nettie's gonna be mad at me! If Carla ever admitted, even in jest, that a witch was inferior to a sorcerer, she was sure to get a scolding from Nettie for at least three hours. Plus she would command Carla to sit on her heels, in the proper way of the Kingdom of the East. Truly, Carla would do anything to be spared that punishment.

"My husband and I implore you as well," said Madam Marie. "We are ashamed as parents not to have known that our daughter faced such dangers at the academy. But, because of that, we decided that we wanted to let her do as she wished. Isn't that right, dear?"

"Yes, that is what we have decided," replied the duke, also turning to Thane.

"I want...to see with my own eyes and hear with my own ears. And then I want to move forward from there," spoke Patricia with an earnest expression. She stood next to her parents as she held her bag tightly to her chest. Her violet-colored eyes held such determination; the anxious daughter of the duke from yesterday was nowhere to be found.

“Lady Patricia,” Thane started—but then blinked once and drew his breath. “I understand. I shall hope for such a situation not to arise, but if something does happen, then I shall protect Lady Patricia with my life.”

“Thank you, Thane,” said Patricia. She smiled beautifully, like a blooming flower. Her parents, too, smiled with relief.

As they all chatted, the time eventually came for the three to depart. The group entered the carriage, and when Carla sat down in the seat by the door, she called out to Madam Marie and asked, “By the way. Will you and your husband be there at the dissolution of the engagement at the royal palace?” she asked.

“Yes, of course,” replied the duchess. “We have nothing but thanks for you, Lady Witch. Do have a safe trip. May the light of Lisandra shine upon you.”

“And may Azhdanel be your guide,” Carla replied.

Hearing the unexpected response from Carla, Marie opened her eyes in surprise and then smiled softly.

Thane, hearing their exchange, could not help notice something strange himself. He had seen a similar scene at the palace, when they concluded their conversation with the queen. At that time, the queen had been the one to incant the name of Azhdanel, but...

“What is it, Thane?” Carla asked, as Thane’s eyes met hers. She tilted her head in wonder as she leaned against the seat’s backrest.

It was just a farewell greeting. To respond to the name of the goddess of love with the name of the god of war, or to do the reverse, was not anything strange. In fact, neither Carla nor Patricia seemed to notice anything strange.

“Nothing,” Thane replied after a moment’s hesitation.

“Oh yeah? Well, if you say so,” Carla said.

With the question still in his mind, Thane continued riding in the carriage as it started on its way toward the academy.

But as soon as the carriage exited the gates of the duke’s mansion, Carla turned her back against Thane, who sat in front of her, and sighed dramatically.

"Haah. No matter how many times I look, there's a knight sitting in front of me," she lamented.

Although she tried to bear it by telling herself that it was for the pact and that it was just temporary, Carla still could not help feeling uncomfortable around knights.

On top of that, the knight in his pure-white uniform was taking up room in the enclosed space of a carriage. Of course she was not at all able to calm down.

"Sorry about that," Thane mumbled.

"I don't feel a bit of sincerity coming from you," Carla said.

"Of course I'm not being sincere," he replied.

"Um, Carla? And Thane too?" started Patricia. She looked worriedly into Carla's face when she saw Carla next to her unable to hide her sullenness.

"Oh, no, no. There's nothing for you to worry about, Lady Patricia," said Carla.

"Of course I'd worry," Patricia responded.

"I'm just not a huge fan of knights," Carla said.

"You mean the knights' uniform," Thane corrected.

"It's the same thing. Oh, don't worry, Lady Patricia. Thane doesn't like witches either, so we're even. And therefore, there's no problem."

"Is that how things go?" Patricia looked back and forth between Carla, who said that things were fine because they disliked each other, and Thane, who remained expressionless but was not bothering to negate Carla's claim.

Thane did say, however, "Don't you dare try to say something like, 'I suddenly don't feel like going.'"

"Of course I wouldn't say that. Jeez, just how little trust do you have in witches? It's just that you're so dang tall—it feels so oppressive in here," Carla said.

"Right back at you. Why must I be forced to face a witch every single day like this?" Thane asked to no one in particular.

"Ha! You're one to talk, being a knight," Carla shot back.

"Um, uh, you two...?" Patricia tried to interject, but she could only widen her eyes in bewilderment as they both reassured her that everything was fine—then promptly continued glaring at each other. The two, in fact, had been bickering the day before as well, but Patricia—overwhelmed by her own personal matters—had not quite noticed.

The words that flew between the two could be violent at times, but compared to the social interactions among nobility, Patricia did not feel a bit of malice behind them at all. Although she had been taken aback at first, Patricia eventually agreed that things really were all right between the two of them.

The two finally stopped their exchange when they heard the soft laughter coming from Patricia. She said to them, "It's the first time I've seen Thane hold up a conversation this long outside of his work."

"Oh my, I would've never guessed that Sir Knight here had such a professional exterior," Carla said, mockingly.

"Thane doesn't even bat an eye when the maids at the castle try to approach him. But when he's talking to you, Carla, he seems like a completely different person," said Patricia.

"Huuuh? Wow, I totally don't need that kind of special treatment," Carla said in genuine dismay.

"Shut up, Carla," Thane said. Then he turned to Patricia and said, "I apologize for the assault on your ears, Lady Patricia."

Thane was famous for being a cool guardian knight. As Patricia delighted in having been able to see an unexpected side of the steadfast knight, Thane cleared his throat awkwardly and sealed his lips. Nonetheless, he continued glaring at Carla, who narrowed her violet-colored eyes and raised her chin in order to look down at him.

Patricia thought they looked like wild animals keeping each other in check—though, of course, she did not share that thought aloud.

"Once we get to the academy," Carla said, "I'll become a proper 'Lady Patricia.' So no need for you to worry."

"As long as it doesn't affect your mission, there's no need to modify anything,"

Carla. But I am curious,” Patricia continued, “how long have you two known each other? It must be a long time.”

“Good grief, no! We only met because of this request. If we didn’t have that, I’m sure we would’ve never spoken to one another,” Carla replied.

“Really?” Patricia said, surprised.

“Really!” Carla and Thane shouted in unison.

“But you both seem to get along so well,” Patricia said after a bewildered pause.

Because of how they seemed to exchange genuine feelings with each other, Patricia assumed that the two had known each other for years. When Carla and Thane both denied the assumption, though, Patricia looked like she did not quite believe it.

After a moment of silence, Carla grimaced and muttered, “I absolutely refuse to associate myself with a knight.”

“Carla...?”

Carla’s voice was so soft that, even sitting next to her, Patricia almost failed to hear it. It carried a painful weight that was not at all like the Carla she had seen until now. But before Patricia could bring herself to say anything, Carla raised her head with a start and, very obviously changing the topic, said, “Anyway, there’s a shop that I want us to stop at.”

“A shop? For what?” Thane asked.

“What do you mean, ‘for what’? Because I need a magical tool.” Carla wanted to stop by a witch’s tool shop. It was the one run by her friend Nettie, and it was on the way to the academy.

Since stopping by the shop would not affect their time of arrival at the academy, both Thane and Patricia agreed to it. Carla quickly sent off her messenger magic.

When they arrived at the shop, a redhead woman wearing the black robe very much emblematic of a witch was standing out front. She wore glasses and held a small bag in her hand. She appeared to be around the same age as Carla.

Seeing Nettie, the owner of the magical tools shop, Thane furrowed his eyebrows even more deeply. “A witch, is it...?” he murmured.

“Hey, Thane. If you don’t want Nettie to glare at you, don’t say anything uncalled-for,” Carla said.

“You have no need to warn me. I have nothing to say to a witch in the first place,” he responded.

“Oh is that so?!” Carla shot back.

Paying no further mind to Thane, Carla opened the small side window next to the door of the carriage. Without missing a beat, Nettie held the small bag out toward Carla, who was in the form of Patricia.

“Oh hey, that’s a pretty good disguise you’ve got there,” Nettie said cheerfully. “Here you go, Carla. I got what you asked for.”

“Oh, Nettie, it’s not a disguise,” Carla responded, peevishly.

“Come on. I was complimenting you that you really could pass for the daughter of a noble,” Nettie teased. She pressed up the frame of her glasses and let her eyes twinkle with delight.

“She knows?!” exclaimed Thane and (the real) Patricia, shocked that Nettie saw right through Carla’s transformation magic.

“Hmm? Ah, it’s okay. Nettie’s just cheating with her glasses,” Carla said.

“Glasses?” asked Thane and Patricia.

“Nice to meet you! I’m the ‘craft witch,’” Nettie said, introducing herself to the knight and the duke’s daughter. She stood with both delight and pride, knowing she’d caught the two unawares.



Being one who specialized in creating magical tools, Nettie wore glasses that were a culmination of her inventions. They had several features and could even detect magic as well as magical powers. Because of this, they even had the capability to see through transformation magic.

Hearing the big reveal, Thane's eyes glimmered at the possibilities held by the glasses—which, unfortunately for him, could only be used by a witch. Told that a normal person would not be able to handle them, Thane looked crestfallen.

I wonder if he thought he'd be able to use them for his knight's duties. Ha ha, he's so easy to read!

"All right, then I'll take this. Thanks for letting me borrow it, Nettie," Carla said.

"I'll send the bill to the apothecary," Nettie reminded her.

"Oh...okay," Carla responded.

"You stay safe, now. Oh, and if you can't make your payment on time, I'll just add a late fee," Nettie said.

"Jeez, as unforgiving as usual, Nettie!"

Nettie's credo was "Never perform free labor." It applied to both her friends and her patrons. The queen had offered Carla a reward for successfully completing this case concerning Patricia and Abel, as well as an allowance in order for her to do so. Carla, however, had not yet taken from Thane that allowance that he had gotten from the queen. Receiving compensation when she had not yet completed the request did not sit right with Carla.

Well then! I'm gonna take care of this request today no matter what so that by this evening I can rightfully receive the reward in its entirety!

As the two witches parted—Carla with a semibitter expression, Nettie with a cheerful smile—the carriage started on its way once again.

Noticing Thane and Patricia looking at the small bag Nettie had handed her, Carla opened it and told them that she had borrowed a magical tool that served as a recording device. What Carla took out from the bag was a pendant. It seemed to differ from what the two had imagined upon hearing the phrase

“magical tool,” since they widened their eyes in surprise.

“It can record both sound and image. Since I don’t want the prince and the girl to know that I’m recording our conversations, though, I’ll be hiding it under my clothes. So we’ll only be able to capture sound this time,” Carla explained to Patricia as she lifted the pendant. A flat, white stone about the size of a circle formed by one’s thumb and index finger hung from a relatively long chain.

“How pretty... It looks like a moonstone. I would certainly think it was a regular accessory item, not a magical tool. Did the woman just now make it?” asked Patricia.

“Yes, it’s handmade by Nettie,” Carla answered.

“You can record with this, huh? It’s awfully small,” Thane remarked. While Patricia marveled at the beauty that was so unexpected from a practical tool, Thane instead seemed shocked at the impossibly small size of such a magical tool used for recording purposes.

The knights’ brigade used magical tools that recorded sound and image as well. They typically came in the shape of a box, however, and weighed so much that it required both hands to carry.

Although Thane disliked witches, it seemed he was not going to deny the impressiveness of the things they made. Carla was miffed at this discovery, given that he had spoken poorly of her medicine. The magical tools that Nettie created were quite distinct from the versions made by others, however; as both a witch and a friend of Nettie’s, Carla felt happy having its quality recognized.

“Like the glasses earlier, it’s for use by witches only. That’s why it’s small,” Carla said.

“I see...” Thane mumbled.

Like the sealing sorcery cast on the letter to Carla, well-established sorcery typically did not require a supporting apparatus.

Sorcery for recording, on the other hand, still had room for improvement. It required a separate device and could not be performed without it. Furthermore, the magical tool to serve as such a device tended to be rather large. The only magical tool as small as Nettie’s pendant that was currently in

widespread use was probably a disposable safety device for self-defense.

Hanging the pendant around her neck, Carla shoved the charm under her uniform and said with gusto, “Let’s record everything that happens at the academy from start to finish and get all the evidence we need.”

“Y-Yes,” Patricia agreed.

That way, even if the prince attempted to twist the truth later, they would be able to respond accordingly. When Carla spoke of having a recording to use as evidence, Patricia—in her maid outfit—righted her posture uncomfortably.

“Lady Patricia, are you feeling nervous by chance?” Carla asked.

Patricia paused slightly and said, “Yes, I suppose I am.” She then looked shocked for having admitted the fact. She brought her fingertips to her lips and said softly, “To express such weakness—I had never been able to do that until now.”

“Huh? That counts as expressing weakness? Even that?” Carla asked in surprise.

“Oh yes. I’m not supposed to allow anyone to see that I’m not completely confident in myself.”

“Wow. Well, I guess that’s how it must be with nobles,” Carla said.

Everyone—even the king himself—gets nervous. To Carla, calling the expression of such a natural feeling “weak” seemed unnatural.

“That was what I was taught—so that was what I believed,” Patricia said.

“What a cramped lifestyle,” Carla said.

“Listen, you—you’re far too carefree,” Thane remarked.

“It’s not ‘you,’ it’s Carla,” she replied.

Seeing the two—who, as if on cue, took jabs at each other whenever the opportunity arose—Patricia could not help laughing out loud, however softly.

“Cramped...yes, that’s probably true. Not just my actions and my thoughts but my entire being has probably grown hard and stiff over time,” she said.

“Lady Patricia, that is not—” Thane spoke.

But Patricia cut him off with a determined “No, Thane.”

Her expression—a smile tinged with loneliness—made her seem more mature than she was yesterday. Seeing the change that was not due to the disguise, Thane widened his eyes slightly.

“I had done my best to be accepted as a crown princess. But with all the challenges that the queen gave me, and even with Prince Abel, I only did things as I was told. Now I finally understand that—now that things have turned out this way,” she said.

The confidence Patricia shrouded herself in might as well have been made of papier-mâché. She may have had natural aptitude, but she did not have strength of heart. She relied on bravado to keep from admitting her own weakness. How fragile she was.

If that was where Lilith and Abel had managed to strike, the fault was not entirely theirs—though it was certain that Patricia was hurt and that the sadness of having been betrayed would not disappear.

Once she realized her own youth and foolishness had allowed her to only be bewildered, the tightness in her chest suddenly felt lighter. With time, even the love she still felt for her fiancé would eventually fade. Patricia could now, finally, say so with sincerity.

“In that case, let’s aim for a clean and complete breakup! You’ll definitely be able to find a much better person, Lady Patricia,” Carla said.

“Do you think so?” she asked.

“I guarantee it. And it’s not as though you have to get married,” Carla continued.

“I’m sorry?” Patricia asked, freezing in panic at Carla’s words. She seemed to have never considered that option.

“Is marriage really necessary?” Carla inquired.

“I-I mean, for the family and the successor...” Patricia said, searching for words.

“Witches have children without getting married. They also adopt their

apprentices while staying single,” Carla replied.

Carla, too, had been adopted by Varne. It was also not rare for noble families to welcome children from other houses. There was no reason for Patricia to believe that such decisions were not permitted.

“Carla, don’t make it seem like witches and daughters of dukes are one and the same,” Thane admonished.

“Though, I guess you probably have hardheaded people like Thane around you, so maybe it’s not as easy,” Carla continued. “But for you, Lady Patricia, you’ll have no problem finding a new partner even if you just sit there doing nothing. You don’t have to pick someone immediately either. Why don’t you try enjoying some romance with several different people for now?”

“Oh my,” was all Patricia could muster.

“I said, don’t recommend any strange ideas to her,” Thane insisted.

“Is it strange? I’m not saying that you should date multiple people at the same time, the way Prince Abel does,” Carla said.

“Ggh...!” came another muffled grunt from Patricia.

“Whoops, my apologies.” There went Carla again, stabbing Patricia where it hurt the most.

It was true that Abel had been unfaithful, but given that he and Patricia were going to call off the engagement, that did not even seem to matter anymore. A maiden’s heart, however, took more than just a day or two to sort out. Even though Thane most certainly did not know much about maidens’ hearts either, he glared at Carla as if he was somehow in the right. Carla went ahead and ignored him, looking away and changing the subject.

“But let’s see... If you’re feeling nervous, then why don’t we try to think of something fun? Lady Patricia: once the engagement is officially called off, what would you like to do?”

“What would I like to do...?” Patricia repeated to herself.

Patricia, until now, only had “things she had to do.” Although there were things she chose to do for herself, she had merely picked them out from a range

of options that had been prepared for her.

Things she liked. Things she liked to do. Even those, Patricia had felt that “the future queen” should not be picky. She always worried about how others saw her.

“What is it that I want to do...?” Patricia asked aloud after a long moment of contemplation.

“There isn’t anything?” Carla asked.

“It’s not that there isn’t; I simply don’t know,” Patricia responded.

It had not been her own will. With that realization, Patricia felt stunned.

The foods she ate, the clothes she wore, the places she went. Every move she made, every step she took—the more Patricia understood the influence that even her every word had, the more cautious she felt she had to be.

There was no need for her to go so far; she even remembered Abel and the queen telling her as much. But Patricia herself had not had the peace of mind to take their words to heart.

When Carla saw the blood drain from Patricia’s face, she turned to her and, looking into her face, brought her violet-colored eyes to meet Patricia’s own. Carla then said to her, “That’s wonderful. You’re free to seek to your heart’s content from now on.”

Patricia caught her breath in her throat as Carla continued.

“Once you become an adult, you’ll have an even wider range of things that you’ll be able to control and decide for yourself. You’ll be able to do the things you want with even greater freedom,” Carla said.

“But, Carla, I’m already eighteen years old. Even if I start now...”

Everyone around her had already decided on their futures. When Patricia tried to claim that it was far too late to seek out a future at this point in her life, Carla did not even bother to hide her exasperation.

“What are you speaking like an old woman for? Are you intending to die by the time you’re twenty?” she asked.

When Carla shrugged her shoulders and mumbled, “How boring,” Patricia opened her eyes wide. She drew in her breath, feeling as though Carla had pointed out just how small Patricia’s world really was.

“Carla, watch how you say things,” said Thane.

“No, Thane... It’s all right,” Patricia said.

She was supposed to be the crown princess. She could not imagine any other future. But when her relationship with Abel started to become uncertain, Patricia had felt like she had been left behind all by herself in a fog that made it impossible even to see underfoot.

But just as Patricia felt too afraid to take a step either forward or backward, it was almost as if a faint light had been lit far off in the distance before her. She whispered, “You’re right... I have such a long road ahead of me.”

“You have to enjoy it, for all it’s worth,” Carla said, speaking as if she was saying the obvious.

At those words, Patricia broke into a heartfelt smile and replied, “Yes. Thank you, Carla.”

“I haven’t a clue what you’re thanking me for. But at the very least, when this day is done, you might start by making a toast with your parents. You can have celebratory drinks at an engagement-cancellation party—with Mr. Scott and everyone!” Carla said.

“That sounds like a lovely idea. I’ll have to keep that in mind as I get through this day,” Patricia said.

“Oh, you may have things you want to say when you see the prince or Lilith, but please leave everything to me for now,” Carla said.

“Yes, I understand. I suppose if I speak, they’ll know it’s me from my voice,” Patricia said.

“Yes, yes. Don’t worry—everything you shared with me last night, I’ll be sure to tell the prince.”

Patricia nodded as Carla pointed her index finger in the air.

“And whatever else we don’t get to, you’ll be able to tell him when you do the

official paperwork for the engagement dissolution at the royal palace,” added Carla.

“I shall do that,” said Patricia with a laugh.

It was then that Carla realized Thane was sitting in silence, in contrast to the two laughing lightheartedly.

“What is it, Thane?” Carla asked.

“No... It’s nothing.”

As Thane refrained from giving a clear response, the carriage arrived at the academy.

§

Not long after it was reported to the professors that Patricia had returned to resume her studies, word that Patricia had come back, with a knight of the royal guard and a maid in tow, spread throughout the academy.

“Lady Patricia!”

The moment they stepped out of the administrative office, several female students surrounded them in the hallway. According to the information Patricia surreptitiously whispered in Carla’s ear, they were classmates—or, rather, the entourage that occasionally followed “Lady Patricia, the daughter of the duke.”

The students did not see through Carla and her transformation nor did they seem to notice at all the existence of the maid who stood quietly behind her. Instead, they celebrated Patricia’s recovery from her illness in an exaggerated manner. Then, saying that they would let Abel know and that he would be delighted to see her—all things that sounded pleasant on the surface—they left the scene as if fleeing from something. The daughters of the nobility all seemed unsure of the proper distance to maintain from Patricia.

“Those ladies must also have no interest in someone who will no longer become the crown princess,” said Patricia.

“At least we’ve been spared the trouble of having to call up the prince and the girl. They may not be friends, but they were certainly useful,” Carla said.

“That’s a cruel way to put it,” remarked Thane.

"Well, Thane, just how do you suggest I phrase it, then?" Carla asked.

"The way you said it is unpleasant, but I don't disagree," he replied.

"You agree with me for a change? Oh no, I feel like you're plotting something," she said.

"Quiet. Now hurry up and pretend to be the lady that you're not," he hissed.

Patricia came to the academy today ostensibly to determine how to complete the classes remaining in the academic year, given her long absence. She was thus not going to attend classes today. They had brainstormed how they might meet with Abel and Lilith under such circumstances, but thanks to the entourage, that issue had been taken care of.

The three, therefore, headed straight for the gazebo.

Since they had told the female students that Patricia would confirm her class and exam schedules there, Abel and Lilith would most likely come meet them on their own.

The gazebo that they arrived at stood quietly in a somewhat inconvenient location removed from the classroom and practicum buildings. Indeed, few would make a habit of frequenting it.

"I see, so this is the scene of the affair."

"Ggh...!"

"Carla..."

"Shush, Thane. And call me 'Patricia.'"

"...Tch."

When Carla admired the gazebo that had popped up numerous times in their conversations, she ended up damaging Patricia's psyche yet again. Very deliberately reprimanding Thane—who had meant to reprimand *her*—Carla sat down in the gazebo with a very graceful motion. She then had Patricia sit further inside the gazebo. Finally, Thane stood beside the two of them.

It was shortly after they had spread out the course registration forms on the table and begun to chat congenially that they heard someone brusquely call

out, "Hey."

When Carla looked up at the interpellation that oozed suspicion, she saw through the eyes of "Patricia" a certain male student.

Well that was fast!

To hide the real Patricia, who sat with her shoulders quivering, Carla turned toward the student. The same lustrous hair as the king, the same blue-gray eyes as the queen. It was Prince Abel Ains Selvester—the person with whom Patricia was to call off her engagement.

Carla was uninterested in festive parades and balcony viewings at which the royal family appeared; she had never attended a single one of them. It was, thus, the first time that Carla saw Abel, who of course appeared in the newspaper much less frequently than his parents.

He had a well-groomed appearance and a lean physique. The air about him suggested a sharpness of intellect rather than friendliness. It was exactly as the magazines and other media had described him. Although he must have run to the gazebo, he was not at all out of breath. Letting anger boil quietly beneath the surface, he looked squarely at "Patricia" and Thane, the knight who guarded her.

Then, before anyone could draw their breath, Abel kicked off the ground.

What the—?!

Carla heard a dull, heavy sound and felt a shock to her entire body. Having been shoved full force, Carla now found herself being held by Patricia.

And only then did she notice the hotness on her cheek.

"Stand down, Thane!" the prince cried out.

"I cannot, Prince Abel!"

Thane stood with his back to Carla. He had stopped the prince's sword with his own scabbard. His uniform was torn at the shoulder, the white fabric becoming stained with blood.

Oh...it's blood.

Just then, warm liquid trickled down Carla's cheek. Hearing a soft flutter, she looked down—and saw a lock of golden hair from her temple scatter at her feet.

"Tell me who you are," demanded Abel. "What have you done with Patricia?!"

Behind the point of the sword, a pair of blue-gray eyes stared at Carla with hatred. As she kept both Abel and Thane—as neither seemed willing to retreat—in her field of vision, Carla felt strangely calm, despite being the one at whom the prince pointed his sword.

Well, well. To see through it with only a glance.

Carla had confidence in her transformation magic. She would have even declared that the only person able to see through her transformed figure as being someone other than Patricia—whom even her own parents could not identify—was Nettie, using her magical tool.

It did not matter in this moment why Abel, who was not even Patricia's family, succeeded in determining that it was not her—from so far away, with just one look. He did not have any proof, after all.

But it seems he hasn't yet noticed that the maid behind me is the real Patricia.

The prince kept his eyes on Carla; he had not even glanced at the maid. If that was the case, then there was no problem at all.

With Patricia's support so she would not fall to the ground, Carla tried to stand. She realized only then that Patricia's hands were shaking.

Now that I think about it, it was in this gazebo that she was attacked by the prince, thought Carla.

Patricia had said that in that moment, she had been more shocked than frightened. Now she most likely felt genuine fear more than anything else. As she had promised, though, Patricia bore it without letting out a single sound.

This was unacceptable.

Carla was a witch and older than Patricia. It was unthinkable for Carla to need Patricia to protect her. Turning just her head to look back at Patricia, Carla

smiled and said to her, “Everything is fine.”

“B-But...”

“Shh. Leave this to me,” Carla whispered softly, trying to soothe her. Then she put her index finger to her lips, motioning for Patricia to stay silent. She gently removed Patricia’s fingers which were digging into her shoulders.

That made Patricia realize that Carla had a cut on her cheek. With tears in her eyes, she handed Carla a handkerchief, which Carla took from her as she stood up.

Several paces away, the prince declared, “Regardless of the purpose, I must punish any suspicious individual who chooses to enter the academy under a false identity.”

“Prince Abel, please remain calm,” Thane replied.

“If you are going to stop me, then I shall deem you guilty as well, Thane!”

Abel made no motion to return his sword to its scabbard. He continued glaring at Carla, who was transformed into Patricia. He certainly had violent intent, yet his gaze also seemed tinged with desperation.

Hmm, I wonder...

Carla approached Abel and Thane, who remained in a stalemate. She tilted her head and did as Patricia often did, touching the back of her raised finger to her lips.

“It has been quite some time, Prince Abel. But what a terrible welcome you give your fiancée. Even the love of a century would fade in an instant,” she said.

“You fake! How dare you speak such nonsense!”

“I feel so incredibly sad. That is why I would like you to see this,” Carla said as she raised her palm in front of Abel, who was looking over Thane’s shoulder, his eyes locked on Carla.

In that instant, an explosion of light—almost like lightning—flashed out of Carla’s hand and directly struck Abel. In the split second that Abel retreated as he momentarily lost his vision, Thane knocked his sword out of his hands. Carla immediately stuffed a rolled-up handkerchief in the prince’s mouth.

"Hnngh?!"

"I am afraid you are being a bit too loud. Please do shut up. Thane, hold him down," Carla commanded.

"H-Hey!" Thane said.

As she left it to Thane to keep Abel restrained, Carla tore off a stretch of ivy that grew around one of the columns of the gazebo. She removed the leaves from the vine and, reinforcing it with magic, used it to bind Abel's hands and feet.

Abel tried to resist, but there was no way he could win against an actual knight who had a larger build. Once Carla tied the vine tightly and made sure that it would not come undone, she sighed and wiped the sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand.

Carla was accustomed to bundling and tying up herbs, but doing so on a living being was not a fun experience. The main ingredients for Carla's medicine were plants and minerals, not bear livers.

"Jeez, I'm spent," said Carla. "I hadn't planned on doing any physical labor. Who do I take my complaints to?"

"Don't stand there like you've already completed your job! What are you thinking, tying up the prince?!" demanded Thane.

"I mean, this is the only way we could talk to him with any semblance of calm," said Carla. She turned to Abel and said, "Now, Prince Abel. I've come here today at the request of several parties with the stamp of approval from the Duke and Duchess of Hemmings as 'Today's Limited-Edition Patricia, the daughter of the Duke of Hemmings.' Do you have a problem with that?"

Abel tried to speak, but his voice failed to form any proper words as it remained muffled by the handkerchief. Though his piercing gaze remained suspicious, when Thane nodded at him, his hostility, which had been on full blast, lessened somewhat.

They had planned to approach the prince and Lilith and have Carla pretend to be Patricia in order to find out what was going on. Now that the transformation had been exposed, Carla thought it best to admit that she was, in fact, a

different person and to seek the prince's explanation that way.

Carla sat down on the bench and patted the seat next to her, motioning to Prince Abel to sit down. She said, "There's no need to stand while talking. Have a seat here, Prince Abel. Thane, you can sit toward the back."

The prince turned away from her in defiance and remained silent.

"Oh, are you perhaps the type who wants to be forced to obey commands? Well I certainly didn't do enough research. My apologies. Then please excuse me," she continued.

Carla pointed her finger at Abel, and the ivy vine that was tied around his ankles extended and tightly wound around his shins, up to his knees. Abel gasped, the handkerchief still in his mouth. Carla sensed Patricia's soundless scream from the back of the gazebo. She must not want to see someone she cared about being hurt.

Sorry! Carla thought, without loosening her hold on him.

Just before Thane stepped in to stop her, Abel, now pale, nodded his acquiescence. Carla finally weakened the bind.

"This is absurd," Thane mumbled.

"Well the prince got violent all of a sudden. What were we supposed to do? By the way, Thane—is your shoulder okay?" Carla asked.

"You..." he replied.

"I keep telling you, it's not... Oh, right. It'll be more confusing if you call me by my name. 'You' is fine for now. In fact, don't even address me."

"You're as selfish as ever," Thane murmured.

The cut on Carla's cheek was only skin deep. The bleeding had already stopped. Even so, she thought it inappropriate to have bloodstains on herself when she was transformed into Patricia. When Carla used her magic to erase the traces of blood on her skin and uniform, both Abel and Thane opened their eyes wide in surprise. While she was at it, she also removed the bloodstains from Thane's shoulder.

He had received the injury trying to protect her. It was his duty to do so as a

bodyguard, but even so, it did not make Carla feel good.

“Your injury hasn’t been healed, okay?” she reminded him.

“Yes... It’s fine,” he said in return.

Because healing magic consumed a lot of power, Carla could not spare enough to use it while she was using her transformation magic. She was able to fix appearances, but the actual wound and pain still remained.

As an apothecary, however, she could not just watch and do nothing when someone right in front of her was injured—especially when she herself was the cause of the injury. But she also simply did not have enough power to heal him.

If it were my teacher, I’m sure she would’ve been able to...

Feeling so much distance between herself and Varne, who was a more than capable witch, Carla glanced up at the sky in frustration.

She had used much of her magical power in the commotion. The time she could remain transformed had shortened. Abel had seen through her, but she still had things she needed to do in Patricia’s form. She could not dillydally.

Oh, jeez. We’ve gotta get this thing taken care of! she thought.

Having seen Carla perform a series of magical spells, Abel’s suspicions toward her seemed to have slightly decreased. Carla undid the ivy that bound Abel’s now subdued feet. Still wary, he sat down next to her, being sure to leave some space between the two of them. Although it was unlikely he was going to act violently again, she left the vines around his wrists, just in case.

Thane picked up Abel’s sword but did not return it to him. Instead, he simply moved toward the back of the gazebo, shielding Patricia from view.

“Okay, I’m going to take this off now. But please don’t think about making any noise,” Carla reminded him. Then she removed the handkerchief from his mouth with a light pop.

Abel coughed slightly, then stared at Carla, his blue-gray eyes cool and still cautious.

“You are a witch?” he asked.

“Please allow me to introduce myself. I am Temporary Patricia. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, for today only,” Carla replied.

“What is with that ridiculous introduction?!” Abel shouted.

“I’m afraid all my willingness to be polite flew out the window when you attacked us without warning,” Carla said.

Rudeness with rudeness, and if not that, whatever it was that was called for. Even with royalty, Carla did not waver in her policy.

“Is Patricia safe?” Abel asked after several moments of silence.

“She’s doing just fine, if we don’t consider just how heartbroken she is over her fiancé’s acts of infidelity and violence.”

“Ggh...!” came a soft grunt from Abel.

Carla mentally rolled her eyes hearing him first ask whether Patricia was safe. *If he was so worried, he should be by her side, cherishing her*, she thought. But her frank response seemed to have done a number on him.

“What are you conspiring, looking like that...? No, if Thane is here, then it must have been planned by my father or my mother,” Abel said.

“Your observation is correct. It’s a request from Her Majesty,” Carla replied.

“From my mother?”

“Actually, I’d like to ask you something. How did you know that I wasn’t Lady Patricia? This transformation worked on the duke and the duchess as well as Mr. Scott. I do look like her, don’t I?” Carla asked.

“Your appearance is similar, but no matter how you look at it, you are a different person,” Abel said.

“Okay, but where?” Carla insisted.

When Abel refused to give a straight answer, Carla brought her face closer to his. He remained seated but backed away as if put off. Seeing as how she was transformed into Patricia, his reaction seemed quite rude.

“I mean, even if you ask me where,” he said, “all I can say is, I can tell just by looking.”

"What does that mean? So you're saying, you could just sort of tell?"

"I suppose so."

"Huh? So you drew your sword and attacked, just for that? Are you serious?" Carla asked.

"Watch how you speak," Thane reprimanded.

"Thane, shush," Carla responded.

To be able to attack as he did, with no hesitation, when he had no evidence—it was, in a way, impressive. Carla was nonetheless disappointed, because it did not give her any useful information that she could use for improving her transformation magic in the future. "Jeez, you're so useless," Carla lamented.

"I am glad not to be of any use to you," Abel shot back.

"You think you're so great, it's unpleasant," Carla responded.

"He actually is a person of great standing," Thane remarked.

"Thane, keep your mouth shut," Carla said.

"What is with you two?" Abel asked, confused.

Carla did not expect to have her usual back-and-forth with Thane at a time like this, but their lack of nervousness caused Abel to relax his brow somewhat.

"Well, seriously. To be able to tell that it wasn't the real deal, just by instinct—Prince Abel must be truly in love with Lady Patricia," Carla declared, sighing exaggeratedly. Abel's shoulders shook for a moment, and his face turned red. Who knew where the prince's murderous intent from earlier went. Seeing him like this, he looked like any young man of eighteen.

"Oh, I've hit it on the nose," Carla said with delight. "Just what are you doing, hurting someone you care about so much?"

"Sh-Shut up! What business is it of yours—?"

"It *is* my business, since I've been dragged into it thanks to you," Carla interrupted him. "I'll have you explain everything in a moment, but first, I have some good news. The engagement between you and Lady Patricia will be dissolved. The queen has decided, and the Duke and Duchess of Hemmings

have also agreed.”

“I...see,” Abel said, after drawing his breath. When he heard the news, all energy seemed to drain out of him. Carla wondered if it was her imagination that he looked relieved.

“So we’re here just to confirm the facts and also serve as a messenger to the rebellious prince who refuses to contact his parents. Is that finally clear to you?” Carla asked.

“Yes,” Abel said, pausing before he did so. “You have my apologies. Thane, you too.”

“Oh wow, he’s so agreeable all of a sudden,” Carla said, astonished. “Wait, is he the same guy from earlier?”

“How irreverent of you,” Thane said to Carla. “Prince Abel, it is but a scratch. Please do not pay it any mind.”

“In other words, the full-force attack from Prince Abel was like getting scratched by a cat for Thane,” Carla concluded.

“Ggh...!”

“Don’t say anything uncalled-for,” Thane reprimanded Carla, though he did not deny what she had said. Carla shrugged her shoulders at Thane, then turned to Abel, who had received the added damage of humiliation as a swordsman.

“Come to think of it, why did you have a sword with you? Are you in the middle of your swordsmanship class?” Carla asked.

“That is correct. We have exams coming up,” he answered.

Because exams were to be held in preparation for graduation, students were permitted to spend their free time however they wished.

“Even then, you can’t possibly be allowed to just carry it around with you,” Carla said.

“That is not a problem. I have special permission, for emergency use,” Abel replied.

Although the use of weapons within the academy was prohibited, it seemed

to be permitted for the royal family. That was understandable, given that there could be situations when the guards may not make it in time.

"Why are you so overly prepared?" Carla asked.

"In fact there did happen to be a suspicious individual—you," Abel replied. "It was not all for naught."

When Abel added proudly that any rogue element disguising themselves as Patricia ought to be captured immediately, Carla could not help but hold her head in her hands.

I can't tell if this guy is highly vigilant or just super aggressive!

Even so, had Abel had with him a treasured sword of the royal family or something similar, even with Thane on guard, they may not have come out unscathed. Thank goodness Abel only had equipment supplied by the academy.

"Ah, right. I don't need to hear any more. Well then, before we get into the main topic at hand—I have a message for you from Lady Patricia," Carla said.

"A message?" repeated Abel, looking like he had not expected such a turn. Carla smiled brightly at Abel. She could not see Patricia at the back of the gazebo being blocked by Thane. Nonetheless, Carla felt like she sensed Patricia's nervousness.

Carla cleared her throat, inhaled, then turned her violet-colored eyes to look straight into Abel's eyes. Seeing the seriousness in her gaze, Abel also drew in his breath.

"Prince Abel—you idiot."

"...Huh?"

"I am sorry I was not able to help you."

"H-Hey..."

"I loved you very much. Goodbye." After a pause, Carla concluded, "That is all."

Abel sat in silence.

Carla had thought that Patricia would have more displeasure to express. But

after much consideration, that was all Patricia had asked Carla to convey to him.

She must have really loved him, thought Carla.

Until the very end, Patricia had never said she had stopped loving him. That seemed to be the case for the prince before her eyes as well.

“Tricia...” Abel finally let out, turning pale upon hearing the message delivered to him with Patricia’s face, in Patricia’s voice. He then simply hung his head in silence.

6. Crown Prince Abel's Circumstances

Abel Ains Selvaster was born the first child of the royal couple.

Being in a position that was always seen by others as a public figure, Abel—even before he could remember—was raised as someone who would become the future king. He did not, therefore, hold fast to the concept of his own, personal self.

He swallowed most things, including personal desires. As someone who was to live for the royal family and the kingdom, there were only two things to which he was attached—the sword and Patricia.

“—and from there, her expression was just so adorable! The moment I saw Tricia, everything went white before my eyes, even more than when I received that blow to the head from Lionel!”

“Prince Abel, I believe that is simply cerebral anemia. As in, just how serious is the training the commander gives a child?” Carla asked.

“It is fine, because it simply means that was how much I was able to corner Lionel. Listen to me, Witch—that tea party was simply fate. My meeting with Tricia must have been orchestrated by Goddess Lisandra herself.”

Just what exactly am I being made to listen to?

Carla was listening attentively to Abel, who had given up and said he would “tell everything.” His trip down memory lane seemed to have no end, however, as he began with his meeting Patricia when they were both children and then moved on to his battles to be able to call her by the nickname “Tricia,” then to his struggles to realize their engagement, then to the happy days of nurturing their relationship, and then back again to ruminating on their past together.

The rumors that he was head over heels for his fiancée seemed to be true. Not minding at all the exasperated look on Carla’s face, Abel capitalized on the opportunity to speak endlessly of his love for Patricia.

It was quite the sudden change in his attitude—so much so that it made Carla

wonder where the prince from earlier, with the open hostility of a wounded animal, had disappeared to.

When Carla—bored from the never-ending flood of infatuation that was nearly giving her heartburn—looked up, she saw that Thane had assumed an expression resembling a perfected state of nothingness.

And behind Thane, Patricia had made herself smaller than ever, trying desperately to keep her presence unnoticed. She had turned red all the way down to her neck, and she could not even lift her face. She must have been regretting coming to the academy today.

“Uh, right. I understand very well just how much you are in love with Lady Patricia,” said Carla.

“No, let me continue. If I cannot fully convey all of Tricia’s charms, there is no way I can explain everything,” Abel replied.

“No, this has been quite enough,” Carla insisted. “Besides, if it’s about Lady Patricia, I’m quite knowledgeable as well.”

“Even more than I am, you say?” he challenged her.

“Why yes—the color of her petticoat today, for example.”

“Huh?!”

“I even know the design of the lace on her corset.”

“Y-You! I demand that you erase such memories right this moment!”

Even as Abel closed in on her with a momentum that suggested he was going to grab her in combat, Carla simply narrowed her eyes to look at him. “Once we’ve completed our business, I’ll consider deleting them from my brain,” she answered. “Anyway, Prince Abel, we can’t be wasting any time—please get to the point. If you loved Lady Patricia so much, why the change once that Lilith girl entered the academy?”

“That...” At Carla’s question, Abel seemed unable to speak, his face displaying disgust that seemed to well up from the bottom of his heart.

But that was precisely what they needed to hear about.

“Oh, the vines on your wrists seem to be loosening. Let me tighten them!” Carla said, pointing suggestively at the ivy still wrapped around Abel’s wrist.

“N-No, I am quite all right,” Abel responded, face twitching. He finally nodded, reluctantly, indicating his willingness to answer Carla’s questions.

“I’ve heard that Lilith is quite the charmer as well. Were you perhaps seduced by her?” Carla asked.

“No way. That is impossible.”

“Yeah, I figured as much,” Carla responded with no surprise or emotion—but Abel seemed neither to care nor to notice.

There were, however, multiple testimonies that described his series of actions wherein he had favored Lilith over Patricia and treated the latter poorly.

Carla demanded an explanation, looking at him with Patricia’s face. Abel sighed deeply and, modifying his speech and expression, began to speak.

“Half a year ago, Lilith Cabot entered the academy.”

The majority of the students at the Royal Academy were children of nobility. Those who had magical powers exceeding a certain level, however, had an obligation to attend the academy, regardless of family rank.

Although Lilith had enough magical powers to be strongly recommended to the academy, she was nonetheless a commoner from the countryside. She lived with her parents and younger brother as a family of four, and they were not financially well-off. Being unable to afford the various expenses tied to attending the academy, they had been postponing her enrollment.

Although tuition as well as room and board at the academy were paid for by the kingdom, students had to pay for their uniform, stationery items, and other necessities themselves.

Students were permitted to attend the academy as long as they were within a specified age range. Lilith had been planning to enroll once a student who was a family acquaintance graduated and gifted her the uniform and other supplies.

“Stories like those are quite common,” Thane remarked.

“Thane—is that right?” Carla asked.

“Yes. The knights’ brigade works the same way. Once you’ve entered, you have very little expense—but it does take a certain amount of resources to prepare for it. If you live in the countryside, you also need to pay for travel expenses to the capital. It’s possible to receive financial assistance from the nobility, but they may ask for your service after graduation. If the desired conditions don’t match, things may be rather difficult.”

“Really? I would absolutely refuse to have strings attached even before I entered the academy,” Carla said, dismissing the idea outright.

“I thought you’d say that,” Thane responded casually.

Abel, too, raised a corner of his mouth at the irony.

“In actuality, the nobles will only support students with whom they have some kind of a relationship. There have also been issues with those who serve as a mediator and put in a good word for a student, only to take some kind of a fee from the student later. That was why a scholarship system that provides more generous funding to promising students was set up starting this year.”

“Oh really?” Carla asked. She understood that troubles must have surfaced involving people who made arrangements with nobility on behalf of a student, just to take a cut later.

Exams to qualify for a scholarship took place twice a year. Abel explained that Lilith had entered the academy after having passed the first of such exams in the year.

“She has a lot of magical power, but even more than that, her ability to use those powers is miles ahead of others. Her theoretical constructions are original, and the magic circles she creates are precise. Those are the things that made her catch the eyes of the palace sorcerers soon after she entered the academy.”

It seemed the sorcerers, who were often difficult to please, had taken a rare interest in Lilith. Abel, however—who was more interested in sword than in sorcery—did not have much interest in Lilith. As the future king, he was happy to know that more talented individuals were being trained in the kingdom, but that was all.

Ah, right. Lady Patricia said a similar thing.

Lilith was therefore invited to join the sorcerers' order, which meant that she saw Abel not just at the academy but at the royal castle as well.

Those who worked at the castle were not limited to nobility. While there were some barriers associated with rank and status, the sorcerers' order and the knights' brigade in particular were units in which those who were capable were treated more favorably than those who were not.

In that sense, since she was both a future vassal and a fellow student at the academy, there was no reason for Abel to rebuff greetings and conversations from Lilith.

"Even before now, daughters of nobility who approached me trying to vie for the position of the future queen were not few. But at the time, Lilith Cabot seemed to have no such intentions."

Abel said that he did not feel the need to be vigilant with Lilith because she did not appear to be trying to ensnare Abel in the same way. Moreover, being a commoner, she could not possibly be a candidate for the next queen.

Even so, until then Abel had not been friendly with any daughter of the nobility other than Patricia. Even if the conversations between Abel and Lilith were mere greetings, their interactions ended up misleading several parties. It seemed people interpreted Lilith's status as a commoner as indicating just how serious Abel was about her.

"Though it was simply that no commoner woman had ever bothered to speak with me, people talked it up as a relationship that had the obstacle of a difference in class."

"Oh, I see. I guess there aren't many commoner girls with enough guts to casually speak with a crown prince. Plus you've basically shut out all the other young noble ladies from your life. So when in fact you were just speaking normally with Lilith, people thought that you were having an affair with her."

"I was not even speaking with her, really. They were merely greetings or simply asking about the progress of classes at the academy. I had ignored the talks, thinking they were frivolous rumors."

Once he started speaking with Lilith, however, Patricia began encountering various minor accidents.

In the beginning, he did not put those two things together. But as Lilith became more aggressive about closing the distance between her and Abel, acting in a very familiar way with him as if she were his partner, the frequency of the accidents that Patricia met with noticeably increased.

“It simply was not possible for books to fall from shelves but only onto Tricia—or for her to trip when there was nothing there. I had misjudged. That woman’s target was not me; it was Tricia.”

“I heard that she was pushed down the stairs,” Carla mentioned.

“Yes, I heard about that after the fact,” Abel said after a moment of hesitation. His fist quivered on his knee. His blue-gray eyes—the same as the queen’s—shone with frustrated regret. “Lilith Cabot is a commoner who entered the academy on a special scholarship without any backing from the nobles...but she hails from the Earldom of Dalaney.”

At Abel’s mention of the noble’s name, Thane looked up, startled. “Lord Dalaney has two daughters, does he not? I believe they are fairly close to you in age as well,” he said to the prince.

“Wait, is it that he’s trying to get rid of Patricia so that he can get one of his daughters to become the next crown princess?” Carla asked. “And Lilith is complicit in his scheme, huh? I guess a transparent magic circle couldn’t be more perfect.” Inferring the relationship at work in the background, Carla struck her palm with her fist.

The Earl of Dalaney was an ambitious and power-hungry individual. He took active part in the disputes among factions within the House of Peers. It seemed he was also trying to expand his power reach in several different directions. For an earl who enjoyed displaying his powers, the thought of being the father of the crown princess—and eventually the father of the queen—probably made his mouth water.

Given that Abel was completely in love with Patricia, however, it was no use trying to have one of his daughters seduce him outright. That was probably why he switched his target to Patricia, trying to get rid of her—if not to kill her, then

to injure her gravely—and squash the plans for the upcoming marriage.

Coming from the family of an earl was not high enough in rank to become the crown princess. But because it was believed that the marriage between Abel and Patricia was set in stone, the daughters of nobility from ranks high enough to be suitable for the royal family all already had their future spouses determined.

Rather than breaking up relationships that had already been established—which would plant seeds for trouble in the future anyway—it was wiser to expand the scope of eligibility for the consort candidate to include lower-ranking nobles.

In fact, the Earl of Dalaney had expressed opinions about the minimum family status required for consort candidates in past parliamentary meetings. Abel bitterly explained that the earl most likely intended to create another opportunity for selecting a candidate for the future queen and to send in one of his daughters for the occasion.

Now that I've heard it, it all makes sense...isn't what I should think, but—is that really how things work? The situation was difficult to understand for Carla, who could very easily declare that she had zero interest in having power. She understood, however, that those who wanted it would do anything to get it.

"Lilith's family is still in the Earldom of Dalaney, correct? Then there must be the possibility that her family has been taken hostage and that she, therefore, cannot refuse any commands given to her," Thane suggested.

"That is correct, Thane," replied Abel. "Plus Lilith has a younger brother who has a weak constitution. I have heard that he occasionally experiences attacks as well."

"Oh my. In that case, it would also be difficult for the family to secretly escape the earldom as well," said Carla.

In the countryside, the feudal lord close by had much more influence than the royal king far away. Lilith's parents were mere sharecroppers. The earl who owned the land on which they lived basically held the power to determine whether to let Lilith's family live or die.

“But if that’s the case, then don’t you just have to arrest the earl in question?” Carla asked.

“Why are you always so simplistic, you?” asked Thane exasperatedly.

“Huh? What do you mean, Thane?” Carla demanded.

“No, I mean— We have no proof, Witch,” Prince Abel replied.

Patricia’s accidents had no witnesses. They had had the academy’s security staff and the maid from the duke’s family accompany her the entire day, but Patricia always encountered the accidents when the others were looking away for a moment or when there were too many people in their surroundings to be able to determine the culprit. Each time, everyone always agreed that there had been no foreshadowing elements.

The talks about developing transparent magic circles and spells with extremely short incantations were also only rumors. The only things that were certain at that point were that Lilith was from the Earldom of Dalaney, that Lord Dalaney was an ambitious man, and that Patricia was encountering mysterious accidents.

If the threats were in fact true, then even if they were to question Lilith, she most likely would not admit to anything easily. In fact, it was highly probable that word would get back to the earl, who would then smother the evidence.

Even as the crown prince, Abel could not pursue the earl just for being suspicious. What they needed was evidence. And for that—

“When I realized that I was considering making Tricia a decoy, I was stunned,” Abel said after a long moment of silence.

Hearing Abel’s voice—full of sorrow and so completely different from a moment ago—Carla felt Patricia hold her breath as she stood hidden behind Thane.

“Can you understand the despair and hopelessness I felt? I was trying to use Patricia—the woman that was more dear to me than my own life—just to expose Lord Dalaney’s crimes. And I did it like it was perfectly natural, with no hesitation at all.”

The foundations that Abel's imperial studies had drilled into him since his young age were for one who would have great power and control. Abel shuddered at himself, having so thoroughly internalized the teaching that one was to prioritize reason and order within the organization over one's own heart.

"But Prince Abel, there was no other..."

"That is not all, Thane. Even if I were able to be rid of Lord Dalaney, there will always be others who will try to cause my downfall. Every time someone tries to harm Tricia, will I use her as bait? What kind of hell would that be?!"

Though they were not in a time of war, enemies drawn to power could appear at any moment. Abel trusted his abilities, but the only method by which he could swear to protect Patricia was through the sword. If they were attacked by sorcery or poison—methods beyond his own abilities—Abel did not stand a chance.

"That was when I finally understood—that being with me was posing the greatest danger for Tricia," Abel barely managed to eke out. Toward the back of the gazebo, Patricia remained silent, her eyes wide.

"Prince Abel..." Thane started, but he too seemed unable to find the right words to say. Silence fell upon the gazebo.

Abel, who had been making a fist as his shoulders trembled, finally let out a slow sigh. He then continued, saying, "That was not all. The fact that she was to be my spouse was putting a burden on Patricia. Not only was she being given lessons by my mother on becoming a crown princess, she was already accompanying me on official duties. Because of that, even on days of rest she was spending more time at the palace than at her own family's residence in the Duchy of Hemmings."

Patricia was Abel's fiancée, but she was not yet the crown princess. Abel confessed that he felt guilty about the current situation, in which she was already taking on various tasks and responsibilities.

He added that it was not infrequent for him to feel ashamed of himself when Patricia's knowledge was more precise and accurate than his own, even though he had grown up receiving an education meant for the next king.

"She is the embodiment of excellence. But even before our engagement, many had said that her abilities should be exercised on behalf of the Duchy of Hemmings."

"Mr. Scott was quite upset about that point as well," said Carla.

"Scott... Yes, he must be," said Abel.

Seeing the strange expression on Abel's face—a mix of both apology and annoyance—Carla surmised that the butler of the duke's family had spoken out against the crown prince himself. Scott truly was a strong and reliable loyalist for his master.

"Not only am I unable to protect Tricia, I am depriving her of the happiness that she deserves."

Abel, with his head bowed in earnest, spoke in a voice that was infinitely sincere. It was clear that he spoke the truth.

But while it was understandable that his actions had been for Tricia, there still remained elements about them that were difficult to understand.

"I get the reason, or rather the motive, but...was it necessary for you to cheat on her?" Carla asked. When she looked at Patricia over Thane's shoulder, she saw the lady anxiously nodding several times at Carla's question.

"It does not make me happy to hear that I cheated on her, but I admit that I acted in a way that would make things seem as such."

"Why? There was no need to do so intentionally."

"Do not be ridiculous. If we were to simply call off the engagement, people would think that Tricia must have been at fault."

"What?" Carla let out.

"I am the only one who is at fault. Tricia has to remain a victim, no matter what," Abel said, responding to Carla with what seemed an irrational answer.

"Huh?"

"I see," said Thane, nodding and agreeing with Abel.

"You too, Thane?" Carla asked in shock.

It was easy to imagine that, no matter how amicably they were to dissolve the engagement, dishonorable gossip would bubble up from various corners. But if the reason for the dissolution was Abel's affair—a very one-sided and unfair reason indeed—then that was a different story. Tricia would be the target of sympathy, not scandal.

"The annulment of the engagement requires a clear fault on my part. But a misconduct great enough to lead to disinheritance would affect our surroundings too much. It had to be a blunder unrelated to our official duties," Abel explained.

For that, a romantic affair was the most appropriate—yet Abel truly had no interest in anyone aside from Patricia. He was not even capable of smiling at other women.

Lilith, however, did not mind at all no matter how reactionless or expressionless Abel was. The fact that she was a commoner was also convenient, for it would not stir up any unnecessary conflict among the nobility. Given that there were already rumors starting to spread about the two of them, Abel decided simply to use Lilith as the partner of his supposed affair.

On top of it all, he hoped to gather evidence about Lord Dalaney's wrongdoings.

Indeed, it was not impossible to understand Abel's words and actions. However—

Something about it pisses me off!

The emotion that welled up inside of Carla was, to put it simply, "irritation." Abel's actions straight up ignored Patricia's feelings.

Glaring at both Abel, who seemed to claim he had done nothing wrong, and Thane, who was completely convinced by Abel's explanation, Carla raised her voice in objection.

"Excuse me, but if you end up hurting Lady Patricia by trying to protect her from scandal, you've defeated the whole purpose."

"Witch?" Abel stammered. He must not have thought he would be rebutted.

Carla closed in on Abel, who flinched back, a look of surprise on his face. “Did you ever think about how it would feel to have someone that you were close to for so long, someone that you were going to marry soon, betray you like that? Being ignored and rejected, when you didn’t even know why? Being forced to watch him grow close with another girl?”

“B-But...”

“You said it was all for Lady Patricia, but you’re both hurting. Protection that makes everyone unhappy—that’s not right at all.”

What crossed Carla’s mind as she spoke was a scene of a fire, one she should not remember—from the day that she lost her family.

A fire had erupted in a house that stood a bit removed from the village; it was not immediately noticed. By the time the villagers arrived to put it out, it was already too late. Carla would later hear that there were signs indicating that her family had risked their own lives to protect her, the youngest.

Carla could say with confidence that the days she spent with Varne were full of happiness. But even after more than a decade, she still could not say that she was glad for having been saved in exchange for someone else’s life. That would probably never change, even to the day she died.

“It’s selfish of you. Please put yourself in the place of the person being protected without being able to do anything.”

To be protected. To be saved. Guilt followed survivors. Patricia would not wish for a peaceful existence that stood on Abel’s self-sacrifice.

“Carla?”

“What, Thane... Oh, huh?”

Perhaps her voice had hinted at tears. When her eyes met Thane’s, as he looked at her with surprise, Carla finally managed to gather herself.

I messed up... I didn’t mean to say things like that. She felt like she had wanted to say that more to herself than to Abel.

“Uhh, sorry about that. Never mind what I just said. The task I took on is simply to confirm the facts and investigate. Right. Anything else would be

barking up the wrong tree.”

“No... I only realized it when you pointed it out, but I really was only thinking of myself with my actions.”

“Huh? Wow, Prince Abel, you’re quite amenable. As in, if you’re so willing to reflect on your errors, why didn’t you think of it sooner?”

“Hey, your impoliteness is excessive.” Thane immediately made a sour face at Carla, who seemed to have gotten back into her usual rhythm. Abel, however, waved his hand as if to signal that it was fine.

“Even if Tricia had refused, I probably would have done the same thing.”

“Wow, you’re so stubborn,” Carla remarked.

“I can’t help it— I can’t help myself.”

Abel laughed bitterly as Carla shrugged her shoulders, exasperated. This prince must have truly wanted to make sure that Patricia was not harmed in any way. Spending all his time with Lilith while neglecting Patricia had also been meant as a way to keep his eye on Lilith. Even if a magic circle was transparent, it had to be operated by sorcery in order for it to activate.

When Abel was with Lilith, Patricia did not encounter any accidents. Working on the conjecture that Lilith was in fact the one attacking Patricia through sorcery, Abel revealed he was attempting to deprive Lilith of the opportunities for attack by being with her.

“So what’s this about you linking arms with her and getting all lovey-dovey with each other?”

“W-We were not being lovey-dovey! I simply did not refuse her when she tried to entangle her arm with mine. It was unpleasant, but I thought that by doing so, Lord Dalaney would let his guard down and let something slip. Plus it was clear that Cabot was not after my affections.”

“I heard that you two were kissing here. How do you explain that?”

“Huh? I have never done that. What are you talking about?” Abel demanded.

“Oh really? Then was it just a misunderstanding on Lady Patricia’s part?” Carla saw out of the corner of her eye Patricia holding her hands to her mouth and

shaking her head slightly.

Patricia had said that she had seen him from behind. She had also said that there was no way she would mistake him.

“Did she produce an illusion using sorcery?” Thane mumbled, almost involuntarily.

“Wait, isn’t it a really high-level skill to be able to create an illusion that looks just like the real thing? Do they teach stuff like that at the academy?” Carla asked, looking at Thane.

“There’s someone in the upper echelons of the sorcerers’ order who is particularly skilled at it. There is a possibility that Lilith Cabot learned it directly from him,” Thane replied, furrowing his eyebrows with a look of great displeasure on his face.

“Is that so? You sound really unhappy. Is that sorcerer the one you don’t like, Thane?”

“We do not get along. But that does not matter.”

“Aha ha, you’re right, it doesn’t matter. But even then, if that’s the truth, Lilith really is quite impressive.”

Even as a student, she had the skills of an upper-class sorcerer. She even had a good sense for theoretical constructions. The only thing she lacked was experience. It was no wonder the sorcerers’ order wanted her.

Though that’s precisely why she’s so likely to be taken advantage of. It’s someone like Lilith who especially needs a reliable guardian.

Carla had become an orphan when she was still young. She had no idea what would have happened to her had she not been able to meet Varne.

Well, I guess we still don’t know how Lilith herself is tied up in all this. I guess that’s all for after this ordeal is done.

If Lilith had been threatened by Lord Dalaney, there was still room for sympathy. If she had been trying to harm Patricia of her own accord, she could face severe consequences. Abel said he could not sense any romantic feelings from Lilith, but it was possible she was simply acting that way.

“Prince Abel, with you giving Lilith special treatment and growing apart from Lady Patricia... What were you going to do if Lilith misunderstood you and started having genuine feelings for you?”

“I would have done nothing. There is no way I would have any feelings for anyone other than Tricia.”

“Oh is that right.”

Did he think that he had no need to be considerate toward someone who would threaten his fiancée? I guess it's this aspect of him that lets him do stuff like that...

For Abel, Patricia was the only one who was special. Carla wondered how it must feel to have someone love you in that way. Did it make one happy? Or did it feel like too much, too heavy of a burden?

Having been present at many scenes intended for divorce, Carla felt like she understood a bit more about love and marriage than she had before. Even so, no matter how many times she served as a divorce agent for a wife, she could not rid herself of the feeling that she was dealing in someone else's affairs.

It was precisely because she did not feel much empathy that Carla was able to speak so calmly to her clients' husbands and even with Abel now. But still—love and romance remained truly a mystery to her.

An herb that grows as much as you take care of it is way more easy to understand, she thought.

That must be what it meant to deal with humans who had their own will. For Carla, who had lost both her blood family and Varne, to give her heart to someone to that extent felt a little difficult to do.

Carla cleared her throat and brought her attention back to the conversation at hand.

“In that case, even if the story about the kiss is groundless, what about the instance when you attacked Lady Patricia when she was here at this gazebo by herself? It seems you told her directly to leave the academy. This must certainly be true.”

"Why would I point my sword at Tricia? What I aimed at was the snake that was next to her."

"Huh? There are snakes around here?" Carla asked.

"There are not. That is why it was a problem."

Many trees grew in the academy grounds. There were also grassy areas scattered throughout, with small wild animals such as birds, squirrels, and moles frequently spotted. A snake sighting, however, was extremely rare: dedicated groundskeepers who maintained the flowerbeds were constantly checking to make sure that there were no dangerous creatures such as bees or snakes.

Abel and Lilith had both been present at the practicum class from which Patricia was absent that day. Having been overcome by an odd feeling, however, Abel left the class before it ended and exited the practicum building to go search for Patricia.

He found her at this gazebo, but—

"In her blind spot, there was a poisonous snake raising its neck to attack her."

"Holy moly, that's dangerous. And that's why you immediately attacked it with a sword, huh? I see..."

Abel had seen through Carla's transformation at a glance and attacked the "suspicious individual" with no hesitation at all. Of course he would have no mercy for a snake.

Yeah, but the one being attacked wouldn't be able to bear it!

Not only that, Patricia was the daughter of a duke, a pure and true lady. She may have been learning self-defense, but to be attacked by someone she knew well must have been a shock to her.

"Was that snake let loose to attack Lady Patricia?" Thane asked, entering the conversation with a stern expression. To hear that there was a poisonous snake at the academy attended by a member of the royal family must have been a concern for a knight of the royal guard.

"When I struck it with my sword, a faint magic circle surfaced, and then they

both disappeared. It was not a living snake but an illusion produced by sorcery.”

In other words, it was not coincidental. Abel believed that it was part of the attack on Patricia.

“Cabot’s skills are at a level that even the palace sorcerers acknowledge. I thought that she had perhaps become able to conceal a magic circle that could activate on a time lapse or be controlled remotely. I could not think of any other explanation.”

“It’s a good thing she’s an excellent student, but it is a problem that she takes her skills in rather dangerous directions,” Carla mumbled.

The snake was an illusion, so it was not real. But if someone who was unable to recognize that it was sorcery fell victim to it, they would experience the same illusory pain that they would experience had an actual snake bitten them.

The attacks had escalated from the level of simply dropping books on someone; they had increased in aggressiveness. And that had provoked Abel’s sense of worry.

“It was meaningless even if I kept my eye on Lilith. Seeing what was happening, I panicked and had the thought that I had to get Tricia away from the academy no matter what. That was why I ended up speaking to her so roughly.”

“But, Prince Abel, didn’t you ever think to consult with anyone about this?” Carla asked him, thinking that, even if he could not speak about it with Patricia herself, he could have at least spoken about it with the queen.

Abel, however, simply shook his head and said, “There is no one more suited than Tricia to become the crown princess. The queen would have told me to reconsider.”

“Oh, yeah, she probably would have said that.”

“If she stopped me...I did not have the confidence that I could resist,” Abel mumbled.

“Excuse me?” Furrowing her brows, Carla brought her ear closer to Abel. “You mean, if she had tried to convince you to leave things as they were and marry

Patricia, you would've just taken back what you said and gone back to the way things were? Is that it?"

"That is correct."

"Wait, then what was the point of your sob story until now?" Carla could not understand. She looked at Abel, wanting to ask him why he had, until now, displayed such stubbornness.

Abel panicked and began to speak very quickly. "D-Don't look so exasperated! I am doing my best to bear everything myself!"

"What in the world?! Do you wanna break up with her or not? Which is it?!" Carla shouted.

"Of course I don't want to break up with her! But that's the only thing we can do!"

"If that's the case, then break up with her no matter what anyone else says!"

"Do you have any idea how much I've had to endure? I let her go despite feeling like I was going to die!"

"But you haven't been able to let her go! I absolutely refuse to have another unsuccessful case!" said Carla.

"Unsuccessful? Just what are you talking about?!" demanded Abel.

"Calm down, you two," Thane said as they stood up to argue with each other.

"Thane, be quiet!" they both shouted turning toward Thane, perfectly synchronized.

Overwhelmed by their force, Thane retreated involuntarily. When he did, Patricia became visible to Abel as she stood behind Thane in her maid outfit.



Before Patricia could even move her lips, Abel drew his breath and said, "You can't be...Tricia?"

Carla sighed and said, "Prince Abel can tell that it's Lady Patricia even before she speaks, huh? Just how much are you in love with her?"

"Wha— Tha—!"

"I heard everything you said," Patricia finally spoke.

At her words, Abel's shoulders shook almost exaggeratedly. Standing there in dismay, looking like he was about to die—in that moment he was decidedly not the prince but just a young man in love.

Patricia looked away from Abel, who stood looking between her and Carla in a panic, and turned to Carla. Her violet-colored eyes, which signaled the resolution in her heart, shone behind the glasses she wore as part of her disguise.

"I apologize for breaking my promise. Will you let me speak?" she asked.

"Of course you'd say that," Carla said, sighing. But she untied the ivy that remained on Abel's arms and stepped back, allowing Patricia to take her spot. "Go ahead. He's figured it out anyway."

"Thank you," Patricia said. She stood in front of Abel, who continued staring at her with his blue-gray eyes opened wide. She then breathed deeply, quietly.

Her right hand rose gracefully and struck Abel's cheek with a light tap. It was not strong enough to be called a slap. Patricia then softly wrapped Abel's cheeks with both her hands.

A transparent droplet fell down Patricia's cheek.

"T-Tricia..."

"I thought that you had come to despise me," she said.

"...I'm sorry."

"I am sorry too...for not believing in you."

Hmm? Why is it that the mood is turning sweet here?

Abel held Patricia's hands, which were still cupping his face, preciously in his own. His blue-gray eyes, cloudy until a moment ago, had regained their spark.

Carla knew that the two of them were close, and their present circumstances were not the result of them disliking each other. However, the dissolution of their engagement had already been decided. Patricia was crying so much, and Abel's resolve to part ways with Patricia was strong...and yet.

I have a bad feeling about this...

"Um, excuse me," Carla started, trying to call out to the pair as they stood looking into each other's eyes.

It was then that Thane interrupted her. "Shh! Someone is coming," he said, his voice tense.

Sensing someone approaching the gazebo, the four of them all looked at each other.

A beautiful girl with distinct facial features approached the gazebo, her shoulder-length chestnut hair swaying.

Wow, what a pretty girl. The color of her hair and eyes, plus her features—this has got to be Lilith, thought Carla.

Any other student would have tried to spy on the goings-on in the gazebo from afar; they would not have so boldly come near. Carla was convinced that this visitor was the other party in the case.

Lilith had a friendly vibe. She seemed the opposite type to Patricia, who came across coolly beautiful and was so elegant that she was almost difficult to approach.

Yet when Lilith's large, round eyes caught sight of Carla transformed into Patricia, Lilith grimaced as though she could not believe what she saw.

"Oh wow! It seriously is Lady Patricia. I thought you'd quit the academy," Lilith said.

"Huh?"

Isn't she a bit too friendly?! Plus why does she sound like she's looking down

on me?!

Carla could not help her utterance, but her understanding was that Lilith and Patricia were not at all close. She had heard that they both acknowledged each other but that they had barely spoken.

“Who is that rude individual?” Thane asked.

“Must be Lilith, huh?” Carla replied.

Thane also seemed to feel a certain ill will toward Lilith for her unreserved speech, one that was different from what he felt toward Carla. It was understandable that, as a knight of the royal guard, Thane would be upset: although it was Carla on the inside, Patricia—being the daughter of a duke—held the position that was only a step below that of the royal family. Even if they were schoolmates, the way Lilith spoke to Patricia would ordinarily not be permitted.

“Most likely,” Thane agreed.

“But she’s very cute,” Carla added.

“That doesn’t matter,” Thane said, flatly.

“Well then.”

Lilith seemed not to have noticed Thane’s irritation. Not minding at all the fact that Carla and Thane were whispering to each other, Lilith stepped into the gazebo.

Oh wow, she really doesn’t hesitate. For now, though, I’ve gotta find a way to get us away from here.

In preparation for her leave-taking, Carla began to gather the forms that had been laid out on the table. She had things she wanted to ask and confirm with Lilith, but since she had had Abel and Patricia hide behind the low wall surrounding the gazebo, this was neither the place nor the time to do so. Having heard the disturbing story surrounding the interactions between Lilith and Patricia, it was safer to avoid the two of them running into each other.

I do wanna see the transparent magic circle because I’m curious about it... Did we pass by an athletic field on our way here? That would be better, since there’d

be more room. Maybe I can have Thane keep watch for us...

“Hey, I’m looking for Sir Abel. Have you seen him?” Lilith asked Carla haughtily.

“As you can see for yourself,” Carla returned, motioning to the gazebo that held no one else.

“Fine then.”



She doesn't even call him His Highness or Prince Abel—just Sir Abel, huh? I wonder if this girl is like this with everybody.

A witch did not care about the status of nobility. Carla's behavior toward Abel earlier could not be described as very respectful toward the royal family either. Even so, Carla would not immediately begin speaking with a noble in plain speech without a greeting first. Even if the students were not yet adults—even if the academy proclaimed equality among them—that was both courtesy and common sense.

Things were no different among commoners living in the town surrounding the castle: If you spoke rudely to a hot-blooded blacksmith, he would throw you a punch rather than give you a reply. If you forgot your manners speaking with the miller, she would charge you twenty percent more for your flour.

And I hear she's even going in and out of the castle. Maybe people in the sorcerers' order are more easygoing than I thought.

Carla had heard that sorcerers, like witches, were rather individualistic—but maybe they were simply unregulated. She could now understand why the sorcerers' order did not work well with the knights' brigade, who, like Thane himself, had great respect for discipline.

...But maybe personality isn't the only reason in Lilith's case.

When Carla looked more closely at Lilith, she saw that her eyes were tense. Her sharp voice, too, seemed to lack composure.

If Lilith was being threatened by Lord Dalaney, with her family taken as hostage, then it would be more than inconvenient to have Lady Patricia return to the academy.

"Hey, look," started Lilith.

"Pardon me," said Thane, interrupting her. He stepped forward, as if protecting Carla, as Patricia's guard should.

Lilith tilted her head and looked at Thane's royal guard uniform from head to toe, then suddenly smiled like a flower in full bloom.

"Oh, you're Sir Thane from the royal guard! You know me, don't you? I'm

Lilith Cabot."

Lilith's voice rose one key higher. Her light-brown eyes sparkled even more brightly. As if it was completely natural, she took a step forward with her hands clasped in front of her chest. Her pose, as she looked up at Thane, was as perfect as that of a stage actress. This girl understood very well how to present herself in the most attractive fashion.

She really is pretty. I can't help admiring her myself.

Carla was impressed with Lilith, from whom she felt more toughness than shrewdness. It was no surprise that she was able to pull off linking arms with the prince.

On top of that, she speaks casually to me looking like Patricia but speaks politely to Thane. Well, I guess Thane has good looks. Only looks, though!

Lilith's behavior indicated her priorities very clearly. Although it helped that Carla did not need to read between the lines, she instantly imagined the smiling faces of the queen and Mr. Scott turning purple with rage.

According to Abel's conjecture, Lilith was carrying out Lord Dalaney's conspiracy. From the situation, it was possible to assume that her family had been taken hostage, forcing her to do so. If she had been a willing accomplice, however, she was as guilty as Lord Dalaney was. Although it was not Carla's responsibility to make that judgment, as long as she had been tasked with the investigation, Carla had to confirm the dealings that operated in the background.

Things sure get complicated when love mixes with power.

If this were a relationship between commoners, there may have been a dispute about who took whom, or who cheated on whom—but that would have been it. The parties involved could break up as they pleased. The kingdom would not be affected.

Lilith's excited voice brought Carla's thoughts back to the situation at hand.

"I've met you so many times at the castle, Sir Thane!" Lilith was saying.

"I have to say that I do not recall," Thane replied.

“That’s not possible! Our eyes even met!”

“You must have imagined it. I also do not appreciate you calling me by my name when I have not permitted it.”

“How awful. You’re so mean!”

Lilith had turned her charm on full blast—and had even begun to tear up—so that anyone else would have been overcome by the desire to protect her. Thane, on the other hand, continued giving her the cold shoulder.

At the same time, Lilith, too, was tough for not becoming discouraged in the face of Thane’s response—he was not bothering to hide his displeasure at all.

“Hey, Sir Thane. How about you send Lady Patricia back home already? You can just put her in her carriage!” Lilith proposed.

“Huh?” Thane said after a moment of shock.

“Once you’ve taken care of that, let’s chat, just the two of us! Since I can’t find Sir Abel anywhere.”

Carla had an undeniable desire to continue watching the exchange between these two, but Thane was starting to give off alarmingly hostile vibes. He was the type even to brush off elegant maids at the palace. He probably could not stand Lilith’s pushy, disrespectful behavior.

“Thane,” Carla called, reminding him to pull back before he surpassed the limit of his patience.

“I beg your pardon,” he said, pausing and taking a dissatisfied step back.

When Carla stepped forward to take his place, Lilith puffed out her cheeks in anger and said, “Lady Patricia, could you please not get in my way? Besides, what did you come to the academy for? Sir Abel is having a great time with me, so you have nothing to worry about.”

“Is that so,” Carla said.

Wow, she’s practically shooting daggers at me...hmm?

Lilith did not seem to be preparing to invoke any sorcery. Carla nonetheless sensed something odd about Lilith’s left wrist, which peeked out of the sleeve

of her uniform.

What is that? That's gotta be cognitive impairment sorcery.

When Carla focused her magical powers into her eyes, she saw that magical powers were wrapped around Lilith's wrist like a haze. When she looked more closely, she vaguely saw a bracelet engraved with a magic circle.

Plus it's using a magic stone? I thought you needed permission to bring a magical tool into the academy.

Magic stones were expensive. The idea that it belonged to Lilith, who not only was a commoner but had been postponing her enrollment in the academy for financial reasons, did not make sense.

It was said that Lilith was conducting research as part of the sorcerers' order, so it was possible that she herself was testing out potential prototypes. The bracelet, however, seemed far too sinister for that. Because she sensed an eeriness that she never felt with any of the tools Nettie crafted, Carla felt that it was more akin to the illegal magical tools that were bought and sold on the black market.

...I don't like it at all.

Casually covering her mouth with the various pieces of paper she had gathered, Carla whispered to Thane in a soft voice only he could hear.

"Thane. There's sorcery enchanting Lilith's left hand."

"What did you say?"

"Be careful. There's something unstable about it. We should get away from where the prince and Lady Patricia are hiding," she said to him. So that her behavior would not seem unnatural, Carla then turned to Lilith and said, "Miss Lilith, is that all you wanted to say to me? If you wouldn't mind, I would like for us to move to a different location."

Carla had intended to urge Lilith to leave the gazebo with her, but Lilith only stood her ground. Glaring back at Carla, Lilith said after a pause, "What's with you, acting all high and mighty?"

"I'm sorry?"

“Some good lot you are. You’re pretty, and you’re smart, and your family is rich... On top of it all, your fiancé is the crown prince, and you’re completely in love with each other. And now a knight of the royal guard is your bodyguard? I bet you’ve never had to go through any kind of hardship your whole life.”

“Miss Lilith?”

Lilith’s smile from earlier had disappeared. Her face was now filled with anger, and her voice shook with mockery.

With her sudden change in state, Carla felt Thane increase his vigilance.

“Why does it always have to be me...?!”

Sorcery!

As Lilith shouted, nearly crying, she thrust both of her hands in front of her. Before them, a magic circle wove with incredible speed. It gleamed for one moment, and then—suddenly a strong gust of wind swirled about them. The wind roared into a vortex as it began to cut everything it touched like a razor.

Whoa, this is dangerous!

The ivy that coiled around the columns of the gazebo soared as they were cut loose. The table and benches also cracked with a loud sound. Pebbles and leaves flew about, grazing Carla’s cheeks and hands.

“Hey, get back!” Thane shouted, extending his arm to try to protect Carla.

“I’m fine,” Carla responded, pushing his arm back and raising her hand toward Lilith.

The magic circle itself had disappeared, but Carla could still detect it and read it. She counteracted the words woven into the magic circle using her powers. As the winds died down, Lilith froze. Opening her eyes wide in shock, she exclaimed, “Huh? What the—?!”

“Thane, take the prince and Lady Patricia and go.”

“What about you?!”

“I’ll be fine. Hurry!”

Thane clicked his tongue very loudly, then leaped over the gazebo wall. He

brought the other two out of hiding and ran with them for cover.

Carla saw them off to safety from the corner of her eye, then she took a step toward Lilith and said, "Well then, Lilith dear. Let's call it a day now, shall we?"

"Who are you?" asked Lilith, uncertain.

"I'm Patricia, the daughter of the Duke of Hemmings."

"D-Don't mock me!" Lilith said, dismissing Carla with hatred. Lilith created two magic circles this time, producing one in each hand. Then, with those two still floating in midair, she produced yet two more. A total of four magic circles appeared, then quickly vanished.

Wow, that's impressive. Those are really pretty magic circles...even though their subject matter isn't cute at all! Flames, huh?!

A fire started from each of the spots where a magic circle had been and quickly transferred to the wooden gazebo.

Fire spread by sorcery spreads even more rapidly than normal fire. In a matter of moments, the elegant gazebo was enveloped in flames.

"Jeez, that's hot! Wait, aren't you putting yourself in danger too?" asked Carla.

"I-I don't even matter anymore!"

"Now, now. Don't give up on yourself so easily. I'll take that bracelet off for you."

"Wha—?!" Lilith said, startled, covering her wrist when Carla pointed at it. The flames, too, wavered, as though mirroring her bewilderment.

"Y-You..." Lilith stammered.

"It'll be fine. I think."

While Lilith remained speechless, Carla, as if trying to soothe Lilith, kept repeating "It'll be fine." Then, like moments earlier, Carla undid the magic circles that had disappeared.

Lilith no longer seemed to have the energy to create new magic circles. She simply stood as though dumbfounded and looked at Carla with a blank

expression. When she started to speak, before her lips could form any words, she simply collapsed where she stood.

“All out of energy—or, of magical powers, huh? I guess when a young girl who hasn’t had much training does all this, that’s what happens.”

A magic circle was woven using one’s magical powers. Although it varied based on the force of the sorcery and its scale, the amount of power consumed when creating even a single, small magic circle was considerable. Even if Lilith had a lot of magical power, firing in rapid succession without thinking about efficiency would, of course, cause her to run out of power.

Carla, too, had little magical power left at this point.

Seriously, there are too many unexpected things! I’m going to ask the queen for an additional bonus! Now, to put out this fire...

Carla disliked fires.

Carla thought she could see in her mind a roof burn down in flames—a scene that she could not have possibly remembered. She even felt like she could hear her parents and her older brother and sister screaming her name. Carla felt faint.

...I’ve gotta pull myself together.

Even when she saw the burned remains where her house had stood, she could not remember anything.

The knight who had come to the scene—just for appearances’ sake—took a single look and determined that it was nothing more than “an accidental fire.” When Varne demanded that he conduct a proper investigation, the man had violently shoved her aside. He had spat at the death of Carla’s four family members, remarking that it was merely an old hut that had burned down. That was the earliest memory Carla had.

That was why, whenever she saw a knight’s uniform—

“Carla!”

Carla raised her face when she heard the voice.

Beyond the burning columns, Carla saw Thane, running back to her after

having helped Abel and Patricia take refuge. When she saw the guardian knight running desperately, Carla could not help but smile.

Even though he hates witches...he's way too serious.

Carla exhaled. She gathered in her hands what little magical power was left in her, then raised them toward the structure.

Thane stumbled as, just before he reached Carla, the plants in their surroundings stretched their branches and leaves all at once and blanketed the burning gazebo. The ivy and the leaves wrapped around the columns and the roof, putting out the fire. The entire gazebo crumbled noisily—and before long, with a dull sound and white smoke, the fire subsided.

“Oh my goodness, I’m exhausted!” Carla exclaimed, then sighed.

Physical labor was outside of her jurisdiction.

Amid the ruins of burned wood and crumbled bricks, Carla knelt in front of Lilith. She took the girl’s hand and, sending her magical power through her fingertips, unlocked the bracelet. It fell to the ground with a clatter.

“There. It’s all done now,” Carla said, patting Lilith on the head.

“Oh...” Lilith muttered as she looked back and forth between her wrist and Carla’s face. Lilith looked like she was about to cry, her face filled with disbelief. Then, as if she had truly run out of energy, she crumpled to the ground.

She’s a year younger than the prince and Lady Patricia, huh? You’ve done all right, Lilith.

Carla stroked Lilith’s hair once more, wiping the soot off the exhausted girl’s cheek.

“Carla! Are you all right?!”

Carla looked up at Thane, who was out of breath after having climbed over the debris to run to her. She then pointed her index finger at him.

“I’m super tired, you know?! You’re gonna have to make sure that the fire’s been put out by yourself.”

“F-Fine.”

"What is it?" Carla asked him.

Thane, who was still short of breath but now did not seem to know where to look, said hesitantly, "What do you mean, 'What is it'? You...your appearance."

"It's not you, it's Carla... Huh? Oh, I'm back to normal, I see."

The arm extended before her was her own, the transformation magic having come undone. Her magical powers seemed to have reached their limit with everything she had done. That was not a surprise. It had been a while since the last time she had fired off her magic in such rapid succession.

"Hey, take me back to the apothecary in a carriage, will you? I don't wanna walk anymore."

"Sure," Thane replied, pausing for a moment.

Hearing the approaching footsteps of Abel and Patricia, Carla looked up at the blue sky and closed her eyes.

Letting the exhausted, soot-covered Carla rest, Thane began the process of handing over to the academy professors and security guards the extinguishing of the fire and other related matters.

Lilith, still unconscious, was taken into custody—though she was restrained, just in case. As soon as other knights arrived as reinforcement, they were to move her to a different location. Of course, her bracelet was also collected as evidence.

In any case, I'm really glad that there were lots of plants and trees around us.

Carla's magic level was not terribly high.

The blinding light that she had used on Abel was more like a gimmick that witches learned as they were first starting to practice magic. Erasing traces of blood, too, was essentially purification magic, which was a fundamental part of her work as an apothecary. Thane and the others had been shocked, but any witch could perform such low-level magic with their eyes closed.

To extinguish the fires with the plants, Carla had used the only other magic aside from transformation magic that she was good at: cultivation magic.

She was only able to control them because they were plants. If she had instead been surrounded by rocks or by the ocean, it was doubtful whether Carla would have been able to put the flames out so effectively.

Maybe I really should work on my other magic more...

Carla had stopped practicing because she had not been improving at all. But perhaps it would be good to resume her training in new types of magic, even if she could not acquire them.

As Carla gazed at the smoldering smoke shrouding the gazebo and the ground, a familiar pair of boots entered her field of vision. When she looked up slowly, her eyes met with Thane's. Behind him stood Abel, who was supporting Patricia.

"Let's go," Thane said at last.

"I can go home, right?" Carla asked, suspiciously.

"We're heading to the castle first. I'll have you accompany me to complete the part of the report that needs to be done today."

"Seriously?!"

"Enough of that. Now get up."

Carla could not wait to return to her apothecary, wash off the dust, freshen up, have a glass of chilled wheat ale, and wrap herself up in a blanket.

Thane ignored even her blatant display of dissatisfaction. He pulled her hand to make her stand, but Carla still could not feel her legs. She ended up sitting back down on the ground.

Thane, eyebrows furrowed very deeply, let out a sigh with a depth to match the crease of his brows. Carla, however, felt *she* should be the one to complain.

"No way. I can't do this today. Let me at least go tomorrow," she said.

"That won't do. I have no other choice; I'm carrying you."

"Huh? Whoa, wait a minute!"

Before she could protest, however, Thane had lifted Carla up. Carla felt dizzy from having her line of sight become elevated so quickly. When she tried to flee

on reflex, Thane tightened his hold on her.

“No, this is too high! I’m scared!” Carla shouted.

“If you stay still, you won’t fall.”

“Are you saying you’ll drop me if I move?!”

Thane carried her as he would a child, with one of his arms holding her under her knees. She had not expected him to carry her princess-style, but to have him hold her in a way that emphasized her small stature did not feel good at all.

“Carla, what do you eat on a regular basis? You feel far too light,” Thane commented.

“Thane, you just have way too much muscle. But I guess this is better than being carried like a sack of grain. It hurts to have someone’s shoulder digging into your stomach. Plus you throw up from all the jostling.”

“How do you know that?” he asked.

“A lot happens in life. Oh, whatever. At least make it a comfortable trip.”

“All of a sudden I want to leave you on the side of the road,” Thane said reluctantly.

Their expressions and voices were full of dissatisfaction, but their objections lacked the usual sharpness. Finding it a bother even to think anymore, Carla gave up. Before he had even taken ten steps, she passed out and fell asleep.

7. At the Knights' Brigade

When Carla next came to, some time had already passed since she had been brought to the castle. In her half-awake state, she was handed a glass filled with cold water. It was only then that she was able to open her eyes fully.

She did not recognize the room in which she found herself.

There were two messy desks and an unadorned filing cabinet. There was not even a stylish lamp in sight. The room was a good match for Carla's apothecary in terms of drabness.

The late afternoon sunlight reached Carla's knees as she sat limply on the stiff sofa, indicating that it was shortly before sundown.

"Where am I...?" Carla asked.

"You're in the administrative office of the knights' brigade, Lady Witch," came a reply.

Blinking several times, Carla's eyes met at close range the eyes of a woman who knelt diagonally in front of her. She was holding the glass so that it would not slip from Carla's hand.

The woman, with her dark brown hair tied back, looked to be in her midtwenties. She was wearing a simple shirt with her jacket off, but the pants and shoes that she wore were the uniform of the same knights' brigade as Thane. It was clear that she was a female knight.

Once she confirmed that Carla had completely regained consciousness, the knight let go of the glass in Carla's hand.

"I wasn't able to do much, but I took the liberty of taking care of your wounds," the knight said.

"Thank you for that. I must've been very dirty," Carla said.

"I'm used to it," the knight said, smiling.

Carla's hands, which held the glass of water, were clean. An ointment had

been put on the cut on her cheek.

"I'm sorry, but your hair—I left it as is," the knight remarked apologetically.

"Hmm? Oh, don't worry about it. I'd totally forgotten," Carla said, touching her hair around her cheek. She felt that one part of it was unnaturally shorter than the rest. Even though she had been transformed into Patricia, what Abel actually cut when he had suddenly attacked them in the gazebo had been Carla's hair.

"I don't really care much about it anyway," Carla said, shrugging.

"Is that so...?" the knight asked, looking at Carla as though she did not believe her. It was, however, true that Carla was just growing it out without thinking much about it.

Carla emphasized cleanliness, but she had no interest in dress or appearance beyond basic grooming. Perhaps that had been an influence of her adoptive parent, Varne.

It must have been rare for an ordinary young woman to hear. However, since explaining it seemed too much of a hassle for Carla, she tried to change the subject by asking, "Have I been asleep this whole time?"

"For the most part. Even during the hearing that took place immediately after you arrived here, Lady Witch was dozing off the entire time."

"Oh my."

"But I was impressed, because you were still able to respond and explain things."

Carla had no recollection, but it seemed she had done this and that, even while she was half asleep.

Living carefree by herself, it was not rare for Carla to stay up through the night when she got on a roll with dispensing or experimenting with new medicine. She knew that she was able to move about even when she was only semiconscious, but apparently, she could also carry on a conversation. She had not even realized, having spent too much time alone.

"I must take my leave now, but Vice Commander Howell will return

momentarily. Please wait here a bit longer.”

Vice Commander Howell?

Carla wondered at first whom the knight was talking about. She eventually remembered, however, that Howell was Thane’s family name, and that the queen had mentioned that he was the vice commander of the First Battalion of the Knights of the Royal Guard.

Carla thought she had heard of a family named Howell before. She was able to recall that she had heard it from one of the other witches. Having just woken up, however, her head did not allow her to remember anything beyond that.

“Hmm, what was it about...a baron family, maybe? Thane’s a noble and a knight, huh...? Though I guess the royal guard is made up mostly of nobles anyway.”

For Carla, both knights and nobles were people who did not interact with her much. They had very little in common with Carla, who was an orphan as well as a witch.

Not that it matters, but...

As she gazed at the door the female knight had exited through, Carla felt her chest cool from her first sip of the cold water. Realizing her own thirst, she downed half the glass at once. As she exhaled softly, she heard a knock on the door. Without waiting for a response, Thane entered the room.

Perhaps he, like the female knight before him, was wearing nothing over his shirt because his jacket had been torn when Abel attacked him. Or perhaps, he was being considerate to Carla, who disliked the knights’ uniform.

Her heart felt less burdened, but at the same time, she felt somewhat uncomfortable as well. When she took her gaze off Thane, she saw that another man had entered the room with him.

“You’re awake, huh?” Thane asked.

“I’m still sleepy. Who’s that?” Carla responded.

The man who entered behind Thane—who wore the same disgruntled look as always—smiled, gently and cheerfully, and introduced himself, “Oh, I’m Tobias

Schmidt! I'm in the knights' brigade as well—vice commander of the Second Battalion."

In addition to his words and actions, Tobias's appearance—his reddish brown hair, his gentle gray eyes—also seemed to suggest that he was not the type to harm anyone. On the whole, he had a very soft air about him.

"I've been to your apothecary before. Do you remember me? That back alley is under my battalion's jurisdiction." Tobias, who explained that he had entered the knights' brigade at the same time as Thane, recounted visiting the apothecary to notify her of the change in personnel when the district had been reassigned.

Those who actually patrolled the town surrounding the castle were the regular knights and police officers, not the royal guard. Since in the past there had been problems related to collusion and embezzlement among the residents and the police, however, it was determined that the royal guard, under direct supervision of the royal castle, should serve as an overseer. Tobias, it seemed, was the person in charge of those arrangements.

"Change in personnel? Now that you mention it, I might have greeted you then."

"Yes, yes, that was me!"

"But I don't remember."

Carla did recall that the knight who had paid the visit was wearing regular clothes, claiming to be off duty that day. She also recalled having spoken to him without much resistance, given that he had behaved more like a commoner and less like a knight.

But that was the only time he had visited the shop. To Carla, he was no different from any other casual visitor who stopped in to browse without buying anything. Of course she would not remember his face.

"That's too bad. Then, it'd be great if you could remember me starting today," Tobias remarked.

"Only if you come to buy medicine," replied Carla.

“Wow, that’s harsh! Oh, but we really only go when something bad happens. So maybe it’s a good thing that we didn’t really know each other! But that feels kind of lonely.”

“I have compresses for sore muscles too. Oh, and for those of you in the knights’ brigade, I strongly recommend deodorizers.”

“Huh? You mean I smell bad?!” Tobias, sniffing his own arm, suddenly began opening all the windows of the office. Carla could not help laughing out loud.

Upon Tobias’s request, Carla took the magical recording tool from around her neck and activated it. Thane gave a sidelong glance to Tobias, who was now sitting at the desk and busily transcribing the audio being played back from the tool. Then he sat down in front of Carla, sporting his usual look of displeasure.

“I heard I was answering questions while I was half asleep,” Carla said.

“Yeah. What you described was the same as what I saw, so I believe there are no errors. But just in case, I want you to confirm this before I submit it,” Thane replied, placing several sheets of paper on the table in front of Carla.

Exchanging the glass of water for the investigative report, Carla began to read. As she did so, Thane explained to her what had transpired while she was asleep.

“Though in haste, I’ve reported the general summary to the king and queen. Prince Abel saw Lady Patricia back to her home. He said he would also make his apology at the Duchy of Hemmings.”

“I sure hope Mr. Scott gives the prince a scolding,” joked Carla. “And what about Lilith?”

“She, too, is awake. She seemed exhausted, but she seemed to have calmed down mentally. We guaranteed the safety of her family in the countryside as a condition for her to comply with the hearing. She obliged, and we were able to get her testimony that she had received orders from the Earl of Dalaney. The earl was just now ordered to appear at the castle with no right of refusal.”

“Wow, already? Doesn’t it take a while to process things like that? You sure act fast.”

“It’s a direct order from His Majesty, after all.”

Even if it actually had been Carla transformed, Lady Patricia, the prince’s fiancée, had been attacked. Not only that, Abel himself had been near the fire. Had it spread throughout the rest of campus, it could have been a disaster. The fact that the gazebo and its surroundings were all that had been damaged, and that there were no fatalities, was perhaps the only silver lining.

This incident clearly went beyond the scope of “trouble among students,” which would have been taken care of by the academy and the police from the capital. It had, therefore, been handed over to the royal palace.

Although the academy’s headmaster wanted the matter resolved within the bounds of the institution, in this case, they had to agree to allow for an external investigation. The outcome must have been vexing, given that the academy had simply hoped for its own autonomy. It was also true, however, that the closed-off nature of the academy had been exploited in this case. Had they agreed to an investigation when the queen initially requested one, they could have avoided everything. In the future, it was hoped that the academy would be more cooperative.

As a general practice, incidents related to sorcery were investigated primarily by the sorcerers’ order. In this case, however, given that Lilith—herself a suspect—had connections to the sorcerers’ order, the knights’ brigade would have command authority over the investigation.

“Carla, you mentioned earlier that the magical tool Lilith wore was similar to an ‘amplifier.’ You were half asleep, so I couldn’t ask you more-specific questions. What did you mean by that?”

“Did I say that? Uh, let’s see... So there was a magic stone on the outside of the bracelet, but there was also a magic circle on the inside, right? Have you looked into that already?”

“No, not yet.”

Even if the knights’ brigade had the authority over the investigation, they would have to ask a specialist in the sorcerers’ order to analyze a magical tool. However, because a member of the knights’ brigade as well as a civil servant from the palace would have to be present as witnesses, the date for the

analysis was yet to be set.

“You can see a magic circle on the inside of a bracelet?” Thane asked.

“I’m a witch, after all.”

Although the concept would perplex Thane and Tobias, a magic circle that was woven with magical powers was something to be felt, not letters to be read with one’s eyes. That was why Carla could still sense the magic circles Lilith had produced even after they had disappeared.

To be able to keep the explanation at “I’m a witch” made things easier in a way.

“Then once the results are in, it’d be great if you can take a look at that too,” Carla said. “Oh, and the person who came up with that magic circle is so horrible that I’d like to punch them in the face. I think that the combination of that with the magic stone was particularly insidious.”

“Carla, can you tell us more specifically what you mean?” Thane asked, furrowing his brows. Tobias, who had finished transcribing the recorded material, put his pen down and also looked up with much interest.

“The magic stone that was used for the bracelet has the ability to sharpen the senses of the person wearing it. It has the effect of making the person more sensitive to their various emotions. Things like that are fairly popular among artists and musicians.”

“Oh, I see. That’s understandable. You’d want your emotional sensitivities to be heightened,” remarked Tobias.

“Exactly. It helps you expand your emotions. It’s not that it creates something out of nothing; it just enlarges the small thing that is already there. That’s probably why I called it an amplifier.”

Tobias nodded and Thane looked at her, implying for her to go on. Carla recalled Lilith’s bracelet as she continued.

A magic stone itself could be used as a source of power. With that bracelet, the stone must have been powering the magic circle to keep it operating continuously. That, too, seemed downright nasty.

“The magic circle itself was the problem. There was a phrase snuck into it to isolate just the negative parts of the emotions that were amplified by the magic stone and then to make only those take root in her memories.”

“The negative parts?”

“That’s right. So even if it’s not anything special, maybe something feels a little unpleasant. Something like that,” Carla explained. “When you feel a little jealous of someone, or when you feel like you’re the only one missing out on something. Even when you’re doing the same thing as everyone else, you’re the only one who gets called out. Or maybe your serving of stew had just liquid and no actual ingredients.”

“Hey, that’s me from yesterday! I’m pretty sure I got less meat than everyone else!”

“Right? Or maybe you got wet because it started raining all of a sudden, or you clipped your nails too short so they hurt, or you’re hungover and feeling drowsy.”

“Exactly! Wait, Miss Witch—how do you know all of my recent misfortunes?”

Carla had just come up with some random examples, but it seemed Tobias had intimate knowledge of a number of them. He agreed with her with enough force to almost leap out of his chair.

“I’m pretty sure that an underage student would not be hungover,” Thane commented.

“It’s just an example. Jeez, Thane.” Carla sighed.

There was a minor objection to a part of her explanation, but these were all emotions that people felt on a daily basis, common enough to be offered up as immediate examples. Everyone felt them, all the time.

“Because of the magic stone, those minor things feel incredibly serious. And because of the magic circle, the person ends up remembering them really vividly, over and over—when they’re awake or even when they’re asleep.”

“Does that mean that someone was manipulating her mentally?” Thane asked.

"There didn't seem to be that much coercion, but you'd definitely feel depressed. All the fun things get pushed to the side, while all the bad things get really intense. It's just one negative thing after another."

Sorcery that manipulated the hearts of others was not permitted. Sorcery that enabled one to realize one's own emotions, however, was not regulated. There was also a demand for such sorcery—among artists who wanted to get out of a slump or medical patients whose memories had become confused or whose senses had become impaired due to illness or an accident, for example.

But to make one subconsciously ruminate on only negative emotions and memories—rather than reaffirm what was good—was in poor taste, Carla declared, grimacing.

"Plus Lilith is a scholarship student from the countryside. This is just my speculation, but when you've worked really hard to make your way out of the poor countryside, the royal capital looks like it's practically sparkling," Carla said. "Then you have all these classmates at the academy who aren't even as good as you are at studying or sorcery—but they were all born into a higher status than you. People who aren't as capable as you are living the good life. They're having a grand old time, with their families and friends so close to them. You have to live every single day, coming face-to-face with that irritating reality."

"But that may not necessarily be the case," Thane said.

"Sure. Maybe your classmate's home life is a mess, or maybe their mansion is in foreclosure because they're drowning in debt. Or maybe they have a terrible relationship with their impressive fiancé. But that doesn't matter. After all, the nobility look down on commoners as if it's the most natural thing to do."

One could not change one's birth or upbringing. No matter how excellent one's performance, it was not possible to remain free of feelings of inferiority.

There were feelings of loneliness from parting with one's hometown and family. There were also feelings of alienation living in a new place. It was true that having acquaintances in neither the capital nor the nobility and being an outstanding scholarship student to boot, Lilith was automatically at a distance from the other students.

Although given the change in attitude between the way she acted in front of Prince Abel and Thane and the way she acted in front of girls including me, Lilith's isolation may also have been caused by her own personality.

Sometimes being isolated led one to become more extreme. Even if each of the thorns was small, if one was stabbed by them over and over, one's heart would wear out over time. Negative emotions such as anxiety and dissatisfaction could narrow one's perspective; they could also easily turn into aggression. If one's sense of self-affirmation were taken over as well, then all that was left was to have one's heart be swallowed up by darkness.

If, in that moment, there was someone that treated you in a way that made you feel special—

Or, if there was someone that took your family hostage and threatened you—

"Even if you know that you're headed in the wrong direction, I think there are times that you can't stop yourself," Carla said.

"That's true," said Thane slowly.

Carla, too, had experienced it. Unable to improve her magic at all, she had questioned even the meaning of her own existence as a witch.

It was true that there was such a thing as suitability. If she could not use magic, though, then there was no point. When Carla had been about to give up, the people who had saved her had been Varne and Nettie.

Maybe Lilith, too, had someone who could stay by her side, guide her, and laugh away her problems with her. But in the royal capital, Lilith was alone.

Both witches and scholarship students were marginalized within their communities. Carla could sympathize with her. *It would have been nice if she had had someone close by to talk to.*

When Carla patted her on the head in that flame-engulfed gazebo, what appeared in Lilith's eyes had been a sense of relief so obvious that it was painful.

She must have wanted someone to stop her.

"I don't know what the earl ordered Lilith to do. But one thing I can say for

sure is that the person who came up with that magic circle has one horrible personality. That person, too, must be a giant ball of insecurities.”

“I’ll refrain from commenting until the analysis of the magical tool has been completed.”

When she heard Thane’s vague response and saw the sour look on his face, Carla guessed that they already had an idea of the bracelet’s creator.

Even if cognitive impairment sorcery had been cast upon it, there was no way the members of the sorcerers’ order would miss it. It was natural to think that there was some kind of connection between the Earl of Dalaney and the sorcerers’ order and that one of its members had been involved.

If a member of the sorcerers’ order who works at the palace is a part of all this, things are looking rather grim. My goodness, power sure is scary!

Carla was just an apothecary who had a small shop in the town surrounding the castle. She had become involved in the messy affairs of the royal family unexpectedly. She sighed, wanting to exit the scene as soon as possible.

“Apparently the Earl of Dalaney contacted Lilith after she began working with the sorcerers’ order and speaking with the prince. He must have thought she could be of use to him,” Thane explained.

“Even though he didn’t even bother to offer her any kind of financial support? That’s so self-centered of him. What a terrible lord,” Carla declared.

“I agree with that,” Thane said. “Carla, the queen has given us an audience three days from now. I’ll come to get you, so be sure to wait at your shop.”

“That’ll be the end of this case, right?”

When she glared at him to confirm, Thane put his hand to his chin as if in thought and looked away. “I believe so,” he said after a very long pause.

“Can’t you make that a definite declaration?”

“I don’t know what I don’t know. I don’t want to be stuck looking after a witch forever either.”

“Hah! You are so arrogant.”

“Aha ha! You two get along so well!” Tobias said, delighted.

“We do not!” Carla and Thane shouted in unison, denying Tobias’s lighthearted comment. Tobias laughed even more at their reaction.

And with that finished, Carla finally set out to return home. Carla was later shaken awake by Thane after falling asleep in the carriage. She then got out on her usual street.

The area in which the apothecary stood was safe for a back alley, but it was deserted, with only a few people walking. There were no streetlights either, only darkness all around.

When she unlocked the door to the apothecary using the light from the carriage lantern, Carla felt relief at the familiar scent of the medicine in the shop. As she lit the lamp on the counter, she was greeted by a scene that had not changed at all since she left.

“I’m home, my sweet apothecary! Gosh, the air is so stale in here with all the windows closed.”

“You want the windows opened?” Thane asked.

“Yeah, it’d be great if you can open the ones toward the top. Once you’re done, you can sit there.”

Although he was a bit puzzled, Thane sat down at the counter after having opened the upper windows that faced the street. Carla returned from the dispensary in the back, holding in her hand a basket that contained bandages and jars of medicine.

“Take off your shirt,” Carla said.

“Huh?”

“The wound on your shoulder. It’s still there, isn’t it?”

The injury Thane had gotten at the academy when he had protected Carla and Patricia from Abel’s sword seemed to have been left untreated. Just because it had stopped bleeding, it did not mean that it was acceptable to leave it unattended.

“No, this is already—” Thane started.

"Not just your shoulder. Your elbow too," Carla declared curtly.

Thane opened his eyes wide and, after a pause, asked, "How did you know?"

"Did you forget my day job? If you can't trust a witch's medicine, you can just take it off later. In any case, let me treat it for now. This is my shop, so you have to listen to me!"

To allow an injured person who stepped into this apothecary to leave uncured would be a blow to Carla's pride as an apothecary witch.

When Thane remained reluctant, Carla lifted her chin and, looking down at him, said, "I'm going to tell everyone that the vice commander of the First Battalion of the Knights of the Royal Guard is actually scared of having his wounds treated. Hey, you scaredy-cat!"

"Haah?! Don't spout such nonsense, you!"

"It's not 'you.' It's Carla."

"...Tch."

Seeing that Carla was not going to back down, Thane, his eyebrows furrowed, began to unwillingly unbutton his shirt.

He seemed to have changed out of his torn clothes in a rush when he went to report the incident to the queen. On his shoulder, however, there was still a cut; on his elbow, too, was a dark bruise.

Carla was impressed by the fact that Abel had managed to attack more than twice in that single instance.

"So it really was true that the prince is good at the sword," Carla commented.

"You didn't believe me?"

"I guess just hearing about it wasn't enough. Plus his image as a brainy kid is still stronger in my mind."

In the limited space of the gazebo, especially with Carla and Patricia there, Thane must not have been able to attack as well as he would have under normal circumstances. For Thane to have kept his injuries at this level, given the fast attacks that Abel made without hesitation, was also quite impressive.

Carla purified the affected areas, which had only been wiped clean. She then applied medicine to both. When she used the ointment for bruises on his elbow, Thane made a funny face.

“Does it hurt?” she asked.

“No, but... Carla, do you make all the medicine sold here yourself?”

“Of course. I inherited the formulas from my teacher. They’re complete originals that she came up with. But I think all apothecaries use similar ingredients to the ones I use.”

The method of preparation that Carla had learned from Varne was more old-fashioned than that of other apothecaries. In that sense, it may have been somewhat rare.

“I think what sets my teacher’s ointment apart is this scent, though,” Carla said.

The ointment had the refreshing scent of peppermint along with a hint of sweetness from cinnamon. It also had the faint glitter of mica-like crystals. They were a by-product of mixing it with magic.

“And when you look at it by candlelight, it sparkles. That’s the proof that it’s witch’s medicine. Can you see?” Carla asked, pulling the lamp on the counter closer to show him.

“Yes,” Thane nodded slowly, as though convinced.

Carla had tried medicine by other apothecaries as part of her research, but she was confident that Varne’s medicine was the most effective. The dispensation notebook that contained Varne’s teachings was Carla’s treasure. She would never let it go, and she would never change anything either.

Though even if the medicines are good, it doesn’t matter if they don’t sell.

The rush of construction that had accompanied the redevelopment of the capital had slowed down. Injuries among workers and fights among people were rare.

This shop was too far removed to carry in people who had been injured in carriage accidents that occurred frequently on the main street. It was also not

the kind of region where mercenaries were frequent.

Carla had no intention of complaining about the lack of demand for medicine for treating wounds, as it was the sign of peaceful times. For there to be no demand for a product in which she had complete confidence was nonetheless a shame, if she had to be honest.

The shop had zero sales this month too—jeez!

Carla was not at all satisfied by the situation in which she somehow made ends meet with her side job.

When she considered making oral medicine again, she recalled Nettie's look of extreme displeasure as she declared that she would never again help with clinical trials.

When Carla finished bandaging Thane's elbow and shoulder—even as she let out a deep sigh—she locked eyes with him, who looked like he wanted to say something.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Carla, how much does this ointment cost?”

“A jar costs one cupronickel coin. A small jar is six copper coins.”

“Wha—?! I-I mean, do you ever sell wholesale to a merchant?”

“Just to one.”

After Varne passed, all of the merchants that had traded with the apothecary withdrew their business. There was only one merchant that still did business with the apothecary. As of now, payments from him were basically the only income that the apothecary had.

“Why do you ask?”

“No reason,” Thane said after a moment of hesitation. “I’ll take one.”

“What? You mean a purchase, for real? What in the world is going on?”

“Shut up and just give it to me.”

“No way, I really can’t believe it. There’s totally gonna be a storm tomorrow... Oh, I don’t accept returns, okay!?”

"I know that."

Carla pointed at him adamantly, but Thane did not seem to change his mind. When Carla wrapped the bruise ointment with questions still in her mind, Thane, too, accepted the package with a strange look on his face.

How weird... Oh well, who cares!

Carla could not tell if she had a strange aftertaste in her mouth or she was happy about the rare sale she made.

She felt complex emotions, but for now, her blanket beckoned. After she saw Thane off as he left the apothecary deep in thought, Carla turned out the light and headed upstairs.

8. To the Royal Castle Once Again

Three days after the stormy visit to the academy, Thane—who had even sent a letter of confirmation the day before—appeared at the apothecary precisely on the hour he had specified.

Noticing the shelves that had grown even emptier, he muttered suspiciously, “There weren’t that many to begin with, but have the items on sale at this shop decreased even further?”

“I sold everything,” Carla said.

“Haah? No way!”

“Why are you so surprised? How rude.”

The day before, Scott, the butler from the duke’s mansion, had come as a messenger to the apothecary.

He could not tell Carla anything related to the dissolution of the engagement between Patricia and Abel, since there was a gag order in place until Carla and the others had an audience with the queen. He did share, however, that Patricia was now sleeping and eating as well as she used to. The duke and duchess, as well as all the servants in the mansion, were enjoying a peace of mind at the change in the young lady.

Scott, now full of relief and his veins no longer throbbing in anger at his temples, came at the order of the duke and duchess. On their behalf, Scott brought an honorarium for Carla in thanks for the fact that their daughter had regained her vitality.

Carla appreciated the sentiment, but she knew that Patricia had recovered through her own power and effort. Besides, this case had been a request from the queen. When Carla refused the honorarium, saying she felt odd receiving payments from multiple parties for a single case, Scott instead fulfilled his task by buying up the contents of the entire shop.

That said, Carla had not had much in stock to begin with. When she nervously

told Scott the grand total of his purchase, he seemed a bit surprised at first but then immediately paid off the sum without saying another word.

His wallet didn't seem any lighter even after he made the payment... I wonder how much he had in there. Boy, the economic power of a duke's family really is scary!

Carla hoped everyone, including the servants of the duke's mansion, would be able to use her hand creams and herbal soaps.

But now I have nothing to sell! I have to let the soaps rest, so I won't have any in stock for a while. Those always turn out better when I dry them naturally instead of with magic.

The only product she had in the shop to sell were the deodorizers, which she rushed to prepare after Scott left the night before.

Today, as promised, was her audience with the queen—but Carla assumed that they would simply be hearing the facts that had been uncovered and the decisions that had been made. She would also learn whether she successfully completed the original request, but given the condition of the shelves in her shop, she wished she could stay holed up in her dispensary preparing medicine all day rather than going off to the castle.

Even so, if she said, “I don’t want to go after all,” it was clear as day that she would once again fall into an argument with the inflexible knight.

“We’re off,” the knight in question said to her.

“I know. You’re always so bossy.”

As Carla stepped out from behind the counter, the deodorizers she had placed in a basket caught her eye.

Come to think of it, I never thanked the female knight who treated my wounds in the office of the knights’ brigade.

Even if Carla had been half asleep, she realized she had nonetheless been disrespectful. The knight did not seem to hold any prejudice against witches. She had even cleaned all the soot and dirt off of Carla.

“Maybe I should bring a gift to that person in the knights’ brigade,” Carla said,

stopping to think.

“Are you still dreaming? This apothecary doesn’t have the margin to afford to pass things out for free. Sell it,” said Thane.

“Jeez, seriously! It’s none of your business!”

Carla thought that a deodorizer was practical, though not terribly elegant. Thane, instead, had to comment on something entirely different. With her cheeks still puffed out in anger, Carla entered the waiting carriage, and the two headed straight for the castle.

When they arrived, they were led not to the Indigo Palace, which they had previously visited, but to the main wing of the Central Palace. Although the initial plan had been for Carla to investigate the matter in secret and dissolve the engagement amicably, the incident had grown so large that the queen could no longer handle the matter alone; other parties had to be involved. Thane also let slip that the king would be present at today’s meeting. When Carla complained about not being told earlier, she and Thane had yet another argument inside the carriage. Even if Carla did not have the right to refuse to attend, she felt she should have at least been told this minor detail ahead of time.

Although she had assumed she would one day see the king because of the pact between witches and royalty, Carla never expected that she would be given an official audience with him.

In any case, this place is so huge. I know it’s to be expected, but this palace is even more splendid than the last!

The Indigo Palace used by the queen was a tranquil space filled with blue and white. The Central Palace, on the other hand, used red and gold—visibly gorgeous and luxurious, perfect for receiving guests of honor from abroad. The pure-white uniform of the royal guard also stood out brilliantly against the formal backdrop, and even Thane appeared to be about thirty percent more handsome than when he was at Carla’s apothecary. Knowing his personality, Carla was not quite convinced by this change—yet seeing maid after maid blush and turn around to spy on him as they passed, she figured it must be an

objective fact.

And no matter where I look, everything is just plain dazzling!

Carla did not know much about art, but she estimated that a single gold candelabrum fitted with jewels was worth enough to purchase the entire building of Carla's apothecary.

Dizzy from the splendor to which she was unaccustomed, Carla climbed the main staircase. She proceeded down the gorgeous long gallery, passed through the salon that made her sigh from its beauty, and saw the chapel outside the window as she walked. The path was very long—so long that Carla felt she might give up in the middle of it. But she finally arrived at the waiting room to the hall where she would have the audience with the king and queen.

The family of the Duke of Hemmings as well as Crown Prince Abel were already in the waiting room. As soon as the door closed behind Carla, Patricia stood up and, running toward her to greet her, shouted, "Carla!"

"Lady Patricia, I'm so glad to see you doing well. Greetings to the duchess and everyone as well."

Since they had parted ways at the burned and crumbled-down gazebo, Patricia had worried about Carla's condition afterward. Patricia, now happily holding Carla's hands, had a much better complexion than on the day the two first met or the day of the incident when they last saw each other. Patricia's eyes sparkled with life.

Seeing the lady steadily regaining her health, Carla, like Scott, felt much relief.

Yet Patricia's violet-colored eyes, full of delight at the reunion, fell upon a spot just to the side of Carla's face. Patricia's eyebrows suddenly turned down as if in apology as she said, "Oh, Carla...your hair."

"Oh, this?" Carla said. "They seemed unbalanced, so I just cut the other side to match."

Carla's hair next to her ear had been cut on one side by Abel. When Nettie had come to collect the pendant-shaped magical tool the day before, she cut the other side to match before Carla could even say anything. More than just being good at crafting magical tools, Nettie was skilled at anything that involved

the use of her hands. Cutting Carla's hair was no exception, so it looked as though Carla had always had her hair styled this way.

It was not as though she had cut her long hair short. The change was slight enough to escape people, unless they had a keen eye for observation.

"Thane didn't say anything, so I figured it didn't make much of a difference. I'm impressed that you noticed it, Lady Patricia."

"What?! Thane, I can't believe you ignored the fact that a young lady cut her hair this much."

"How? Where...?" Thane started, suddenly put on the spot. "I mean, please excuse me. I must apologize."

"Don't say it to me; say it to Carla!"

Thane only looked awkwardly at the angry Patricia, but Carla believed that he genuinely had not noticed. Besides, if he had commented on her outfit or her hairstyle, she would not know how to react. If he left it alone, so much the better for her. Since her hair would eventually grow again, she was happy to have people forget about it.

When the scolded and embarrassed Thane approached her, Carla just smiled at him. She then turned and said, "Lady Patricia, Prince Abel—it's not a problem at all. I always use my hair to test various dyeing agents anyway."

"What?! Carla, how can you?!"

"You use your own hair, do you? Apothecaries sure are tough..."

Following Carla's reply, Patricia looked at her as though she were looking at one disappointing child. Abel, on the other hand, seemed impressed. A noble lady's hair must be an important part of her body; to Carla, it was just one of the many different ingredients to which she had access.

Patricia and Abel also seemed to feel a certain level of guilt toward Carla for what had transpired at the gazebo. Carla, however, wanted the two to let bygones be bygones. In fact, Carla felt like she had gotten a fairly sweet deal for having been able to witness Lilith's impressive sorcery.

As they carried on their conversation, a chamberlain entered and said, "The

preparations are now complete. If you will all proceed to the audience room, please.”

Abel and Patricia led the way. The original purpose of the request had been the dissolution of the engagement between the two. Seeing them walk next to each other so intimately close, however, Carla envisioned a different future as she followed behind. She could not help frowning.

I...I'm not giving up hope quite yet, though!

She had set the stage for calling off the engagement; all she had had to do was to confirm the facts and bring Abel forward.

Yet Carla sensed the possibility she would hear an outcome she did not want to hear. As a witch, however, she was going to hold fast to the last ounce of hope she had and resist that outcome as best she could.

If this request ends in failure too, I don't know how many in a row that makes... I don't even wanna count!

As Carla sent vibes toward the young couple to make sure they successfully called off their engagement, Madam Marie—Patricia’s mother—fell into step beside her and whispered, “Lady Witch, I don’t know how I can possibly thank you.”

“Huh? Oh, not at all. I only did what I was tasked to do.”

“But, Lady Witch, you didn’t even accept the reward that the duke and I prepared. Scott seemed quite disappointed when he returned.”

“But he was kind enough to buy so many of my products. That’s more than enough.” Seeing Marie still looking apologetic, though, Carla suddenly had an idea. She said to the duchess, “In that case, Duchess of Hemmings... Rather, I have a favor to ask of you, Madam Marie.”

“What could it be? Anything that I can do for you,” Marie replied.

“If you think that it’s too much trouble, or if you are offended by it, please don’t hesitate at all to refuse this request. But it would actually help me a great deal if I can hear some honest opinions about the soaps and deodorizers and things once you’ve had a chance to use them.”

“Oh, that’s such a small thing! Of course, I’d be happy to give you my thoughts. We’ve shared the items with the servants as well, so I’ll also be sure to collect their opinions.”

“Thank you,” said Carla. “And actually, I have one more thing...”

Quickly turning around to check where Thane was, Carla leaned in to whisper something into Madam Marie’s ear. The duchess opened her eyes slightly in surprise, but when she heard the rest of Carla’s request, she put the back of her finger against her lips, just as her daughter often did. And on those lips, a beautiful smile appeared.

“Actually, I was thinking of asking Lady Witch to do precisely that.”

“Is that so? In that case, I take it that your response is in the affirmative.”

“Why yes, of course.”

The two looked at each other and nodded, just as the party arrived at the audience room.

The heavy doors opened, and the group entered the room and lined up along the beautifully polished floor. Carla wanted to stand at the very end, where she would not be noticed. Thane, however, brought up the rear and took up the last spot himself; he forced Carla to stand next to him. On the other side of Carla stood Madam Marie. Then stood the Duke of Hemmings, Patricia, and Abel at the end.

Neither the Earl of Dalaney nor Lilith was present.

In addition to his plans to be rid of Patricia, suspicions about various other unsavory crimes such as embezzlement had surfaced when the knights searched the earl’s residence in the royal capital. With investigations for those new charges still in progress, the earl remained in custody.

An investigation team was also headed to his earldom. Although it would take some time for the whole picture to be revealed, what seemed clear was that his punishment would not be a light one.

Unlike Lord Dalaney, who continued making excuses and passing the buck to others, Lilith was cooperating fully with the investigation and responding

willingly to all questions. Having used up all the magical power she had and having been under the distorted influence of a magic circle for so long, she was still in the hospital, not yet fully recovered. Her life was not in danger, however, and she would hear the outcomes of the incident upon her recovery.

Soon after Carla and the others completed their preparation, the royal couple entered the room. They sat in seats placed on a level one step above where the group stood. Next to the royal couple stood the chief chamberlain.

Just like when Carla had met her to hear her request, the queen wore an indigo dress. Although she was not in her full official attire, she did wear a tiara this time. The audience may not have been made public to other noble families, but it was still an official one. Any reports or decisions made would be handled officially.

The queen looks dignified today, as usual. But the king... It's my first time seeing him, but boy does he look scary! Who the hell was it that joked he didn't have much of a presence?! thought Carla.

The king had the same black hair as Abel. The slightly lowered outer corners of his eyes gave off a soft impression. He seemed to have a gentle personality, and he also did not speak much. His general reputation was that he rarely became angry.

While his people respected and loved him, some also made light of him, especially in comparison to the queen, who was known as a strategist. Yet in his eyes Carla saw a frightening alertness. This type of person was incredibly rational, capable of making decisions without even registering people as people. He was, in other words, the type to rule from behind the scenes.

The magazines and newspapers really were unreliable. In this case, though, it was probably more accurate to assume that the king himself was taking advantage of his public image.

A gentle king and a fierce queen, they say—but isn't it the opposite? Not that the queen isn't capable, but still, thought Carla.

It was the queen, not the king, who had used the pact to summon Carla. *She had been the only one to show concern about the marriage between Abel and Patricia, in other words.*

Although the queen appeared to be all intellect, she was actually quite compassionate. This must have been the reason she decided to embark on the dissolution of the engagement, even when she understood the various disadvantages associated with doing so.

“—Well then. We shall now begin the investigative report regarding the recent fire that erupted at the academy, as well as the various attacks on Lady Patricia, the daughter of the Duke of Hemmings.”

The clear voice of the elderly chief chamberlain provided an overview of what had become apparent regarding the incident. Expressions of opinions and rebuttals would also be permitted during this time.

The background of the case was, overall, as Abel and Carla had surmised: it began when the Earl of Dalaney—who was plotting to eliminate Patricia from the picture—approached Lilith, who had joined the sorcerers’ order and begun to have contact with Abel at the royal palace.

Lilith received a bracelet from the Earl of Dalaney as “a present to celebrate the fact that she had become a scholarship student.” Lilith, however, was hesitant to accept the gift, which clearly contained an expensive magic stone and also seemed rather suspicious. She tried to refuse the bracelet on the spot, but he forced her to wear it then and there. Lilith then discovered that she was unable to take it off.

“He said that he had the key back in his earldom and that I would have to wait to remove the bracelet until the key arrived. All I could do was to trust his word.”

At the academy, students were not permitted to wear extravagant accessories. As a scholarship student, Lilith was expected to follow the academy rules even more closely than the other students.

Lilith also shared that, following Lord Dalaney’s recommendation, a blinding sorcery was performed on the bracelet—so that it would not be seen by others until she was able to take it off.

Sorcery to impair cognition was difficult to perform; it was not something that could be performed by just anyone. It turned out that a key member of the sorcerers’ order had undertaken the task.

"The person who applied sorcery to the bracelet was Vice Commander Peter Sadler, who also served as mentor to Lilith Cabot in the sorcerers' order. We have confirmed that he also crafted the bracelet. We are unable to locate Sadler at present; however, an intensive search for his whereabouts is currently being conducted."

So there really was someone within the sorcerers' order who was working with Lord Dalaney. And it was someone as high up as the vice commander. Plus we don't even know where he is... What an unpleasant feeling.

It was unclear whether Vice Commander Sadler had acted of his own accord or been threatened into action by Lord Dalaney. What was clear, however, was that someone from the upper echelons had assisted in committing a crime. The sorcerers' order would be quite restless for some time.

Carla sensed irritation from Thane, who was standing next to her. When she looked up at him and raised her eyebrows, he whispered to her, "We sent people to the sorcerers' order as soon as we were able to get the statement from Lilith, but Sadler had already disappeared."

"I bet he had rigged the bracelet," Carla replied.

Sadler must have set up the bracelet so that he would be notified if it were ever unlocked or destroyed. There was a possibility it had also had an eavesdropping function, though that would only become clear when the analysis of the bracelet was performed.

"He must've been pretty meticulous about things, huh?" Carla said.

"Yeah," Thane said, looking as though he had some ideas about the matter at hand. Carla glanced at him, then returned her gaze forward.

Lilith had been concerned because the bracelet always felt cold, and she felt ill whenever she touched the magic stone. She believed she was not compatible with the magic stone and that she just had to bear it until the key arrived to unlock the bracelet.

Before long, even activities like studying that had always given her pleasure began to feel uninteresting to her. She also started getting more and more irritated by small things. But no matter how long she waited, the key did not

arrive. Becoming impatient, Lilith visited the earl—and that was when he ordered her to inflict harm upon Patricia.

"I didn't want to, but he threatened that he wouldn't be able to guarantee my family's safety if I didn't. That was when I thought that, as long as Lady Patricia wasn't at the academy, I wouldn't have to do anything terrible. She's a noble's daughter who's been spoiled all her life. I thought that if I just harassed her a little, she'd get scared and go back home. So I started showing off my relationship with the prince. But it didn't go as planned."

Patricia had shown no signs of leaving the academy.

Not only had everyday occurrences started to depress Lilith, Lord Dalaney also began to add relentless pressure. Her small acts of harassment against Patricia thus escalated to direct attacks.

"I began to think that everything was going wrong just because Lady Patricia was at the academy. That if Lady Patricia wasn't there, then the crown prince would help me, and I'd be able to do well here in the capital. That was how I felt—that Lady Patricia's presence was the cause of all my unhappiness."

Lilith shared that she felt annoyed by everything and that dissatisfaction and anxiety always dwelled in her heart.

It was confirmed that, even in circumstances in which she was forced to act and she had no recourse, Lilith had nonetheless tried to resist. Furthermore, the negative emotions that the bracelet's magic circle amplified had also influenced her actions. It was thus determined that there was room for sympathy and rehabilitation for Lilith.

"Given these circumstances, it has been resolved that Lilith Cabot will be obligated to perform service activities while a student at the academy. She will also be on continuous probation with an assigned officer. Her appointment to join the sorcerers' order after graduation from the academy will not be overturned. She will, however, receive a reduction in pay for one year from the start of her appointment."

Despite causing a scandal within the academy and performing harmful acts against the daughter of a duke—and despite her having committed these acts as a commoner—it was clear that Lilith's extenuating circumstances had been

greatly taken into consideration when choosing the punishment. It was also proof of Lilith's abilities and the expectations for her future.

"I have no objections," said Patricia, the main victim of the incident, giving her consent; the duke and duchess also agreed.

The queen, however, raised her hand.

"Your Highness, if you please," spoke the chief chamberlain.

"Bring Lilith's family from the Earldom of Dalaney to the royal capital. For their involvement in the crime, I order them to labor under my watch. They will do so in the herb garden of the castle. As concomitant punishment, I forbid them from returning to their earldom for a minimum of ten years," the queen declared.

A voiceless wave of reactions flowed through the room. The queen termed it as the family being complicit, but in actuality, she was offering them protection. It was unclear what punishment Lord Dalaney would receive. He could, however, retaliate against Lilith's family—who still lived in his earldom—out of resentment for his plans having failed. By having the family live and work within the castle grounds, the queen intended to prevent future harm to the family as well as schemes to exploit Lilith.

In addition, because of this, Lilith would come under the influence of the queen rather than that of the sorcerers' order. It may have been the vice commander who had lent a hand to Lord Dalaney, but there was no guarantee that other sympathizers did not lurk within the order. It seemed unwise to fully entrust Lilith to such a group. Given that those at the castle acknowledged Lilith's abilities, the queen intended to do Lilith a favor by placing her entire family under the kingdom's watch.

I'd expect nothing less from the queen, thought Carla. She's thought of everything. That's great, Lilith—you can be with your family now.

As tenant farmers, Lilith's family was already familiar with this type of work, and Lilith's younger brother, who was of ill health, would also have the opportunity to receive treatment in the royal capital. These were good outcomes, all around.

Plus they'd be working at the herb garden. Maybe the little brother will be cured by the queen's herbs, and he'll aim to become an apothecary... If that happened, that would be fun.

The idea that they were growing the ingredients for the medicine used to treat their son would also encourage Lilith's parents to engage in their work with enthusiasm.

With agreement from everyone present, the proposal to move the Cabot family to the royal capital also moved forward. When Carla clapped her hands to express her approval, Thane looked at her in shock. The chief chamberlain narrowed his eyes a bit, but she was not reprimanded.

"This concludes the report regarding the incident at the present moment. Next, Crown Prince Abel, if you please."

Being called upon, Abel took a step forward. With a contrite expression on his face, he apologized for what had transpired at the academy—first to his parents, the royal couple, then to Patricia's parents, the duke and duchess.

"As for my engagement and marriage," he began.

Oh! I'm counting on you! thought Carla. Just say the words: "I take full responsibility for the disturbance and call off the engagement"!

Lilith had been targeted not only because her abilities were acknowledged by the sorcerers' order but also because she was deemed to be someone who might be able to seduce Abel. He himself had to reconcile with the fact that he had failed to recognize his own position as having that much influence. Further, he had to reflect upon the fact that he had acted on his own judgments without consulting others.

As Carla watched with a mix of both excitement and nervousness, Patricia quietly stepped forward and stood next to Abel.

"If I may be forgiven, I wish to proceed with my marriage to Lady Patricia," he declared.

"I obj—fmg?!"

Thane's large hand muffled Carla's exclamation.

“Stay quiet,” he hissed as Carla struggled to voice her opinion.

Huuuh?! Hey, Thane! Let me go!

She even shot her hand in the air, but he forced her to lower it. There was no way petite and powerless Carla could win against a knight who was both tall and buff. Carla glared at him and stomped on his foot with all her might—only to have her own foot take on more damage as it met with Thane’s impressive military boot.

Seriously! Next time I’m gonna buy those shoes that Ange was wearing—the ones with the stiletto heels that look like a murder weapon!

“If I am allowed to marry Patricia, I shall accept any punishment given to me.”

“I feel the same way. I give my own apology as well and beseech you to permit our marriage.”

Abel and Patricia looked at their parents and potential future in-laws with expressions of submission. When prompted by the chief chamberlain, the king finally spoke.

“Having caused all this commotion, we cannot let you get away without taking *any* responsibility. But thanks to you, we were able to reveal Lord Dalaney’s wrongdoing and deal a blow to the pride of a certain group of people. For that, I commend you,” he said, smiling. He then remarked that he would consider their punishment, thus avoiding any definite statements for the time being.

That was the only bump in the discussion. As Carla stood there with her mouth still covered by Thane, the dissolution of Abel and Patricia’s engagement was taken off the table. Their marriage would proceed as planned.

Patricia was smiling happily with tears in her eyes. Abel was holding Patricia’s waist as if wanting to show that he would never let her go. The situation was very “happily ever after”—but Carla, who had been requested to dissolve their engagement, was very, very dissatisfied.

My bad premonitions came true! This is the worst!

Even though she had somewhat prepared herself for this outcome, Carla

could only think of yet another knot on the rope counting her failed missions.

“Just celebrate the happy couple, Carla,” Thane said, sighing.

“Mug ug!” she managed in her failed attempt to tell him to shut up.

“Apothecary Witch Carla and Vice Commander Thane Howell of the First Battalion of the Knights of the Royal Guard.”

As the two on the end snipped at each other, the queen called out to them. Freezing, Carla and Thane hurried to stand upright.

“You did good work this time. Therefore, I shall give each of you a reward,” the queen said.

“Huh?” Carla blurted out. Thane, too, stiffened in shock.

“What now? No need for you both to be so hesitant.” The queen looked amused—as in, she was grinning from ear to ear—as she looked down upon them from where she sat. When she told them to step forward, Thane did so, though reluctantly. Carla, on the other hand, took a full step backward. She looked straight at the queen and shook her head vigorously.

“Nooo thank you. I’m happy to receive just the amount that was indicated at our first discussion.”

“Huh?” Hearing Carla reject the reward, Thane turned around in surprise.

With an excessively prim and proper expression, Carla repeated, “I don’t need it.”

The queen appeared even more amused. “Your reward will increase, Carla,” she reminded the witch.

“I don’t need it. I refuse it. I absolutely don’t want to receive any more additional rewards for failing my missions!”

“Ha ha!”

When Carla made her declaration, pouting, the queen burst out laughing. Everyone else in the room also could not help smiling wryly. Thane alone remained flustered, but the queen, having ceased her merry laughter, looked at him with authority in her blue-gray eyes.

"Thane Howell," she began, "I do not permit you to refuse either. I shall ask you in several days' time about your request for the reward. Be sure to think upon it."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Thane said, snapping back to himself. "I understand."

Thane bowed once more to the queen, who nodded looking satisfied. When he returned to his spot next to the others, Carla whispered to him, "How nice to be praised, huh?"

Thane, though, remained silent.

What, he's gonna ignore me? He can at least say something! Carla fumed.

Thane only momentarily glanced at Carla before returning his gaze forward. He remained deep in thought until they left the room.

§

Aside from a certain someone, the audience with the king and queen ended without anyone expressing any objections.

Upon returning to the waiting room, the group began to prepare to return to their respective homes. Although Carla complained to Thane for his treatment of her earlier, he seemed to simply let it enter one ear and go out the other. He even presented her with a winning argument by stating, "Either way, your objection would have been rejected, with the majority being in favor of the marriage." Needless to say, Carla ended up in a foul mood. With the duke and duchess, Patricia, and even Abel all thanking her, however, Carla had no choice but to give up.

"Haaa," Carla sighed melodramatically.

"That's quite a sigh," Thane remarked.

"Leave me alone. I mean it. Why do things always turn out like this?!"

"It's probably your own fault."

Even though she had expressed a cry of despair from the bottom of her heart, Thane simply frowned at her, exasperated. The rest of the group looked upon the two with a collective smile.

“How? All I did was try to move forward with calling off the engagement, like I was asked to do!”

“In that case, you’ll just have to tell yourself that it’s a coincidence and come to terms with it,” Thane said. “Come on. Let’s go home.”

If this was how the cookie was going to crumble, there was only one thing Carla could do: throw a giant Disappointment Party with Mr. Scott, the one other individual who had expressed disapproval of the marriage between Patricia and Abel.

Carla wondered if they could have it at the tavern Nettie frequented. The establishment had an impressive menu that included only winning dishes. Even nobles went there on the down-low, enticed by its delicious fare. Carla was certain that even those related to a duke’s family would be able to enjoy it. She was certain Mr. Scott would like the tavern’s assorted plate, which featured small amounts of several different dishes.

“Lady Witch, may I have a word?” Madam Marie asked, approaching Carla who stood there beginning to mentally prefinance the drinking away of her sorrows.

“Madam Marie,” Carla said, coming back to reality.

Apparently Abel was going to spend the night in his own room at the castle, given that it had been a while since he had last returned to his own family’s residence.

“There is still time before dinner, so we are all thinking of having tea together,” Marie said to Carla. Apparently the loyal butler Scott of the duke’s family, who was currently waiting in the hallway, was also going to join them. “We’re having them prepare the tea for us as we speak. Won’t you join us, Lady Witch?”

“I would love to. That’s perfect—I can share a bitter toast with Mr. Scott.”

“Oho ho, you’ll have to toast with tea, then. Thane, I believe you were asked to take Lady Witch home. I’ll make the arrangements, so you won’t have to worry about it.”

“I understand,” Thane said, though with some hesitation.

"Oh, bye then, Thane. You're finally free of the witch, huh? We both made it in one piece!"

"Yeah," he replied as though he had something more he wanted to say. Carla tilted her head, puzzled.

What's up with him? That was weird.

He had said from the very beginning that he could not stand the idea of getting involved with a witch—so why did he all of a sudden look so reluctant to part ways?

"Could it be...that he likes the deodorizers?" Carla asked herself.

He had stopped her when she tried to bring it as a gift earlier today. Perhaps he had such self-centered intentions as to hog them all to himself. If he had taken a liking to them, then all he had to do was to come and buy them at the apothecary. It was possible, however, that he found it difficult to do so after having criticized them so much.

Well, well. Maybe he does have some cute aspects after all.

Carla understood, soon after meeting him, how much pride Thane took in his work as a knight. For him to decide not to wear his uniform—even if he had judged that it was necessary to do so in order to carry out his mission smoothly—must therefore have caused considerable inner conflict.

Carla felt at ease, too, when he did not take pity on her for having had her hair cut. All in all, the truth was that it was easy to be with him, despite all the things he said to her.

...He's still a knight, though.

When she saw that white uniform, Carla still felt the sensation of the depth of her heart being squeezed mercilessly. But if Thane was the one wearing it, her bottomless anger and resentment turned into mere "irritation." She was able to speak of it more lightly.

She did not know why this was the case. If she had to make sense of it, though, perhaps it was because of Thane's outrageous arrogance—that which made him not hide the fact that he despised witches, even to a witch herself.

Seriously—he's so stupidly honest.

There were many who looked down upon those they disliked. There were very few who were willing to go up against them head-on—especially against witches, a group from whom people ordinarily kept a distance.

Having to see him was unpleasant, and there were also many troublesome incidents. Even so, the past few days had been the most fulfilling that she had spent in the last several years.

“Well,” Carla said, after a long moment of contemplation, “I guess that’s all over after today.”

“Lady Witch?” Marie asked.

“Oh, nothing.”

“Is that so? Well then—shall we?”

Since Varne’s passing, Carla had not spent this much time continuously with any one person. She guessed that must be why she felt like she was missing something, somewhere in her heart.

Feeling Thane’s gaze upon her back, Carla left the waiting room with Marie as she waved her hand in a flutter of farewell.

That evening, the Indigo Palace, which housed the queen’s office, received a guest.

The visitor was none other than Marie—the Duchess of Hemmings. She was Queen Sylvia’s childhood friend, and with the upcoming marriage between their respective children, she was soon to become an even closer family relation.

The tomboyish and lively girl had become a queen, while the gentle and quiet girl had become a duchess. The two women, whose faces still showed remnants of their younger selves, smiled at each other wearing the same expressions they had when they were children.

“I’m sorry to take up your time; I know you must be busy,” Marie said.

“That is not a problem. In fact, I should have been the one to speak with you first. I appreciate that you asked to meet with me.”

Sylvia welcomed her friend cheerfully, though also apologetically. Rather than the drawing room in which she met with Carla, Sylvia led her childhood friend to her private room in the back.

Once the handmaids prepared the tea, the queen had them take their leave. When she and Marie were alone, before the latter could say anything, the queen bowed deeply to her.

“Sylvia?” Marie asked, startled.

“Marie, I want you to let me apologize first.”

The duchess opened her eyes wide, surprised at the sudden apology.

“I made Patricia bear through worries that she should not have. It is true that Abel is a part of the cause. However, I am responsible for not having had full control over the actions of my son, as well as of Lord Dalaney and the sorcerer. For that, I cannot apologize enough.”

“Please raise your head, Sylvia.”

“I cannot ask you to forgive me—but I do want you to believe me. I promise that I will never let such a thing happen to Patricia, ever again.”

“No. Patricia was also at fault in this incident. Had she come to us earlier, we could have taken action before it came to this. She remained shut up in her room even after she returned to the mansion. I daresay, she seemed drunk on playing the part of the tragic heroine,” Marie said. Though her comment was blunt, she spoke gently.

“That is a rather sharp remark,” said the queen after a moment of startled amazement. She brought her hand to her chest, as though her friend had hit upon a sore spot.

The queen recalled then that this childhood friend of hers, who seemed so mild-mannered and somehow set apart from this mundane world, occasionally displayed a mercilessly pragmatic side as well.

“Even if her youth had prevented her from being able to see the whole picture, to be taken over by sadness and hope to be pampered, to not even be able to ask for help... No, to not have allowed her to ask for help was our fault

as parents," Marie said. "That's why there's no reason for you alone to fret."

"But, Marie—"

"An apology from you is not at all necessary. More importantly, I must say that neither one of our husbands was at all reliable in this case! I do wish for Prince Abel not to follow his father's lead and instead to become a more desirable man."

"You mustn't say that."

With the lighthearted banter, the mutual apologies came to an end. The two women looked at each other and smiled wryly.

Once she took a sip of her tea and gave a sigh of relief, Marie mumbled, "The Lady Witch did seem unsatisfied."

"Ah, yes. I did ask her to help me with dissolving the engagement, after all."

"Was that your true intention?"

"Of course. Abel is my dear son, and Patricia is precious to me as well. But when I made the request to the witch, I believed that it was the best thing for the two of them to part ways."

When Marie asked her if that meant she was dissatisfied with the reconciliation between the young lovers, Sylvia made a face as if she did not know how to respond. Setting aside the case of Lord Dalaney and the sorcerers' order, having the matter between their two children settled harmoniously should have been a truly happy outcome. And yet her expression showed that there seemed to be something still amiss, preventing Sylvia from celebrating the occasion wholeheartedly.

"Sylvia, dear," Marie said, clasping her hands as if in prayer and setting them down on her lap. The air about her suddenly changed. Marie looked straight at Sylvia with eyes filled with seriousness. Seeing Marie's violet-colored eyes appear as though they were searching into the depths of her heart, Sylvia—despite being queen—felt slightly intimidated.

"Was it not you yourself who wanted to dissolve the engagement...no, the marriage?"

“Marie?”

“You tried to make those two children break off their relationship in place of your own marriage—which you wanted to redo. Isn’t that right?”

Sylvia drew in her breath. Unable to keep herself from trembling, her teacup fell from her hand. Marie smiled quietly and, tilting her head slightly, brought the back of her finger against her lips.

“You think...that I should have married the king and become the queen of this kingdom. Am I wrong about that?”

“M-Marie...”

Tears welled up in the queen’s blue-gray eyes as though they could not be suppressed.

The primary candidate for the future queen had been Marie, not Sylvia. Everyone had thought that graceful and motherly Marie was most fit to be the queen. Instead, Sylvia had ended up earning the title of princess—a woman whose character was the exact opposite of Marie’s.

That was why Sylvia still could not help feeling this way—that what she had believed to be love and passion were but mere deceptions.

Marie, as the former primary candidate for the prince’s fiancée, had been receiving lessons to become the future queen. It was therefore unacceptable to make her marry just anyone. As a result, it was nearly predetermined politically that she would marry into the house of a duke.

To be a duchess was second only to being queen. However, there was a large difference in age between Marie and the duke, the younger brother of the previous king. The two, of course, had also not interacted aside from exchanging mere greetings. It was a marriage that could not be described as anything other than strategy and compromise.

But all Marie did was smile that gentle smile of hers.

Every time she saw Marie, who acted as if she were truly happy, Sylvia could not help thinking that she herself—having taken the queen’s throne away from her friend—was the one forcing Marie to put up such a front. Sylvia had spent

years plagued by guilt.

Sylvia's lips trembled, though she should have been strong. "I-I deprived you...of your happiness," she managed to say.

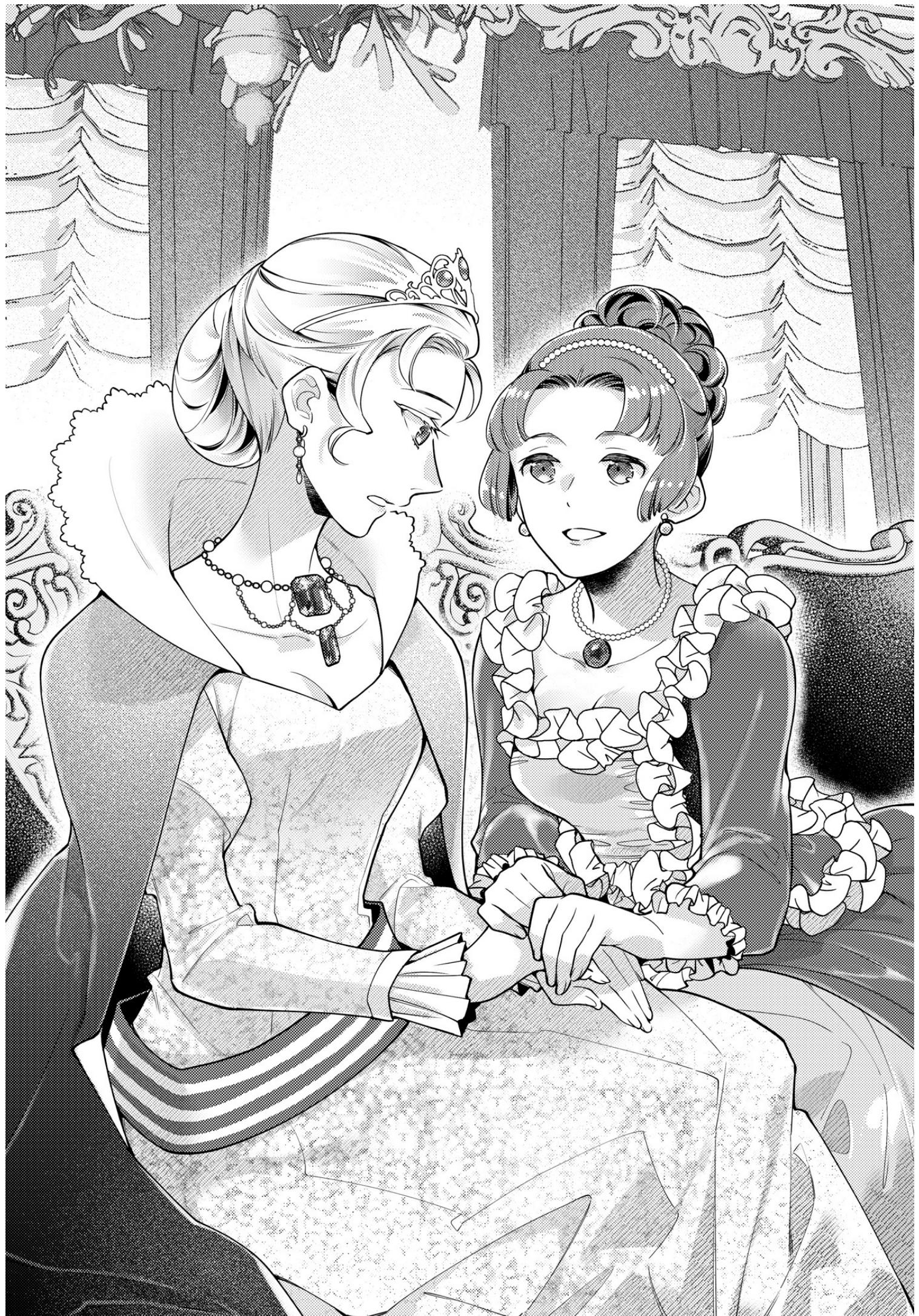
"I swear in the name of Goddess Lisandra—I am happy."

"You're lying!" Sylvia shouted.

"Listen, Sylvia," Marie began. "Those days when I was brought to the palace that I didn't even want to come to, in order to become a queen that I didn't even want to become—every day I felt like I wanted to die."

"What...?"

Marie stood up and, sitting down beside Sylvia, took her childhood friend's hands into her own.



“I was stubborn and didn’t tell even you. My stepmother and my father were forcing me to aim to become the crown princess. Even when I told them that I didn’t want to, they wouldn’t listen to me. But...in the palace that I despised, I met someone that I fell in love with. And he’s the one I’m married to today.”

“Marie?”

“I was so much younger than he was, so he didn’t take me seriously. It took so much effort to persuade him.”

“M-Marie,” Sylvia muttered, trying to interject.

Marie giggled softly. Her violet-colored eyes were definitely hers, and yet they somehow appeared different. As the queen sat there with her eyes opened wide in disbelief, Marie continued to drop bombshells in the name of new truths.

“I wanted to marry my husband instead of the king, but I knew that it wouldn’t be possible if I only tackled the issue head-on. That was why I suggested to the king to be each other’s cover-up—given that our interests aligned.”

“Cover-up...”

“My husband is kind. I knew that if my engagement were to be called off at the last minute and I had nowhere else to go, he would be willing to marry me.”

“Wait, Marie. That’s—” started Sylvia, again trying to say something.

“I’m quite the schemer, don’t you think?” asked Marie, laughing softly. “But my husband had said that he didn’t have anyone else he was in love with and that he simply had no interest in marrying anyone. That’s also why I thought I had a chance. I worked so hard to have him fall in love with me.”

As the queen sat there confused, Marie pressed her handkerchief to her friend’s cheek, which was stained with tears. Marie smiled brightly at Sylvia and said, “That’s why I’m so happy—my wish came true. Sylvia, do you remember the day you and the king first met?”

“At the ball...at the palace,” Sylvia replied after taking a moment to remember. “It was the one in the new year, after our debutante ball.”

“You’re wrong,” Marie said. “It was much earlier than that, in the city, before we were even adults. He was there incognito, as they call it? The king used to go out quite often. He frequented, in particular, the library, the playhouse in the third district, and the restaurant behind the central church.”

As Sylvia heard very familiar places listed off, her eyes grew even wider.

“Notice anything, Sylvia? Those are all places you frequented as well, aren’t they?” asked Marie.

“That’s not possible...”

Laughing lightly, Marie said to her dear friend, “The king told me he fell in love with you at first sight.”

“Your Majesty, don’t you think it’s because you don’t properly express these things, that Sylvia misunderstands you?”

“Why did you have to tell her? For so long, I was in love with her even though we had never spoken. I never told her because it would seem so awkward.”

“What?!” Sylvia shouted. How long had the door, which she believed was closed, been open? When the queen turned around, hearing behind her a voice that was all too familiar, she saw her husband—His Majesty the King—standing there.

“It’s quite romantic to think that the first meeting was at a ball, but the truth tends to tug even more at the heartstrings,” Marie said.

“Lesson learned. I shall take that to heart, indeed,” the king replied.

“Well then, Sylvia,” Marie said, turning to her friend, “if you’re going to request a divorce, now is the time to do it! I shall assist you in every way I can!”

“Wait just a minute! That was not part of the plan!” the king shouted.

“But just look at the two of you. Don’t you think you’d be better off getting a divorce?”

“W-Wait, I beg you!”

When Marie spoke with conviction, the king began to panic. Turning blue, he ran to the queen and knelt before her. Taking his wife’s hands away from Marie

and holding them tightly, as though clinging to them for dear life, he implored, “You would never speak of divorce, would you, Sylvia?”

“Um, uh, Y-Your Majesty,” the queen began.

“I cannot wait another minute,” Marie declared. “How many years have you two been married? She still can’t trust you, even after all this time. Please give up and accept the fact that you two just weren’t meant to be.”

“Every day, every time I see her, I tell her that I love her!” the king protested.

“Wow! If you say that multiple times with that pretty-boy face of yours, it’s only going to sound frivolous!”

“What?! I can’t do anything about my face! Plus I get her a present every time I go somewhere!”

“That’s a common trick among adulterous men. They give you things because they feel guilty. And then when there’s an important occasion, they start saying that they have other commitments.”

“Y-You’re talking about her birthday, aren’t you?! I couldn’t be absent from the negotiations with our neighboring country!”

“Oh really? You’re trying to tell me that our capable king couldn’t even free up his schedule for half a day?”

“I couldn’t very well appear in front of Sylvia looking exhausted! My face is the only thing I have going for me!”

“Well that’s just the price you pay for not being able to charm her with your character!”

Even once her tears dried, the only thing the queen could do was to watch, dumbfounded, as her friend and her husband argued with the force of a raging storm.

But thanks to them, she felt a bit calmer.

It was true that Marie was not just a simple, quiet woman. Hearing Marie’s words and seeing her behavior now, though, the face of a young woman she was finally able to meet just recently—the daughter of someone to whom she owed so much—appeared in the queen’s mind.

“Let’s get you divorced! Yes, right now!” announced Marie.

“No! I will absolutely not get a divorce!” the king insisted.

“Both father and son are so stubborn!” Marie yelled back.

“Could it be...Carla...?” the queen muttered.

“Oh, you finally figured it out.”

With that, “Marie” raised her index finger and gold magical dust emerged from it and thinly enveloped her body like a film. She slowly transformed once again, the magic coming undone—and there stood Carla, who was supposed to have returned to the apothecary in the back alley.

“Carla, why...?” the queen had to ask.

“Well, I guess because what I was requested to do was to dissolve the engagement that was ‘a mistake.’ I figured that the mistake to fix didn’t have to be that of the prince and Lady Patricia.”

Carla remembered clearly the words that the queen had spoken that day, almost a plea made in a voice that sounded like her heart was being torn to shreds:

“The engagement itself was a mistake.”

“It was a mistake on the part of myself and the king when we decided to forge this relationship.”

Carla realized only later that the queen had spoken with such connotations not because of her position as queen but because the marriage she truly wanted to end was not that of the children; it was her own. Carla managed to induce the hidden plea of the queen, who was in such agony that she was no longer even able to speak the name of Lisandra, the goddess of love.

“I’m the apothecary witch. That’s why I know who it is that is truly in need of medicine.”

There were many patients who hid their wounds and pain. It was also an apothecary’s job to see through such pretense. Varne had been truly remarkable in those respects as well. Carla was nowhere near Varne’s level, but she was confident that, at least in spirit, she was not far behind her teacher.

Carla revealed to the queen without hesitation that she had asked Madam Marie to set up an occasion in which to meet with her. She had then requested the duke to bring his nephew, the king, to the meeting place and listen in on the conversation while hidden from view.

“I-If that is the case...” the queen started.

“Yes. Everyone else is here as well.”

“What?!”

Once again, the queen turned around with a start. She saw this time the true Marie and the duke nestled close to each other just beyond the doorframe. Behind them stood Abel and Patricia as well.

“Th-That cannot...”

The queen blushed furiously. As though to hide her from others' view, the king immediately stepped in, embracing and covering his wife.

“Ggh! I cannot possibly allow others to see Sylvia look so vulnerable!” the king shouted.

“F-Father?”

“Prince Abel. Your father seems to interact with your mother coolly under normal circumstances, but this is his true nature,” said Marie.

“I-I see,” managed Abel.

“Usually the king embodies the idea that ‘a skilled hawk hides its talons.’ But when it comes to Sylvia, his talons themselves seem to disappear entirely. I cannot figure it out,” explained Marie to the surprised prince, shrugging her shoulders in confused exasperation.

The duke, too, nodded in agreement. Then he shared yet another fact, saying, “All the men of Selvester have too much love and affection for their wives. I worried that I would be the same way—which was why I had no intention of taking a wife myself.”

“There is no such thing as too much love from my dear husband,” said the duchess.

"That was what Marie said in order to win me over."

"Father, I had no idea," mumbled Patricia.

On the duke's dignified face was an expression of such embarrassment, that one half expected him to let out a little "tee hee." Having her shoulders embraced by such a duke, Madam Marie smiled her usual smile.

With this series of truths revealed to them about their parents and their future in-laws, the young lovers stood in wide-eyed surprise.

Carla, on the other hand, stood before the royal couple and, as though barring their way, opened her arms wide. She exclaimed, "Your Majesty the Queen! Please declare your divorce before everyone present! With this many witnesses, it will not be possible to have it overturned!"

"She cannot!" the king cried out.

"Your Majesty the King, please be quiet!" Carla shouted.

"W-Wai—nnh!"

When the queen was about to speak, her husband covered her mouth. Physically. By putting his lips on hers.

"Oh."

"Oh my."

"Father..."

Patricia blushed and let out a little yelp. Abel seemed not to know where to look. The duke appeared resigned to the inevitable. Madam Marie looked delighted.

And Carla stood there, grumpy as ever.

The kiss scene seemed to have no end; the sweetness level in the room was increasing. The queen, too, seemed not to see anyone but her husband.

"...It's still a failure? Even after I did all this...?" Carla muttered in disbelief.

"Just give it up, Witch."

"Huh? Hey, Prince Abel!"

As she was practically dragged off by Abel, Carla was forced to leave the room. It was not long after that Carla reconfirmed that she had, in fact, been unsuccessful in her mission yet again.

9. See You Tomorrow at the Apothecary in the Back Alley

In the end, Carla's request ended in failure this time as well. The situation was extremely regretful and unsatisfactory. Carla could not, however, allow herself to stay sad about it forever. Thanks to the reward she had earned from her side gig, she was able to make all the payments that had piled up. To live each and every day, however, she needed to earn her daily bread.

In order to restock her inventory of the products that Mr. Scott had bought, Carla once again found herself in her white coat, holed up in her dispensary from early in the morning. That was when she heard the rare ringing of the bell that hung on her door.

Did I imagine it...?

Carla's only regular customer, the wholesale merchant, came to the shop once a month. It had not yet been a month since his last visit. Was it possible that this was a "normal" customer?

That can't be; don't get your hopes up, Carla told herself, putting up her defenses as she paused her medicine-making.

Oh, but I still don't have that many products for sale. I should have more the day after tomorrow though! Praying that what she had in stock matched the customer's request, Carla looked out from the dispensary.

"Welco—huh?"

Although she had meant to greet the visitor, the surprise she felt prevented her from finishing the word.

"That's terribly unfriendly of you, Carla," Thane said, frowning with irritation.

"Thane? Wait, why are you here?" Carla asked, rushing out of the dispensary to the shop space.

"Should I not be here?" he asked, standing there with his arms akimbo, not

wearing his jacket but rather holding it draped over his arm. He was not wearing his gauntlets either.

“Oh, Miss Witch! I’m here! I’m here too!” shouted Tobias, poking his head out from behind Thane.

“Oh, uh... Who are you again?” Carla asked.

“Oh, no way! I’ve been forgotten!”

“No, I sort of remember your face. Did you tell me your name, though?”

“You don’t even remember that?! I’m Tobias, Tobias Schmidt! I was classmates with Thane in the knights’ brigade!”

“Is that right?” Carla wondered.

“Thane, Miss Witch doesn’t seem to care about me at all!”

“That’s just how she is,” Thane said nonchalantly.

With the sudden presence of the two knights, the small shop felt even smaller. The temperature, too, seemed to have risen, but she did not think that it was her imagination; in fact, she was certain that it really had gone up by about two degrees.

“Oh gosh, there are two bulky men in my shop. How oppressive,” Carla commented.

“That’s some welcome you’re giving us. And here we brought you good news,” Thane remarked.

“Good news?” Carla repeated.

Thane had served as the messenger who brought the request related to the pact—the request that ended up being much more eventful than expected. Recalling the failure in which it had ended, Carla could not trust Thane much, regardless of what he came to tell her. She stared at him suspiciously, shifting her body as though preparing for escape. Thane, however, raised one corner of his lips and looked over at Tobias. Then, out of nowhere, the two knights ushered forward a middle-aged man. He was chubby and slightly taller than Carla.

"You know this man, correct?" Thane asked.

"Wait, Morgan?" Carla asked in surprise.

"H-Hello there, Carla. Aha ha..."

The man, who would not stop bowing as he ran his hand through his thinning hair, was Morgan—the only merchant with whom Carla's apothecary did any business. With the sudden appearance of an acquaintance, Carla blinked several times and stepped out from behind the counter.

"Today isn't the day you're supposed to come, is it? I still haven't prepared the products you ordered," Carla said to him.

"O-Oh. No, uh..."

"Though I do have some of the ointment you usually get..." Carla continued.

Interrupting Carla, who was panicking at the fact that she did not have enough products in stock, Thane crossed his arms intimidatingly and declared, "Michael Morgan is currently under investigation for suspicion of conducting fraudulent business transactions."

"What?! Morgan, what did you do? You were always the one that told me to be careful of a deal that sounded too good."

"Carla, *you're* his victim," Thane told her.

"Huh?" Carla said, her jaw dropping.

"I'm sorry, Carla! I did it all on impulse!" Morgan shouted, sitting on his heels and folding himself to the ground. "Forgive me! Please—I beg you!"

"Whoa, isn't that the 'dogeza' pose that's supposed to be the ultimate for apologizing in the Kingdom of the East? I've never seen it before," Carla remarked.

"You know of it?" Thane asked.

"I heard about it from Nettie. But it sure doesn't feel terribly good when someone actually does it for you," Carla replied. "Come on, Morgan, get up."

"Uh, right..." Morgan said as Carla brought him to his feet. His face looked pale, and he was sweating profusely. When she asked him if he wanted to take

some medicine for emotional stability, he immediately refused. Having even Morgan—who had only tried her medicine once—refuse her offer so outright, Carla could not help having her feelings hurt.

“So what about me?” Carla turned to ask the two knights.

“Morgan is one of the suppliers who has a contract with the knights’ brigade. We mainly buy medicinal products from him. To be specific, we purchase ointments for cuts and bruises.”

Hearing Thane’s voice, which he had lowered in earnestness, Carla could not help getting an inkling of what this was all about. Thane and the other knight would not have brought Morgan to this apothecary if there was not a reason to do so.

“Don’t tell me...” Carla started.

“That’s right, Carla. It’s your medicine.”

“Wait, Morgan—you were selling my medicine to the knights’ brigade? Not to the mercenaries’ guild?”

“Well, uh, I still make a few individual sales to the guild—argh! I-I’m sorry, sir!”

Thane glared at Morgan when the latter accidentally let the truth slip. Morgan shrunk down further in size.

Carla could only be surprised at the news she was hearing; she almost felt as though it was somebody else’s matter. Seeing her, Thane—looking somewhat irritated—began explaining the situation to her in an exasperated tone.

“Regardless of where the contractor gets their products, as long as they submit the requisite forms and the products clear the quality standards, then there are no real problems. But this guy,” Thane said, indicating Morgan, “falsified the source of his products and fraudulently raised their prices.”

“Huh,” Carla let out.

“Thane, you’re making things sound unnecessarily complicated,” Tobias said when he saw Carla’s dull reaction. He shoved Thane aside and stepped forward to take his place.

In other words, Tobias explained, Morgan purchased Carla's products cheaply, and then falsified the documents he submitted to the knights' brigade. He created fake labels and claimed he had acquired them from a fictitious pharmacy. He then listed his costs for the products much higher than what he had paid Carla. On top of that, he sold the products to the knights' brigade at an even higher profit margin.

For example, Carla's ointment for bruises was sold in the shop for one cupronickel coin. The wholesale price was cheaper, at roughly sixty to seventy percent of the retail price. When ingredients were hard to come by, sometimes Carla sold them to Morgan at roughly the same price as what she charged for them in the shop. In other words, their transactions were relatively fluid. Even then, there was no way that the wholesale price should end up higher than the retail price.

"Morgan was selling this ointment to the knights' brigade at five cupronickel coins per jar."

"Five?!" Carla exclaimed.

"But they work so well, you know? Everyone in the knights' brigade wanted this medicine—and no other. So we were buying it at whatever price he named," Tobias added.

Medicines were a treasure trove of trade secrets. There were many apothecaries who refused to publicize information about themselves, including their addresses. There were also skilled apothecaries who sold their products as they traveled, rather than settling down in one place. Such medicinal products were often even more expensive.

Because of such circumstances, the auditing for documents related to medicine was especially lax. Tobias looked particularly regretful as he cited that as the reason for not being able to detect the falsification. He was, after all, the person in the knights' brigade in charge of managing such supplies.

Apparently, Tobias's gentle face had turned into that of the devil upon hearing that the knights' brigade was being ripped off by the high resale price. When Carla heard that, she could not help wishing she had been there to see it.

Expanding the market for Carla's medicine was the fruits of the labor of

merchants like Morgan. Carla, who both managed a storefront and had to create her own medicine, could do nothing more than to wait for customers while sitting in her own shop. That was why she had left the end purchaser and the final selling price entirely up to Morgan.

“When Carla treated my wound here, I had an inkling,” Thane spoke.

“Oh, that one time,” Carla recalled.

“The characteristics of the witch’s medicine were also present in the medicine we use at the knights’ brigade,” he shared.

When Thane had dropped her off at the apothecary after the incident at the academy, Carla had used the same ointment that she sold to Morgan to treat Thane’s injuries.

Come to think of it, he seemed really invested in the matter. So that’s why.

Thane had purchased the medicine in order to confirm whether it was the same as the one the knights used. He investigated the matter with Tobias. When they judged that they were not in error, they called up Morgan—and finally ended up at the apothecary.

“Ordinarily we would immediately cease business with such a merchant and ban them from conducting any future trade with us. But we really can’t be satisfied anymore if it’s not Miss Witch’s medicine. In reality, it takes longer to heal with other medicine, and we end up using a lot more of it. So all told, it would be a huge demerit for us not to be able to continue using your products,” Tobias said.

“It was due to our own shortcoming that we were unable to see through Morgan’s fraud. Therefore, the knights’ brigade is not going to calculate the falsified amount or charge him for it,” Thane said. “But with you, Carla, things are different.”

When Thane called her out by name, Carla tilted her head. Tobias then began to explain, saying, “There’s a policy that states the knights’ brigade can’t do business with individual retailers. That’s why we talked to the higher-ups and decided we’d figure out the difference in price between what Morgan charged us and what he should have charged us. Then, Morgan will pay that difference

to you, Miss Witch. And if you can forgive all of us for this entire situation, we would permit Morgan to continue doing business with the knights' brigade."

"Oh, I see... By the way, when did the knights' brigade start buying my medicine from Morgan?" Carla asked.

"About a year ago," Thane replied.

"Oh, a year... I get it."

"Oh, Carla..." Morgan mumbled, and Carla glanced over at him. In his sorrow and shame, Morgan had managed to make himself shrink even smaller than before.

If it began a year ago, Carla had an idea of what had happened.

"Morgan, you only messed with the price and the label? You didn't mix in anything, did you?"

"I-I never did anything like that, I swear!"

"In that case, I don't need to be paid the difference. As long as he does things right moving forward, then that's fine by me."

"Haah?!"

When Carla forgave Morgan without so much as a fuss, the three men stared at her as though their eyes would pop out of their sockets. While Morgan's face could not help but reveal shades of happiness, Tobias wore an expression of shock. Thane's expression, on the other hand, showed displeasure of roughly thirty percent more than usual.

"I mean, if you calculated it, it would be quite an amount, right?" Carla asked.

"That would be."

"Yes, it would."

Thane and Tobias both agreed.

"It's fine. I'm also partially responsible, given that I left everything to Morgan and didn't even ask him where he was selling my products."

"Carla...! I really am sorry. It was just on impulse."

"It wasn't on impulse. It was for your daughter's medical expenses, wasn't it?"

At her response, Morgan drew in his breath in surprise. Hearing this circumstance for the first time, Thane and Tobias's expressions also changed.

When Morgan fell to his knees again with his head hung low, Carla took both of his hands in hers and helped him to stand.

"You knew about it, huh...?" Morgan asked.

"I'm still an apothecary, even if I'm not that good. I'm sorry I didn't know other apothecaries or doctors that I could introduce you to either."

A year ago, when Morgan greeted her with the same, teasing remark he always made—"Have your dispensation skills improved at all?"—Carla thought she saw a glimmer of earnest anxiety deep in his eyes. She thought that something might have happened to someone close to him—most likely his beloved only daughter. When she saw him again the following month, however, he seemed to have calmed down considerably.

It was most likely during that time that he changed his client from the mercenaries' guild to the knights' brigade and began selling Carla's medicine at a much higher markup.

"It's not your fault. I was—" started Morgan.

"But if it had been my teacher's medicine, I know it would've cured her. It would've been fine if I was able to make medicine that your daughter could take. That's why—I'm sorry."

"...It was still wrong of me," Morgan said and began to cry inconsolably. Carla squeezed his hands once—then let go.

What Carla said was not a lie. The various medicinal products that Varne had taught her to make treated a range of symptoms. Plus they were incredibly effective. If Morgan had access to them, he would have been able to cure his daughter without having to rely on a doctor who charged him an exorbitant amount of money.

Even though she taught me so many things. Even though I'm her only apprentice. Carla was frustrated by her own lack of powers. She gritted her

teeth and exhaled softly.

“She’s better though, right?” she asked him.

“Yeah. She’s back to her normal self now. She can even play with the other kids in the neighborhood,” Morgan answered.

“Is that right? That’s fantastic!” Carla’s expression immediately brightened. She celebrated the recovery of his daughter with sincere joy.

Morgan—with tears in his eyes and a nose reddened from rubbing—explained that he began inflating the prices of the medicine when his only daughter became ill and he needed money to take her to the doctor.

Even after she recovered, he worried that he would seem suspicious if he suddenly changed his pricing scheme. He also confessed that he had continued his fraudulent acts because, more than anything else, he could no longer resist the temptation of filling his pockets more than he used to.

“I’ll change my ways! I’ll only do legitimate business from now on! So please, don’t do anything to my daughter—I beg you!”

“Thane and the other guy never said they would charge you for any crime. Though the inspections will probably be more strict from now on,” said Carla.

“Urgh...” Morgan let out.

“Come on now, dad! You’ll do great.”

Tobias, promising to create a contract and a written oath, left the shop with Morgan—who continued thanking Carla numerous times, despite her teasing remarks.

Although Carla thought Thane would return to the knights’ brigade with the other two, he remained behind at the apothecary. As though he had something he wanted to say, he stood staring at Carla and the shop with its rows of empty shelves.

“What is it, Thane?”

“Are you sure you’re all right with that?”

“I said I was.”

"It was legitimate compensation that you deserved to have earned. Why do you defend Morgan?"

"Maybe because...it's a bond that my teacher left me."

Varne was famous for her eccentric ways, but her dispensation magic had been second to none. There had been many merchants who wanted to conduct business with her. Those who had their eyes on Varne's oral medicine, however, stopped working with the apothecary when they learned that Carla was only able to make medicine for external wounds. The only merchant who had remained was Morgan.

"Do you think that's a silly reason?" she asked him.

"No," he said after a long pause. "But I do think that you're an idiot."

"What? I don't want to hear that from Thane—Mr. Stupidly Honest and Way Too Serious."

"What did you say?" Thane demanded, his lapis lazuli eyes lighting up with flames of confrontation. Carla recalled how, on their first meeting too, they had glared at and argued with each other like this. It had been an extremely unpleasant first encounter. Now, however, it had all become a beautiful memory—

Uh-uh. No way. I still don't like him. Plus he's a knight and all.

Carla amused herself for thinking such an impossibly saccharine thought for even a moment. She smirked like she had done when they first met.

"And besides, I got to learn that the people of the knights' brigade like my medicine—so much so that they're willing to pay a fortune for it," she added.

"I had no idea that it was your medicine," Thane said, hesitating.

"Hee hee. How do you feel, finding out that you were using medicine made by 'a witch, of all things' without even knowing, Sir Knight?"

"Wh-Why you!"

"It's not you, it's Carla. Or did you want me to shut you out again?"

Thane seemed to remember the first day they met, because he suddenly

became wary. To be able to upset a knight that was bigger than she was gave Carla a very good feeling.

“I’m a customer today,” Thane said after giving his words some thought.

“Huh? You mean, you’re gonna buy something? Wow, to think that you would say such a thing. I’m definitely gonna see pigs fly next.”

“Shut up!” Thane retorted.

“Oh, but the only things I have now are the deodorizers and the medicine for insect bites.”

“That’s fine.”

Laughing at Thane, who seemed very dissatisfied, Carla wrapped up his medicine. She had a feeling that this unsavory but inescapable relationship between the two of them—who had the worst impressions of each other from day one, who only quarreled when they saw each other—would continue a bit longer.



Side Story: From White to Navy

In a back alley on the outskirts of the royal capital, in an apothecary nestled among soot-covered stone walls, echoed a voice whose cheer seemed entirely out of place.

“Exactly! And Miss Witch, you really should’ve seen the expression on Thane’s face right then...”

“Hey, shouldn’t you be going now? You’re supposed to go around to the other stores too, right?” Carla asked.

“You’re as cold as ever!”

The person relaxing at the counter of the apothecary as though he were in his own house was Tobias, a member of the knights’ brigade. Being the vice commander of the second battalion, he oversaw the area that included the back alley. As a result, he appeared at Carla’s apothecary from time to time and engaged himself in idle talk.

Seriously...what does this guy come here to do, anyway?

Carla had met Tobias just the other day, through the request she received related to the pact between witches and the royal family. It was none other than the Case of the Failed Dissolution of the Engagement of the Crown Prince.

Apparently, the two had exchanged greetings when Tobias had come to the shop to introduce himself as the new vice commander in charge of the area. Carla, however, did not remember him at all.

Ever since the discovery of the fraudulent acts of the merchant Morgan, Tobias began stopping by at the shop, saying he was in the middle of making his rounds or that he happened to be in the area. Even on days when he was off duty, he sat sipping Carla’s herbal tea and sharing all sorts of stories with her.

Since any medicinal products the knights’ brigade needed were purchased through Morgan, Carla did not understand what Tobias wanted with his frequent visits to the deserted back alley. She simply tilted her head in

confusion.

"Here, I'll give you this, so get yourself going now. I have to make medicine too," Carla told him.

"Wow, a deodorizer. Thank you! Thanks to you, Miss Witch, the quality of life in the knights' brigade has most definitely gone up."

"I'll let Morgan know that I provided it to you as an advance of the next order from the knights' brigade."

"You're still gonna charge me, huh? You sure are strict! Though I guess that's the way to go!"

In every respect, Tobias was the exact opposite of Thane, who constantly sported a look of irritation on his face. Even now, Tobias thanked Carla happily as he received the deodorizer.

Although she had initially forced the deodorizers upon Thane out of spite for his behavior toward her, it seemed the knights' brigade had taken a liking to them. She now received orders for them regularly. Although she knew that the male knights had need for them, the earnest words of thanks that she received from the female knights were still fresh in Carla's mind.

Maybe I should think about coming up with different scents, aside from just mint and lavender.

Carla only recently became able to think such thoughts. In the two years since her teacher Varne passed away, Carla struggled to get through each day. She did not have the peace of mind to even think about the future. Carla had always been the type who enjoyed coming up with new solutions to problems or trying out new experiments. She had forgotten even those joys, though.

Although the number of products that she sold to the knights' brigade increased somewhat, that did not mean the sales of the apothecary had dramatically improved. Even so, Carla was amazed by the fact that she was able to look at things so differently from before.

Rose and gardenia smell good, but maybe they're not quite right for deodorizing. Maybe orange or rosemary would be good. Oh, and also patchouli?

As she excitedly thought of potential combinations, her eyes met those of Tobias on the other side of the counter.

“Oh, you’re still here,” she remarked.

“Pfft—aha ha ha! Miss Witch, you’re awesome!”

“I can’t get a sense for what you find to be amusing...”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Don’t even worry about it. Okay, then I should be on my way.”

“Right. Stay safe.”

“Wow, you don’t sound sincere at all!” Tobias said, still laughing cheerfully. As he left, the door closed quietly. Sighing softly, Carla cleaned up the teacup Tobias had used. As she turned to head back into the dispensary, she heard the bell on the door ring again behind her.

“Sir Tobias, did you forget something?” Carla asked.

“...It’s me,” said the visitor.

Whether on accident or on purpose, Tobias occasionally left his belongings behind. Thinking that he had perhaps forgotten to take his pen or some other item, Carla turned around—only to find Thane standing there with his usual look of annoyance plastered on his overly serious face.

“Oh, Thane...wait, huh?”

Seeing him, however, Carla opened her pale-green eyes wide in shock. She rubbed them vigorously, but she seemed not to be dreaming.

“Wait, why? Thane, don’t tell me, were you fired from the knights’ brigade?” Carla asked.

“How did you reach that conclusion?” Thane responded.

“Because your clothes are different!”

The royal guard, to which Thane and Tobias belonged, had for its uniform a white knight’s attire. Featuring detailing in gold against a pure-white background, the uniform was a long-standing tradition of the knights’ brigade.

What Thane was wearing now, however, was a knight’s uniform in dark navy.

The accent color was still gold. The overall design did not differ much, but the impression it gave off was entirely new. Before, the uniform had seemed noble and aristocratic; now it also seemed dignified on top of that.

“It changed, starting today,” Thane stated.

“It did?”

Carla approached Thane with her eyes rounded, voicing her initial approval. She circled all around him, looking at him from head to toe. Seeing Carla as surprised as he had hoped she would be, Thane seemed both satisfied and relieved.

As Carla continued staring at Thane’s new uniform, he asked her from above, “Was Tobias here?”

“Yeah, until just a little while ago.”

“To do what? He’s off duty today, isn’t he?”

“Who knows? That’s what I wanted to ask. Come to think of it, the two of you seem to keep missing each other.”

Carla only realized it now, but Tobias often seemed to be at the apothecary just before or after Thane. Tobias usually stayed longer, but somehow the two managed to never be present at the same time. As a result, Carla always ended up having to deal with each one individually.

“You should make an effort to come together,” Carla said.

“It’s not like we arrange it this way...though, could it be that he anticipates it...?”

Perhaps it was a coincidence that they visited the apothecary on the same day. They said that they were classmates that could not seem to get away from each other. Given the overlap in their biorhythm, however, the two seemed more like best friends or even twins—thought Carla with complete disregard for Thane, who continued muttering to himself.

“The navy blue looks good on you. Oh, could it be that you came to show me your new uniform?” Carla asked.

“N-No way!” Thane exclaimed. “It’s just that I asked for the renewal of our

uniforms as the reward for the case from the other day. So I thought I would come and tell you.”

“Wait, you mean that special reward from the queen? You asked for a new uniform?”

“Is there something wrong with that?” Thane asked, pausing.

Carla thought that he would request something more personal, like a promotion or reward money. She had not at all expected him to request to have a change made to the traditional uniform of the knights’ brigade. Thane was proud of his position as a knight. It was only natural, therefore, that he also placed much significance and value on the uniform.

“No, there’s nothing wrong with that,” Carla replied. “I was just surprised.”

“I see,” Thane said, exhaling as though relieved. Then he said something else that Carla did not expect. “You didn’t like the white uniform from before, did you?”

“Huh?” Carla let out, after taking a moment to parse what he said.

“It was too much of a hassle to take off or change my jacket each time, just to come here. That’s all.”

“That’s all? Thane...you mean, *that* was the reason?”

Just because I disliked the white knights’ uniform? Really?

To request a change in the traditional uniform of the knights’ brigade, just for that—as the thought made Carla fall silent, Thane just stood there awkwardly.

It was true—with this navy uniform, she did not feel the helplessness and anger that she felt when she saw the previous uniform.

But even so, he didn’t have to go this far, she thought. And what’s more, he didn’t have to tell me the reason the uniform changed. But he still told me about it honestly. I mean, seriously.

“Are you stupid or something?” Carla asked.

“What?”

“No, I mean, you must be an idiot. It’s a reward from the queen. Let’s make it

something more meaningful! Like money!"

"Who's the idiot, you? You rejected that reward, remember?"

"It's not 'you,' it's 'Carla.'"

As their voices overlapped, the two looked at each other with their mouths open, midsentence. After several seconds of silence, Carla was the first to begin laughing.

"Hee hee, this is so funny."

Once she had gotten a hearty laugh out of her system, Carla looked up at Thane, who stood there, still sulking. At her gaze, the lapis lazuli eyes of the tall knight, now wearing his new uniform, wavered for a moment.

"I'm kidding," she said. "How handsome."

Thane looked at her with a start.

"The clothes, I mean," Carla finished.

After taking a brief moment to collect himself, he said, "Stop teasing."

"You're used to hearing it, aren't you? No need to be so bashful."

"What?! Who's being bashful?!"

Laughing again, Carla made her way back to the counter. Thane no longer seemed to have any business at the apothecary, but she could at least make him a cup of herbal tea.

He's here, after all.

Whether it was white or navy, being with Thane in his knight's uniform was still annoying. Now, though, Carla did not feel the kind of resentment she had felt before. That was probably a good thing.

When Carla crouched and opened the cupboard under the counter, she saw an indigo teacup. It was a present she had given Varne when she was a child; she had saved up her allowance to buy it.

"You want some tea?" she asked.

"...Sure," he replied.

Seeing the flower pattern on it with fresh eyes, Carla picked up the new cup in her hands.

Afterword

Hello. It's very nice to meet you. My name is Kosuzu Kobato. Thank you for deciding to pick up *The Apothecary Witch Turned Divorce Agent*.

This work was originally posted to the web novel site Shosetsuka ni Naro, but DRE Novels was kind enough to publish it as part of its initial lineup when the label was first established. I feel honored, as the experience has been both sobering and motivating.

I normally write romance novels geared toward women. They also tend to be stories that are heartwarming or based in pure love. In comparison, I began writing this work not just to capture the growing romance between the main characters but also to aim for a cheerful and enjoyable story that would lift the spirits of those who read it.

If this volume was the type of work that allowed you to pick it up easily, forget about your troubles while you read it, and feel lighter of heart once you finished it...then that would make me very happy.

Our heroine Carla is a down-on-her-luck witch, but that does not mean that she has low self-esteem. She does not gloss over her own feelings, and she is capable of saying clearly what she wants to say. As I wrote the novel, I thought numerous times about how great it would be to have someone like her as a friend.

On the other hand, we have our hero Thane. Although our first impression of him is not terribly positive, he actually has a maternal aspect to him that often makes him end up as the designated worrier of the group. Perhaps it was inevitable that, partway through the book, he ended up at the mercy of Carla's unpredictable behaviors.

Starting with these two main characters, I was lucky enough to have Yasuyuki Syuri-sensei draw the many incredible illustrations for this volume.

When I first saw the character designs for Carla and Thane, I found myself in

shock and blurting out, “They’re really real!” Even all the secondary characters, such as Tobias and Nettie, were all drawn in ways that were just as I had imagined them but also more than I ever could have expected them to be. Everything—from the costumes to the accessories, as well as the compositions of all the scenes—is truly remarkable. Thank you so very much!

Another huge honor has been the fact that Yuka Tachibana-sensei was kind enough to write the endorsement for this title. I could not be more excited by the fact that Tachibana-sensei enjoyed reading this story. Given all the other time commitments that must exist, I truly cannot give enough thanks!

Beginning with my editor, I owe a debt of gratitude to everyone in the editorial department. Despite the hectic schedule associated with the immense undertaking of establishing a new label, everyone always responded to my inquiries with good cheer. I cannot thank them enough.

In addition, to the individuals in charge of the proofreading and review process, the designers, the many bookstores throughout the country, all the different people involved with various related departments—I would like to express my most sincere gratitude.

Lastly, to all of the readers: thank you for finding this story among the many works that are out there. If at the end, when you closed the book, you were able to say, “That was fun”—then as the author, I could not be happier.

I give thanks from the bottom of my heart to all the people who came into contact with this book. I look forward to seeing you again soon.

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The Apothecary Witch Turned Divorce Agent: Volume 1

by Kosuzu Kobato

Translated by Satoko Kakihara Edited by Heidi Ward

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