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

9th of March
Dearest Snu,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

of, they can carry 32 grams at most.

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

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

Your Beloved Best Friend

Dear Loretta Underwood,

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

Charlotte's ability to grow plants: 1
locating where the poison Is in plants: 5
memorizing recipes In her head: 3
identifying Danger signs in plants: 2
using animal Hide as ingredients: 3
Her curiosity: 1
deciphering weather, and what They mean: 5
finding which leaves Are dangerous: 4
Coming to own decisions and solutions: 1

Kind regards,
Seo Yoshikazu.

9th of March

Dear Snump,

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

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

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

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

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

like a useless child.

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

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

Before too long, we came to his house.

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

His smile I approved of.

His garden I loved.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Your Smitten Soul Sister

Dear Charlotte Underwood,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

from you and your parents will do.

Let me know by the end of this month.

Thanks,

Nāku iti noa, nā.

Mikaere Tahuriorangi.

Deadly Nightshade – Belladonna

Hi, Snu, I thought I'll share you some herb lore on some of the herbs I come cross! Let's start with Belladonna, also known as Deadly nightshade! The name Belladonna, meaning beautiful woman, was given because women used the belladonna to dilate their pupils to make them seem bigger! It is true that it can do this due to the alkaloid atropine inside, but it also makes it pretty… poisonous. Back then they must have not know the belladonna's other name, Deadly Nightshade (*Solatrum Mortale).*

A book in Mikaere's study by a famous in the 16th century herbalist called John Gerard wrote that it's so dangerous, you shouldn't have it around you. Uh-huh. I'm sure he didn't mean it. Who in their right mind would want to banish something beautiful as the belladonna?

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