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Miri Mikawa

Illustration by Aki



Sugar Apple Fairy Tale

The Silver Sugar Master and the Yellow Garland

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NEW YORK

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TRANSLATION BY NICOLE WILDER
COVER ART BY AKI

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CONTENTS

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

Chapter 1 The One Who Summoned Them

Chapter 2 The Silver Sugar Fairy

Chapter 3 Five Successors and One Last Intruder

Chapter 4 The Fairy’s Apprentices

Chapter 5 Fading Power, Preserving Power

Chapter 6 Spindles and Silver Thread

Chapter 7 An Oath Between Fairy and Human

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

The Silver Sugar Master and the Yellow Garland

Sugar Apple Fairy Tale

CONTENTS

Chapter 1	The One Who Summoned Them
Chapter 2	The Silver Sugar Fairy
Chapter 3	Five Successors and One Last Intruder
Chapter 4	The Fairy's Apprentices
Chapter 5	Fading Power, Preserving Power
Chapter 6	Spindles and Silver Thread
Chapter 7	An Oath Between Fairy and Human
Afterword	

The Silver Sugar Master and the Yellow Garland

Sugar Apple Fairy Tale

Story & Characters



Silver Sugar Master
Anne



Warrior Fairy
Challe



Fairy
Mithril



Silver Sugar Master
Kat



Candy Crafter
Jonas



Fairy
Noah

The Story So Far

Anne, a young Silver Sugar Master, joins the Paige Workshop and takes charge of making sugar candy for the First Holy Festival. But Lafalle, a fairy born from one of Challe's brother stones, slips into the Paige Workshop, abducts Anne, and imprisons her in a stronghold on the edge of the Bloody Highway! Just as it seems that the Paige Workshop will be unable to make it to the First Holy Festival, Challe, who was also captured, helps Anne escape in time for her to finish the candy sculptures. With the sculptures for the First Holy Festival complete, she successfully rings in the New Year. But right as the festival ends, Keith approaches her with a proposal: "Will you start a new workshop with me?"

Keywords

SUGAR CANDY···a sacred food that can extend the life spans of fairies and bring good fortune to humans.
SILVER SUGAR MASTER···exceptional candy crafters who have been granted a medal by the royal family.
SILVER SUGAR VISCOUNT···the highest-ranked candy crafter.



Silver Sugar Viscount
Hugh

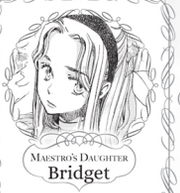
The Three Major Factions of Candy Crafters

The three workshops that candy crafters can join to efficiently secure raw materials and a market for their candy.

Paige Workshop Maestro
Glen Paige

Mercury Workshop Maestro
Hugh Mercury
(concurrent post)

Radcliffe Workshop Maestro
Marcus Radcliffe



Maestro's Daughter
Bridget

Proxy Maestro and Silver Sugar Master
John Killean



Candy Crafter
Keith



Proxy Maestro and Silver Sugar Master
Elliott



Former Head Crafter
Orlando

Candy Crafter
King

Candy Crafter
Nadir

Candy Crafter
Valentine

Huh?

What are you talking about, Anne? You silly girl.

You had a papa, too, Anne. Just like all the other children, you had a papa and a mama who brought you into this world.

Feel better now? Of course you had a papa. Soon after you were born, however, he got dragged off to fight in the civil war and died. But he did his best to make sure that you and I could get away.

What kind of father was he?

Well, let's see. He was a lot like you, Anne. He worked very hard at everything he did, and he had big round eyes just like you do. He was kind and a little timid. He sure cried easily for a man. When we watched tragic plays, he would weep for the poor characters. He'd sit there bawling beside me, and I'd naturally sober up. I always ended up focusing on his face instead of the play.

Come over here, Anne. Give me a hug. Your hair feels so warm. Were you out in the sun all day?

The warmth of the sun feels so nice.

Anne, you look just like your papa. That naive, confused expression of yours reminds me so much of him. No, no, that's a compliment. They say that daughters who look like their fathers will be happy in life.

Listen, Anne.

When you get bigger, if you find somebody who you love, you must never part from them. So long as you love them, and they love you back, you have to stay together.

You may think you'll be able to stay on the same path forever, but sometimes, you can't. But other times, you may think that you have to part, only to find that you can stay together if you only apply yourself.

Whether you walk together forever or have to split up along the way, the time you spend together will bring happiness to you both.

The most important thing for any living creature is the amount of happiness they experience in their life. At least, that's what your mama thinks. So don't you ever give up on being happy. Not without a good reason anyway. Extending your happiness, even by a moment, is the most important thing for you both.

You don't understand? No, I don't suppose you would, at least not yet.

But just remember this one thing: Never let go of the person you love. This is very important. Don't forget it, Anne.

Chapter 1
THE ONE WHO SUMMONED THEM

It was so bright outside that Anne's eyes hurt. She stood on the front porch of Hollyleaf Castle and squinted, looking out over the courtyard still covered in lingering snow. She didn't see anyone, and she heard nothing from the direction of the sloping road running down the hill, not even the sound of a wagon.

"Huh? Keith isn't here yet. Why were we in such a rush?"

Over a month had passed since the First Holy Festival. It was held at the height of the winter, and the snowfall had since eased up and was starting to melt.

That said, the roof of Hollyleaf Castle was still covered in white, as were the surrounding trees. The piles of snow had hardened, and as their surfaces slowly melted in the rays of the sun, they sparkled like shards of glittering glass.

Throughout the winter, it had been vital to shovel the middle of the courtyard to allow wagons to come and go. But now that was no longer necessary. No new snow was piling up to block traffic, and the sodden, decaying blades of withered grass were starting to show.

Mithril Lid Pod, the water droplet fairy sitting on Anne's shoulder, mumbled uncertainly. "That's funny. I was sure I heard the sound of a wagon."

"Have you gone senile already, Mithril Lid Pod?" snapped Challe Fenn Challe, the obsidian fairy standing behind Anne.

Mithril raised both fists in the air. "You're the last person who should be accusing people of going senile—you've been alive for over one hundred years!"

“Come on,” Anne said, interrupting. “It’s not that cold out here, and besides, isn’t it nice to breathe in the fresh air? It feels good. And Keith will be coming along any minute now. We just have to wait.”

The air was chilly, but Anne was wearing her cloak, and the sun was shining, so she was able to keep warm.

Mithril clung desperately to Anne’s neck. “Anne, did you hear how mean Challe Fenn Challe was just now?! Wasn’t he horrible to me?!”

“He didn’t sound any worse than usual. But I guess he was a little mean.”

“You see?! He’s mean, right?! You should say something to him, Anne!”

“Say something to him…”

Anne looked up at Challe.

He glanced back down at her with his sharp, intense gaze. His eyes were so enchantingly beautiful that they sent a chill down Anne’s spine. The light reflecting off the snow highlighted his long eyelashes, his bangs, and the contours of his cheeks.

“Challe…you’re beautiful…,” she mumbled without thinking.

“That’s not what I meant!” shouted Mithril.

Flustered at what she’d just said out loud, Anne turned bright red. “Ah! Sorry! Um, right, say something…to him…”

Challe chuckled and whispered into Anne’s ear, “Seems you’ve taken a liking to my face. That makes me very happy.”

Anne practically leaped away from Challe and in a near shriek insisted, “I have not; it’s not like that! I’m just stating a fact!”

Challe smiled coolly and turned his gaze toward the courtyard. As if nothing had happened, he said, “There are no signs that boy is coming. Shall we head back inside?”

Anne slumped in defeat, and from atop her shoulder, Mithril grumbled disappointedly, “I don’t think you’ll ever stand a chance against Challe Fenn Challe, Anne. Not even in a hundred years…”

There was nothing Anne could say to refute that; Mithril was exactly right.

Just then, the door opened behind them, and Elliott Collins, the Paige Workshop’s red-haired proxy maestro, poked out his head.

“I thought I heard you making a fuss out here,” he said teasingly as he stepped out onto the porch. “Do you mean to tell me Keith still hasn’t arrived? I overheard some people blabbing about him, and I got all excited and dashed out. But I guess I’m a fool for believing it.”

“I think he’ll be here before too long,” Anne replied. “This is Keith, after all. It’s not like him to be late, especially when he promised to be here at a certain time.”

“You’re right about that. Keith’s a man of his word.” Elliott put his hands on his hips, narrowed his eyes, and squinted at the bright, snowy courtyard. Then he casually announced, “The Paige Workshop is going to be returning to Millsfield tomorrow.”

“Oh…is that so?”

Anne had already prepared herself for this, but now that it was happening *tomorrow*, she felt a pang of loneliness like a cold wind sweeping across her heart.

But I’ve already made my decision.

She straightened up into a more dignified posture and shook off her momentary bout of weakness.

“We’ve stayed too long as it is. Lots of orders have been coming in, and we’ve been getting letters from our candy crafters saying they’re eager to return to the workshop.”

Right after the First Holy Festival, Kat said he had work to do and quickly headed back to Southcent. Jonas left, too, saying that he was going back to the Radcliffe Workshop. Keith was busy preparing to launch his own workshop and departed the castle less than three days after the festival.

The Paige Workshop should have returned to Millsfield immediately, but the snowfall had been unexpectedly heavy, and it would have taken a long time to transport their equipment through the bad weather, so they had delayed their return.

“We’ll be real busy from here on out,” Elliott declared. “Ah, but one bit of happy news is that Noah said he wants to work with us. He’s decided to go with us back to Millsfield. Thanks to the sugar candies that you and the Viscount gave him, he seems to have fallen head over heels for sugar candy, you see.”

“Sure seems that way,” Anne agreed. “He’s been asking me to show him how they’re made. He helped out a bit with my work, and he seems to have a surprising knack for it.”

Noah the fairy had lived in Hollyleaf Castle for fifteen long years, waiting for his master, and had nearly perished before they'd managed to save his life with sugar candy. In breaking his promise to his master, Noah had finally come to understand the man's feelings and left behind the restraints that he had created for himself.

Over the past month, he had been showing interest in all sorts of things and seemed to be enjoying himself. He was especially delighted to watch the crafters make sugar candy and took a great interest in the production process.

"I thought so, too. If we can keep him on as an apprentice for a while, it'll be a big help, so I'm all for it! And what's in store for you, Anne? You must be meeting with Keith today because you're getting ready for something, right?"

The night of the First Holy Festival, Anne had decided to focus on her still vague dreams for the future. If she was to accomplish that, she knew she couldn't stay at the Paige Workshop forever, even if she felt safe and comfortable there.

As she was thinking about this, Keith had approached her and proposed that they start a new workshop together.

Anne hadn't been able to give him an immediate answer.

She wanted to find a dream of her own. And to do so, she needed to leave the Paige Workshop. She knew that much, but she hadn't yet figured out what she should do once she left.

As she helped the Paige Workshop get ready to depart from Hollyleaf Castle, Anne had asked Challe, Mithril, Glen, and Elliott for their thoughts on what path she ought to take.

Several days earlier, she at last made up her mind and contacted Keith indirectly to request a meeting. Keith had sent her a letter in reply, saying that he wanted to show Anne the workshop that he had been setting up and that he would come see her in the morning in two days' time.

"I think establishing a workshop will be a great experience. And if I do that with someone as skilled as Keith, I know it will turn out well."

Anne had never thought about having her own workshop before. But it was very appealing to imagine creating a place as comfortable as the Paige Workshop on her own. She thought it

would be wonderful to be able to build something solid with her own two hands—something other than sugar candy.

Anne had little experience, and she was young. Establishing and managing a whole workshop would be too much of a burden for her to bear by herself. To have secured a partner in the endeavor was the best thing she could have hoped for. And that partner was a sincere candy crafter with recognized skills.

Anne's ideals were still indistinct and formless, but she thought owning a workshop might somehow make them clearer. Doing this with Keith seemed like a shortcut to discovering a dream life of her own.

"I see," said Elliott. He turned to Challe and Mithril. "So, you two, what do you think about Keith and Anne setting up a workshop?"

The two fairies looked at each other. It seemed they hadn't expected the question.

"Why are you asking us?" Mithril said, puzzled.

"Well, you're both determined to stick with Anne no matter what she does, right? Wherever Anne goes, you go. Besides, you two seem to understand Anne even better than she understands herself."

"You've got that right! Until I've repaid my debt to Anne, I'll follow her anywhere, even to the depths of hell!"

"If you're willing to go to hell and back for Anne, then what do you think she should do going forward, O great Mithril Lid Pod?"

"The best thing for Anne is to do exactly what she wants to do!"

Elliott looked deflated. "…Well. I guess it was stupid of me to ask. What about you, Challe? What do you think?"

Anne was startled by the question, even though Challe was the one being asked. She wondered what Challe thought about her future.

Challe had vowed to protect Anne. That oath would keep him close to her, but she knew it would also make it difficult for Challe to find happiness of his own. That was why Anne needed to achieve her dreams as soon as possible. If she did that, then Challe would be able to leave her without breaking his vow.

But another part of her wasn't ready for that yet. She wanted to walk her path as slowly as possible so Challe wouldn't leave her.

Whenever she let her guard down, petty thoughts like that filled her mind.

I'm so selfish.

Challe gazed into the distance as if he were looking out over the forest. After a brief silence, he said, "As long as Anne's and Keith's ideals are in alignment, I believe working together is the best option for both of them."

Just then, they heard the sound of wagon wheels rolling over stones from the direction of the road.

"Could that be Keith?"

Everyone, including Anne, turned their eyes toward the sloping road.

"The wheels sound rather heavy for the boy's wagon," muttered Challe.

The noise rapidly grew closer as a single vehicle ascended the hill.

The vehicle that appeared was not the small, single-horse wagon Keith usually took. Instead, it was a handsome carriage, drawn by two horses. The body of the carriage was painted with black lacquer, and the door was adorned with a crest consisting of three six-pointed snowflakes—the kind that marked candy shops—encircled by a ribbon.

It was the crest of the Silver Sugar Viscount.

The carriage headed straight through the area clear of snow and came to a stop right in front of the castle's porch.

The carriage door opened, and out stepped Hugh Mercury, the Silver Sugar Viscount. Behind him was his bodyguard, Salim, a young man with dark skin.

"I came unannounced, so I didn't expect a welcoming party!"

Casually brushing back his wild brown hair, Hugh approached Anne and the others. He typically dressed plainly, but today, for some reason, he was wearing a simplified version of the Silver Sugar Viscount's formal attire. It seemed awfully restrictive for Hugh's wild demeanor, but the result only increased his masculine charm.

Unbothered by everyone's obvious surprise, Hugh walked up the stone steps and approached the group.

"What brings you here, Viscount? And why are you dressed like that?"

“A fine way to greet me, Collins. I’ll have you know that I dress the part while I’m working.” Then Hugh’s expression changed. “I’ve come to give you an order as the Silver Sugar Viscount. Proxy maestro of the Paige Workshop Elliott Collins, three days from now, at midday, you are to present yourself at the royal castle. You should not enter at the main gate on the triumphal road, however; instead, you are to enter through the west gate. I will arrange it so that the guards will let you pass when you give your name. Bring with you any personal tools you need for crafting sugar candy.”

“Huh? The royal castle? And you want me to bring my tools?” Elliott’s eyes went wide with surprise. “And why should I do that? Is there a reason?”

“I can’t answer that now,” Hugh said bluntly before turning to Anne. “You’re being given the same order, Anne Halford. Three days hence, at midday, present yourself at the castle. You are to bring your tools as well.”

“Me too?!” she yelped.

She was shocked. If she were the maestro of a faction, like Elliott, she might expect an invitation to the royal castle. But Anne was still a newly minted Silver Sugar Master, with few accomplishments to her name. She didn’t even belong to a faction. She was only a single crafter of little importance. She didn’t understand why someone like her would be summoned to the castle.

As though he could see the confusion on her face, Hugh went ahead and gave her a warning.

“Don’t ask me why. I can’t give you an answer at the moment. And there’s one more condition for you, Anne. You are to bring Challe with you.”

Challe scowled. “Me, go to the royal castle? Why?”

“Because you have also been summoned.”

“A fairy who isn’t even a candy crafter? For what purpose?”

“I can’t answer that.”

“Well, who summoned us?”

“I can’t answer that, either.”

Hugh was uncompromising. A shade of displeasure colored Challe’s eyes.

Then Mithril rose to his feet enthusiastically atop Anne's shoulder. "Does that mean I've been called to the castle, too?! Could it possibly be time for the royal visit of my dreams?!"

"No. You don't need to come."

Flatly rejected, Mithril wilted like a scoop of salted greens. He sat back down and clasped his knees dejectedly.

"You can't just summon us to the royal castle willy-nilly, Viscount. We have our own jobs to worry about," Elliott protested. "I'm going back to Millsfield tomorrow, and I've got several matters to take care of for the workshop. Anne also has things she needs to do. Isn't it a bit high-handed to refuse to explain the reason when you're ordering us to abandon our duties like this?"

Elliott, as the proxy maestro of a faction, didn't seem surprised by Hugh's order.

Hugh's lips curved into a slight smile. "I understand what you are saying, and I will tell you as much as I'm allowed to say. This order doesn't come from me. Someone asked me to convey it to you, and I came here to do so. This command has been issued not only to you two, but to a number of candy crafters selected according to certain criteria. You cannot refuse. You must answer the summons."

Someone was trying to gather candy crafters. And because they had made their request through Hugh, there could be no question that the client was a member of the nobility.

But why had Anne been chosen to participate? There were plenty of other candy crafters with more experience and greater renown. And the most perplexing part of all this was that she had been asked to bring Challe with her.

"We have no right to refuse?" Elliott asked with a sigh.

"I'm afraid you do not."

"I understand. I'll show up."

"Be sure that you do. And you too, Anne. Got it? Bring Challe with you when you go."

"…But—"

"You're going," Hugh ordered sharply, then turned on his heel and started to walk off. A moment later, he halted.

No one had noticed his arrival, but standing at the foot of the front porch was a young nobleman with a genteel face and light-

brown hair. He was wearing a long winter overcoat that reached down to his ankles, and his slender frame cut a sophisticated silhouette. The soft tie wrapped around his neck was a perfect match for his demeanor. The man was Keith Powell, the son of the former Silver Sugar Viscount. The tips of his boots were dark and wet from walking over the damp grass.

It appeared Keith had come up the road in his usual one-horse wagon. But he must have seen the Silver Sugar Viscount's carriage pulled up alongside the porch and, out of deference, parked his wagon at the top of the slope instead.

"You're here, too, Keith?!" shouted Anne, startled. "How long have you been there?"

"Yes. I just arrived," he said with an awkward smile.

Anne and the others had been too distracted by what Hugh was saying to notice Keith. But Challe and Salim had apparently known he was there, however, and didn't look particularly surprised. They just glanced at him out of the corners of their eyes.

"It's been a while, Keith," said Hugh simply.

Keith politely bowed. But when he raised his face again, his expression was stiff. "Viscount. Those orders you just gave—?"

"Have nothing to do with you."

Keith's expression hardened even more at the way Hugh cut off his question.

"You're saying I haven't been summoned?"

"That's right," Hugh said flatly.

Keith stayed rooted to the spot as Hugh passed in front of him, then Hugh and Salim got into their carriage and took off.

As Anne watched the carriage crawl down the sloping road, she mumbled, "What's going on? Those orders… I don't understand them at all."

"Do you know anything about this, boy?" Challe asked Keith, who was standing motionless in front of the porch.

Just then, Anne noticed something. Keith was balling his hands into fists as he followed the departing carriage with his eyes.

Keith slowly turned to face Challe and nodded.

“I heard that yesterday, the same orders were issued to John Killean, the proxy maestro over at the Mercury faction, and a crafter by the name of Stella Knox from the Radcliffe faction. Today it was Mr. Collins and Anne’s turn.”

Keith, who had been shown to the lesser hall on the second floor of Hollyleaf Castle, sat down at the dining table and took a cup of warm tea into his hands as he slowly explained what he knew.

Cups of fragrant herbal tea had also been set before Anne and the rest of the group. Their invigorating aroma hung in the air.

Anne was supposed to go with Keith to see the workshop he was setting up for them. But Hugh’s orders had changed her plans.

Anne, Challe, and Elliott patiently listened to what Keith had to say. Mithril, meanwhile, sat limply on Anne’s lap with a dark and gloomy expression.

“Killean and Anne and I are all Silver Sugar Masters, of course. Maybe they’re only inviting Silver Sugar Masters? Oh, but that Knox guy—I’ve heard rumors that he’s really good, but I don’t think he’s received a royal medal yet.” Elliott was swinging his crossed legs as he stared at Keith with a conflicted expression.

Keith set his teacup down on the table and nodded. “Stella is not a Silver Sugar Master. He was ahead of me in school, and while we were students, he learned candy crafting techniques alongside his regular studies. He’s been training earnestly at the Radcliffe Workshop since he graduated. He’s very skilled, but he’s in poor health, and the timing of the Royal Candy Fair has always been bad for him, so he’s never been able to enter. But he’s so talented that everyone says that if he did enter, he’d definitely win the royal medal. The Radcliffe Workshop has Marcus and one other Silver Sugar Master. But that Silver Sugar Master does much less work than he used to, likely because of his age. At this point, I think that Stella’s abilities are superior.”

“Is there really such an amazing person at the Radcliffe Workshop? But you’re better than him, aren’t you, Keith?” asked Anne. “I mean, you’re good enough that Marcus chose you as the candidate to be the next maestro.”

Keith smiled bitterly. “I wonder. I feel like Stella and I are equals. Though Stella would get angry with me for saying so. He

would say I'm being cheeky. But though he is my equal, Stella is often ill, and he has a willful streak, so he's always taking off work. He's not cut out to be the maestro. That's why I was chosen."

"He's got the skills, but he's not a Silver Sugar Master, and he's sickly as well?" Anne cocked her head in puzzlement. "Everyone else is either a Silver Sugar Master, a proxy maestro, or in some other elevated position, right? I'm a novice Silver Sugar Master without any affiliations… I wonder what criteria they used to select people."

Beside her, Challe spoke quietly. "It seems reasonable to assume they've selected one person from each of the big factions."

Elliott clapped his hands together. "That must be it. They weren't after Silver Sugar Masters, after all. Instead, they chose one person with real ability from each faction. And Anne is in the unaffiliated category, maybe? But why her, I wonder? If we're talking about skill, someone like Kat or Keith would have been a good choice, too."

At those words, Keith looked down, his expression resentful. "… I'd also like to know, too," he grumbled quietly.

Anne was sure she'd heard him. But the next instant, Keith raised his head and smiled.

"My plans are all messed up now. I'd hoped to invite you to take a look at the workshop I've been preparing, Anne. I may as well tell you, I was so certain you'd be delighted with it that I envisioned you agreeing to join me right then and there."

It was exhilarating to hear Keith, who was an expert in his own right, speak frankly about his confidence in her.

"You weren't too far off, Keith," she said. "I was planning to agree once I saw it. From here on out, I want to focus on figuring out what I want in life. I feel like starting a new workshop with you is the fastest way to do that. I think it will help me find my dream."

Keith looked surprised for a moment but soon smiled. "Thank you," he replied. "I'm happy that you've given it so much thought, Anne. But you've been summoned to the royal castle in three days' time. We don't know why, but…the fact that you've been selected must mean that there's some major job there for you. One that will require your skills as a candy crafter."

“Mm. I agree. That’s why I think it’s best if we put off talking about the workshop until I have a clearer understanding of what I’m to be doing.”

“Of course. I’m sure it’s an important task…” Keith was slowly growing sullen as he continued. “I’m happy that you considered building a workshop with me. I should be happy, but I…I can’t be. What’s wrong with me…?”

Suddenly, Keith got up. He grabbed his long overcoat from his lap and thrust his arms through the sleeves.

“Oh, leaving already?” Elliott asked.

“Yes,” Keith answered, hanging his head. “It looks like our discussion about the workshop will have to be postponed. Excuse me. I’ll see you later, Anne.”

Keith quickly descended the stairs. He was practically fleeing.

Keith didn’t even look me in the face, thought Anne.

He was always so courteous and kind, and he wasn’t the type to leave without saying good-bye. No matter how big a hurry he was in, he always looked the other party in the eye, at least for a moment, and gave them a smile.

But Keith hadn’t met Anne’s gaze just now. In fact, it seemed like he’d deliberately avoided looking at her. It was as though he couldn’t stand to be there another second.

“I wonder what’s the matter with Keith,” Elliott mused. “Seems like he’s brooding over something.” He reached for his teacup. As he brought the tea to his lips, he looked across the rim of the cup at Challe.

“Speaking of things being the matter, something’s up with you, too,” Elliott continued. “You were summoned by name. I have to assume there’s a reason.”

Challe had confronted Hugh and the Earl of Downing at the fort in the wilderness beyond the Bloody Highway. He had demanded that they let the fairies there go, and they had complied with his demand. They must have sensed that the other fairies regarded Challe as someone special. The way the fairies treated him, plus his presence as he stood there in the snow, had been proof enough of that.

That was the only time Anne could recall an aristocrat having any contact with Challe.

“Will you be all right going to the royal castle, Challe?” asked Anne. “Nothing bad is going to happen, right?”

She was growing anxious, but Challe rested his chin in one hand and held the other over his steaming cup, calmly enjoying his tea. The amber-colored liquid swayed inside the cup.

“If it was something like that, I’d expect soldiers to be storming this place as we speak. We’ve received a polite invitation. I doubt there will be any real trouble.”

Mithril, who had been drooping gloomily in Anne’s lap, suddenly raised his head. “Challe Fenn Challe! I’ll have you know I’m quite worried! So, so worried, I can hardly stand it!” Despite Mithril’s words, his eyes sparkled brightly, as if he had made some wonderful discovery.

Challe seemed to notice this and looked at him suspiciously.

“Worried? *You’re* worried about *me*? What could you possibly mean?”

“N-n-n-nothing! I’m just genuinely worried about you! Really! What’s that face about?! I don’t extend my concern to just anyone, you know!”

“Will this really be all right?” Anne muttered. She was still full of uncertainty.

“We’ll find out once we get there,” said Challe, without the least bit of concern.



Why? Why is this happening?

Keith was overwhelmed by the impatience that had blossomed in his chest.

Anne and Elliott had received a direct summons to the king’s castle from the Silver Sugar Viscount. The two of them didn’t seem to entirely understand its significance. But Keith, the son of the former Silver Sugar Viscount, was shocked by the unusual order.

There was no precedent for any candy crafter besides the Silver Sugar Viscount being invited to the royal castle. He was the designated candy crafter for the royal family, after all. As long as

he was present, they had no need of other candy crafters. If anything, this was a slight to the Viscount's honor.

And yet someone had summoned the candy crafters all the same. What's more, they had given those orders to the Silver Sugar Viscount to convey. There must have been something big happening with the royal family, something that involved sugar candy.

Besides that, several crafters had been invited, and yet Keith was not included in their number. He was shocked to hear that he had been overlooked. In any other situation, he could have accepted it as a reflection of his own lack of ability.

But this was different. As he watched Anne's face, he'd been overcome with impatience and an anxiety he'd never felt before.

This won't do. I have to find a way to bury these feelings. To figure out where they're coming from…

He had been afraid of how he might behave under their influence, and so he had fled from Anne's sight.

Keith had left Hollyleaf Castle and returned to the city of Lewiston. He walked aimlessly around the city, not caring that the snow he kicked up dirtied the cuffs of his pants.

Ever since he'd tested his skill against Anne's at the Royal Candy Fair the year before, Keith had considered her a good friend and rival.

To be sure, Keith had lost at that Royal Candy Fair, but he had always thought that the outcome had stemmed from his choosing the wrong motif. In that forum, her sentiments had been victorious. But Keith had always believed that he had shown greater skill and precision in his work. He hadn't felt the least bit inferior.

That was why he had always considered Anne a friend and been concerned for her welfare. It was also why his very first thought after making up his mind to launch his own workshop had been that he wanted to make Anne his partner.

Anne and Keith were equals. That was why they could be partners.

Now, however, he was afraid that it was only his own vanity that had led him to believe he was on the same level as Anne. But at the same time, Keith felt sure he wasn't simply being vain. He

had resigned himself to living in the shadow of his father, Edward Powell, but he didn't think he had been wasting his time.

Anne was chosen, and I was not. And the fact that I don't know why is making me anxious. I'm impatient. It's not clear what they were looking for when they made their selection. I want to know. I want to ask someone why they didn't choose me.

He hated not knowing what separated him from Anne. It made him uneasy, as if he couldn't see the tips of his own toes. He felt like he wouldn't be able to relax as long as he still felt that uncertainty.

Should I ask the Viscount? Can I really be so direct?

He didn't want to raise such an awkward question. It would be too rude, even if it was Hugh he would be asking. But the more he thought about it, the more the irritation in his chest grew.

He felt a heaviness in his head that seemed to portend a headache. He grasped at his hair and grimaced.

Keith found himself walking toward the market on the east side of Lewiston.

The Silver Sugar Viscount, Hugh Mercury, had purchased a mansion there, which he maintained as a secondary residence. It was a three-story mansion with extensive storehouses in the back. But it was also right in the middle of a neighborhood, sandwiched among a row of houses. It had belonged to a wealthy merchant who did a lot of business overseas. The merchant had parted with the residence when he closed down his business, and now Hugh maintained it. The building's construction made it difficult for gatekeepers and security guards to keep watch, so many of the neighbors weren't even aware that it was the Silver Sugar Viscount's villa.

Keith was surprised that this was where his feet had taken him, but he also couldn't pull himself away. After walking around the eastern market for a little while, he made up his mind.

He couldn't fight against the voice inside him demanding to know why he hadn't been chosen.

When he knocked on the front door, a servant fairy immediately answered.

"My name is Keith Powell. I am a candy crafter. I'd like to request an audience with the Silver Sugar Viscount."

When Keith announced himself, the fairy gave him a dubious look. This was a natural response. It was unthinkable for an ordinary candy crafter to waltz into the Silver Sugar Viscount's home. The fairy seemed on the verge of closing the door on him, so Keith introduced himself further in a panic.

"I'm the son of the former Silver Sugar Viscount! I'm Powell's son, Keith!"

After giving the fairy his name, Keith felt a ball of disgust sink into his stomach, as if he had swallowed a stone. He'd always hated being defined by his father, and he couldn't believe that he had introduced himself that way. But that was how badly he wanted to see the Silver Sugar Viscount.

The fairy briefly disappeared to confirm Keith's identity, then showed him inside.

He was led into a drawing room with a large fireplace, a couch, a desk, and two armchairs. The curtains hanging over the windows were thick and weighty, and although the furnishings weren't flashy, they had obviously been made with care.

Even so, it was a modest dwelling for someone who held the rank of viscount.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Keith."

After Keith waited a short while in the comfortably heated room, Hugh strode in and greeted him.

Keith got up from a chair and returned the greeting.

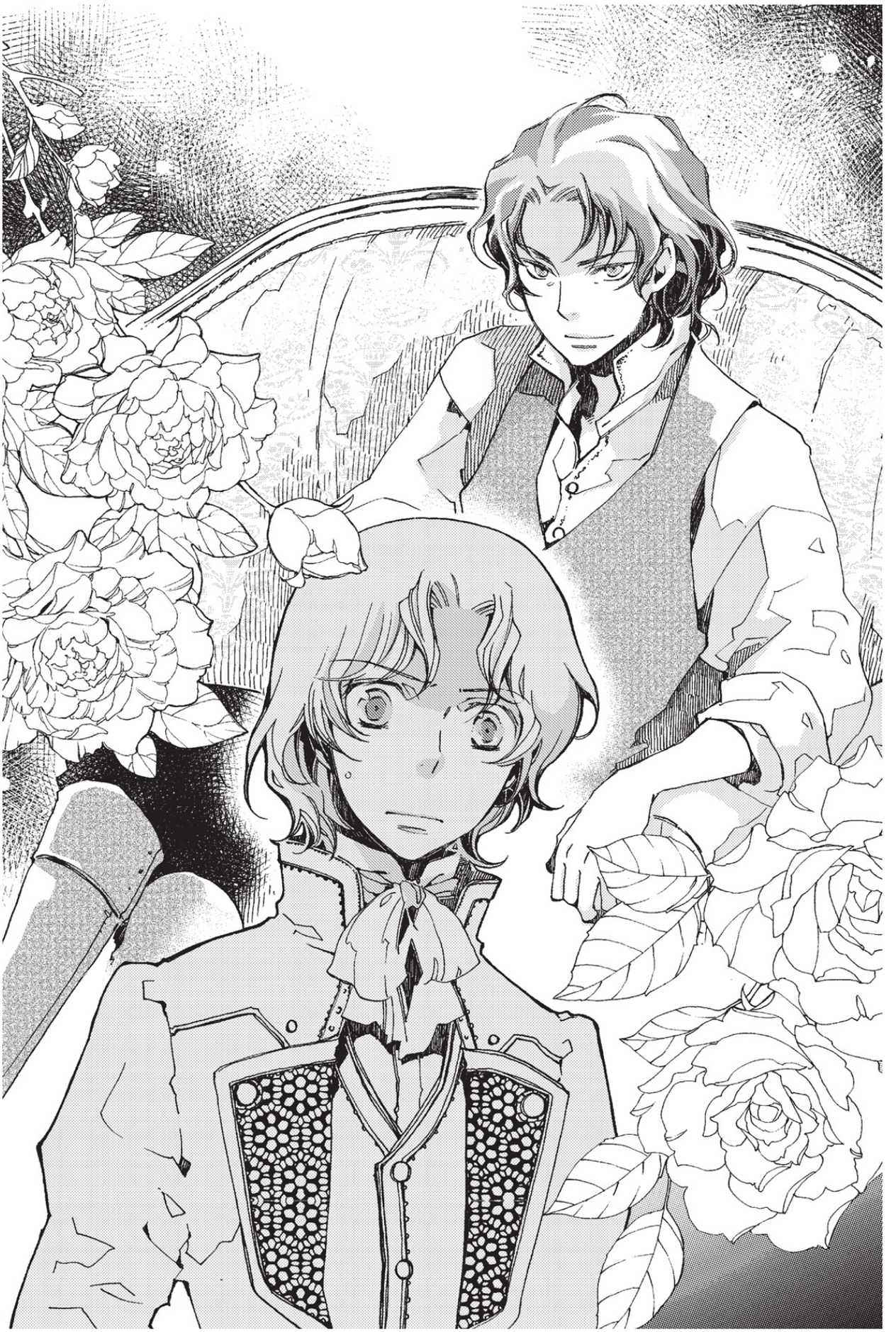
Hugh had taken off the formal attire of the Silver Sugar Viscount and was wearing his usual plain brown jacket.

"Why did you have to arrange a meeting with me?" he asked, taking a seat on the couch. "What's this about?" He crossed his legs and looked up at Keith, who was standing directly across from him.

"I'll get straight to the point: Why wasn't I chosen?"

"What do you mean?"

"Yesterday and today, you issued orders summoning four candy crafters to the royal castle, correct? Not only did you issue them directly as the Silver Sugar Viscount, but this is the first time that the royals have invited other candy crafters to the castle. I assume there must be a very special job to be done, and an important one at that. It is a job, yes? Since you're having them bring their tools."



“As you deduced, it is a special and significant job. But if you know that already, what are you trying to say?”

“I want to ask why I wasn’t selected for that job.”

“That’s some confidence, Keith. I never figured you for such a narcissist.”

“If I could understand the selection criteria, I would have never considered asking like this.” He wanted to convey his feelings accurately, and he wanted to avoid becoming emotional as best he could. “I could understand if a single talented representative was chosen from each faction. Mr. Killean and Mr. Collins are both Silver Sugar Masters and are indisputably the most skilled in their factions. Stella is not a Silver Sugar Master, but he could be considered the greatest crafter at the Radcliffe Workshop right now. He was chosen not for his title or standing, but for the abilities he possesses. You are the only one capable of accurately assessing all that to select the best candidates.”

Hugh rested his chin in one hand, with his elbow against the armrest of the couch, and grinned. “I expected as much from a graduate of the State Church Independent School,” he said. “Very clever.”

“There are few people who can give the Silver Sugar Viscount orders. I’m sure you wouldn’t reveal who it was, so I’ll refrain from asking. Regardless, you received a request from that person and chose one skilled crafter from each faction. That much I understand. And if that was all there was to it, I wouldn’t mind, I’d be satisfied with that. What’s bothering me is…why Anne was chosen.”

“We selected Anne to represent the candy crafters who are not affiliated with any faction.”

“As far as I can tell, the most remarkable unaffiliated crafter is Mr. Hingley.”

“I agree. But Kat would never agree to come to the castle. I already knew that, so I excluded him. That left two candidates in my mind, you and Anne.”

“So then why her?! Was I not good enough?!”

Hugh stood up slowly. His face was blank. Perhaps he was angry over Keith’s rude line of questioning. The tall man looked down at him pointedly, and Keith was briefly intimidated. But

now that he had come this far, he couldn't back down until he had heard why he wasn't selected.

"Anne holds a royal medal. You do not."

"That's true. But Stella Knox doesn't have a royal medal, either, and he was still chosen."

"Compared to the Silver Sugar Masters at the Radcliffe Workshop, Knox is more skilled."

"So you're saying that my skills are inferior to Anne's?!"

"What do you think? Are you able to prove that you're better than her?"

"Well…!"

Hugh smiled down at him disparagingly and slowly walked in a circle around Keith. "What's the matter?" he asked from above Keith's head, his voice no more than a whisper. "You came here because you wanted to lodge a complaint with me, didn't you? So go ahead. Tell me that you're better than Anne."

Keith clenched his hands into fists and bit his lip. He'd thought that he and Anne were the same. For that reason, he couldn't think of a way in which he surpassed Anne or in which Anne surpassed him. He couldn't lie. His arms trembled with frustration as he struggled to answer.

"I…"

"Say it."

"I…I am not better than Anne in any way. But she also isn't any better than I am. Our skills are equal. So I can't tell you that I surpass her. But what do you think, Viscount? That's what I'd like to ask. I'm the one who came here to ask questions!"

Squeezing his fists so tightly that his fingers turned white, Keith raised his head and glared at Hugh, waiting for an answer.

Hugh came to a stop directly in front of Keith. For a moment, he was silent. He then slowly opened his mouth. "As a matter of fact, I wasn't sure myself whether it should be you or Anne."

Keith leaned forward. "Then why Anne?!"

But Hugh replied with yet another question. "Do you wish you were selected despite not even knowing what the job is?"

"Of course!"

"Why?"

"Why? Because Anne was chosen…!"

He said it without thinking, then covered his mouth in surprise.

So that's it. I just didn't want to lose.

His feelings didn't come from hostility, only pure competitive spirit. He didn't have to win, he just didn't want to lose. He wanted to stand on the same playing field as Anne. Of course, he was curious about what was going on, and he did have a desire to participate. But more importantly, he couldn't stand feeling like Anne was leaving him behind. That was the source of his anxiety. He had simply been nervous and impatient, feeling like she might be moving beyond his reach.

"I…I think I am Anne's equal. And that's what I want. So if she has been chosen, I also want to be chosen," Keith said, then hung his head. "I'm acting like a little kid, aren't I?"

Keith had always been calm and had always taken great care not to embarrass himself in front of others. But the emotions bubbling up inside ran counter to this, so they were hard to contain. He was ashamed of his own impatience.

Hugh suddenly broke into a smile. "This version of you is much more authentic than the guarded, clever son of Powell you try to be," Hugh said. "I like it. You don't need to worry about your father's standing anymore, and you don't need to act so refined, even if you are the son of a viscount. So tell it to me straight, like a true crafter: What do you want to do, and what do you desire? That will be enough. Raise your head, Keith."

Once Keith did as he was told and lifted his head, Hugh continued. "Should I pick you or Anne? I puzzled over which one of you to choose, but I wasn't the one who made the final call. When I hesitated, another person ordered me to summon Anne."

"Huh? Does that mean…?"

"I hadn't made up my mind yet. But I was told to summon Anne, and I obeyed. Still, I find it difficult to discount you. I was the one who chose all the other candy crafters aside from Anne. Also, the number of crafters invited to the royal castle can be four *or* five. So I could theoretically summon one more: you."

"That means… Are you saying I could still be chosen?"

Hugh adjusted his tone of voice. "Keith Powell. Prepare your candy making tools and present yourself at the royal castle in three days' time. This is an order."

With that, Hugh quickly the room.

The order had come down. Rather than happy, Keith felt relieved, exhausted, and a little foolish.

Anne and I are equals.



Hollyleaf Castle. In Anne's room on the second floor of the west wing, the fire in the hearth had died down, and the air had chilled completely.

Challe Fenn Challe sat near the window, deep in thought. There was no moon in the sky outside the window, and the snow-sprinkled forest stretched out through the inky darkness. Frost clung to the edges of the windowpanes.

He could hear Mithril snoring in Anne's bed and Anne breathing in her sleep.

Even now, when he was no longer worried about them being attacked by Lafalle, they were still sleeping like this for some reason, the three of them all in the same room. They all felt like it was the natural thing to do, so no one had said anything about it.

But whenever Challe tried to collect himself like this, he realized that it was absolutely ridiculous. Why, when they had so many extra rooms and there was no danger, was their first impulse to huddle together?

It didn't seem strange to me, either, though.

Even Challe had felt like it was natural for the three of them to be together. Even though he knew that it was strange.

Hollyleaf Castle was quiet. That was because the day before, everyone from the Paige Workshop, with the exception of Elliott, had returned to Millsfield.

As he'd departed, Glen Paige had thanked Challe. He had offered Anne words of encouragement, telling her, "Do your very best, for the sake of your future."

In contrast, Bridget hadn't seemed to know what kind of attitude to affect upon her departure, so she had defaulted to her usual crabby attitude. She had even grumbled and complained at Anne. "Why aren't you coming with us, when there are so many things I want to ask you?"

But Anne had calmly answered her, “I’ll come see you before too long, so we can talk then. You can treat me to some tea.” Bridget had angrily called her cheeky after that, only to give her permission to visit at any time.

Danna had seemed heartbroken to be parting with Anne and had cried the whole time. Hal had desperately tried to comfort his sister, but it was only when Anne told Danna, “I’ll come see you soon, so please make some of that delicious herbal tea,” that she finally put on a little smile.

Noah had reminded Anne over and over again to come and visit them. He was leaving Hollyleaf Castle after fifteen long years, so he must have been anxious about taking the first step on his new path. He had followed Anne around until it was time to leave, grasping the fabric of her skirt the whole time. Anne had promised to make sugar candy for Noah whenever he liked.

The four candy crafters, King, Orlando, Valentine, and Nadir, had told Challe and Mithril they were always welcome at the workshop. Then they’d turned to Anne and said, “Good luck out there, head crafter!”

They had called Anne their head candy crafter to the very end.

The members of the Paige Workshop were not bad people. Even Challe didn’t mind being with them, so if Anne had wanted to live and work with them, he was sure they could have spent many carefree, enjoyable days together.

But that wasn’t what she wanted.

She was young, just sixteen, and was well aware that she still lacked experience as a Silver Sugar Master. That was why she wanted to develop herself further. She was hoping to change herself.

Wanting change was a very human characteristic. There was hope in the way they set their eyes on the future. It was one of their strengths.

Anne had decided to launch a new workshop with Keith. That was an unsurprising development, and even Challe thought that it was worth trying.

But he found himself unable to welcome the change wholeheartedly.

If Anne was able to bring her dreams to life and find happiness, Challe would have served his purpose. He would lose his reason

for staying by her side. As long as he had a pretense, he could stay with her openly. But if he lost his reason, he would have to leave her. After that, he wouldn't be able to touch her or talk to her, only watch her from afar.

So he wouldn't mind if Anne got flustered and failed to find her happiness. He wouldn't mind if she walked her path slowly, getting lost along the way.

He thought that far, then smiled bitterly.

Why, he wondered, did he want Anne to wander lost through life, when he should be wishing for her happiness?

Somewhere deep down, he had been relieved when Hugh Mercury had shown up with his orders. Now there would be a delay before Anne started establishing a workshop with Keith.

What worried him now was what the orders Hugh had delivered entailed.

No one knew what awaited the assembled crafters. But since the Silver Sugar Viscount, the guardian of all candy crafters, was involved, it probably wouldn't be anything bad for them.

But the one thing Challe was struggling to understand was why he had been summoned along with them.

Someone had asked for him specifically. Who could it have been?

He had been born from a piece of obsidian stone, and the fifteen years he had spent with Liz had been filled with peaceful days, like a dream. Neither Challe nor Liz had desired change, and they'd never expected it to come.

Then there had been the hundred-plus years after Liz's passing. He had taken his revenge, then been passed around, bought and sold, and had experienced all sorts of things. But he'd been so submerged in hatred and rage that nothing had changed inside him.

However, something had started to change after he met Anne. And as a result of that meeting, Challe felt like he was now truly headed toward some great crossroads. He couldn't help feeling that way.

Challe left the window and approached the bed. Mithril was lying atop the quilt, limbs spread wide. Anne was holding the quilt to her chest, sleeping peacefully.

This girl was the one who had changed his destiny. Anne had to be the key to Challe's fate.

He softly put his hand out toward Anne to touch the curve of her cheek. But then he hesitated and withdrew his fingers.

He turned his gaze to the window again. Outside it was dark. It was the night of the new moon.

Who was it? Who called me to the castle?

Perhaps Challe had been summoned to the castle by fate itself.

Chapter 2
THE SILVER SUGAR FAIRY

The castle that stood at the center of the royal capital of Lewiston was the oldest building of its kind in the Kingdom of Highland.

Originally, it had been a small fortress called Lewiston Castle that consisted only of a keep with a single defensive wall surrounding it. But after the Millsland family had decided to make the castle their stronghold three hundred years before, they'd built a new castle surrounding the original keep and erected a second keep, then a third.

And then a hundred years ago—

When the Millsland family, which had united the Kingdom of Highland, took the throne, they expended the castle yet again.

The current incarnation of the castle had four different keeps, all from different eras.

If it were possible to look down on the royal castle from above, it would be clear to see that, just like the growth rings of a tree, there were multiple layers of fortress walls enclosing different sections. In comparison to other castles, the royal castle was exceptionally large, owing to that haphazard construction.

The towers, all of different heights, stood at irregular intervals, and they all had some kind of banner fluttering at the top.

There were banners that bore the crest of the Millsland family and banners that bore the king's insignia, which were hoisted when the king was present in the castle. There were banners bearing the queen's insignia and others for the children. There was even a banner for when the relatives of the Millsland royal family were visiting the castle.

Beneath the fluttering flags stood a group of soldiers, their helmets and armor reflecting the sunlight in an impressive display.

With the royal castle at its center, the royal capital of Lewiston had developed quickly as a castle town over the past hundred years.

The city looked like bits of stone that had been lined up around the enormous castle, endlessly encircling it. Snow still lingered on the edges of the streets and the roofs of the houses, and the wind blowing through town was cold. But the sunshine was bright, a sign that the cold was abating day by day.

“Do you think Mithril Lid Pod is all right?”

As she shrank away from the cold wind that caressed the back of her neck, Anne turned around to look in the direction of Hollyleaf Castle, which she could not possibly see. Anne’s boxy wagon proceeded into Lewiston, headed for the west gate of the royal castle.

“I’m sure he’s fine.”

Elliott was sitting next to Anne, holding the reins of the wagon.

“I’m not sure.”

On the other side of Anne sat Challe, frowning.

“I’m with you,” she agreed. “I still feel bad for leaving him behind all alone.”

“Oblivious as always, Anne. What did you notice back there? Didn’t you think it was strange how well Mithril Lid Pod accepted everything?”

“Now that you mention it, he was a little too obedient.”

Indeed, it would have been a bad idea for them to bring Mithril with them. Especially to the royal castle. If they entered the castle with someone who didn’t have permission to be there, that would be enough to get them dismissed.

Knowing what Mithril was like, they’d naturally expected him to throw a tantrum about going with everyone, but he had readily said, “I’ll mind Hollyleaf Castle by myself.” He had been in a suspiciously good mood when he had waved them off.

“He’s plotting something,” Challe asserted.

Anne laughed uncomfortably. “Ha-ha-ha… He would never do that… By the way, what would he be planning?”

She was almost afraid to ask, but she was more afraid not to.

“I have no idea what path his strange train of thought might take,” Challe replied.

“If I was left alone in that castle,” Elliott interjected buoyantly, “I’d go out and pick up a bunch of girls and tell them I lived in a castle and throw a big party there!”

“I guess there’s nothing wrong with that, but it feels like a creepy thing to do.”

Elliott’s flippant remarks were wearing on them, but Elliott himself seemed delighted at the idea.

“Oh, really? It’s every man’s dream. So romantic! Right, Challe?”

“Don’t lump me in with you, Droopy Eyes.”

“Hang on, what do droopy eyes have to do with anything? Well, I guess you’re probably completely satisfied with Anne. In a certain sense, I suppose that’s a man’s dream, too.”

“Who even mentioned this poor child?”

“Oh? Have I gotten the wrong idea about you two?”

Anne slumped as she listened to the conversation taking place over her head.

“Poor child”…

Sure, even she had to admit that she was rather poor, in many senses of the word, and that she could be somewhat childish sometimes. But she felt a little disheartened to hear Challe say it so clearly.

The wagon arrived at the west gate of the royal castle.

The main gate, which stood at the front of the castle overlooking the triumphal road, was so tall that Anne felt dizzy just looking up at it. A huge relief of the crest of the royal family was engraved into the enormous stone double doors. The doors were so large they didn’t seem like they should move at all.

By comparison, the west gate was about half the size of the main gate in height and width. Instead of stone double doors, it consisted of a single large oak door with iron rivets. On either side of the gate were stone guardhouses, where some guards were standing at attention.

The west gate appeared to serve as the entrance for merchants bringing various goods into the castle, and it was already open.

“So this is the royal castle.”

Anne looked up at the west gate.

The royal castle was the residence of the king of Highland, and to an ordinary citizen like Anne, it was something only ever seen from afar. She'd never considered that she might like to go there or that she even *could* go there. As if looking up at a cloud floating through the sky, she could see the royal castle but had never expected to reach it.

She was about to set foot there. As though she were stepping onto a cloud, she was simultaneously curious and overcome with fear of the unknown.

Anne and the others gave the guards their names and identities and were shown inside. One of the soldiers led their boxy wagon to the carriage house, where horses and vehicles were stored.

They left the wagon there, and the three of them were led deeper into the castle on foot.

After passing through the gate, Anne grew so nervous that she struggled to breathe. But as they walked on, her mood settled somewhat. Whenever she looked up at Challe, who was walking beside her, she saw that he was as calm as ever. Elliott was gazing with curiosity at the castle architecture, and he didn't seem as nervous as Anne, either.

Since the walls encircled the castle in three layers, the interior of the castle was confusing, and it appeared coming and going were quite difficult.

To travel even a short distance, they had to follow one path around one way and another path around another way; it seemed like they were hardly moving forward at all.

Just as they had lost all sense of direction, a castle keep came into view.

It was a compact little keep with only four small corner towers. The stonework was relatively unsophisticated, so it was clearly a building from an older era.

"This is the first castle keep."

The soldier who was showing them the way told Anne and the others only that, then continued walking.

They entered through the doors of the keep. Perhaps the structure was not in regular use, because it had few decorations or furnishings. Bare stone walls simply continued down the corridor. There were no signs of life, and the air was cold. The sounds of their footsteps echoed off the ceiling.

Judging by its age and its structure, this must be the central part of the castle formerly known as Lewiston Castle.

Naturally, the royal dwellings and administrative spaces had been moved to the newer keeps, which were more beautiful and convenient. Which must mean that this place no longer served a purpose and had been left behind and forgotten.

Anne wondered why the castle had such a strange structure.

It's almost like they were trying to leave the center of the royal castle empty on purpose.

They continued straight down the hallway and came to an arched doorway. The door was standing open, and bright beams of sunlight streamed in and filled the hall.

The soldier came to a stop in front of the door.

"From this point on, only those with permission may enter. All of you have been granted permission, so please go in by yourselves. Proceed to the Cocoon Tower."

The soldier stood at attention on that spot.

"'The Cocoon Tower'?" Anne asked back.

The soldier replied, "You'll understand once you go inside."

Anne looked at Challe and Elliott.

Elliott shrugged.

"Well, if he says go in, let's go in."

He stepped forward into the bright sunlight.

Inside was a spacious garden.

It was circular and surrounded by a castle wall. The only entrance was the door that Anne and the others had just passed through. It was constructed so that no one could enter without going through the castle keep.

In the center of the snow-covered garden was a conical spire entwined with briars, like some kind of monument.

The spire matched the towers of the keep in height. It was built out of irregularly cut stones, but they were fitted together tightly, with no gaps, creating a smooth exterior. The surface was covered in withered briars.

The briars that wound freely around the spire were light brown in color and had a shine to them. They glittered slightly in the light. It appeared as though the spire was transforming into a giant cocoon.

This was undoubtedly the so-called Cocoon Tower.

It looked like it was holding something huge inside, something that was slumbering.

Anne wondered whether the spire was protecting what it held inside or preventing its contents from escaping. The beauty of the glittering vines contrasted with the dreadful look of their thorns, giving the spire a conflicting image.

The spire was the only thing standing in the pale, circular garden. It seemed like anything extra had been deliberately culled from the empty space around it. It felt like an enormous prayer space.

"You made it. Collins, Anne, Challe, you're all here."

Suddenly, they heard Hugh's voice echo across the circular garden.

When they looked toward the source of the voice, they saw Hugh standing at the base of the Cocoon Tower, dressed in the formal attire of the Silver Sugar Viscount. He was quite far away, but the castle walls caused sound to carry easily, so they could hear him clearly.

"Come over here."

There was a stone-paved path stretching from the doorway where Anne and the others stood to the Cocoon Tower. It was the only portion of the garden free of snow. They proceeded along the pathway.

As they approached the tower, they got a better look at Hugh. He was standing in front of an open door to the spire.

"Glad to see you all. Come on, relax. I'm not going to eat you."

When Anne and the others reached the door, Hugh jerked his chin and signaled for them to follow, then stepped inside. Elliott, Anne, and Challe followed after him in that order.

The moment she had taken a single step inside, Anne sniffed the air.

That sweet fragrance. Could it be silver sugar?

Small, irregularly placed windows were set in the wall here and there. There were some down by their feet and others up near their heads. In fact, the windows extended nearly to the ceiling. They were fitted with panes of cloudy white glass, so the lighting was soft. And thanks to their irregular placement, every inch of the interior was bright, from the path underfoot to the ceiling.

Farther inside was a stone staircase that followed the wall and curved upward in a spiral. The interior of the spire was divided into several stories, with the spiral staircase along the wall providing passage to the upper floors.

Anne and the others had entered at the first level. Surprisingly, the inside of the spire didn't feel oppressive. The room was about twice as tall as Anne. And for some reason, the sweet smell of silver sugar hung in the air.

There were already two other crafters in the room.

One of them was someone Anne had met before, at the Selection for the First Holy Festival—John Killean, the proxy maestro for the Mercury Workshop. He had a slender, prim-looking face and was wearing a monocle.

The other person was an unfamiliar man in his early twenties. But from what Keith had told her the day before, Anne could guess who he was. The man was probably Stella Knox, a crafter from the Radcliffe Workshop. He was slim and pale, and his sleek hair, which hung over his eyes, was a shade of platinum blond that verged on white. Anne had heard he was sickly, and indeed, he did have a very delicate air about him. But the look in his eyes was cool and placid. There were small earrings in his ears and several dainty rings on his fingers. His elegant accessories were somewhat feminine and complemented his chilly appearance.

The two men bowed silently to Anne and Elliott, the latecomers. Anne returned the bow, but Elliott raised his hand casually and greeted Killean. Apparently, Killean had tried to entice Elliott to the Mercury Workshop once before, so they had a fairly friendly relationship.

Killean and Stella both looked at Challe and made slightly puzzled faces. They must not have known about him being summoned.

Hugh stood in front of the stone spiral staircase.

"There's one more candy crafter coming."

"Wasn't it just the three of us who were summoned, plus Killean and Knox?" Elliott asked.

Hugh curled his lips into an amused smile. "I added one more person." Then he directed his voice toward the door behind Anne and the others. "You're the last one. Glad you made it, Keith."

"Keith?!"

Anne and Elliott's eyes went wide, and they both spun around. There in the doorway was Keith Powell, looking a little embarrassed. He slowly stepped inside the spire.

"You were chosen, too, Keith?"

In response to Anne's question, Keith shook his head slightly. "'Chosen'… Well, not exactly. More like I forced my way into getting picked. I was a little pushy and asked the Silver Sugar Viscount to include me. I told him I wanted him to select me as one of the crafters involved with this project."

"How bold of you!"

Elliott looked shocked and impressed.

"I think so, too. But I wanted to participate."

Then Keith bowed slightly to Hugh, who nodded back.

"All right. Now we're all here."

Hugh unfolded his crossed arms and looked at each of the crafters' faces, one after the other.

"John Killean, proxy maestro of the Mercury Workshop. Stella Knox, of the Radcliffe Workshop. Elliott Collins, proxy maestro of the Paige Workshop. Anne Halford, head crafter. Keith Powell, candy crafter. I have chosen the five of you. You are all skilled young candy crafters. Allow me to introduce you to the person who ordered me to gather you here. Everyone, kneel."

When he said that, Hugh took a knee where he stood, prompting everyone else to kneel, Anne included. Challe alone remained standing, leaning back against the wall. Hugh saw that and made a bitter face.

"Challe, you too."

"I am not under your control. I won't bend a knee."

"I see you're as impudent as ever."

Hugh clicked his tongue.

Anne didn't know what was about to happen but figured it was safer to follow Hugh's lead and kneel. They were in the royal castle, after all. There were any number of people around who could have someone decapitated with a single command.

Despite that, however, Challe refused to kneel. He was a fairy. He was under no obligation to honor the person living in the castle as his king. And he also had his pride as a fairy to uphold.

"I don't mind, Viscount. That fairy does not need to kneel. In fact, you and the other crafters do not need to kneel before me,

either.”

They heard a clear and dignified voice coming from the doorway.

Without meaning to, Anne looked toward the voice, as did the other crafters.

“Everyone, please rise.”

Anne laid eyes on the woman who slowly entered the spire, and she gasped.

The woman had green eyes and light-brown hair. She was slender but not bony, and she gave an impression of softness. Her rigid posture conveyed dignity and intelligence. She was a noblewoman Anne had seen twice at the Royal Candy Fair.

The queen?!

Her high collar was decorated with multiple layers of lace, which set off her kind-looking face. Her loose, broad-hemmed blue dress was of plain design, but the fine draping highlighted the quality of the handiwork. She exuded an air of royalty.

Forgetting to stand, Anne followed the queen with her eyes as the royal came up next to Hugh. The other crafters were just as astonished as Anne was.

When Hugh stood up, he took the queen’s hand and respectfully kissed its back.

“In accordance with your orders, I have gathered the crafters. Five of them. All young and talented.”

“Thank you, Viscount. Now everyone rise.”

The crafters realized that they were still kneeling and scrambled to stand.

After making sure that everyone was on their feet, the queen addressed them unhurriedly.

“I am Marguerite, queen to His Majesty, Edmond II, king of Highland. I ordered the Silver Sugar Viscount to send for you all. The royal family is in need of several young, talented candy crafters. We’d like to entrust you with a certain project. It is of the utmost importance. Those of you who take it on will become candidates to be the next Silver Sugar Viscount.”

It was plain to see that the crafters were startled by the queen’s words.

“That is not to say that the Silver Sugar Viscount is going to change anytime soon. Please understand that this is insurance in

case anything should happen to him or if he is ever unable to fulfill his duties. In the event that anything should happen, a new Silver Sugar Viscount will be selected from among the eligible candidates."

"Candidates to be the next Silver Sugar Viscount"?

As the meaning of the queen's words slowly dawned on Anne, she felt apprehensive. Becoming Silver Sugar Viscount was beyond the scope of her ideal life.

"There are conditions for being involved in this project. This job will require you to learn several techniques, all of which are secret. You may not reveal them to anyone. Those of you who can swear to uphold confidentiality may stay. If any of you cannot, leave this place now. Once you begin, you will not be permitted to quit partway through. Anyone who is not prepared for that should also leave now."

Anne had never once considered the possibility of becoming Silver Sugar Viscount. In fact, ever since learning of the restrictions placed on the Silver Sugar Viscount when she'd competed against Hugh, Anne had thought that the position wasn't for her. If she had only been summoned to the castle to become a candidate for viscount, Anne probably would have left right then and there.

However, Queen Marguerite had mentioned techniques.

The foremost candy crafters in the Kingdom of Highland were assembled in this place. They should know everything there was to know about silver sugar and sugar candy.

And yet the queen had deliberately mentioned secret candy crafting techniques, suggesting that there were skills even they didn't know.

Techniques that Silver Sugar Masters, even those who are proxy maestros to the factions, don't know?

She wondered how there could be such things. Though Anne was skeptical, the possibility that secret candy crafting techniques might exist was thrilling enough to pique her interest. From the depths of her heart, she heard a little voice pleading to learn them. She couldn't fight the desire to know. Perhaps it was in her nature as a candy crafter.

She could see that same feeling play out in the other crafters' eyes as well. No one made any move to leave.

The queen nodded.

“Very well. That means all of you must keep this oath.”

The queen looked around at the crafters.

“Starting now, I would like you all to learn techniques for silver sugar refinement and sugar candy production from a very special person to preserve this knowledge for the future. The current Silver Sugar Viscount also learned from them. But he learned these techniques after he was already on the path to becoming the Viscount. Typically, these techniques are only allowed to be passed on to the Silver Sugar Viscount. But this time, we’d like to have the five of you, the future candidates for the position of Silver Sugar Viscount, learn them as well. As for why that is…”

“It’s because the royal family finally came to the realization that even my life is not eternal.”

A composed female voice interrupted the queen’s words. The voice was somewhat low for a woman’s, and it had a resonance to it that was easy on the ears.

“I suppose this means you all are my pupils?”

Behind Hugh and the queen, a figure smoothly descended the spiral stairs hugging the wall of the spire. She had lustrous brown eyes, long blond hair that glistened translucently, and pale skin. She was clothed in a sleek, thin white dress. Every time she took a step forward, one of her graceful white legs showed through the slit in the skirt. On her back was a single long wing that reached down to her knees. She was a fairy. And her face, painted with a faint smile, was so beautiful it took Anne’s breath away. Her thin lips were rose pink and terribly alluring.

Challe frowned intently and straightened his posture.

None of the crafters, Anne included, could take their eyes off the beautiful fairy.

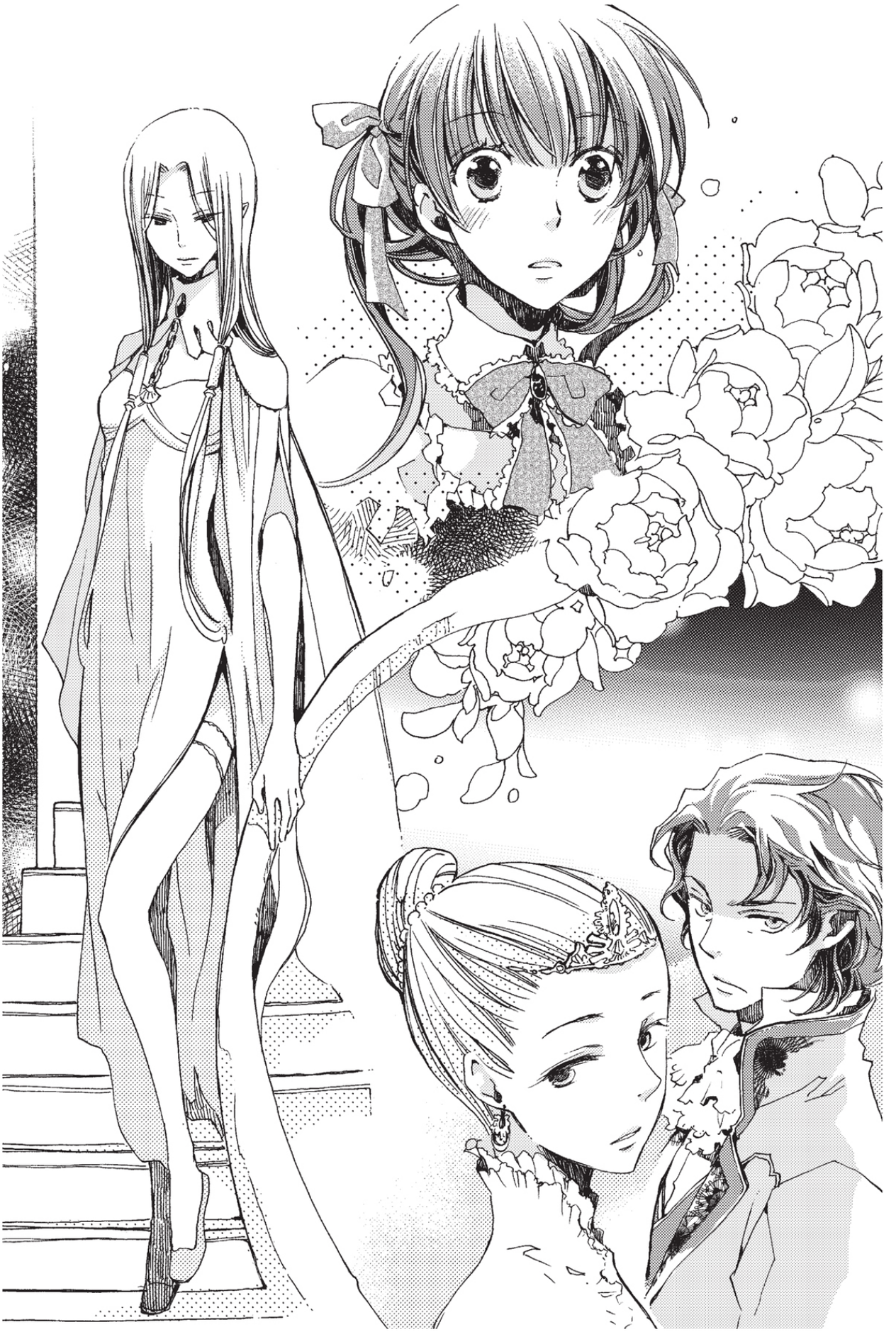
The queen looked slightly troubled.

“Lulu, there’s a sequence to my explanation. You weren’t supposed to just come out all of a sudden.”

The fairy finished descending the stairs and took a spot next to the queen. She snorted and crossed her arms, and then, staring scrutinizingly at the dazed candy crafters, she said arrogantly, “Surely that’s enough explanation. My name is Lulu Leaf Lean.

You were summoned in order to become my pupils. To learn from me. That's all."

The crafters had various reactions, from frowns to blank stares, but none of them seemed to understand the meaning of her words. Anne could only cock her head in confusion.



Who is this lady?

Paying no attention to the bewildered crafters, Lulu turned to Challe, who was leaning against the wall.

"You're the obsidian fairy, I take it? I've been waiting for you."

"So you're the one who summoned me. Why did you call for me? Who are you?"

"I am Lulu Leaf Lean. I called for you because I wanted to meet you, of course."

This beautiful lady summoned Challe… Why? Who is she? Is she connected to him?

Anne felt a sudden swell of questions she wanted answers to, but she was so overwhelmed by Lulu's strange intensity that not one left her lips.

Exasperated, Hugh stepped between the queen and Lulu on one side and the crafters on the other.

"You all need an orderly explanation. Your Majesty, if I may have your permission, I will explain everything to them in detail."

"Yes. Please do so, Viscount."

Seeming bewildered by the fairy's conduct, the queen nodded, visibly relieved by Hugh's words.

"Well then, could I ask you to leave us, please? Go upstairs, teacher of mine."

Hugh turned to Lulu and politely urged her to leave.

"The unworthy pupil would turn away his teacher?"

"Only out of consideration. I do not ask that you go up alone. Wouldn't it be acceptable to go upstairs with the man you summoned? I'm assuming you'd at least like to speak with him, since you said you wanted to meet him."

"I see. The unworthy pupil is being tactful."

Hugh bowed courteously as Lulu sneered.

Everyone stared in wonder at this exchange. The Silver Sugar Viscount was affording every courtesy to a fairy. Despite his title, he was bowing to a fairy, a being who should be in a subservient position in the Kingdom of Highland.

Who is this fairy who can make the Silver Sugar Viscount bow?

"Well then, follow me, Obsidian."

Lulu commanded Challe as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Then she turned around and placed a foot on the first

step. Challe immediately followed. Anne quickly grabbed the sleeve of Challe's jacket.

"Challe, wait! Don't go alone! What if something happens?"

"Don't worry. I doubt she's capable of doing anything to me."

That might be true, but Anne was still anxious about Challe going alone. She suddenly felt as if she was being abandoned.

"Don't worry, little girl. I won't do anything untoward with your obsidian stone."

Lulu smiled at Anne, then walked briskly up the stairs. Challe followed after her. Anne's hand fell away from his sleeve.

She felt helpless. It was a loneliness such as she had never experienced before. Challe was just going to an upper floor in the same building. There likely wouldn't be any danger. Normally, she would have thought nothing of it.

She barely understood her emotions. She wondered if she was just feeling helpless because she was nervous about coming to the royal castle. But she had a sense that this was something else.

As soon as Lulu and Challe disappeared to an upper floor of the spire, Hugh turned back to the candy crafters. His demeanor calm, he slowly came up in front of them.

"First, I suppose I need to explain to you who Lulu Leaf Lean is. Listen carefully, candy crafters."

Anne was startled. Her mind, which had been scattered with worry about Challe, suddenly snapped back into focus.

That's right, I was summoned here as a candy crafter. I'm here to do a job.

"You all are Lulu's chosen successors."

Successors. The expressions on the faces of the candy crafters changed at the weight of the word.



The Cocoon Tower was four stories tall.

The space on the second floor closely resembled a candy crafter's workshop. There was a workbench with a stone slab affixed to it, barrels for silver sugar and cold water, and a variety

of tools, such as spatulas and knives. It had a small furnace and a stone mill. The air smelled sweetly of silver sugar.

Lulu bypassed that second floor and continued up to the third. This level was less spacious than the second and appeared to be a living space. It had a bed, a clothing trunk, a washbasin, and other items for daily living.

From there, the spiral staircase led to the top floor. It was a small, round room and would be crowded with only five or six occupants. The space was mostly unfurnished and felt empty. It was a bright room. Looking up, Challe saw that cloudy white glass had been set into the conical apex of the spire. A circle of light was coming down from overhead.

“Only the windows up here open.”

As she said this, Lulu placed a hand against one of the small, irregularly spaced windows and pushed it open.

The cool, moist breeze of late winter blew into the spire. Lulu stood by the window, letting her hair flutter in the breeze and narrowing her eyes. She seemed to enjoy the feeling. The single wing on her back stretched pleasantly and shivered.

“How about you get to the point and explain who you are already?” Challe asked, standing outside the circle of light in the center of the room.

Lulu looked amused and approached Challe with an expression like she was holding back a smile. “I heard about you from the Silver Sugar Viscount,” she said. “You’re a bit of obsidian named Challe Fenn Challe. Have you met the other two? Do you know where they are? Were the other two even born in the first place?”

“What other two?”

“The opal and the diamond. Your brother stones.”

Challe felt a chill, as if a sharp blade had suddenly been thrust before his eyes. He quickly took a step back, away from Lulu.

“Why do you know about that?”

“I’ve known about it for five hundred years. You were the stones on the sword that King Riselva always carried. I often gazed at you while I was by King Riselva’s side, you see. And your name rang a bell when I heard it come out of the Silver Sugar Viscount’s mouth. I recognized it as the sound of one of those three stones.”

“Riselva? You mean the last fairy king, Riselva Cyril Sash?”

“Yes, him.”

Lulu nodded casually.

“I was born from a large tree. The man who looked at me and drew me into this world was King Riselva himself. After that, I served King Riselva for over a century. Of course, that was almost five hundred years ago.”

It can’t be. She’s been alive for over six hundred years?

Challe had met fairies who had lived for one or two hundred years’ time. In fact, Challe himself was over one hundred years old. But it was rare to meet a fairy older than that.

Fairies born from trees were plant spirits, and their lifespans were typically measured in decades or centuries. Given their abilities, it was even possible for them to live a thousand years. Their lives might be shorter than gem fairies’, but they were still quite long.

But even fairies born from gemstones and fairies born from trees could have their lives cut short by various misfortunes. Living several hundred years without encountering fatal illness, accident, or malice was a difficult feat indeed.

“If I’d just been tossed out into the wide world, I would have lost my life after about a hundred years at best. In fact, I would have been extraordinarily lucky to have made it that far if I’d led a normal life. But I fell into the hands of the human king Cedric and was imprisoned. For better or worse, being captured lent a certain stability to my life. They locked me away in here with great care, you see. I’ve been alive for over six hundred years. But that seems to have weakened my body in a way, and just four months ago, I found myself bedridden. That threw the royal family into a mad rush. They seemed to realize that there were limits to even my life. That’s why we summoned you all.”

Lulu reached out to Challe and touched his cheek.

“Your coloring is different, but you are indeed one of the stones selected by King Riselva. You look a lot like him.”

Challe let her do as she pleased. He felt no discomfort at the way she touched him. She seemed to be revisiting old memories.

“It was a month ago, maybe? You caused some sort of uproar? The human soldiers left for a fortress in the wilderness. I heard about the incident from Marguerite and the Silver Sugar Viscount. The affair concerned fairies, so I heard all sorts of

things about it, and your name came up in the stories. Challe Fenn Challe, they said. I was surprised. I knew that it was the name of a fairy born from one of those three stones. I wanted to meet you so badly I couldn't stand it."

It was a strange sensation, being touched by Lulu.

The fingers of a fairy who had lived six hundred years and who had memories of the last fairy king, Riselva, reminded him of an enormous tree, one that had slowly accumulated many memories over the course of its life. It made him strangely calm.

"I assumed that it would be impossible for me to meet with you, but then my chance came. The royal family decided they would summon candy crafters to be my successors, so as to preserve my techniques. Among the candidates was the girl candy crafter who travels with you. When I heard the news, I was jumping for joy, on the inside, at least. That's why I ordered the Silver Sugar Viscount to summon her and have her bring you along as well. The humans thought this was strange, but I explained it away. I told them that I wanted to take this opportunity to see you since I had heard tales of your beauty."

"Now that you've met me, what do you intend to do?"

"Nothing at all. I simply wanted to meet you. To meet one of the people to whom King Riselva entrusted the future of the fairies. Have you met the other two?"

"One of them. The opal."

"What is his name? What became of him?"

"His name was Lafalle Fenn Lafalle. He's dead."

Lulu frowned.

"And what of the diamond?"

"Not born yet, it seems. Their time has come, but they haven't been born, is what Lafalle said. They're still a stone, and I don't know where they are."

"I see. That means you're alone, Obsidian."

Lulu pulled her hand away from Challe's cheek. She walked over near the window and leaned back against the wall, crossing her legs. She gazed outside through the small window and mumbled wearily.

"But I believe it fortunate for me to meet even one of you. It brings back memories of King Riselva. Fond memories."

“What was Riselva expecting from the three stones? Did he hope that the fairies born from them would wage a war to restore the fairy kingdom?”

Challe thought back to his conversation with Lafalle. He had said that they needed to follow Riselva’s will and wage war to take back the fairy world. But Challe had not been willing to go along with that idea.

He couldn’t shake the feeling that Riselva had hoped for something different, something more.

If Lulu had indeed served Riselva, there was a possibility that she had heard something from him.

Ever since they had been summoned to the royal castle, Challe had felt that his destiny was unfolding. If meeting Anne, who held the key to his fate, had set things in motion, he now sought the grounds he needed to probe further into his own destiny. Whatever Riselva had wanted from him had to be connected to Challe’s fate.

But Lulu simply shook her head.

“I don’t know what King Riselva was expecting from the three stones. Despite our meeting, I can’t tell you what he wanted or why, or what he was hoping for, unfortunately. I’m simply a silver sugar fairy. A fairy who served the fairy king by making sugar candy. I wasn’t even the head silver sugar fairy.”

“A silver sugar fairy?”

It was the first time Challe had heard those words.

“Fairies who make sugar candy are called silver sugar fairies. Five hundred years ago, there were dozens of us. About twenty silver sugar fairies were imprisoned here with me. Water fairies, plant fairies, there were all kinds. But they all vanished when they reached the ends of their lives. A hundred years ago, my final companion vanished, and I was ultimately left here alone. I am the very last of my kind.”



Fairies were the first to discover the method for refining silver sugar and the first to make sugar candy.

They made the energy of the beautiful “essence” of silver sugar their own, and they used it to extend their lives. The fairies’ intuition for sugar candy was so acute that the humans were no match for them, and the techniques that they’d cultivated for making sugar candy far surpassed any known to the humans.

The fairies who served the fairy king and made those candies were known as silver sugar fairies.

Five hundred years ago, Ancestor King Cedric and the fairy king clashed. The fairy king was defeated, and in the aftermath, the humans pursued, captured, and enslaved the fairies. In their hatred, the humans condemned the fairy king’s closest subjects to an even worse fate than slavery, tracking down and killing them one by one.

The silver sugar fairies were no exception.

However, Ancestor King Cedric did not wish to lose the candy making techniques that the silver sugar fairies possessed. So he decided to protect the silver sugar fairies from the anger and hatred of the people who wanted them dead.

Cedric placed twenty silver sugar fairies who had served the fairy king under his protection and sheltered them in Lewiston Castle, which was a small, inconspicuous castle at the time.

“Lulu Leaf Lean is the last of those silver sugar fairies.”

The queen had left the duty of explaining all this to Hugh before leaving the Cocoon Tower.

Hugh had taken a seat on the stone staircase, and after settling in, he had ordered the crafters to relax as well. The crafters’ nerves had settled once the queen left, and they’d gathered around Hugh to listen carefully to him.

“That’s got to be a legend, right? I can’t believe that that fairy has been alive for five hundred years,” Stella Knox said soberly. His gray eyes looked rather astute.

“You’d better believe it. To hear her tell it, she served the fairy king for one hundred years. After the fairy king’s death, she spent five hundred years here. That works out to her being alive for nearly six hundred years.”

“Nonsense,” Stella mumbled, snorting laughter. He wasn’t the least bit afraid of the Silver Sugar Viscount. He had a sharp tongue and great confidence in himself. That was the impression the young man gave off.

Killean cast a piercing glare at Stella. “You’re being rude to the Viscount,” he said.

“How? All that rubbish isn’t the truth, is it?”

Killean and Stella glared at each other for a moment, but Hugh himself ignored Stella’s impertinent attitude.

“Successive generations of kings have inherited the silver sugar fairies. The supervision and care of the silver sugar fairies does not fall under the king’s purview. But only the closest members of the royal family can be allowed to know about the silver sugar fairies. For that reason, responsibility for all matters related to silver sugar fairies has been assumed by the queens who marry into the family. Do you doubt that the royal line has been unbroken for the past five hundred years?”

“I do not doubt your words, Viscount!”

The one who answered him, almost reflexively, was John Killean. Everyone turned toward the sound of his voice, and Killean made a startled face. Then he deliberately cleared his throat and said defensively, “Well, what I mean is…considering the lifespan of a fairy, I don’t think we can say that it’s impossible. Though five or six hundred years is an extraordinarily long time.”

Hugh nodded. “It is extraordinary. And in fact, during the past five hundred years, the rest of the twenty silver sugar fairies who were here reached the ends of their lives and vanished. The only one left is Lulu, who was born from an enormous tree and who has an especially long lifespan. However, even her life is not eternal. Four months ago, she fell bedridden, which made that fact very clear to the royal family.”

Anne looked up at the ceiling, as if trying to find Lulu, who had disappeared upstairs with Challe.

That beautiful woman was a silver sugar fairy who had served the fairy king depicted on the ceiling of the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell. The story had a miraculous quality to it, as if an apparition had flown down out of the mural and materialized.

Anne didn’t doubt Hugh’s words like Stella did, but it still didn’t seem real to her.

“The fairies were the first people in the world to refine silver sugar and make candy out of it. They extended their lives using silver sugar, the only food they can taste. The intuition that they

have for silver sugar and sugar candy is many times sharper than humans'. We humans first tried our hands at making sugar candy five hundred years ago. We started by watching and imitating what the fairies were doing. Despite lacking any special intuition for silver sugar or sugar candy, we nonetheless fumbled our way into candy crafting techniques. However, even after five hundred years, humanity has yet to attain the level of mastery that the fairies possessed."

Hugh slowly took a deep breath, then asked everyone a question.

"When was the position of Silver Sugar Viscount created, and for what purpose? Is there anyone here who knows?"

The next instant, someone gave a clear and intelligent answer.

"The position was created one hundred years ago, around the same time that the Millsland family took their place as the royal family of Highland. The purpose of this was to allow the royal family to retain the best candy crafter in the country so they could secure the greatest good fortune for their nation. By the way, I believe that the title of Silver Sugar Master was created about ten years after that, which was also when they started holding the Royal Candy Fair."

It had been Keith who answered.

"I'd expect nothing less from a graduate of the State Church Independent School. Oh, that's right—Killean is a graduate of the seminary, and Knox and Keith are both graduates of the Independent School, huh? Lots of intellectuals here."

The seminary was a school that the State Church had established in order to train future members of the clergy. Commoners and nobility alike could attend. However, one had to pass a difficult examination to enter and receive an advanced education. In contrast, the State Church Independent School had been founded so that the priests could provide a more general education to the populace. Tuition was very costly, so only the children of the nobility and wealthy merchants could afford it, but it was also an exclusive school that required great academic aptitude for entry.

Anne knew nothing of that world—she had even skipped out on Sunday school. She was impressed by Keith's knowledge.

The other two people Hugh had called intellectuals probably already knew everything Keith had said, and Elliott also looked like he had known it as a matter of course. Anne seemed to be the only one lacking such knowledge.

Hugh had probably anticipated that and formulated his question to allow Anne to hear the answer.

"It's as Keith just said. That is the official reason."

Elliott frowned suspiciously. "Official? Is there another reason, Viscount?"

"There is. That reason is her—it's the existence of Lulu Leaf Lean. Cedric hid twenty silver sugar fairies in Lewiston Castle and forced them to make sugar candy. The three sons of Cedric honored the dying wish of their father and king and continued to protect them. Then when the Millsland royal family assumed the throne, they gained the right to protect the silver sugar fairies themselves. The fairies made beautiful sugar candies that were beyond anything humans could create. And the Millsland royal family alone benefited from the good fortune those sugar candies invited."

Anne felt uncomfortable about Hugh's use of the word *protect*.

She knew about the cruelty of the Millsland royal family and how they had completely eliminated the Chamber family and the Alburn family during their reign. They were cruel even to their own brethren. She didn't believe that those same rulers could have ever truly appreciated the artistry of the silver sugar fairies, much less have been their benevolent protectors.

Anne reasoned that the Millsland royal family had hidden the fairies away in order to take control of the beautiful sugar candies that they made and monopolize the good fortune that the sweets invited.

Calling it protection might sound good, but the truth was that the fairies had been captured and imprisoned.

Otherwise, there's no reason why Lulu would only have one wing…

Hugh continued.

"However, the silver sugar fairies reached the ends of their lives one by one, and their numbers dwindled. Finally, a hundred years ago, the last one other than Lulu passed. At that point, the Millsland royal family contacted the most outstanding candy

crafter in the kingdom and decided that Lulu would teach them in order to preserve the skills and knowledge that she possessed. The fairies' sugar candy techniques were the special privilege of the Millsland royal family. To keep them from being used by outsiders, they fettered the crafter who'd learned them by granting him the rank of viscount. That's why the position of Silver Sugar Viscount was created. Ever since then, the person who becomes Silver Sugar Viscount has taken an oath of secrecy about Lulu's existence, swearing that they will not teach anyone the techniques they have learned from her. I, too, learned from Lulu. And Keith's father, Edward Powell, the former Silver Sugar Viscount, certainly knew Lulu as well."

Keith frowned and shook his head. "This is the first I've heard of any of this…," he said.

"Of course it is," Hugh replied. "The former Silver Sugar Viscount must have taken the same vow. That's how far the royal family went to keep the fairies' techniques a secret. But when Lulu became bedridden four months ago, the royal family finally started to show some concern for her. After all, if she dies, then all the knowledge and skills that she possesses will be lost. I've learned from her, of course, but if I alone am the successor to that knowledge, it will be lost forever if something happens to me. It's a disconcerting situation. We need more people to inherit her knowledge. The royal family decided to take it one step further. They've chosen to gather several candidates for Silver Sugar Viscount and teach them Lulu's techniques so that they can be her successors."

The knowledge and techniques of a silver sugar fairy who's lived for six hundred years…

Long ago, when Anne was young, her mother, Emma, had told her all sorts of old stories to put her to sleep. The ones that had left a special impression were the tales about fairies.

The fairies were the first in the world to make sugar candy.

Emma had always whispered that into Anne's ear, as if she was confiding some important secret. Anne got the feeling that a hidden truth was being revealed to her, a truth hidden in the old nursery stories, one that even Emma hadn't known.

What is the fairies' sugar candy like? How do they make it?

She ached with the desire to learn something new, something unknown.

Hugh looked around at the five candy crafters he had gathered.

“The task of cultivating Lulu’s successors was entrusted to the queen. Acting on her orders, I selected the candy crafters who are likely to be able to learn the skills and techniques. You five are the chosen successors. Now that you’ve heard all this, you have a duty to become her successors. To become Lulu’s pupils.”

“A fairy’s pupils?” Stella looked stunned, as though he had heard something unbelievable. “Why become pupils to the fairy? If someone’s going to teach us, it should be you.”

“I have not mastered the techniques to the same degree she has. It would be impossible for me to teach you.”

“That may be true, but are we really supposed to call a fairy master?” Stella objected. “Normally, that would be unthinkable. I’m not happy about the idea.”

“You haven’t forgotten, have you, Stella Knox?” Hugh cut him off with a menacing smile. “I’m sure that the queen told you to leave if you weren’t prepared for this. And none of you did. Every single one of you has already assumed this responsibility. I won’t entertain any complaints. You will become the fairy’s pupils. That is your task.”

Chapter 3
FIVE SUCCESSORS AND ONE LAST INTRUDER

“It’s cold.”

Slouching in an armchair, Stella Knox mumbled and coughed slightly. He didn’t look well. The room couldn’t have been that cold, but perhaps he had a chill. He had on both a blanket and a thick jacket, and he had been rubbing both of his arms for a while.

Elliott was sitting cross-legged, relaxing on the carpet spread out in front of the hearth. He turned over and brushed back his bangs, which looked even redder than usual in the light of the fire.

“Want to come over here? It’s warm, Stella dear.”

As soon as Elliott said that, Stella raised his eyebrows.

“Hey, don’t call me anything weird like that…!”

Stella started to yell at Elliott, then coughed violently. Elliott’s eyes went wide, but Keith was the one who panicked, rushing over to Stella and rubbing his back.

“Stella. You mustn’t speak too loudly.”

“…Fine…then tell that ginger jerk…to shut up…!”

Stella pointed at Elliott as he had a coughing fit, and Elliott made an expression like a child who had found an amusing toy.

“So sorry. Stella is a girl’s name, so I can’t help it if I find it cute.”

Keith spoke to Elliott, trying to smooth things over. “Mr. Collins, the thing about Stella’s family is that his father made it big as a trader in just one generation. The heirs of successful people are often cursed by the jealousy of others, so they gave him a girl’s name to avoid that. There’s a good reason for his name, you see.”

“Oh, I’m sure they’ve got it hard, the rich do,” Elliott sneered. “I’m glad I was a poor family’s brat!”

Stella’s coughing finally settled down, and he looked up, glaring at Elliott with eyes like ice. “All right, from now on I’ll call you a little brat!”

“I don’t like that much. Maybe you can call me Daddy instead. Come sit on my lap?”

“Stop joking around. But I am cold. Move out of the way.”

“Oh, but can’t we at least sit close beside each other?”

“If I sit beside someone like you, my eyes will start to droop, too.”

At their exchange, Keith slumped and heaved a sigh. “Cut it out, you two. It’s unbecoming.”

The crafters had been granted rooms in the first castle keep, from which they could see the Cocoon Tower looming over them. They were to begin taking lessons from Lulu the following day, but for the moment, they had been ordered to remain in the castle.

There were five rooms side by side, and they’d each been assigned to one of them. At the end of the hallway, past their quarters, was a large room that they were being permitted to use as a living room and dining space. It had a table set with six chairs and a hearth. There were also sofas and armchairs placed in front of the hearth for them to relax in.

The floor and walls were bare stone, not dressed with plaster. It was an old castle, so this was unsurprising, but it made everything feel chilly. There were tapestries on the walls and a rug on the floor, perhaps to ward off the cold as much as possible. The furnishings were all brand-new.

It was easy to see that the castle keep, usually empty, had hastily been made into a living space for the candy crafters.

After finishing their dinner, the crafters had gathered in front of the hearth in the large room. They were all on the couch or in armchairs, relaxing in front of the fireplace.

Anne was staring into space on a chair near the fireplace, watching the dancing flames. She couldn’t help but worry about Challe. He had disappeared to an upper floor of the Cocoon Tower with Lulu, and that was the last they had seen of him.

Stella and Elliott were arguing about one thing or another, but Elliott showed no signs of moving away from the hearth, and Stella didn't seem able to handle the cold, so they ended up sitting in front of the fire together.

"Stella, should we build the fire up more?" Keith asked, looking concerned for Stella. The two of them had apparently gone to school together, so perhaps looking out for Stella was an old habit from those days.

"Please do. What does the Silver Sugar Viscount expect us to learn here? And from a fairy, no less!"

"What's wrong with being the pupil of a fairy? Aren't we lucky to get a beautiful lady to teach us?" Elliott asked nonchalantly.

Stella made a perplexed face. "It's not a question of wrong necessarily, but fairies are supposed to defer to humans, right? I mean, I bet you don't bow to that fairy you're keeping, do you, Anne Halford?"

Anne came back to herself as she was suddenly pulled into Stella's conversation.

"Huh, what?"

"Today you showed up with the pet fairy that you keep, didn't you? Do you bow to him?"

Stella seemed to have misunderstood a few things. It was only natural he would assume, if she had a fairy with her, that she was his master. And judging by Challe's appearance, it wasn't strange for Stella to think that he was a pet specifically.

"He…Challe isn't under my control. He's my friend. His wing is in his possession, so he's free. And if I have a request for him, I do bow to Challe when I ask it. When you ask someone a favor, it's normal to bow to them, isn't it?"

Stella looked perplexed. "That doesn't make much sense to me."

He didn't seem to find the idea horrible or bad; Stella appeared to be genuinely confused. Keith had said that Stella's father was an important merchant. He'd probably been around lots of fairy servants from a young age. It was possible he felt he had the right to command them and that this state of affairs was so normal to him, he had never thought to question it.

"But everything comes down to the Viscount's instructions," Killean said from the sofa. "We ought to follow them." He was cleaning his monocle with a handkerchief.

Stella made a displeased face. “Don’t you feel any reservations about doing whatever the Viscount tells you?”

“I have no reason to doubt him. Moreover, what is there to doubt about this situation?”

“Leave the fairy thing aside for now. I’ve got a few issues with how the Viscount is going about this. He summoned us all here and only revealed the secret once there was no turning back, right? Who wouldn’t have reservations after something like that?” Stella pressed the point, coughing slightly.

Killean tersely put his monocle back on. As light glinted off it, he declared, “Well, I don’t doubt him in the least!”

“Ah, sure. It’s plain to see that you adore the Viscount. I’ve had enough. It’s so cold in here, I can’t stand it. I’m going back to my room,” Stella mumbled sourly. Still wrapped in his blanket, he shuffled out of the room.

“What a rude guy.”

Killean seemed annoyed as he watched Stella go, but Keith frowned a little.

“Certainly, it was rude of Stella to put it that way. But I was also thinking that the Silver Sugar Viscount should have considered his methods more carefully. I personally don’t have any complaints about it, but then there are people like Stella. I think it would have been better if the Viscount had laid everything out for us and explained what was about to happen and what possible outcomes there were.”

When Keith said that, Elliott smiled bitterly.

“It’s a sound argument,” he said, “but what naive little princelings you are. You too, Keith.”

Keith didn’t seem to like being called that. He looked annoyed. “What do you mean by that?” he demanded.

“Rulers are all unreasonable and domineering. And the Silver Sugar Viscount may be the guardian of candy crafters, but he’s still a vassal of the ruler. Isn’t it naive to think that you can complain about the fact that his methods are coercive?”

“But—”

“But what? You gonna tell him to think about our feelings? You’re up against people who could have our heads on a whim, for any reason they please. That’s why I say you’re naive. Stella and you both.”

Keith didn’t seem to be able to find the words to object, and he bit his lip, looking a little frustrated.

But Killean crossed his arms and answered in a low voice, “Collins, the way you’re speaking about the Viscount is not appropriate. This project is one of the Viscount’s responsibilities, so we can’t say he’s being coercive.”

“Well, darling Stella said it, and I have to agree! Killean, you really do love the Viscount, don’t you?”

“This isn’t a matter of liking or disliking him! The Viscount is our leader, so it only makes sense that we treat him with respect.”

“You don’t have to be shy about it, you know? It’s common knowledge that ten years ago, when he was still named Ackland, you were so smitten by the sugar candy sculptures of the head crafter of the Mercury Workshop that you dropped out of seminary school to become a candy crafter, you dope.”

“What?! Is that true?!” Anne gawked. “You were so taken with Hugh’s sculptures that you dropped out of seminary school?!” She was amazed to hear that.

Killean raised his eyebrows. “That’s hardly common knowledge, is it?! If you hadn’t said anything, Anne wouldn’t have known! Plus, when I was at the seminary, I was told I had a chance of becoming the youngest priest ever. I was top of my class, so I’d appreciate you not calling me a dope.”

“What else would you call someone who walked away from the path toward becoming the youngest priest ever to become a candy crafter?”

“You really make me mad. Unbelievable! I’m going to bed now, too.”

Killean announced the end of that conversation, then left the room in a huff.

Elliott watched him as he left, suppressing a smile. “He’s a real cutie, that Killean,” he muttered. “He’s awful shy. Welp, guess I’ll turn in, too. Gotta be ready for tomorrow. You should get some sleep as well, Anne. And you too, Keith.”

Elliott shot to his feet and winked lightheartedly at Anne. Keith still refused to look at him, so Elliott shrugged slightly and left.

Everyone was on edge, and not just a little bit. They were all worried. Anne didn’t think that Elliott would normally have said something so harsh to Keith.

“Are you all right, Keith?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Well, how about we all get to bed? I’ll see you to your room, Anne.”

Keith let out a sigh and lifted his head to show her his usual gentle smile. Reflexively, Anne smiled back.

“Keith, you’re like a prince or something, offering to show me to my room. I feel like I’m being treated like a princess.”

“Oh? I just thought it was the proper thing to do.”

Keith sounded embarrassed when he said that. He stood up first and helped Anne to her feet by pulling on her hand. That gesture was also rather aristocratic.

They left the combination living and dining room and emerged into the dark and chilly hallway. Small windows lined the corridor at regular intervals, from which streamed dim light.

They could also see the Cocoon Tower through the windows. Light was shining out of its own windows, illuminating the hallway of the castle keep. Every last window of the tower was glowing, giving the briar vines a glossy radiance and making the tower look as though it were floating in the darkness.

The Cocoon Tower wasn’t moving, and yet it seemed like a living plant that was slowly inhaling and exhaling.

Anne stopped to look at the tower. Keith also came to a halt beside her.

“What do you think the sugar candies that the silver sugar fairies make are like?” Anne asked the question without thinking.

As soon as it left her mouth, Keith looked at her in surprise. “I tend to have lots of different matters on my mind, but you never have anything but sugar candy on your mind, do you, Anne?”

“That…kind of sounds like you’re making fun of me…”

“Not at all. I envy you. I try to be deliberate and work hard, and I try to be serious about sugar candy. But you already maintain the attitude I go to such lengths to keep up, as naturally as you breathe. On top of that, you’re much more serious about sugar candy than someone like me…”

His voice was subdued, but he looked toward the floor as he spoke. He sounded very critical when he talked about himself.

“Keith?”

When Anne touched his shoulder, Keith bit his lip hard and looked up at her.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “That was…it was nothing. Just me grumbling. Come on, I’ll see you to your room.”

Anne nodded, but she couldn’t help but be concerned about what was happening out the window. If Challe didn’t come back, she had a feeling she wouldn’t be able to settle down and sleep, even if she returned to her room.

“Keith, I’m still worried about Challe, so I’m going to go take a look at what’s going on in the Cocoon Tower.”

“You are? Well, don’t stay up too late, okay?”

Keith smiled gently as he always did, then turned around.

He was straightforward with just about everything. Perhaps he was too straightforward, Anne thought. It probably got him into trouble.

Anne shivered against the cold and hugged her own shoulders. Just as she started walking, intending to go to the Cocoon Tower—

She heard footsteps. Hoping that they might mean Challe was coming up the stairs toward her, she squinted down the dim corridor. Then a figure emerged from the gloom. It was an unfamiliar man wearing a light-blue jacket. He appeared to be in his late twenties. He was an elegant man with beautiful blond hair and light-blue eyes. His arms were folded behind his back, and he walked toward her at an easy pace. He came to a halt when he noticed Anne but immediately started walking again and came up to her.

“So…”

When the man reached Anne, he mumbled as if he was about to say something, then cleared his throat and started again.

“Who are you?”

In spite of his age, the man had a very composed voice. Anne didn’t know his social standing, so she hesitated over how to react. Ultimately, she curtsied slightly and offered a simple greeting.

“I am a candy crafter. My name is Anne Halford. I came here because I was summoned by Her Majesty the Queen.”

“You’re that Halford?! Turn toward the light a little. Wow, you really are.”

Anne did as she was told and faced the windows. “You know about me?”

“I saw your face at the Royal Candy Fair,” the man said happily.

There was elaborate embroidery on the man's jacket. It seemed to be a very fine garment. Thinking about who might have been wearing clothing similar to his jacket at the Royal Candy Fair, Anne concluded that he might be an attendant who waited closely upon the royal family.

But there had been many attendants standing beside the king and queen at the Royal Candy Fair. She hadn't memorized each one's face. In fact, she hadn't even gotten a good look at the king's face because she had been so nervous.

The only person whose face she remembered was the queen, and that was only because she was particularly eye-catching, since there had only been one woman wearing a gorgeous dress in the royal family's tent.

"Are you a valet to His Majesty or to the queen?"

"Well, something like that."

"Do you have some sort of business with one of us?"

"I'm just out for a walk. I heard that five or so candy crafters were invited here today, so when I was done with work, I came over to check things out. How about it—does it seem like your work will go smoothly?"

"We haven't started yet, so I don't know. But I do want to see it through, one way or another."

"How reassuring," the man said, giving her a youthful smile. "Oh yes, by the way, there isn't anything the crafters need, is there?"

"Not at the moment, no. It's our first day here."

"Well, if the food isn't to your taste or you don't have enough furniture or something, I can help with most anything. If anything bothers you, please tell me. I won't mind."

"Thank you very much. If we ever need something… Ah, but how should we let you know?"

"If you ever have a task for me, you can tell the queen. Tell her you have something to ask Eddie, and you'll be set."

Apparently, he was the queen's servant.

It was a bit suffocating to be confined inside the royal castle, but both Hugh and the queen seemed to be treating the crafters with great care. Anne doubted that one of her servants would have walked over to the old keep on an ordinary stroll. She

figured that the queen's servants must have been ordered to make sure that the crafters weren't lacking for anything.

"I understand. That's very kind of you."

"Of course, my pleasure. Well then, I'd like to go check in on the Cocoon Tower as well."

With an easygoing wave of his hand, the queen's attendant walked off briskly down the hallway again. Anne quickly lost sight of him.

I'd better go to sleep, too, so I can do my job. But I wonder what's become of Challe?

Just as she had that thought, she saw Challe appear in the door to the Cocoon Tower. Overjoyed to finally see him, she had started to head down to meet him, when—

Lulu emerged behind Challe. They faced each other, exchanging words. Challe smiled. Anne was shocked by that smile.

Anne had never seen Challe give such an unguarded grin to anyone but her. Lulu returned a superficial smile but then placed her right palm gently against Challe's cheek.

The sight of the two fairies facing each other in the dim light was so beautiful that it took her breath away.

But the beautiful vision also made Anne's chest ache, as if it had been hollowed out.

Lovely. So very lovely. The two of them really look great together.

Anne tightly gripped the fabric of her dress with both hands.

And then it dawned on her. The loneliness that she had felt that afternoon when she watched Challe disappear with Lulu, it must have been because he and Lulu were such a good match.

Beautiful.

Challe was with a fellow fairy. His single wing was glittering like it had been sprinkled with silvery-blue powder, and Lulu's wing was glowing with a yellow color that was nearly golden. Their two wings looked magical, like visions floating in the dark night. Fairies' wings were beautiful. And they were even more enchanting when they were shrouded in light.

It was an effortlessly beautiful, natural spectacle, akin to the morning sun painting the sky light purple or the moon illuminating the evening dew. It seemed fitting, as though Challe was meant to be there.

Humans with humans and fairies with fairies—that was the most natural order. Suddenly, Anne felt like crying. But she hated the idea of crying at such an important time, simply because she'd realized something that was glaringly obvious.

I don't have a beautiful wing like that.

She ran off toward her bedroom.



Anne is always one step ahead of me. I can't help but feel that way. She's barreling ahead, and at some point, I'm going to lose sight of her.

When Keith got back to his room, he threw himself down on the bed, put his hand on his forehead, and closed his eyes.

A sense of uneasiness was burning inside his chest. It was excruciating.

He was aware of the differences between Anne and himself, which he noticed even in their most trivial actions. He would have liked to think that it was just a variance in disposition, that's all. But he was worried the difference was actually that he was inferior to Anne.

Can I really stand on an equal footing with Anne? I'm not so sure anymore.

He had the urge to grab Anne's hand and pull her back toward him, telling her to slow down. But he didn't want to do as he had done earlier and expose his own shortcomings yet again.

If he was feeling uneasy, he just had to work harder—that was all. If he had time to worry, that was time that could be better spent kneading silver sugar or something.

I'm going to walk side by side with Anne.

He told himself that he would crush his anxiety and impatience. Anne would serve as his driving force to do so and motivate him to move even further ahead. He wouldn't be defeated; he would carry on. Together with Anne.



Lulu had wanted to hear from Challe about where he was born, the circumstances of his encounter with Lafalle, and the details of Lafalle's death. The sun had set completely while they were talking. When she noticed that, Lulu finally stopped asking Challe questions, suggesting that they stop there for the day.

"I assume you're staying here, too, with that young candy crafter. That's good… We should still have enough time. Probably."

Lulu, who had come as far as the outside of the Cocoon Tower to see him off, sounded like she was trying to convince herself. Then, as if she had just remembered it, she asked him one more thing.

"That girl who is to become my pupil tomorrow—why are you with her?"

"At first, it was because she purchased me. But she said that she wanted to become friends with fairies and returned my wing. After that, we just stayed together as things went along."

"She wants to become friends with fairies? And she gave you your wing back? What an unusual child."

Challe recalled the blank look on Anne's face and broke into a smile.

When he did, Lulu put on a superficial grin and lightly touched Challe's cheek.

"So that means that you're free, does it? I envy you," she said. "My wing has been in human hands for five hundred years. Make sure you treasure your freedom."

That was all she said before she removed her hand from his cheek, turned on her heel, and went back inside the tower.

A prisoner for five hundred years, huh?

As far as he could tell from the way the queen and Hugh acted, and from the environment that was provided for her, the royal family had been treating Lulu with great care.

But to the very end, she was still a slave. One of her wings had been taken from her, and she had been forced to make sugar candy in the same spot for five hundred years. Even if she had never known danger, she'd never known true happiness, either. Day after day had simply passed her by. That had gone on for five hundred years. It was brutality, in a sense. The thought of her situation—a fellow fairy's situation—made his chest ache.

Challe walked away from the tower. Hugh had told him the location of Anne's room. He headed straight there.

Hugh had also offered to prepare a separate room for Challe, but he had grown accustomed to being with Anne and wasn't interested in sleeping separately, so he had turned it down. But he knew he would have to be careful, because he was liable to touch Anne if he let his guard down. Even if it would make Anne happy, he knew he shouldn't get too close to her. If he did, he might forget himself.

He found the room right away. When he stepped through the door, it was dark inside.

The stone walls and floor were cold. Even so, every care seemed to have been taken to make the place comfortable. There was a rug with long pile spread across the floor, and the bed was wide and solidly built.

He had expected Anne to already be asleep, but instead he found a bulging ball of blankets on the bed, rolled up like a bagworm. It had to be Anne. The blankets didn't so much as twitch. If she were sleeping normally, he would be able to hear her breathing, and she wouldn't be balled up like that. She was holding her breath, curled up motionless inside.

He recalled that when Anne had been feeling down before, she'd assumed this sort of position.

Did something happen?

Suspiciously, he approached the bed and took a seat near where he thought the bagworm's head was. When he did, the blanket bagworm responded to the movement on the mattress with a jolt.

"What a strange way to sleep. Is this some new health trend?"

He spoke to her, but there was no response.

"Are you sleeping?"

There was no response to that, either.

She was pretending to be asleep. But Challe couldn't help but be concerned by her bagworm act. He lay down next to the bagworm, snuggling up close. The bagworm seemed bothered by that sensation and moved just a little, creeping around restlessly.

Challe lay motionless on his side, and after a little while, the blankets near the head of the bagworm shifted aside so that Anne

could peek out. Challe and Anne suddenly found themselves face-to-face, close enough that their noses were almost touching.

“Eep!!”

Anne let out a strange shriek and tried to jump up. However, she was tightly wound up in her blankets, so just like a real bagworm, she stayed put and simply rolled over on the bed to face the ceiling.

Challe peered down at her from above.

“Pretending to sleep? Whatever for…?”

He started to say something else, but then he noticed that Anne’s eyes were damp with tears. The area around her eyes was puffy and red.

“What is it? Did something happen?” he asked.

“N-not really. It’s nothing.”

Challe placed his arms to the sides of Anne’s body to keep her in place, and she couldn’t sit up. He kept her there and peered down at her face.



“Don’t dodge the question. Something happened. Trouble with the other crafters?”

“That’s not it. Challe, come on, move.”

“I’ll move as soon as you tell me why you’re crying.”

“Why…! It’s because you’re—!”

“I’m what?”

Anne looked startled by the words that had come out of her own mouth. She turned bright red. Tears began to fill her eyes again.

“What did I do?”

He asked as gently as he could so as not to make her cry. Anne suddenly covered her face with both hands.

“Show me your face. Talk to me.”

Challe softly grasped Anne’s wrists, trying to get her to look at him. But Anne was stubborn and didn’t move her hands at all.

“Anne. Talk to me.”

Her shoulders trembled terribly. She was crying so hard she couldn’t speak. Challe hadn’t the faintest idea what was causing her tears, but he wanted her to stop.

“Don’t cry.”

He wanted to hold her. He tried to keep the urge under control, but it grew so strong he couldn’t fight it.

“Anne…”

Can’t stand this.

He was just about to make his move when it happened.

“A—a love scene—?!”

He heard an unbelievably loud voice behind his back.

Even Challe was shocked enough to sit up and look in the direction of the voice. Still heaving with sobs, Anne looked toward the voice from the gaps between her fingers, and her tear-drenched eyes went wide.

“Mithril Lid Pod?!”

“Mithril Lid Pod?!”

Challe and Anne shouted simultaneously.

The door to the room was ever so slightly ajar. Peeking in at them through the gap was a little fairy with blue eyes and silver hair. There was no mistaking it—this was the lake water droplet fairy, Mithril Lid Pod.

Chapter 4
THE FAIRY'S APPRENTICES

"Oh no, no!! Sorry, sorry! Don't pay any attention to me, you two! Go on, go on. Continue what you were doing. Do more, in fact. I'll just take a little walk…"

Mithril quickly tried to pull his head back through the door, but Challe leaped off the bed, dashed over, and grabbed the little fairy by the scruff of the neck.

"Wait! What are you doing here?!"

"I'm sorry for interrupting, Challe Fenn Challe. Don't get mad. I'm leaving, see? I'm surprised at what a lecher you are, but I'm sure this is all the result of my grand plan, so I'm happy to see it!"

"How did you manage to get it so wrong?"

"Oh, do I not have the right idea?"

Anne was still planted on the bed, while Challe was carrying Mithril by the scruff. He tossed the little fairy onto the bed, and Mithril rolled several times, then stood up, plunking right back down to sit in front of Anne. Then he raised a hand.

"Hi, Anne! Haven't seen you for half a day!"

"Mithril Lid Pod…why are you here?"

"Weeell, the thing is, I was worried, awfully worried, about Challe Fenn Challe, who was summoned to the royal castle without knowing why. I thought that if push came to shove, I might have to rescue him, so I hid in the wagon and came along. I slipped out once there was no one else around, but this castle's awful big. It took a while for me to find you two. Anyway, this castle is really amazing, Anne. There are so many people, and so many fairies, and so much food! I mean, that mushroom dish you

had for dinner sure smelled good!" Eyes glistening, Mithril told them about what he had seen in the castle.

Challe gave him a cold look. "So in other words, you wanted to see the castle, so you tagged along?"

"Oh! That's exactly…wrong! I was worried about you."

"Are you stupid? If you get caught trespassing in the castle, your head will roll."

"……Huh?" Mithril suddenly turned pale and clung to Anne's knee. "Anne?! Is that really true?" he asked.

"Probably. Just think about it…"

"Say what?! Th-th-this is bad! You two have got to hide me, right now! Please!"

Anne felt a headache coming on. Challe let out a sigh and looked down at Mithril, who was clinging to Anne. Thanks to the unexpected intruder, it seemed like he was not going to learn the reason for Anne's tears after all.



"…I'm so embarrassed," Anne grumbled gloomily as she walked down a hallway in the castle keep.

With Mithril Lid Pod having barged in the night before, she had somehow managed to leave things hanging with Challe. She had a feeling that if Challe had continued interrogating her about why she was crying, she wouldn't have been able to lie to him.

She'd been surprised by Mithril's intrusion and nervous because they needed to figure out some way to keep him from being discovered, but honestly, she was glad he'd shown up.

She was ashamed of herself to have cried about it in the first place. She rubbed her cheeks vigorously with both hands.

"I've got to pull it together."

Anne felt like she ought to want to support Challe's happiness. If she started weeping over things like this, there would be no end to it. She would end up causing Challe unnecessary worry.

The candy crafters were supposed to start receiving instruction from Lulu in the Cocoon Tower that morning. They had been

ordered to bring their tools so that they could work with silver sugar, so Anne was carrying her leather tool case.

All candy crafters had a personal tool case. These typically consisted of long narrow strips of leather with pockets in which they could secure their spatulas, shaping knives, and the other tools needed for their handiwork before rolling the whole thing up to carry around.

Most candy crafters made their tools themselves. That way, the tools were easier for them to use.

They would whittle the wooden tools, making them a perfect fit for the size, bulk, and shape of their own hands and accounting for their own idiosyncrasies. Only when they needed steel blades or stone vessels did they entrust the work to an expert blacksmith or mason.

Anne had woken up before dawn, as was her habit.

Mithril had been snoring loudly in bed, and Challe had still been lying on his side on the sofa with his eyes closed. She had sneaked out of the room so as not to wake them.

Breakfast had been prepared for them in the combination dining and living room. There was bread and milk and fruit. Anne ate heartily without waiting for the other candy crafters, then hurried off toward the Cocoon Tower.

She knew that once she touched silver sugar, she would feel at ease and forget her troubles for a while.

“Viscount.”

As she was about to head down the passageway that led from the second floor of the castle keep to the first, Anne heard the voice of Queen Marguerite coming from downstairs. She froze.

What are you supposed to do if you meet a member of the royal family in the hallway in the morning?! Prostrate yourself?! That can’t be right… Kneel? And then what? Is it normal to greet them with Good morning*? Or are we not supposed to speak to them?!*

Her whole body was rigid. The very idea of a commoner like her unexpectedly running into a member of the royal family in the hallway in the morning took her straight past nervousness into absolute terror.

“Whatever is the matter this early in the morning?”

Next, she heard Hugh’s voice.

“Lulu will start teaching her skills to the candy crafters today, correct? I’m feeling nervous about it.”

“My teacher is just as confident as always, and I’ll be with the crafters as well. You don’t need to worry. More importantly, it would be distracting to have you there, Your Majesty, so if you would be so kind as to withdraw, I would appreciate it.”

Slowly and quietly, Anne peeked over the banister to spy on the lower floor.

She thought it might be rude not to show her face when she was this close, but on the other hand, it could be disrespectful to interrupt. At any rate, she hadn’t the faintest clue about the etiquette of aristocratic society.

Queen Marguerite and Hugh were standing in the hallway near the door. Marguerite was wearing a dress similar to the one she had worn the day before, but Hugh was in a modest brown jacket. Anne could tell from his outfit that he also had not been planning to see any royals. Perhaps the queen had come here to catch him off guard.

“Is there something that you would rather not allow me to see, Viscount?” the queen asked in a frigid tone of voice.

“Why should there be any such thing? Is there something arousing your suspicion?”

“These past few months, Lulu has been avoiding seeing me one-on-one. Whenever I tell her that I am going to see her, without fail, you are always there with her already. Then she makes up some clever excuse and immediately withdraws to her chambers. And then there’s the matter of that black-haired fairy. Lulu told me that she wanted to meet him because he was rumored to be stunningly beautiful, but that doesn’t seem like much of a reason to summon someone. I get the sense that you and Lulu are trying to hide something from me. But that is not admirable behavior in my subjects. Everything that relates to silver sugar fairies is my responsibility. I am acting as an agent of His Majesty the King.”

“You worry too much. We certainly—”

“Please don’t lie to me!”

Suddenly, the queen interrupted Hugh in a sharp tone.

“But we—”

Hugh sounded uncomfortable, and the queen talked right over him.

“Stop it. Tell me the truth, please. I want you to talk to me as you did long ago, like a friend.”

Anne heard Hugh sigh.

“I can’t tell you.”

“Why not?”

“My teacher doesn’t want me to.”

“What are the two of you scheming? By any chance…are you trying to use the royal family’s plans to create successors for some purpose of your own? It was you who first proposed to His Majesty that we should train some successors after Lulu took to her bed, wasn’t it, Hugh? Are you planning something? Something you don’t want to tell me? If you are, then as your queen, I need to know it. If it results in harm to the royal family, I will have no choice but to deal with you and Lulu severely. Do you understand that?”

“As you say, I was the one who proposed that we train her successors. But I have no ulterior motive. I made my proposition purely because I fear that her techniques could be lost forever. Don’t worry. I would never act against the royal family.”

“And can I trust you both, Hugh?”

“I’d like you to trust us. The candy crafters are going to be getting up anytime now. Marguerite, please go. The crafters won’t be able to relax with the queen hanging around.”

“…Very well.”

The two of them walked off in different directions down the hallway, and Anne let out the breath that she had been holding. She clutched her tool case to her chest and leaned back against the wall. The stone wall was cool. She had gotten a glimpse of something that she wasn’t supposed to see. She wondered how Hugh and the queen had come to be on such familiar terms.

Anne walked down the hallway on the first floor of the castle keep, trying to keep her footsteps as quiet as possible, and emerged into the garden where the Cocoon Tower stood. The garden was bright with the glitter of lingering snow this morning, but it was a cold light. Anne shivered against the chill, then rushed without stopping into the Cocoon Tower.

The interior of the tower was also cold. But it was somewhat better just because she was sheltered from the elements.

The crafters had been told to assemble on the second floor, where a candy workshop was located.

Anne climbed timidly up the stairs and emerged into a round room a little bit smaller than the room on the first floor. She saw workbenches topped with stone slabs, mills, and stoves. There were flat stone platters and barrels of silver sugar. Surrounded by familiar things, Anne breathed a sigh of relief.

She walked into the center of the room and set her tool case down on one of the workbenches. Quietly, she sucked in a big breath.

It smells sweet. The scent of silver sugar.

The scent had permeated the stone walls, floor, and ceiling. Anne wondered how much time was needed for it to be transferred into something like stone.

Hugh said it's been five hundred years. This place has been a workshop for five centuries.

And the beautiful fairy named Lulu had presumably been making sugar candy there for the past five hundred years. Anne shuddered when she realized that. Doing the same work, in the same place, day after day. And for five hundred years. It was a terrifying thought, a slow and drawn-out torment.

"You're an early riser, child."

Suddenly Anne heard a voice behind her and nearly leaped into the air. When she turned around, she saw Lulu Leaf Lean coming down the spiral staircase toward her. She was tying back her golden hair like a bunch of silk threads.

"Good morning. Um, you're up early, too, Master."

Anne greeted her nervously, and Lulu nodded in acknowledgment.

"When you get to be six hundred years old, you tend to get up early. Also, young lady, you can stop it with the 'master' stuff. You are here to study under me, yes, but it feels wrong to be called master."

"Well then, I'll call you teacher, like Hugh does."

Lulu wrinkled her nose.

"That's even worse. He calls me that to tease me by acting more deferential than he needs to. Lulu is fine. Call me Lulu."

"Well then… Lulu?"

"What is it, child?"

“I’ve got a name, too. It’s Anne. Please call me that. I’m Anne Halford.”

“I see. Anne, is it? Then that’s what I’ll call you,” Lulu said, grinning.

Her smiling face was exceptionally beautiful, and yet she seemed straightforward and easy to get along with. Anne returned her smile automatically.

Even though she had apparently been locked up in the tower for five hundred whole years, Lulu was not at all as gloomy as one would expect. Moreover, she had been imprisoned there by humans, and yet here she was, smiling and chatting with a human.

She seemed to be kind and magnanimous. Her eyelashes, shining gold, were lovely. Challe had to be attracted to her, too, Anne thought.

A fairy woman like this would be a fitting match for him.

Lulu seemed like an ideal partner for Challe.

Anne was no Mithril Lid Pod, but she felt that, for the sake of Challe’s happiness, she should probably be rooting for them to fall in love. It had only been one day since they’d met, but from what she’d seen the night before, they seemed to get along. When she thought about it, she felt a throbbing pain in her chest, but she forced the sensation back down and repeated the following words in her mind like an incantation.

It’s the reasonable thing. The natural thing. The best thing for Challe.

“What’s the matter, Anne? Do I have something on my face?”

Anne was flustered by the question.

“Ah, no! Nothing…”

She started to answer, then suddenly remembered something important. She needed to know why Lulu had summoned Challe.

“Um, Lulu? Can I ask you something?”

“I’ll answer you if I can, sure.”

“Why did you ask for Challe to come here? How did you know about him?”

“Oh, is that it? Well, you see, I heard from the Silver Sugar Viscount that there was this beautiful fairy, and I wanted to meet him—that’s all. Surely it’s normal to want to see something beautiful.”

“So now that you’ve met Challe, what do you think?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well…for example, do you think he’s attractive? Or do you think you might want to be with him?”

Lulu crossed her arms and looked down at Anne with an amused expression. Lulu wasn’t quite as tall as Challe, but she was tall, and her line of sight was far above Anne’s.

“Does that mean you think Challe is attractive, and you want to be with him?”

“Huh?! N-not at all! Those were just some examples!”

Anne panicked at the thought that she might have inadvertently revealed her own feelings.

“I see. ‘Examples,’ huh? Hmm. Let me see. When I first met Challe, as you might expect, I thought he was very beautiful. Not bad. A good man. Someone who could be my lover.”

“Lover,” eh? I knew it. She would think that.

Anne’s face had gone flat, but Lulu was staring at her and smiling. The fairy looked even more amused.

“Assuming the obsidian fairy feels the same way, I intend to announce our courtship as early as tomorrow. How about it, Anne? Will you ask the obsidian fairy for me? Ask him if he will be my lover?”

“Y-yes.”

After answering, Anne took several deep breaths to calm her disordered feelings.

But after Anne agreed, Lulu stared at her and asked, “What’s wrong? Would that be all right with you?”

For some reason, Lulu seemed dissatisfied. Anne was about to ask her what she was unhappy about when Hugh entered from downstairs.

“You’re here early, Anne,” he said, coming up the stairs. “And I’m glad to see you up bright and early as always, my dear teacher.”

Looking at his face, Anne felt more than a little anxious. She thought back to what she had witnessed between the queen and Hugh a short time earlier; it was like there was a completely different side of him that she had never seen before.

“What’s the matter, Anne? You’re making a weird face.”

“Oh? Nothing.”

“She saw your ugly mug on what was looking to be a perfectly refreshing morning, so now she’s probably feeling rather ill.”

Hugh merely shrugged at Lulu’s insult.

“What terrible things you say to your charming pupil, O teacher of mine.”

“I’ve never found you charming, not once.”

“Well, I’m so sorry to hear that. Starting today, you’ll have five brand-new pupils, and I have no doubt they’ll be more charming than me. Don’t you worry.”

Hugh’s mannerisms were completely different now than when he’d been wearing the formal attire of the Silver Sugar Viscount the day before. Clearly, he drew a line between life as the Viscount and life as Hugh Mercury.

When she heard Hugh mention her pupils, Lulu snorted and turned away from him. “Well, I gave you my word, so I am going to teach them my techniques. I’m not pleased or amused to be taking on pupils, but…I suppose it is my duty.”

For an instant, Anne saw a flash of sadness in Lulu’s eyes. Even though he must have seen it as well, Hugh only said flatly, “That it is, my dear teacher.”

“Oh whoa, you’re early! Are we late? I didn’t think we got the time wrong, but…”

Elliott suddenly popped his head up the staircase. Killean was with him, too.

“Good morning, Mr. Collins, Mr. Killean.”

Elliott casually waved at Anne’s greeting as he approached them. Wearing his usual easy grin, he bowed to Hugh as well.

“Good morning, Viscount.” He turned to Lulu. “We met yesterday, but I haven’t introduced myself yet. I’m Elliott Collins. How should I address you?”

When Elliott came over to Lulu, he extended his hand, looking for a handshake.

“Call me Lulu. And I’ll call all of you by your names as well.”

“All right then, Lulu. Pleased to meet you. It’s a privilege.”

After Elliott exchanged a handshake with her, Killean stepped forward next and took Lulu’s hand.

“I’m John Killean, proxy maestro to the Mercury Workshop faction.”

“I hear your name from time to time from the Silver Sugar Viscount. He says that you’re not very flexible, but your skills are reliable.”

Killean looked pleased to hear that the Viscount had mentioned him to Lulu.

When Killean finished his handshake, Hugh looked around at the three crafters.

“What about the other two? Did they run away?”

“Don’t worry, we didn’t run,” Keith answered from the stairs. “Good morning, Viscount. And I feel that I must point out that we are not at all late. We’re exactly on time. You’re simply all too early.”

Behind Keith as he came up the stairs was Stella, looking sleepy and unwell. Keith glanced at Anne and smiled. It was his usual grin.

Then Keith walked straight over to Lulu and bowed deeply. “I am Keith Powell. I believe my father once received instruction from you.”

“Powell would be… Oh, him? You’re the son of Edward, the Silver Sugar Viscount before Hugh? I see, you do have a similar presence. I am Lulu.”

Keith bowed once more and looked at Stella. The candy crafter was standing absentmindedly in a corner of the room. He must not be a morning person. He looked sleepy, and his head wasn’t moving much; he didn’t seem the least bit interested in anything, even Lulu. As if there was nothing to be done about him, Keith let out a little sigh.

In a casual tone, Lulu directed a question to Stella.

“You over there, are you interested in becoming my pupil?”

“Pupil, huh…?”

Once she spoke to him, Stella looked as though he were noticing Lulu for the first time. Gently rubbing his eyes, he responded sleepily, “Sure, assuming that a fairy like you knows something that’s worth me learning.”

“What a charmer. Your name?”

“Now I have to introduce myself? At this hour? What a pain.”

At his response, Hugh frowned.

“Knox. And if he won’t wake up, perhaps I ought to dash some water over him?”

“No, I don’t mind, Silver Sugar Viscount,” Lulu replied. Her eyes were filled with obvious confidence. “And you, Mr. Nobody, can see for yourself whether I know anything that’s worth learning.”

Stella started to say something back. He was probably offended that she had called him Nobody. But before he could say anything, Lulu took a step forward and addressed the whole group in a calm voice.

“Elliott, John, Anne, Keith, and Nobody.”

Everyone’s eyes were on Lulu. Stella didn’t look pleased to have been called Nobody again, but he was paying for his own mistakes. Lulu didn’t seem to care how he felt, and she continued.

“You brought your crafting tools, right? First, show me what you can do. There are barrels of silver sugar along the wall. Use it to make candy. I want something about the size of your palm. Use color. You can make whatever shape you like. Make something you’re good at.”

Stifling a yawn, Stella started moving sluggishly. Naturally, the other candy crafters moved much more quickly. Along one wall of the workshop was a chaotic lineup of tools. There were some that were familiar and some they didn’t even recognize. The crafters took a cursory look around, searching for the tools they would need in the jumble, and started collecting them.

Anne scooped silver sugar from one of the barrels using a stone bowl and headed for one of the workbenches. Keith and Stella went over to the same workbench. Elliott and Killean set up at the workbench behind Anne.

Anne scooped cold water from another barrel and mixed it into the silver sugar spread on top of her workbench. She started kneading it with both hands, and her eyes went wide at the feel of it.

She raised her head and looked at Keith and Stella, who were at the same workbench. She saw the same surprise on their faces.

“The texture of this silver sugar is different,” Killean mumbled from the workbench behind her.

Just as he’d said, the texture of this silver sugar was quite different from what she was used to. This silver sugar had a powdery softness to it. The grains were finer than anything Anne or the others had used before.

When they added cold water and began to knead, the silver sugar took on a glossy luster.

While they were doing that, Hugh carried in a wooden box full of vials of colored powder. The crafters each took the two or three vials they would need and returned to their workbenches. They added the colors and got to kneading.

Anne untied the cord on the tool case she had brought with her and laid her tools out on the workbench.

I think I want to make a flower.

Snowy winters held plenty of beauty in their own right. But Anne was growing tired of frosty fields of white and was beginning to long for flowers, butterflies, greenery, and other such bright and colorful things.

Anne mixed red powder into the silver sugar little by little, making a soft pink color. She rolled it out thin using a small rolling pin and cut out flower petals one by one with a paring knife. Once she'd cut out the petals, she used a needle to add texture by carving veins onto their surfaces.

Keith was making a tiny fairy. He seemed to excel at making handsome statuettes. The figurine had an elegant face and really drew the eye.

Stella was sitting in a chair and setting about his work slowly. He appeared to be making a crown. There was no gusto in his expression, but still, he was one of the candy crafters Hugh had chosen. His crown was modeled after climbing rose vines, and the vines traced graceful curves to form an elegant design. The sculpture appeared to be based on his own aesthetic sensibilities rather than something he had seen before. If there had been a smith in the room who worked with silver and gold, they probably would have wanted to make Stella's exact design into a real crown.

Killean was making the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell. He seemed to be attempting to accurately reproduce the patterns on the church's roof tiles and pillars. He was painstakingly replicating the detailed stone reliefs.

And Elliott was making butterflies. He was working quickly, and unlike the others, each of whom was concentrating on making a single sculpture, he was nimbly producing a whole flock of butterflies using only his fingertips. They were all

different colors, and the transparent hues of their wings exhibited astonishing delicacy.

Each had their own idiosyncrasies in the way they made candy. But without a doubt, their skills were top class.

Anne felt elated as she glanced around at the others' fingers and faces as they continued working.

The five of them sometimes got irritated and butted heads over certain things, but being here with fellow candy crafters felt genuinely amazing.

Lulu wandered leisurely around the workbenches, observing the crafters at work. The expression on her face looked content, but at the same time, she seemed a little disdainful of their efforts.

Hugh was watching the crafters from over by the wall.

Lulu was about to walk past Anne when her eyes fell on Anne's open tool case, and she came to a stop.

Anne's usual habit was to spread her tool case out in front of herself so she could see all the tools at a glance, from one end to the other. When she did that, she could quickly find the tool she needed, which made her work easier. But when she really got going, she grew too impatient to put the tools she had taken out back into their spots and just abandoned them nearby. By the time she finished working on something, most of her tools were usually jumbled up.

But now her work was still in the early stages, so her tools were still neatly arranged.

Lulu looked surprised for a moment, then reached for one of the tools sitting snugly in their pockets in the tool case.

"Hey, Anne… This is…"

Lulu picked up the tool and was briefly at a loss for words.

The tool she was holding had a wooden handle, at the narrow end of which was a needle that had been curved into a hook. The handle was about as slender as Anne's index finger, but it had slight indentations to make it easy to grip. It was well used and had a glossy black patina. And at the end of the handle was a small engraving, a simple design that looked like a sugar apple.

"Where did you get this tool?"

"I got it from Mama. She got it from her teacher."

When Anne had first started making sugar candies, she had assembled a collection of tools. She'd made the ones she needed a few at a time. When her collection was almost as large as her mother's, Anne had noticed this particular tool in her mother's tool case. She hadn't known how to use it.

When she'd asked how it was used, her mother had shrugged. "I got that from my teacher, who wasn't very kind and never told me how to use it. I'll give it to you, since I don't use it anyway," she'd said before popping it into Anne's tool case.

"You say your mother received it from her teacher? Did you ever learn that teacher's name?"

"No. And I don't know how Mama learned to make sugar candies."

"Hmm. I see."

Lulu stared intensely at the tool for a little while.

"Um, Lulu? What is it?"

"Never mind, it's nothing."

Lulu replaced the tool in the case, turned around crisply, and moved to a spot where she could look out over all the candy crafters.

"That's enough. Everyone, stop working. The Silver Sugar Viscount didn't choose you for nothing. I'm relieved to see that you all have skills, in your own way. Your abilities are perfectly sufficient for making ordinary sugar candy. There's not much I can do to help you there. However—"

Lulu signaled Hugh with her eyes. At her cue, Hugh picked up an object that had been sitting in a corner of the room that was nearly tall enough to reach his knees. Anne assumed that it was probably a sugar candy sculpture, but it had a protective cloth covering over it, so she couldn't say for sure. Hugh set it on a shelf near the window.

"Nevertheless, the sculptures that you create do not represent the full potential of sugar candy. A sculpture made by a silver sugar fairy, using the very best techniques, contains almost limitless power. Such sculptures are rare, owing to the incredible amount of time and labor they require. But they represent the very essence of the candy craft, and any silver sugar fairy who cannot make one of these is said to be no silver sugar fairy at all. Look. Over by the window."

The instant Lulu finished speaking, Hugh removed the cloth from the candy sculpture that he had placed near the window.

“What…is that…?” Stella mumbled.

Keith gasped, and Elliott squinted as if it were dazzlingly bright. Reflexively, Killean made the sign of the cross in front of his chest. Anne simply stared in amazement. She couldn’t pull her eyes away.

It was a flag. It was made out of sugar candy, so it didn’t move, of course. But it was twisted in such a way as to give the impression it was fluttering.

The most incredible thing about it was that the flag seemed to be translucent. The light passed through it, illuminating it brilliantly.

Normally, if a candy crafter stretched their silver sugar dough thin enough, light could show through it as if through frosted glass. But this flag was glowing as if the light from behind it were actually emanating from the sugar candy itself. That was how strong the illumination was. The light did not lose any intensity as it passed through the flag.

Depicted on the flag was the crest of the Millsland royal family. The colors were vivid and bright, just like when light passing through water broke into seven colors on a lake bed.

“It’s like you wove a rainbow…,” Anne mumbled with a sigh.

Beside her, Keith was overcome with shock as he said, “How did you get it to turn out like that?”

Light passing through water or a prism will split into seven colors. The candy was so vibrant it was like Lulu had woven it from beams of light.

Crafters normally made sugar candy by adding colors to white silver sugar dough, then making a sculpture out of it. No matter how cleverly the colors were produced, the shades either turned out flat but intense or soft and washed out. It was one or the other.

Anne had never seen such vivid coloring before. She also couldn’t believe that a sugar candy sculpture was letting through so much light. It was as if Lulu had mixed beads of light into her silver sugar dough.

“This is a piece of sugar candy made using the greatest techniques of the silver sugar fairies,” Lulu said proudly.

“The Silver Sugar Viscount is required to learn how to make candy like this,” Hugh said to the dumbfounded crafters.

At the sound of his voice, the crafters startled and turned their gazes on him.

“Though it’s also rare for the Viscount to make anything like this,” he added. “Only for His Majesty’s coronation ceremony or when he’s praying for victory in a war. We make them only for such special occasions.”

How do you wind up with colors like those? How do you make the light pass straight through like that? How do you get the candy like that? How did she do it?

Anne’s heart was pounding wildly.

I want to know.

“I will teach you the skills to make candy of this caliber,” Lulu said solemnly. “There are two main elements. One is color. And the other is the way you compose the candy sculpture. With the techniques at your disposal now, you could never create this sculpture, even if you spent a hundred years kneading the sugar and another hundred building it. You have to know how it’s done.”

Then she grinned brightly. “We’ll start with point number one, color. Why don’t we go out for a while to look at the color of silver sugar, okay? Consider it a field trip.”

The candy crafters rushed back to their rooms to get their capes and coats.

Anne would also need to bring Challe along with her. That was because Lulu had suggested, “It’s dull being the only fairy. Let’s have Challe accompany us as our bodyguard.”

When Anne got back to her room and told him that, Challe stood up from where he had been sitting by the window, looking irritated. As soon as Challe moved, Mithril also hopped to his feet on the bed.

“Can I go with you, too?!”

Challe answered him with a cold look in his eye. “Have you forgotten that you’re an illegal trespasser?”

“Oh, th-th-th-that’s right! I’ll stay hidden instead. Have a good time!”

Reminded of his situation, Mithril buried himself under the blanket in a panic.

Once Anne and Challe left the room together, Challe muttered, “Mithril seems liable to go wandering around and forget he isn’t supposed to be here.”

“I hope he doesn’t forget, but…there’s no way…”

Anne had a feeling that Mithril, who was immensely curious about the royal castle, was quite likely to get caught carelessly roaming around the castle. But his one saving grace was that there were lots of domestic workers and servants about, so if he acted the part, there was a good chance no one would recognize him as an intruder.

When they arrived at the carriage house next to the stables, they could see several wagons parked in the center. Among them was a carriage with the Silver Sugar Viscount’s crest painted on it.

The other candy crafters seemed to have already boarded the carriage, and only Hugh and Salim had yet to get in.

Hugh waved casually when he saw Anne and Challe. But his expression immediately clouded. Following his gaze, Anne saw that the Earl of Downing was walking over, directly behind her and Challe.

The Earl of Downing was the chief retainer of the Kingdom of Highland and had loyally served the Millsland royal family since the reign of the previous king. He had been the one to push for the accession of the current king, Edmond II.

He came to a halt.

“You… I knew it…”

The earl fixed his gaze on Challe.

Hugh hurried over and stood in front of the earl.

“Lord Downing, can I be of service?”

“When I learned that the queen had granted a fairy and a group of candy crafters access to the Cocoon Tower, I grew worried. I went to the first castle keep, but there was no one there. I heard that you were planning an outing and came here to see, but… So the one they summoned was this fellow, huh? We met out in the wilderness. Why was he called over?”

The Earl of Downing gave Hugh an unsparing look.

“The silver sugar fairy told me to summon him,” Hugh replied. “Apparently, she heard rumors of his beauty and wanted to meet him.”

“She wanted to meet him, you say? That makes no sense. Even out in that wasteland, I had a feeling something strange was going on with the fairies, but… Who are you, fairy?”

A chill ran up Anne’s spine. She wondered what this old retainer would do if he learned that Challe was meant to become the fairy king. This man was the most trusted retainer of the Millsland royal family, and he had completely eradicated the other two branches of Ancestor King Cedric’s bloodline on the grounds of preserving the stability of the kingdom. After the current monarch, Edmond II, took the throne as a child, the earl had waged a preemptive war to guarantee the reign of the young king. In light of his distinguished service, he commanded great authority in the kingdom, almost equal to that of the royal family.

Challe’s face remained blank as he answered the earl.

“Challe Fenn Challe. I’m a fairy. And this girl’s bodyguard.”

The Earl of Downing still looked suspicious, but after a moment, he simply waved his hand.

“Very well. Go on, then.”

Hugh and Anne bowed to the earl and urged Challe toward the wagons.

The Earl of Downing had permitted them to go, but Anne was certain that he was still wary of Challe. The old retainer, who had long supported and protected the royal family, wasn’t likely to overlook even the smallest sign of danger.

Anne was sure he would be keeping an eye on them.

Challe isn’t out to hurt humans like Lafalle was, but still…

She wished she could get the other people to understand, but the moment they heard that he was a fairy who had been born to become the fairy king, they would react with fear and anger and would probably turn against him. Because of that, Anne didn’t want Challe to reveal the truth of his birth. She wanted to make him keep it a secret forever and live a happy life.

But she was also perfectly aware of her own selfishness in thinking only about Challe’s happiness.

She knew that the fairies were in dire need of a king who could realize their hopes.

The five candy crafters and Lulu all rode together in the Silver Sugar Viscount's large carriage, which could seat six people.

Hugh accompanied the carriage on horseback with his bodyguard Salim at his side. Challe was also traveling with the two of them on horseback.

After the carriage left the castle grounds, it passed through the center of Lewiston and took the road south.

Though she had expected Hugh to accompany them, Anne was surprised that Lulu was allowed to leave the castle. She had been confined there for five hundred years, but apparently she could still go out.

Of course, Hugh and Salim were keeping a watchful eye on her. And because she was a fairy, the royal family probably also felt sure that she couldn't do anything imprudent as long as they were in possession of her wing.

Anne was slightly relieved to see that the royal family did not treat Lulu like a typical prisoner. Judging from what she had seen, it seemed likely that Lulu would be permitted to live with a partner in the royal castle if she asked.

Pretending to look out the window at the scenery, Anne stared at Challe's back as he rode along on a horse a little bit ahead of the carriage.

That morning, Lulu had said that she might want Challe to be her lover.

If Challe and Lulu got engaged, the vow that Challe had made to protect Anne would become an obstacle. To keep from getting in their way, Anne needed to work hard at her job and find someone she could love, allowing Challe to leave her side without breaking his vow.

I need to fall for someone like I've fallen for Challe, but…

Even Challe had told her to find somebody to love. Anne knew she had to follow his advice.

But at the moment, Challe was right there in front of her, and she felt like there was no one else in the world whom she could love like she did him. No matter how she tried to control her heart, it yearned for Challe.

Stella was gazing out the window on the opposite side of the carriage from Anne. He hadn't complained about getting in the carriage or about leaving the castle. He appeared to be

unenthusiastic about everything, but he did seem to possess a sense of curiosity.

Any candy crafter, no matter the circumstances, would have been eager to learn after seeing Lulu's incredible sugar candy and hearing that she would teach them the techniques required to make it.

They passed tranquil scenery outside the city, the forest spreading out on both sides of the road. The trees of the forest were bare for the winter, and tightly packed snow lingered at their bases.

"How wonderful it is to ride in a carriage with such an exceptional beauty! The boys back at the workshop aren't going to believe that our teacher was such a beautiful lady."

Elliott had both hands behind his head and was smiling foolishly at Lulu.

"Oh?" said Lulu, giving him a curious look. "You're rather promising, for a human, Elliott!"

"Don't try to flatter her! It's pathetic," Stella said. He sounded like he was already fed up with Elliott.

But Elliott kept the same grin on his face. "Huh? But these are my true feelings. And it's a fact."

"I don't mind," Lulu said, looking smug. "Oh, do go on, Elliott. The rest of you don't need to hold back, either—you can each take a turn praising me." The single wing at her back was tinged a faintly glistening gold.

Keith smiled wryly. "It's hard to offer praise when you outright demand it."

Killean, on the other hand, very seriously adjusted his monocle and scrutinized Lulu, as if observing a stone. He nodded. "Mm. Well then, allow me," he said in a stiff monotone. "Certainly, you are beautiful. Exquisite. The greatest beauty in all of Highland."

"Very good."

Even though Killean's heart hadn't been in it, Lulu made a childish but happy expression, and Anne suppressed a laugh.

"You really are lovely, Lulu. I want to become as beautiful as you someday, too."

"Even if you lived a thousand years, you wouldn't be able to catch up to her," Stella said cruelly, without even looking over from the window.

“Aw…that’s true, but…”

“How about you praise me a little, too, Mr. Nobody?” Lulu demanded. “You’re my pupil as well, aren’t you?”

“If you’d been listening earlier, you’d know not to call me Mr. Nobody…!”

Stella started to raise his voice but broke into a coughing fit. Keith rushed to rub his back. Lulu frowned a little.

“Oh, are you all right, Nobody? You poor thing. It seems like you’re in bad shape.”

Stella managed to glare at Lulu despite his coughing fit, so Anne tugged at the sleeve of Lulu’s dress.

“Um, Lulu? Calling him Nobody is making it even worse.”

“Oh, is it? He doesn’t like being called that, eh? Well, allow me to apologize, Mr. Nobody.”

Lulu was obviously doing it on purpose.

Once his coughing settled down, Stella, between gasps for breath, said defiantly, “I’ve got no praise for someone like you. Plus, when did I ever say I was all right with being your pupil?”

Lulu was teasing Stella. A smile rose to her lips. “You’re very difficult, you know that?”

“Anyway, if all this foolish talk is finished, you might tell us where it is we’re going,” Killean said seriously as he wiped his monocle with a handkerchief.

“We’re going to see the sugar apple trees that the royal family uses,” Lulu answered readily.

“What do you mean?” Anne asked.

Keith explained, “The silver sugar that the Silver Sugar Viscount refines is harvested from sugar apple trees that are used exclusively by the royal family. Every autumn, my father would spend several days away from the castle harvesting sugar apples. In order to secure silver sugar for the royal family, certain swaths of sugar apple forest are reserved for the private use of the royal family. They’re off-limits to ordinary people, or so I’ve heard.”

“He’s exactly right. And there’s a reason why the royal family has fenced off those sections of sugar apple forest.”

Lulu looked around at the crafters in the carriage.

“Now, all of you. The colors in the candy sculpture that I showed you and the colors in the sculptures that you made were different, yes? Why do you think that is?”

After thinking for a moment, Anne answered honestly, “I don’t know.”

Elliott also shrugged, as if to say that he didn’t have the faintest idea.

But the three intellectuals—Keith, Killean, and Stella—fell silent, perhaps because it annoyed them to admit outright that there was something they didn’t know.

“Well, it’s got to be because the quality of our colored powders was different. The powders that the Silver Sugar Viscount prepared must have had weak pigments.”

After a few moments, Stella made this assertion, as if he had seen through some sort of cunning trick.

“Those were the same powders that the Silver Sugar Viscount uses for the royal family. There are no higher-quality colors than those.”

After Lulu negated Stella’s theory, Keith raised his head.

“Did you mix something into the silver sugar to improve the color?”

“I do not adulterate my silver sugar like that. It would taste awful. The only taste that a fairy like me can perceive is the taste of silver sugar, you know. The sweetness would fade if we mixed things in.”

Without hesitation, Killean then asked, “Is it that you’re using special colored powders made with a formula that we don’t know, Lulu?”

“That’s wrong, too. You all keep going in circles around the same point. That’s why no one has ever grasped this technique, even after five hundred years. You can’t see the essence of it. Humans can’t understand the reality of candy making, yet I still have to teach it to them?”

Lulu sighed. She seemed disappointed in her poor students.

Anne leaned forward in curiosity. “And fairies can understand it better than humans can?” she asked.

“Of course. Silver sugar and sugar candy are directly connected to a fairy’s body and soul.”

“Well then, wouldn’t it be better for you to show your techniques to some fairies as well, Lulu? Wouldn’t that result in the best candy crafters?”

“The royal family thought the same thing about one or two hundred years ago. The human king in those days sent in several fairies to become new silver sugar fairies and told us to teach our techniques to them. They made a certain degree of progress, but that was all. Ultimately, none of them became new silver sugar fairies.”

“Why was that?”

“It must be the same way with you humans. If you captured other humans from somewhere, tossed them into a workshop, and made them train, would they become amazing candy crafters? No, they’d master a certain number of skills but make little progress beyond that. Someone needs to have the right disposition for being a candy crafter. That’s how it is for fairies. In the case of humans, those of you with ambition get together, so someone with the right temperament for it is bound to exist within the group. After the death of the fairy king, humans stopped letting fairies do the work of candy crafting. That meant they were oblivious to which fairies had the knack for it.”

“Couldn’t we just hire lots of fairy apprentices into the workshops we have now, then? If we do that, we’re bound to find some fairies with talent among them, right?”

Anne’s voice was full of enthusiasm.

That’s it! That would be wonderful!

If fairies possessed a keener intuition for the work than humans did, and there was a possibility that they could become better candy crafters than humans, then they ought to try it. It would be ideal if humans and fairies could work the same jobs without discrimination and develop respect for one another.

If only there were a workshop like that.

Anne and Keith had promised they were going to establish a workshop together; it would be great if they could make it into a place like that.

Lulu looked stunned, like she had heard something she couldn’t believe.

Stella snorted out a laugh. “Let fairies into a workshop? Fairy candy crafters? I’ve never heard of such a thing!”

“But in fact, you have. There’s one right in front of your eyes. Lulu is a candy crafter.”

“Not that I blame you, but you’re much too inclined to take the fairies’ side, you know that? You favor them because you’re in love with that fairy you’ve been dragging around with you, the one you call your friend, right?”

“No way!”

Anne flushed with embarrassment at his spiteful words, and her voice cracked as she answered.

In an attempt to cover for her, Keith turned to Stella with a stern look on his face. “Stella, that was rude! Anne was simply pointing out the possibility, that’s all.”

The soft, kind expression had disappeared from Keith’s face, replaced by hardness and determination.

“Keith, you’re too quick to take Anne’s side. Are you in love with her?”

“Why is that the only thing you can talk about?” Keith snapped.

Then Elliott grinned foolishly and leaned forward. “What’s goin’ on? Are we talking about love?” he asked slyly. “You really like love stories, right, Stella dear? Ladies always do.”

“Who are you calling a lady?”

Anne was relieved that Stella had responded to Elliott. He must have also noticed the hostility between Keith and Stella and tried to defuse the situation in his own way.

Stella glared at Elliott like he was cursing him from the depths of his heart, but Elliott looked entirely unbothered.

“Come on, it’s all right,” Elliott said. “I just adore love stories, too, you know?”

“What exactly is all right? Besides, I never asked what you liked.”

“Don’t be so cold! Let’s have fun telling love stories, Stella darling. Have you got a girlfriend? By the way, my fiancée ran out on me, so I’m looking for one myself.”

“I never asked.”

Elliott and Stella went back and forth along this silly line of conversation until Killean said with exasperation, “Stop it already. Are you children?”

Lulu smiled slightly. “You really are a hopeless bunch of students.”

The five candy crafters had nothing to say in response to her insult. Just then, the door to the carriage suddenly opened—it

was Hugh. The carriage had come to a stop without anyone noticing.

“All right, we’re here. Everyone, put on your coats and get out.”

Exhaling white puffs of breath, Hugh jerked his chin and directed them to step out.

Lulu was the first to stand.

“Very well, then. I’m just here to do my duty. Let me show you all the true colors of silver sugar.”



They had arrived at an expansive grove of sugar apple trees.

“Wow! It goes on and on!”

Anne struggled to walk through the snow as she marveled at the scenery.

Spreading out as far as the eye could see were short sugar apple trees with slim, pale trunks and branches that were even slimmer, the thickness of a child’s little finger.

Sugar apple trees had never taken successfully to domestication, no matter how hard humans tried to cultivate them. If someone wanted sugar apples, they had no choice but to find a tree growing wild in nature and harvest the fruit there. And because the trees grew wild, one rarely saw groves of them on this scale.

As far as Keith knew, this sugar apple grove was the largest in the kingdom.

A low fence had been constructed around the orchard for protection. Here and there were little brick buildings, thin wisps of smoke rising from their chimneys. The soldiers who protected the grove were stationed there all year round.

Anne stopped to look around at the grove of trees. Joy danced in her eyes.

A normal girl probably would have been delighted to look at dresses or jewelry, but Anne’s eyes were twinkling as she stood in the middle of a grove of sugar apple trees bare for the winter.

She was a little strange, but even so, she was dainty and charming from afar, no taller than the little sugar apple trees.

Like a puppy or a kitten. And yet—

—Sometimes, when I'm looking at Anne, I get overwhelmingly anxious and impatient.

As Keith was absorbed in his thoughts, someone wrapped their arms around his neck from behind, hugging him tightly.

"Whatcha lookin' at?"

The person who had come up behind him was Stella.

"Stop it, Stella. You're heavy."

"She's your rival, right? Anne, I mean. I've heard all sorts of things about the last Royal Candy Fair."

"You should have entered, too, you know, Stella."

"I was sick, so I couldn't. It's their fault for holding it every year during such a cold season."

Without fail, Stella always fell ill around the time of the Royal Candy Fair. It seemed to have something to do with the changing seasons, but he always chalked it up to bad luck.

"Autumn isn't really that cold, though."

"Never mind that. More importantly, about earlier. What's the deal with you taking Anne's side over mine?"

"That's because you were basically picking a fight over nothing. I just sided with the person who was in the right."

"Staying above it all, as always."

Stella released his hold on Keith and peered into his eyes. Then Stella opened his gray eyes a little wider, revealing a hint of amusement.

"Oh, but this is unexpected. You can't hide that, can you?" Stella smiled slyly and lightly clapped Keith on the shoulders. "I've never seen that look in your eyes before, Keith. You've always been so suave and sophisticated. What happened to you? Now you look like you want something real bad."

"What do you mean by that?"

Keith didn't understand what Stella was implying. But the contempt in his voice was crystal clear. After he'd angrily answered Stella with a question, Stella shrugged.

"Oh, nothiiing, I mean just what I said. You want to make Anne yours, right?"

At Stella's vulgar and direct way of phrasing his question, Keith suddenly flared with embarrassment. "I do get anxious with her around," he admitted. "And I feel impatient. I'll own up to that.

But it makes sense. We're both candy crafters, and she makes me want to keep working hard so that I can keep up with her. That's what she is to me. And nothing more. Keep your weird suspicions to yourself. I'm going on ahead."

Keith turned around and walked off angrily, kicking up snow as he went.

What the heck is he talking about?



Lulu showed the crafters to one of the small brick buildings near where their carriage had stopped.

The snow came up to about their knees here, but it was solid enough to walk on. Fresh snow had fallen on top of the old, frozen snow, so they were still buried up to their ankles, but they forged ahead, kicking it up as they went.

In the bright glare, their breaths came out white.

Fairies didn't feel the cold, and Lulu was wearing a thin dress that made Anne shiver just looking at it. She was hardly tripped up by the snow at all, possibly because fairies weighed about half as much as humans. Compared to Anne, who was trudging along clumsily with a great deal of effort, Lulu cut an elegant figure as she floated along in her thin white dress. The wing at her back was nearly colorless and looked faintly golden as the sun's rays passed through it.

Challe was with Salim, following Anne and the others.

When they reached the building, Lulu gave an order to Hugh.

"Open the door."

Using one of the keys on the key ring at his hip, Hugh undid the lock set in the wooden door.

He opened the door. There was no sunshine inside, and it was cold and smelled of earth. A large number of barrels stood in rows on the stone-paved floor.

"All right, go in. Open the lid of a barrel and take a look."

At Lulu's insistence, the candy crafters stepped into the hut. She offered them no explanation as to what was inside the barrels.

Anne doubted that there would be anything terrible inside, but still, she opened the lid with hesitation. Inside was a liquid. It was a deep-blue color, dark enough to almost be indigo.

A short distance away, Keith opened the lid of a different barrel, but inside this one was a liquid that was such a deep red it almost looked black. The liquid inside the barrel that Elliott opened on the other side of Keith was such a deep yellow it almost looked brown. Stella's barrel contained red. Killean's was blue. Each of the barrels they had opened was filled with colored liquid.

The crafters looked at Lulu in confusion.

"What is this, Lulu?" Killean asked.

The fairy stepped into the building and stopped next to Anne.

"You know the flowers that signal the arrival of spring?"

The flowers in question were dainty, charming flowering bushes with thin petals and slender stalks that grew in clusters across the fields in the springtime.

They were delicate flowers, but their petals came in vivid shades of red, yellow, and blue, and when the fields were filled with these colors, the common people knew that spring had come.

"This is what you get when you collect petals of those flowers and boil them down. Right after a harvest is finished, you apply this liquid at the bases of sugar apple trees. You keep applying it for the whole year, throughout winter, spring, and summer. I've heard that this work is done by the soldiers protecting this place under the direction of the Silver Sugar Viscount, but we used to have companions who would do that job. They were called color fairies. Once autumn arrives, you harvest the sugar apples."

Lulu stealthily reached for the slit in her dress. She appeared to pull something out from inside, but Anne couldn't see it very well because the room was so dim. Just for a moment, the object in her hand glinted, reflecting the light streaming in through the door.

"Sugar apples that have been given this blue liquid for a whole year produce silver sugar in a vivid blue when you harvest them."

Anne was shocked and looked down at the liquid in her barrel.

"Blue silver sugar?"

“That’s right. If you give them red, you get red. Give yellow, you get yellow. The silver sugar itself takes on the color. You all should know that you can make any color so long as you have red, blue, and yellow. The colored powders come in a tremendous array of colors. Do you know why that is? To mix in colored powder is, after all, to introduce a foreign substance to your silver sugar. Mix in too much, and your colors become muddy, and you won’t get the color you were going for. So you use a huge range of colored powders and try to get them close to your ideal colors. But if the silver sugar itself is vividly colored, then the colors will not get muddy. You can make any color you wish by combining silver sugars.”

Anne had never before considered the possibility of coloring the silver sugar itself.

Silver sugar was normally white, something to which you added color after the fact. But as Lulu had said, that entailed mixing a foreign substance into the sugar. It was such a basic principle, yet it had never occurred to her.

Give color to the silver sugar.

Anne started to tremble in silent excitement. The other crafters also looked down at the colors from the spring flowers in awe. There was a greedy twinkle in their eyes. Something they hadn’t known about before had been revealed to them.

At their level of expertise, they had been confident that they knew everything there was to know about sugar candy. In fact, nobody knew more human techniques for producing sugar candy than they did, and there was no one more skilled at using these techniques than they were. But that was not the limit of the craft.

There were techniques and theories about producing sugar candy that humans did not know. They could obtain more knowledge, new knowledge. That would develop the candy crafting even further. They’d thought they had reached their limits, but now their potential was expanding right before their eyes.

“…Blue silver sugar…red, yellow… Who came up with such a thing?”

When Stella asked this, Lulu turned to him.

“Fairies,” she answered him solemnly.

The response was weighty, like she was delivering the word of God. She spoke only the truth, without a single embellishment.

Still looking down at the liquid, Keith smiled bitterly. “So this is the practical application of that experiment where you tint white flowers with colored water? We did that when I was in school.”

Elliott scratched his head, making a mess of his red hair. “No additives. I see now. We’ve been mixing stuff in.”

“Magnificent,” Killean offered simply.

Lulu watched the crafters’ quiet excitement with an inscrutable look on her face. And then—

“The true nature of things always eludes humans,” she declared coldly.

Just then, Lulu yanked Anne’s upper arm. Before Anne could even be surprised, Lulu brought Anne against her chest and held a knife used for sugar candy crafting up to her neck.

“Huh…? Lulu?” Anne was bewildered.

“I’m sorry, Anne,” Lulu said gently. “Please be my hostage, just for a little while.”

“Lulu?”

Hugh started to step forward, and Salim and Challe readied themselves to attack.

“No one move.”

With her cutting tone, Lulu brought everyone to a halt.

Hugh remained calm. His voice was even quiet as he asked, “What do you think you’re doing, Lulu?”

“I’ve been serving humans for five hundred years. I think it’s about time I get a vacation.”

“Have you forgotten? The queen still has your wing. Even if you run away, you’ll die immediately.”

“I haven’t forgotten. However…now that I’ve come this far, isn’t it all the same, whether I get my wing torn to pieces and vanish or wait like this for death? If those are my choices, I want freedom, even if it’s only for a few moments.”

Lulu moved steadily toward the door of the little building, pulling Anne with her.

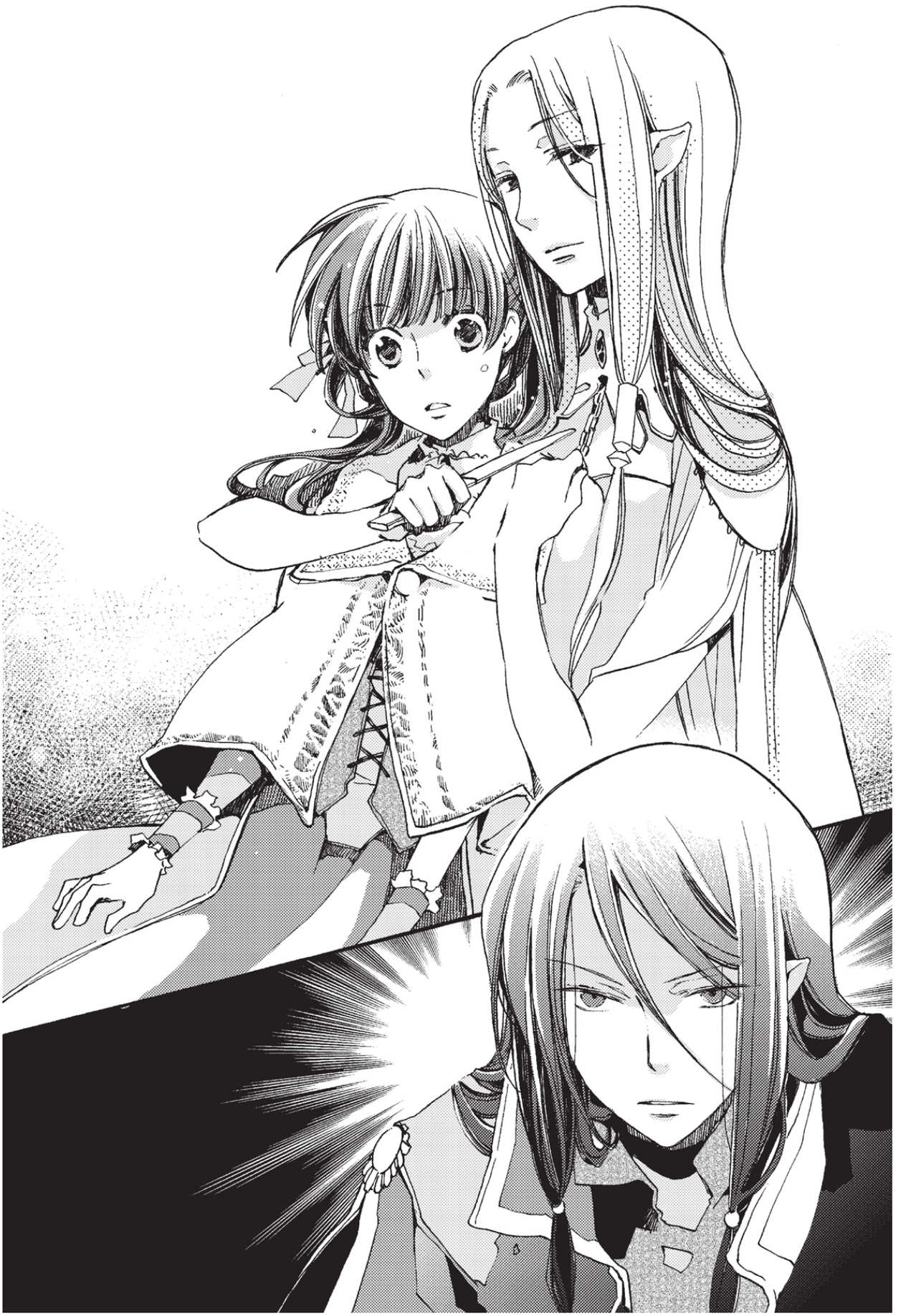
Hugh frowned slightly. He looked hurt by Lulu’s words.

“Give her here,” Challe growled. He looked ready to pounce. “Let Anne go, Lulu.”

Lulu laughed. “Do you want to come with us, Challe? With your strength, we ought to make it pretty far. That’s why I went out of my way to ask you to come with us today. I just want to be free in my final days. Help me, please.”

Challe scowled.

“Did you just say these are your final days, Lulu?”



Chapter 5
FADING POWER, PRESERVING POWER

At Challe's question, Lulu grimaced in a way that made it obvious that she knew she had made a mistake.

All of a sudden, her strength gave out. And she hadn't had much strength to begin with, either to restrain Anne or to thrust the knife at her. Lulu was so weak that Anne could have shaken loose all by herself.

"How vexing… So I don't even have the strength to escape…"

The knife fell from Lulu's hand and hit the stone floor with a metallic clang. Lulu tried to cling to Anne as she slowly collapsed. In no time at all, she lost consciousness.

Hugh quickly loaded Lulu into the carriage and headed back to the royal castle with the candy crafters. Anne propped up Lulu as they were jostled in the carriage. The fairy would not wake up. When Anne felt how light and delicate Lulu's body was, she recalled Noah, the fairy who had refused to eat anything for years because of an order from his former master. Noah had grown nearly too weak to continue living; he had almost disappeared. The way Lulu looked now reminded her of how Noah had looked back then.

Challe carried Lulu to the third floor of the Cocoon Tower, where she lived. The candy crafters watched her after she was laid in her bed.

"We're not getting any more work done today. Go back to the keep."

Hugh looked down at Lulu's limp form and ordered the candy crafters away.

“You told us that when Lulu became bedridden, it was decided that she needed to train her successors, right, Viscount? But is she still unwell? I wonder if someone in such poor health can teach us anything at all.” Stella frowned, looking annoyed.

Hugh grimaced. “Well…no matter what happens, she’s going to teach you,” he said. “It’s her duty. Now go, all of you.”

His evasive words gave Anne a hunch.

Hugh is hiding something.

“What are you standing around for? You too, Anne, go on,” Hugh prompted.

She was about to walk away, when—

“…Wait. Anne, let me apologize.”

Anne heard Lulu’s thin voice and paused. The fairy had finally regained consciousness.

Anne looked at Hugh, wondering what she should do, and he urged her to move close to Lulu’s side.

The other candy crafters had already gone down the stairs. Challe alone remained near the top of the steps.

Anne returned to the bed and crouched beside it. When she looked at Lulu’s face, so pale that it looked almost transparent, as though she might vanish at any moment, Anne’s heart ached.

“That was wrong of me, Anne, to frighten you like that.”

“Oh no, I wasn’t afraid at all.”

Anne answered honestly, and Lulu grimaced.

“Well, that’s pretty bad, then. If I couldn’t scare you even just a little bit, then escape is out of the question.”

“Why are you so weak? I’ll make you some sugar candy. I probably can’t make anything as amazing as you can, but even so, I think eating some will give you a little energy.”

Even when Noah had been on the verge of vanishing, Anne had been able to save his life with candy. If Lulu ate some sugar candy as well, Anne thought she might improve at least a little. But Lulu shook her head.

“I don’t want it. There’s no need.”

“Why is that?”

“Because it’s not necessary,” she asserted forcefully.

Then Lulu looked up at Hugh. He was looking down at her with a stern expression.

“Silver Sugar Viscount,” Lulu said. “How will you punish me, now that I’ve attempted to run away?”

“I won’t punish you. I won’t even tell the queen. As long as you teach the five candy crafters, that is. So long as you just keep that promise, I can overlook almost anything.”

“Just what I’d expect from you. Sugar candy comes first, and everything else hardly matters, so long as it doesn’t disrupt the status quo.”

“That’s right. I am the Silver Sugar Viscount, after all. But tell me, teacher of mine, were you really planning to run away? Or was that just some sort of act? You must have known that you’d never get away.”

“I was serious. I’ve spent so, so long thinking of nothing but escape, so I wanted to try it. That’s all.”

“…What is going on here? Lulu, Viscount…”

They heard a voice quietly reproaching them.

Anne and Hugh turned around simultaneously to see who had spoken. Challe, who had been standing at the top of the spiral staircase, moved aside slightly, and Queen Marguerite came up the stairs.

The queen slowly approached Lulu with an angry expression on her face.

Anne made room for her, and the queen knelt down in the spot where Anne had been and took Lulu’s hand.

“What’s going on, Lulu? I received word from the Silver Sugar Viscount that you went out to look at the sugar apples and collapsed. Didn’t you recover from your spell? You’re hiding something from me, aren’t you? Tell me, please. I’m beside myself with worry.”

The queen’s expression was angry, but her voice was fearful.

Lulu turned her face away on her pillow and shook the queen’s hand off. “Oh, enough. What a pain. I can’t deal with this crybaby right now. Viscount, you explain. It’s too loud, so everyone go downstairs. I’m going to sleep.”

“Lulu!”

“Shut up! Go!”

Still facing away, Lulu yelled, and the queen shut her mouth tightly. She looked like she had been slapped. Hugh gently touched the queen on the shoulder.

“Your Majesty, go downstairs. I will explain.”

Hugh urged Anne, Challe, and the queen down the stairs.

In the workshop where the smell of silver sugar hung in the air, Hugh ordered Anne and Challe to return to the castle keep.

Anne started to head down the spiral staircase with Challe, but when they had gone halfway down, Challe tugged at her arm. When she turned around, he placed his index finger against his lips, signaling her to be quiet. He motioned toward the floor above them with his eyes.

They could hear the queen’s voice.

“Explain it, please, Silver Sugar Viscount. Why is Lulu in such a state?”

Even though Anne knew that it wasn’t good to eavesdrop, she wanted to know Lulu’s true situation. She couldn’t bring herself to leave. Instead, she peeked stealthily into the workshop. The queen had her back to them as she confronted Hugh.

“She’s at the end of her life,” Hugh announced with a sigh.

Anne was startled by his words and looked up at Challe. He frowned.

“She was born from a great tree, so Lulu’s lifespan is very long. I heard from her that at its longest, it could reach about a thousand years. But apparently, she’s been feeling her strength ebbing for the last century or so. When she collapsed four months ago, she knew that her time was near. She figured that at best, she had only half a year left. She informed me of this. At that point, I made a suggestion to His Majesty. I told him that we ought to train more successors in the candy making techniques of the fairies. Lulu was weak, but she agreed to take on students. In exchange, I promised to grant her wishes to the fullest extent possible.”

“It’s been four months since Lulu collapsed.”

“That’s right. She has one or two months left to live.”

“One or two months”?!

Anne felt like her head had been shaken violently.

She recalled the words of the doctor in Knoxberry Village, when he had called Anne out of the house after examining Anne’s mother, Emma, after her fall. “Your mother has half a year to live,” the doctor had said. At that time, Anne had just gaped at

him, overwhelmed by it all. Nothing had seemed real, and her whole body had felt numb.

“One or two months”?! That’s…so soon? How awful.

“You decided this without consulting me? And then you concealed it from me? Something as important as this?”

“Yes.”

As soon as he said this, the queen slapped Hugh’s cheek.

“Why would you disregard me and act on your own?! Everything to do with the silver sugar fairies is my responsibility. Your behavior is unacceptable for a retainer! You should have told me!”

Despite having been struck, Hugh did not turn away from the queen. He stared straight at her.

“It was unacceptable as your retainer. However, my teacher wished for me to move things along without informing you. And I consider her my master. It was the final wish of a fairy who has spent the last five hundred years imprisoned here, doing nothing but working silver sugar. Like a good student, I was going to grant my teacher’s wish, as long as it didn’t cause any problems.”

“Why didn’t she want you to tell me?!”

“Because Lulu knew that you would become emotional, as you have.”

“Emotional?! When have I—”

“…You’re crying, aren’t you?”

Hugh quietly pointed this out, and the queen shook with a start.

“I don’t know what hardships you went through after marrying His Majesty at the age of seventeen. But I do know that when I met you again ten years later, that sensible, timid, and shy girl had become a dignified queen. The royal castle is not a relaxing place to be. You can’t let your guard down. You can’t show anyone your true feelings. But there is one person here who has nothing to do with castle politics: the silver sugar fairy hidden at the center of the castle. You were entrusted with her, and I can imagine what kind of conversations you had with her and what kind of times you spent together. Lulu hated the idea of making you cry. You know her and her disposition.”

The queen hung her head. Her shoulders were still shaking.

“Marguerite.”

Hugh called her name as if trying to comfort her, and the queen lifted her head abruptly.

“I won’t permit you to look at me with such pity in your eyes. I am the queen, wife of His Majesty the King.”

“I will ask Lulu to continue instructing her successors.”

“You are an awful man, Hugh. To ask that of Lulu when she’s so weak.”

“It would be even more awful if the secret techniques of the fairies were to disappear. For fairykind and humankind both.”

His voice was cold, befitting a Silver Sugar Viscount.



“One or two months left.”

After they had eavesdropped on the conversation between Hugh and the queen, Challe urged Anne on, and they left the Cocoon Tower. Anne seemed to have been rattled by the discussion about the end of Lulu’s life, and she was wearing a doleful expression as they headed back toward the castle keep. Challe had also been rather shocked, but the revelation had been no great surprise.

Fairies born from large trees were said to have the potential to live from several hundred to a thousand years. But Lulu was already six hundred years old. Accounting for individual differences, it was no wonder her time to die was approaching.

Challe finally understood Lulu’s feelings and why she had simply wished to meet Challe, the fairy to whom Riselva had entrusted the future. Aware that her life was coming to a close, she must have wanted to check on certain things that were important to her.

As they stepped off the cobblestone path that led straight from the Cocoon Tower and into the hallway of the castle keep, Anne suddenly grabbed Challe’s jacket. When he stopped and looked down at her, she was hanging her head. All he could see was the hair on the back of her head.

“Listen, Challe…do you like Lulu?”

As a fellow fairy, he ached at Lulu's circumstances. And she was not an unpleasant person. Still, it had only been two days since they'd met. He didn't particularly like or dislike her.

"I don't dislike her."

He gave this initial answer, and Anne's grip on his jacket tightened.

"Lulu seems to like you, too. Could she become your lover?"

"Lulu?"

Challe had spent a long time with Lulu the previous day, but she hadn't been flirtatious in the slightest.

"She told me to ask you. Lulu did. To ask if you could become her lover, Challe."

"What do you think?"

"Why ask me? This is a question for you and Lulu to consider. It's none of my business."

"None of your business? What does that mean?"

The tone of his voice demanded an explanation, but Anne didn't look up.

"After all, it's only natural. You and Lulu, I mean. I don't have the right to object."

Anne sounded indifferent. He couldn't see her expression.

None of Anne's business? Only natural? Quite right.

"So could Lulu become your lover?"

"…Is that what you want?"

The moment he asked, Anne's shoulders shook with a start. Then she nodded sharply. If Anne desired something, Challe wanted to grant it, no matter what it was. But when Anne nodded, it suddenly became painful to be close to her.

"If that's what you wish…very well. The question is whether I can become her lover or not, yes? Let me go try."

Challe spun around. Anne's hand, which had been holding tightly to his jacket, slipped away.



As she listened to the sound of Challe's boots heading toward the Cocoon Tower again, Anne was unable to lift her head.

Don't cry. Don't cry.

She had practiced this over and over again in her mind, but in the depths of her heart, she could hear herself calling Challe's name. There was nothing she could do about the conflict raging in her chest.

This is Lulu's wish.

The moment Anne had learned that Lulu's remaining time was only one or two months, the image of Emma lying in her bed for the whole half a year before she'd died had arisen in her mind, and now it wouldn't leave her thoughts.

When Emma passed, Anne had been bitterly upset about those six months. She had blamed herself, convinced that if she had been stronger, she would have been able to make some more enjoyable memories for Emma during the end of her life.

Lulu's time was even shorter. The end of her life was right before their eyes.

Lulu was a fairy. If she ate some sugar candy, her life would probably lengthen, but she had already rejected Anne's proposal, flatly and without hesitation. That reminded Anne of Noah. She got the feeling that deep down, Lulu did not want to live. Something about her gave one the sense she was weary of life.

If a fairy who had been kept prisoner by humans for five hundred years desired something, then Anne wanted to give it to her, no matter what it was.

Lulu had said that she wouldn't mind taking Challe as her lover. If she had a partner like Challe, that might help her rediscover the desire to live. She might agree to eat some sugar candy and extend her life. And if that happened, Challe would also get a companion.

Everything would work out great.

"Anne? What's going on?"

Someone called her name from behind her. It was Keith. But she couldn't manage to turn around or even to raise her head.

"What's the matter, Anne?" Keith asked in his usual kind, considerate tone. He was standing directly in front of Anne, peering down at her face.

"Are you crying?"

She wished she could say no and look up at him with a smile on her face, but it was impossible. Keith's hands touched both of

Anne's shoulders, and he gently, hesitantly pulled her toward him.

"What's the matter? I don't know what happened, but I think it's all right to cry if you want to, don't you?"

The moment he said that, Anne burst into tears. Her shoulders shook.

On some level, Anne did want Challe and Lulu to become lovers, but even though she knew that was the right thing to be hoping for, the thought was so painful that it made her want to tear out her heart. Her feelings were in hopeless disarray.

"Anne. It's okay to cry."

Even though Keith was hugging her tightly, she was hardly even aware of it.



Anne looked different when she was crying. She didn't seem like she was going to hurry off somewhere, like she usually did. Perhaps that made Keith feel secure somehow, because his impatience seemed to melt away in that moment.

She looked so pitiful as she sobbed that he instinctively hugged her. Holding her like that, he felt the warmth from her body and the feminine slenderness of her frame, so different from a man's. That made him hug her even tighter. Anne did not resist. When he buried his face in her hair, he smelled the fragrance of silver sugar. A sweet scent.

"Anne, it's okay to cry."

When he whispered that, Anne sobbed even harder. A sweet, tender feeling flooded Keith's chest.

I want to make her mine.

For the first time in his life, Keith felt a strong urge for someone.

Since Anne was his rival, someone with whom he wanted to stand on an equal footing, Keith had been feeling anxious about everything that she said or did. He'd been worried and scared that she might climb out of his reach someday. Anne was someone to compete against and work with. But she was

unmistakably a girl, and her body was much slenderer and her skin much softer than his. That was abundantly clear to him now.

We're both candy crafters. But Anne is a girl.

Feelings of affection flooded his chest. He hadn't noticed the obvious because he had only seen Anne as a fellow candy crafter before.

Keith was worried that his fear of being outpaced would come back to haunt him as soon as Anne stopped crying. But he was a man, so he didn't think he ought to feel so anxious or impatient.

Holding a girl made him sharply aware of his own masculinity. Keith was a man, and he was taller than Anne. He was stronger. His hands were bigger. When he thought about it like that, he felt ridiculous being worried and anxious.

If he was worried, all he had to do was work harder, until his anxieties disappeared. All he had to do was keep polishing his skills.

The girl crying in his arms was small and helpless, and he didn't want to let her cry any longer. If he could hug her tight and remove the sadness in her heart, he would.

As a candy crafter, Anne was his competition. But at the same time, she was a weak little girl, and Keith was a man who was much stronger. He understood that clearly.

I want to stand with her and protect her. I want to make Anne mine.

His desire for Anne was more powerful than any he had ever known before. He couldn't dismiss it. The light of the setting sun shone in, casting Anne and Keith's elongated shadows down the hall.

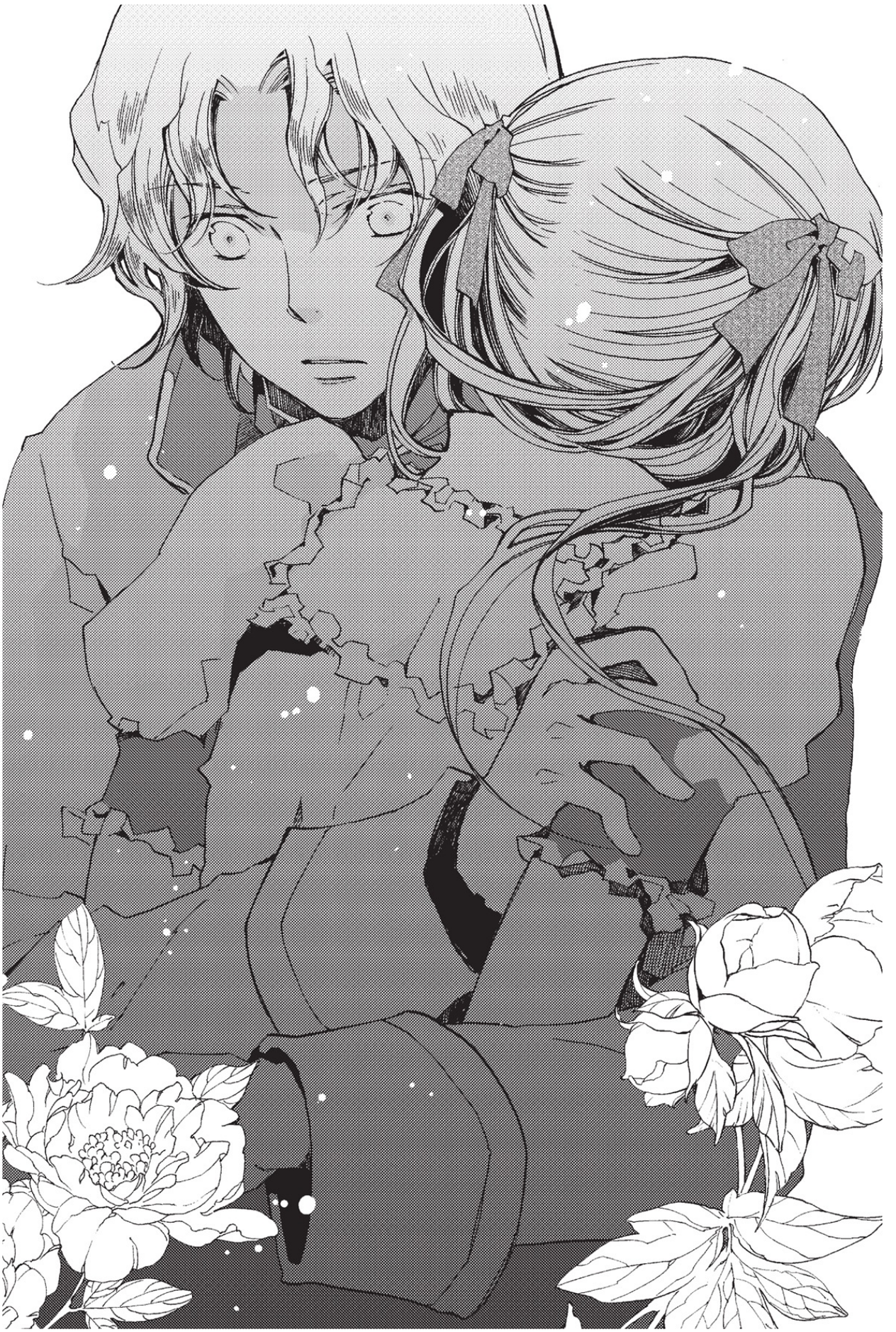


Challe headed for the Cocoon Tower. This was what Anne wanted. If he kept that in mind, he could do anything without hesitation.

But this time, his chest felt painful and empty.

Hugh and the queen appeared to have left the Cocoon Tower. There was no sign of anyone inside. Challe climbed the spiral

staircase to the third floor and cut across the room, going straight for Lulu's bed.



Lulu looked comfortable. She was sleeping peacefully. Suddenly, for some reason, Challe found himself aggravated with her. He placed one knee up on the bed and leaned over her.

"Wake up, Lulu."

Lulu opened her eyes. She looked startled to see Challe's face so close at hand. Her eyes bulged in surprise.

"What?! What is the meaning of this, Challe?!"

"Apparently, you want to know if I might become your lover."

"…Huh?"

Ignoring Lulu's frown, Challe put his hand on her chin.

"I don't know anything about you, since it's only been two days. I'll have to try *everything*."

"W-wait!! I just remembered! I was teasing Anne. Is that what this is about?! Don't tell me that Anne really asked you about this? Did she tell you something about me wanting to make you my lover?"

In a panic, Lulu put both hands on Challe's shoulders and pushed him away.

"I got your message loud and clear from Anne," Challe said. "We'll give it a try."

"You idiot! Don't even think about trying something when you look and sound so disinterested! It's perfectly obvious that you're angry with me!"

When she said that, something finally clicked with Challe. He realized why Lulu was so aggravating and why he was so irritated and angry with her.

"I was just teasing Anne about that!" she continued. "It just slipped out because Anne was moping about so much. Anyway, back off. Even if you don't really mean it, having your face so close is unnerving."

Challe straightened up. Lulu breathed a sigh of relief and slowly sat up in the bed. As she combed through her disheveled hair, she smiled wryly.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think she was so simple. I don't want to try you out as a lover. I'm six hundred years old, for God's sake. I've completely lost any interest in such coarse matters as love and sex. However—"

Lulu looked up at Challe meaningfully.

“When I see how upset Anne’s request made you, I can tell you also have feelings for her.”

“What are you saying?”

“The fact that you got mad when Anne asked you about becoming my lover means that you’re in love with Anne, right?”

Challe frowned, not quite understanding. Lulu’s expression turned exasperated.

“Can’t you tell? You want to stay by Anne’s side so bad you can’t stand it, right? Don’t you feel a wild, urgent desire to pull her close to you?”

He couldn’t answer. Because she was exactly right.

Lulu seemed to take his silence as affirmation, and she continued. “That’s what we call love, you know. You’re in love with Anne.”

Love?!

Challe was dumbfounded.

I can’t be! In love—with the scarecrow…?

It was true that he found her charming and difficult to resist. And that sometimes he wanted to touch her so badly he couldn’t stand it.

Challe had long since realized that those feelings he had toward Anne were different from the feelings he’d harbored for Liz. But this was the first time he had heard that those special feelings went by the name of love.

“What’s the matter, Challe Fenn Challe? Your face is a little red.”

Lulu grinned suggestively. Challe was annoyed, but he couldn’t find the right words to say anything back. Challe immediately took a seat on the edge of Lulu’s bed.

“What’s wrong with it? Go ahead and fall in love. Fall in love, have fun, get hurt.”

“She’s…a human.”

“So what?”

“I’ll make her unhappy.”

At that answer, Lulu looked at him in confusion, then laughed loudly.

“You are an idiot! If it were a one-sided love, it might make the other person unhappy, but if you love each other, you don’t have to worry about that.”

“Even if we’re both in love, we’re a fairy and a human. Our lifespans are different, everything about us is different. Even if we love one another, she’ll reach the end of her life having only known my companionship. As a human, she will leave nothing behind.”

“And that’s why you’re such an idiot. It’s stupid to say she won’t leave anything behind. She’ll leave behind proof that she lived in all sorts of ways. The results of her actions, the things she creates, the memories of the time she spends with people. Her presence will linger in many forms. And the question of life spans is of little importance.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Think about it. Even though we were both fairies, King Riselva and I lived for vastly different spans of time. If it had been left to nature, however, King Riselva would have lived a lot longer than me. It’s the same for humans, surely. Even if you think you’ll live the same amount of time as someone else, it’s common for one partner’s life to be cut short by illness or accident. It’s like saying it wouldn’t be worth taking a spouse because your companion might get sick in the future or meet with some sort of accident.”

“You’re just rationalizing.”

“Maybe I am. But you know, the most important thing about being alive is the many happy experiences and memories we accumulate. It would be a terrible folly to allow fear and anger to rob us of those things. But anyway, I suppose the question is, assuming you two both love one another, what happy memories might you make together?”

Challe knew that Anne did not dislike him. But he wondered if she thought about him as anything more than a reliable friend. Earlier, when Challe had asked if Anne wanted him to become Lulu’s lover, Anne had nodded.

Surely she wouldn’t tell the person she loved that she wanted him to become involved with a different woman? But this was Anne they were talking about. He could imagine her taking Lulu at her word and suppressing her own feelings for Lulu’s sake.

How does she feel?

For the first time, he was curious about Anne’s feelings. He wondered who she loved.

He wondered if she even had those feelings, since she had always been so preoccupied with sugar candy.

“Don’t be afraid. Bring it up with her and find out how she feels. You’ve got a chance at love, so what are you worrying about?”

Lulu’s words sank into his chest and settled there. It felt like they were washing away the unhappy future that Lafalle had predicted for him.

“It’s no use holding back, Challe. That hesitation is exactly the thing that will make both of you unhappy. You know, I envy you. These last five hundred years of mine have been empty. I have nothing worth remembering. My physical safety was always guaranteed, and I had no complaints about how I was employed, but really, I was just passing the days. By comparison, the hundred years that I spent with King Riselva were flooded with color. There were hardships, sure, but thinking back on it now, even those are just one more color in the palette.”

At those words, which Lulu had spoken so nonchalantly, Challe felt an intense rage toward humankind that he had not felt for a long time.

Though her physical safety had been guaranteed, being forced to live an unchanging existence here for five hundred whole years was torture. It was all the more so because it had gone on for so long.

“Do you want me to threaten the queen and take your wing back, so you can escape?”

Lulu waved her hand dismissively.

“If you do that, Marguerite will surely be punished.”

“Surely you don’t care what happens to the human who has control of your wing?”

“I do care, unfortunately. She’s been a good conversation partner for me these last ten years. I’m quite fond of her.”

“Are you a fool? You’re just grateful to have someone to talk to since you were already imprisoned here.”

“You’re right about that. But I can’t help that I developed some fondness for her,” Lulu mumbled with a soft smile.

“But you tried to run away this afternoon. If you had escaped, the Silver Sugar Viscount would have taken the blame. You don’t mind that, do you?”

“That I don’t. He’s a tough character. If I were to run away, he would be the only person left who knew my techniques. They’d come down on him harshly, but they wouldn’t take his life.”

“If you’d left your wing behind when you ran, it would have been torn up immediately. Even if you’d escaped, you would have had several days to live at best. Why do that?”

“…My life will be over soon anyway. I wanted to have a little adventure. That’s all.”

“Eat some sugar candy. You should be able to make the best candy there is and eat it yourself.”

“I don’t want to go to those lengths to extend my life.”

“Why not?”

“No matter how long I live, in the end, my techniques and knowledge both are going to pass to humans, and then it’ll be over. I’ll hand something cultivated by fairies over to humans, and my life will end. Even if I live longer than this, I’ll never amount to more than that.”

Lulu must have felt dismayed that the silver sugar candy techniques that fairies had developed would ultimately end up in human hands. It was all the more frustrating because there were still fairies around as well.

She had given up on passing to other fairies the knowledge that they had cultivated among themselves. She was helpless to change that. But it was sapping her energy nevertheless.

Fairy things should be in fairy hands.

It wasn’t anger but calm determination that suddenly surfaced in Challe’s mind.

No one knew Riselva’s dying wishes. Even Challe and his two brother stones did not know what legacy he had entrusted to them. But assuming that it was something very important for the fairies, it was probably not his duty to make war against the humans.

Fairy things being passed on to fairies—that seemed much more important than war.

“That’s a serious face you’re making, Challe. You seem to have a lot of different things to think about. You should shut yourself away someplace quiet until your thoughts are collected. The top floor of this tower, for example, would be perfect.”

In the state he was in, even if Challe were by Anne's side, his feelings would be in disarray, and he wouldn't know what to say or do.

He needed to digest what Lulu and Lafalle had said. And he needed to consider the hopeless silver sugar fairy stretched out before his eyes, as well as the dying wishes of the fairy king who had entrusted the future to him, and his own feelings, of course. He had been putting off thinking about these things for long enough.

"Could I stay here for a while?"

"I don't mind. Marguerite and the Silver Sugar Viscount only rarely show their faces here, and it's not like they would say anything if they saw you in here anyway. But leave that talk aside for a minute. The guy over there, is he an acquaintance of yours?"

When Challe shifted his eyes over to the spiral staircase where Lulu was pointing, he saw Mithril Lid Pod standing there, trembling all over.

That fool!

He wanted to shout at Mithril, the unlawful trespasser, for shamelessly intruding here. But if he made an uproar, it would cause even greater pandemonium.

"Mithril Lid Pod, why are you here?"

"I saw you through the window. You and Anne were acting kind of strange. And then you left. I thought it was odd, so I went to check on things, and Anne was crying."

Challe wondered why Anne was crying. It was curious. But first, he had to do something about Mithril.

"Go back to the room immediately, Mithril Lid Pod," he commanded quietly. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

But Mithril started yelling.

"What are you gonna do after you send me back to the room, huh?! I misjudged you, Challe Fenn Challe! Just one day after you pin Anne down, you have a secret rendezvous with such a beautiful lady! Even if you are nothing but a pervert, I thought you'd at least take some sort of responsibility after holding a girl down like that! You're unbelievable!"

Challe almost felt dizzy at Mithril's outrageous accusations.

"Who held who down now?"

“You pinned Anne down! I saw you! Clearly, with these very eyes!”

“Oh, good going, Challe. It sounds like you don’t need any advice from me.”

Lulu seemed sincerely impressed, and Challe put his head in his hand. How on Earth was he going to explain that to anyone? He was exhausted just thinking about it.



As Anne cried, her turbulent emotions settled down bit by bit.

Challe had gone to Lulu. At first, that fact had made her feel like a thunderstorm was swirling in her chest. But eventually, that feeling gave way to a sort of flat resignation.

She wanted to do something for Lulu, who had been a prisoner for five hundred years. Considering it was humans who had kept her in chains, Anne felt that as a human, she ought to do something herself.

Lulu wanted her freedom, but she couldn’t have it, and she had been instructed to teach Anne and the other candy crafters her techniques. If that woman wanted Challe for a lover, then as long as Challe was all right with it, Anne thought he ought to be with her.

It’s stupid to stand here crying. This is a good thing.

If Challe could give Lulu a reason for living, then her life could still be extended.

As her tears came to a stop, Keith asked her comfortingly, “Are you all right, Anne?”

“…Yeah.”

When she answered him, she was startled to realize Keith was still holding her in his arms. He was warm. His soft bow tie was right in front of her eyes. She hurriedly leaped away from him.

“Ah, s-s-sorry, Keith!” she said in a panic. “Did I get your tie dirty?!”

“It’s not dirty, and you don’t have to apologize. You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to, but…is Challe the reason you’re crying?”

“No, I’m just being stupid… It’s about Lulu’s life.”

Looking surprised, Keith answered her with a question. “Her life? Lulu seems to be unwell. Is that because she’s at the end of her life?”

Anne knew she had messed up, but it didn’t seem like she would have any luck trying to deceive Keith, perceptive as he was. She nodded.

“Lulu’s got just one or two months left.”

“No…”

Keith was at a loss for words. Anne looked up at him.

“Listen, Keith. Would you make some sugar candy for Lulu? If we do that, it will extend her life.”

“Where did you hear about that, Anne?”

A voice came from the dim hallway behind her. When she spun around in alarm, Hugh came walking toward them from the other end of the hallway into the castle keep. The look in his eyes was sharp, and his presence was clearly different from that of the friendly, kind man that they knew.

Anne faltered. “Well, I…”

But Keith quickly interrupted. “Is it true?” he demanded. “Is it true that Lulu has just one or two months left to live?”

“It’s true. It hasn’t got anything to do with you all, so I deliberately didn’t tell you, but now that the queen knows, there’s not really any need to hide it.”

“How can you say it has nothing to do with us? We’re talking about the last days of the person who will be teaching us!” In spite of herself, Anne raised her voice.

Hugh answered her with a blank expression.

“Anne, humans who think the way you do are a rare breed. Do you think the other four candy crafters are going to do anything for a fairy, who they see as someone to be used?”

“Even if she is a fairy, she’s still our teacher. And please don’t decide for yourself how we all think,” Keith said, challenging him.

Hugh shrugged.

“In that case, go tell the other three about how long Lulu’s got left. Discuss it among yourselves. All five of you.”

“All right, I will.” Keith nodded.

Hugh suddenly took Anne by the arm. “Keith, you go to the room upstairs. I’ve got something I want to ask Anne,” he said.

Hugh tugged at Anne’s arm and led her into the darkness down the corridor. He opened the door to a room that was not in use and closed it again once they were inside. The only thing filling the empty stone room was the light of the setting sun. The air was cold. The chill from the stone floor they were walking across passed through the soles of Anne’s shoes right into the bottoms of her feet.

Hugh’s harsh aura was frightening. Anne backed up until she was pressed against the cold stone wall. She felt cornered.

Chapter 6
SPINDLES AND SILVER THREAD

“Anne, where did you hear about exactly how long Lulu has left to live? I was trying to keep that under wraps. So was Lulu. Today was the first time I said anything about it, and I only mentioned it once. Just that one time. Were you eavesdropping?”

She had been completely exposed. There was nothing she could do but admit it.

“I’m sorry. I overheard you. I was worried about Lulu’s condition. I wanted to know the truth.”

Hugh heaved a sigh, then turned away from Anne and looked out the window.

“You and?”

“Me and Challe.”

“Well, I suppose I don’t have to worry about Challe. He won’t say anything he shouldn’t. You either, Anne. And at this point, it’s all right for you to talk about the time that Lulu has left. But you must forget everything else you saw in that room.”

Anne understood that “everything else” referred to the situation between Hugh and the queen.

“I understand… But, Hugh, aren’t you taking a risk? If someone found out how things really are…”

That was what she was worried about. If the Silver Sugar Viscount was developing an intimate personal friendship with the queen, that would surely be seen as an act of betrayal toward His Majesty, a major crime that could end in death for both Hugh and the queen. And it wouldn’t be a simple beheading. It would

be the punishment given to the most wicked criminals in the Kingdom of Highland—they would be burned at the stake.

In Highland, where there was a custom of returning the body to the earth, burning someone alive, until even their corpse was reduced to ash and had disappeared from the world, was the most serious punishment there was.

“You’ve misunderstood. Don’t worry.”

The light of the setting sun hit Hugh’s face, etching complex shadows into his features.

“The queen was the daughter of the Cabot family, a branch of the Millsland family. I visited the Cabot household frequently as a crafter for the Mercury Workshop, that’s all. His Majesty knows that. I had friendly chats with her while I was there. But ultimately, I was a candy crafter, and she was a noblewoman. The difference in our stations was clear, you see? She has always considered me a friend, but I could never take that step, not in my mind anyway.”

Before Hugh became Silver Sugar Viscount, he’d apparently had a reputation among the aristocracy as a skilled candy crafter with the Mercury Workshop. He’d also had regular dealings with Lord Alburn, for whom Anne had made sugar candy before.

“‘A friend.’” The queen had used the same words, and Anne wondered if she was just imagining that there was something hidden in them.

At the very least, before she was married, the queen must have harbored some kind of feelings for Hugh. And how had Hugh felt? The reason Anne was thinking so much about it was that she was always calling Challe her friend while yearning for something more.

“It would be awful if someone misunderstood, so I won’t tell anyone.”

“Please don’t. Now you go on up, too, and talk to the other candy crafters. Also, tell everyone this: Lulu will resume teaching you starting tomorrow. Come to the Cocoon Tower at the same time you did today.”

“In her condition?!”

“She has no choice. She must do as she is ordered.”

Hugh said that, then turned his gaze back toward the window. His expression revealed a melancholy that was not typical of him.

After a few moments of silence, Hugh dug through his pocket as if he had suddenly remembered something. “I almost forgot,” he said. “Lulu has homework for you five. ‘How would you go about shaping silver sugar dough into something using a different method than you ever have before? Think about it,’ she said. So look at this, and think it over. Take it.”

He presented Anne with a slender rod about half as long as his arm.

At one end of the rod, a small stone weight was attached to the tip. A wooden disk was affixed to it about one finger length from the weight, the rod passing through the disk’s center.

“A spindle?”

It was a tool used for spinning cotton or wool into thread. As soon as Anne took it, Hugh waved her away.

“Go.”

As she rushed up the stairs, Anne couldn’t suppress the feelings that were swelling up inside her chest.

This is too much.

It was overwhelming to think that a woman who had been enslaved for five hundred whole years was just going to vanish.

Even if she wasn’t going to get any recompense for the five hundred years that had been taken from her, they—the candy crafters who were learning from her—needed to do something for her. If they didn’t, humanity as a whole would become an ugly, wretched mass in Lulu’s eyes.

And on top of all that, homework…

She didn’t understand what to do with the spindle.

When she arrived in front of the big room that the candy crafters used as both dining hall and living room, she heard Elliott’s voice coming from behind the door.

“One or two months?!”

“Yes. That’s why I thought we ought to get Lulu to make and eat some sugar candy. If she did that, her life would lengthen.”

“But fairies’ lives cannot be so easily extended. Even if it was sugar candy made by the Silver Sugar Viscount, I’ve heard that it wouldn’t lengthen a fairy’s life more than a few months,” Killean said with composure.

Then she heard Keith’s frantic voice.

“The Silver Sugar Viscount only makes normal sugar candy, right? But Lulu said it herself. The sugar candy sculpture that she showed us was something even stronger, made using the fairies’ best techniques. If the candy was made using those methods, it might lengthen her life even more. Surely it would give her years instead of months.”

“But the Silver Sugar Viscount can’t make sugar candy for anyone other than His Majesty the King.”

“Couldn’t we make it? In the coming days, while we’re studying under Lulu, we could make something for her.”

Stella’s apathetic voice interrupted Keith’s impassioned speech. “Am I included in this ‘we’ you’re talking about?” he asked.

“Not confident enough, Stella?” Keith replied provocatively.

“What?”

“If we can’t adequately master the skills we’re taught, we won’t be able to make anything good. Lulu’s recovery will tell us whether we’ve made good candy or not. There can be no clearer assessment than that, can there? Are you afraid of the results coming to light?”

“I never said I wasn’t confident. What’s with you, Keith? You’ve got some attitude.”

“Sorry, but I thought this was a good opportunity. If you’re going to take such a defiant stance, you’ll lose your chance to grow as a candy crafter,” Keith asserted decisively.

Elliott whistled at him lightheartedly. “What’s happened to you, Keith? You’ve turned into a real man all of a sudden.”

“Please don’t tease me.”

“Fine. Anyway, the question is whether or not Lulu will recover enough to be able to teach us, right? For the time being, how about we make some normal sugar candy and get her to eat that? She’d probably get at least a little bit better. Also, the Silver Sugar Viscount has already learned Lulu’s techniques, hasn’t he? That raises the question of whether we can learn from him.”

Killean answered Elliott’s questions thoughtfully. “I talked to the Viscount yesterday, but it sounds like it will be difficult for us to learn from him. The Viscount has learned the techniques from Lulu. But they’re apparently rather tricky. The Viscount is more or less able to make candy with them. But even he is slow at it and still makes mistakes. He told me that he is not proficient

enough to teach the skills himself. Lulu is the only one who can teach us."

"I guess we're stuck learning from her, then, huh? But with Lulu in that condition…" Keith groaned.

"She's going to start teaching us again tomorrow. Hugh…the Silver Sugar Viscount said so."

Anne answered him as she opened the door and stepped into the room. Everyone turned to her simultaneously. Elliott, who was sitting cross-legged in front of the hearth, frowned when he heard her report.

"In that state?" he asked. "Is she really in teaching shape?"

Anne shook her head.

"I don't know," she replied. "But the Viscount said that she has to do as she's ordered… But I do want to learn the techniques that Lulu knows—I really want to learn them. And I want to make sugar candy for Lulu. After all, she's done nothing but make candy for humans for so long. So if she'll teach me, I'll learn from her and make candy for her. I'll do it alone if I have to. Also, we have homework from Lulu."

The first person to react to the word *homework* was Stella. He raised an eyebrow with a twitch and looked at Anne.

"What do you mean, 'homework'?" Stella asked.

"She told us to look at this tool and think about this question: 'How would you go about shaping silver sugar dough into something using a different method than you ever have before?'"

Anne held up the spindle to show them, and the crafters all made the same quizzical expression. Spinning cotton and wool into thread was women's work, so the men were not familiar with the tool.

"It's a spindle. You use it to spin cotton and wool and stuff into thread."

Keith cocked his head. "We're to look at this and think? I wonder if you can use it in place of spatulas and knives?"

"Isn't that something you would use to form the core of a candy sculpture? The shape looks like it would be easy to pull back out," Stella said dismissively.

Elliott stroked his chin. "It's not that simple a solution, I'm sure."

Killean wiped his monocle and put it back on, then stared intensely at the spindle. “Maybe you don’t use the thing itself, maybe the word *spindle* is a hint…”

Anne looked down at the spindle in her hand.

She didn’t know. Even if the word was a hint, she couldn’t even begin to understand what it was suggesting.

Humans could not easily grasp techniques that fairies had spent hundreds of years mastering. She had a feeling that Lulu was making sure they all appreciated that fact.

That night, Challe did not come back to the room. But no tears came. Before Anne got swept away in such emotions, there was something she had to do.

If Lulu was going to teach them even when she was so weak, then Anne and the others needed to take in everything she had to teach them without missing the tiniest detail. And if it was possible for them to make the highest-quality sugar candy, then she felt that they ought to, for Lulu’s sake.

Everything will work out great.

She wanted to believe that.

What worried her was Mithril. He wasn’t in the room. He had left a note on the bed that said, *I’m stepping out for a bit. Don’t worry!* But she was anxious about where he was and what he was doing there.

He didn’t come back, no matter how long she waited, so Anne slipped out of bed in the middle of the night, intending to look for Mithril. She walked all around the inside of the castle keep, and once she confirmed that he wasn’t there, she went outside. She followed the castle wall all the way around. After that, she thought about going to look in some other places, but she was relying on the dim light of a candle and feared that she would get lost in the labyrinthine castle.

Even though she was wearing a stole on top of her nightgown, the night air was still chilly. Her fingertips and toes were frozen, and she was ready to give up and go quietly back to bed.

“Mithril Lid Pod…where could you have gone…?”

When Anne stepped into the hallway of the castle keep, she saw a human figure. She stopped and held the candle aloft, revealing

a man in a blue jacket standing at the back door of the keep with his back to her. He was looking up at the Cocoon Tower from the doorway.

Anne had seen him before. It was Eddie, the queen's attendant. The light of the first-quarter moon cast his faint shadow onto the stone walkway. Illuminated by the cheerful moonlight, he somehow looked terribly lonesome.

"Out for a walk again tonight, Mr. Eddie?"

When she approached him quietly and spoke to him, Eddie turned around with a sad smile on his face. Anne curtsied and greeted him once more.

"That's right, out for a walk. I wasn't planning to, but then I heard that the silver sugar fairy has only one or two months left to live. What a shock… I ended up here. I suppose the Silver Sugar Viscount must have known about this, and that's why he proposed that we should train her successors four months back. Do the candy crafters know that the silver sugar fairy's life is coming to an end?"

"Yes, we learned about it today."

The flame of the candle she was holding flickered in the breeze that blew past them.

"What kind of person is the silver sugar fairy, Miss Halford?" Eddie asked, turning back to look at the Cocoon Tower.

"What kind of person? Well, let me see… She's a splendid candy crafter."

"'Splendid,' huh…? Generation after generation of queens have been responsible for the silver sugar fairies. Other people have nothing to do with them ordinarily. Even I've only met her once. It was fifteen years ago, when she was called on to make a piece of candy. The royal family needed some good fortune when the Chamber Rebellion happened, you see. It was Downing's suggestion."

The eyes of the queen's attendant were incredibly clear. They had a sincere glint to them, as if the man was trying not to overlook anything important. That quality made them all the more beautiful. In his expression, Anne sensed a youthful strength.

"Why did they go to the silver sugar fairy and not the Silver Sugar Viscount?" Anne asked. "They had a Silver Sugar Viscount

in those days, too, right? Back then, Master Powell was the Viscount. Let's see, that was probably about five years after he assumed the office."

"The candy that the silver sugar fairy made with the fairies' techniques was more beautiful than anything that the Viscount could make himself. The fairies' candy had greater potential to bring good fortune. It's what allowed the royal family to emerge victorious. The Chambers were known for their outstanding military prowess, you see."

"Lulu—the silver sugar fairy—told me something. She said that fairies have a keener intuition for sugar candy than humans do. That's why they're better suited for crafting sugar candy."

"But it's so unfortunate. To think, that silver sugar fairy won't be with us anymore."

"But if we teach her techniques to other fairy candy crafters…"

"Are there other fairy candy crafters?"

"There aren't. But Lulu said that if we get lots of fairies involved in the work of candy crafting, just like humans, then there's a possibility that some fairies with the right talents will stand out from the rest. If lots of fairies work as crafting apprentices in the workshops just like humans do, surely that will produce other silver sugar fairies on Lulu's level."

When Eddie heard that, his eyes widened a little. "That's an interesting idea," he said. "Fairies apprenticing at workshops, huh? But fairies are all supposed to be slaves."

"Was that a mandate established by a previous ruler a long time ago? I've always thought it was strange."

As long as Anne had been aware of the world, fairies had been hunted, had their wings torn from them, and been made into slaves. When she asked the adults around her how long things had been like that, they could only say that it had been that way since many, many years ago.

Fairies were slaves. But who had decided things would be that way and when? Why did most people accept this arrangement as the natural order of things, as Stella did? She couldn't help but wonder.

"No. It wasn't a decision made by the state. Fairies are simply handled the way they are out of custom."

"So it's not a rule?"

“It’s a custom. But those can be even more bothersome than laws sometimes. The king can’t simply change things by handing down an order.”

“So magnificent sugar candy is going to disappear from the world because humans are set in their ways…?”

Even though it had no justification, humankind was tied down by this custom. Moreover, the fairies were oppressed by it. In a way, the custom was like a plague—intangible yet dreadful in its effects.

“Probably, yes. And that, too, is unfortunate. That the light of five hundred years of mastery will just…vanish.”

After a brief, hesitant silence, Eddie suddenly let out a long yawn.

“I’m tired. I think I’ll go back. You should get some sleep, too, Miss Halford.”

Eddie slowly turned his back on her and walked away. He looked really worn out.

The following morning, Anne headed for the workspace in the Cocoon Tower along with the other candy crafters.

Lulu was already there, waiting in the workroom, which was flooded with morning light. She was sitting comfortably in a chair in the corner with her legs crossed, and she greeted the crafters as they came up the stairs.

“Good morning, everyone.”

Challe was standing next to Lulu, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, wearing a sullen expression. Seeing him like that, Anne felt a little jolt of pain shoot through her chest. Challe must have spent the previous night with Lulu.

If Challe has become Lulu’s lover, I will make a piece of sugar candy to extend Lulu’s life.

Anne felt heartbroken, but she encouraged herself with that thought and stood up straight.

“We’ll get started immediately. You now understand why the colors on the sugar candy piece that I showed you were more vivid than on a normal candy sculpture, right? That was the first lesson. Now for the second. Let me teach you how I put it together, using a method I’m sure you’ve never encountered. I

gave you homework yesterday. Did any of you get any ideas when you were looking at that spindle?"

Lulu pulled out a spindle and looked around at each of the candy crafters.

No one could answer her, including Anne. Ultimately, none of the five of them had hit upon anything.

The silence seemed like a harsh rebuke from Lulu. Stella was chewing on his lip a little, looking frustrated.

After a little while, Lulu finally spoke. "There's nothing to be ashamed of," she said. "I'd be embarrassed if you all grasped in a single night a skill that took fairies hundreds of years to develop."

Lulu skillfully twirled the spindle around in her palm. "We'll use this to shape the sugar candy. Spreading, cutting, and twisting aren't the only methods for assembling sugar candy sculptures."

Lulu signaled to Challe with her eyes. Then he handed Lulu a piece of kneaded sugar dough about the size of her palm that was sitting on one of the workbenches. Lulu stretched it into a long snake. She folded it in half, stretched it out long again, and folded it in half again.

As she repeated those steps, several thin, glimmering streaks began to appear in the silver sugar dough.

"After it was boiled out of the sugar apples and dried, this silver sugar was milled five times."

"Five times?!" Killean shouted hysterically.

"That's on the low end," Lulu said, as if it were perfectly normal. "When I was still full of energy, I milled silver sugar as many as ten times. When you mill it many times over, the texture of the silver sugar changes. I'm sure you all noticed yesterday that the feel of this silver sugar is different."

As she talked, Lulu kept on folding and stretching, folding and stretching the silver sugar dough, and after a little while, she called to Challe again. He carried over a small jar, and Lulu dipped her fingers into the liquid inside.

"This is oil pressed from sugar apple seeds."

With fingers coated in a thin film of oil, Lulu pulled out one end of the silver sugar dough, which was streaked with fine stripes of luster, and twisted it with little tugs like she was making rope.

Once that piece was as thin as string, she wound it around and around the shaft of the spindle.

She stood up slowly and suspended the spindle from the thread of silver sugar.

Then she gently gave the spindle a twist.

“Ah!” Anne exclaimed quietly, gasping.

The spindle, which had a weight attached to it, spun around and around in the air. With every rotation, the thread that was being pulled from the lump of sugar dough in Lulu’s other hand wound around the shaft. As the thread was pulled, the silver sugar stretched smoothly into more thread, which continued winding around the shaft.

Silver sugar thread was being drawn from the lump of sugar dough.

The candy crafters stared at this in wonder. No one moved, as though they were enchanted.

“So this is how fairies make silver sugar candy…”

As if he was feeling a chill, Stella hugged his shoulders with both arms and leaned back against the wall. The spectacle seemed to have shocked him.

Smoothly, the silvery thread streamed through the gap between Lulu’s fingers. It was a magical, awe-inspiring sight. But they probably would have been less surprised if it actually were magic.

The silver sugar was turning into real thread, right from Lulu’s fingertips, and winding itself on the spindle. This was an unmistakable show of her expertise. This was a technique the fairies had devised.

It was something humankind had not achieved even after five hundred years of making sugar candy.

Anne was astonished by the astoundingly special technique.

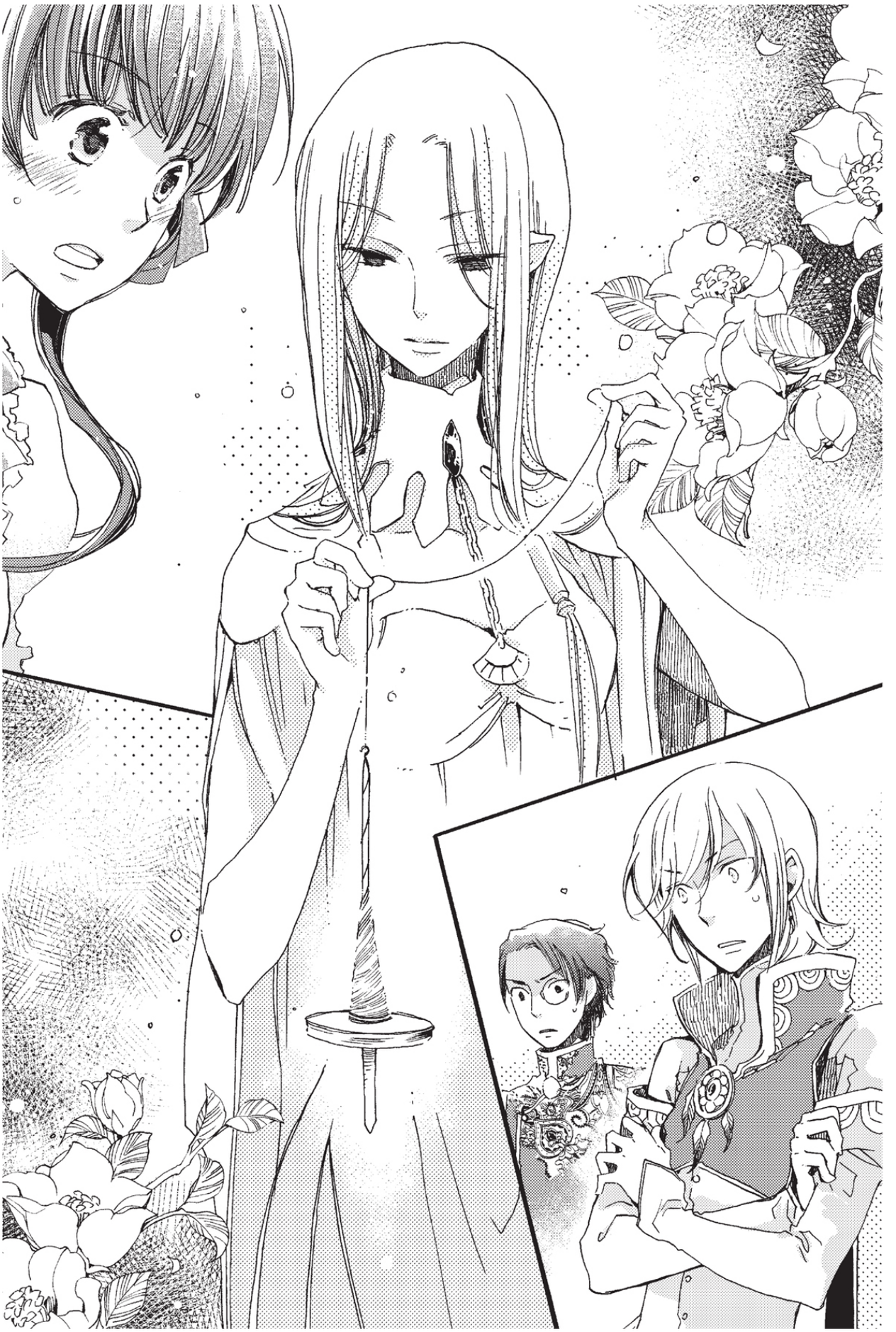
All night, some of the best candy crafters in the kingdom had puzzled over the spindle, yet they hadn’t even been able to imagine using it like this.

Amazing.

Emma kneading silver sugar dough. The movement of the knives as Emma used them. The movement of her fingers. Her use of color. When Anne first began to appreciate how difficult it all was, she had stared at her mother’s fingers and felt the same sort of wonder she was experiencing now.

Amazing. Truly amazing!

She was astonished, and inspired, and most of all—



I want to do that, too.

The feelings of her childhood rushed back to her. Thrilling excitement accompanied an eagerness that seemed like it would make her heart leap right out of her chest. Anne's emotions seemed like they would catapult her off toward some unknown but exhilarating destination.

With my teacher.

Hugh called Lulu his teacher, and Lulu hated it because he used the word to tease her. But maybe Hugh actually did respect Lulu, and maybe that was exactly why he called her his teacher, even if he did it jokingly.

"If you repeat this process twice, it gets as thin as a strand of hair. But this thread hardens quickly. After a day, it breaks easily. Before that happens, you need to use it to form your sculptures. Speed is a requirement. As is careful work."

Lulu sat down in her chair again with a thump. It was like she had run out of energy.

"The tools are all here. Now practice. That's what you're here to do, right?"

Anne moved her eyes over to the workbench. Sitting there were several spindles. Not attempting to suppress her enthusiasm, Anne was about to reach out for one.

But she saw Stella slowly walking toward Lulu, and her hand stopped.

"What is it, Nobody?"

Lulu looked up at Stella.

Stella looked like he was in sort of a daze as he stood before Lulu, but his eyes were glinting sharply. Challe seemed to slightly raise his guard, as if he sensed something dangerous in his gaze.

"What do you do?" Stella asked.

"What do you mean, 'What do you do?'"

"You make that thread, and then? How do you turn it into a candy sculpture? Teach me, please, quickly."

The desire to know seemed to be rising from his whole body like a haze. Even Stella, who was always cynical about everything, was stirred by a will to learn. Although he was always derisive about everything else, he must be strongly drawn to this knowledge, which he simply could not dismiss or pass up.

“Hmph. I don’t even know your name, so you’re no pupil of mine.”

“Fine, I’ll tell you my name now and become your pupil.”

“No, I don’t need any more students.”

“Why?!”

“Foolish boy! You must learn that there are limits to other people’s patience. When you want something, is there always someone around to bring it to you? Or teach it to you?!”

Lulu shoved Stella away and rose to her feet. She was trembling slightly, but even so, she firmly stood her ground and regained her bearing, then looked around at Stella and the other four crafters with unsparing eyes. Her wing stretched taut and turned a transparent orangey color.

“You don’t give it a bit of thought—you just ask for it to be handed to you, is that it?! Are you just here to steal the techniques of the fairies?! I’m sick of you. I don’t want to teach a damn thing to novices like these. I don’t care if the Silver Sugar Viscount threatens me. My life will be over soon anyway. I fear nothing.”

Lulu was suddenly seething with anger. Panicking, Keith tugged on Stella’s arm and pulled him away, then stepped forward himself.

“We’re sorry, Lulu!” Keith said. “Please forgive our insolence, we—”

“Silence, human! I didn’t want my final pupils to be some lowly humans anyway. What a disappointment. You five don’t think about anything. People like you are no students of mine.”

“We’ll think things over!”

Without meaning to, Anne spoke up.

“We’ll put our heads together! All of us!”

Anne didn’t want to make Lulu feel hopeless. She had come to this place as one of the chosen few, and if Lulu gave up on her now, she felt like she would never be able to call herself a candy crafter again.

Lulu didn’t have enough time left to train new candy crafting fairies and impart her techniques to them.

That was why she had no other option but to take humans as her final class of pupils. If she was overtaken by despair, then the skills that the fairies had developed would be lost. As a candy

crafter, Anne had to prevent that at all costs. If she didn't, she felt like humans would lose all rights to even make sugar candy.

"We'll practice the technique until we can produce this thread. Then we'll think about how the thread might become a candy sculpture and try to make it into something. So you see, we are your pupils!"

Lulu snorted dismissively.

"If you think you can, go ahead and try, little girl."

Anne nodded firmly.

"Okay."

Lulu gave Challe her hand. She was still unsteady on her feet. Together, they ascended the spiral stairs.

I said I would think about it. What should I do now…?

Even though Anne was the one who'd said she would think about it, she had a feeling that with her basic skills and knowledge, she had little hope of deciphering the techniques and knowledge of the fairies.

But I have to try! If I don't, Lulu will lose all hope.

The silence lingered, and Anne grasped her spindle tightly.

Keith and Stella were both in a daze, still staring in the direction that Lulu had gone.

Killean let out a long sigh, took off his monocle, and rubbed his eyes. "You sure made Lulu mad. What were you thinking?" he demanded. "I bet now she won't teach us anything else."

When he said that, Elliott grinned. "There's nothing to do but try, right, Anne?" Elliott said. "Since you made a point of it and all."

Anne raised her head and looked at Elliott. She was startled to see the excitement of a new challenge in Elliott's expression. Suddenly, Anne felt the tension and worry leave her, and she started to relax.

That's right. Right now, we have five people.

Elliott, Killean, Keith, and Stella were all candy crafters who had been hand selected by the Silver Sugar Viscount. Their skills were top-notch. They were people with real talent and confidence.

With five candy crafters, there was a good chance they could come up with something.

This is the first step. It's just like when I first touched silver sugar. Exactly like that time.

This seemed like a challenge that she ought to enjoy. Along with all the impatience and anxiety, excitement began to bloom in Anne.

In the world of sugar candy, crafters do not learn every little detail from their teachers. They watch what their teachers do, commit this to memory, and practice it to sharpen their skills. Then they think about it some more on their own and work out even more clever techniques.

They had seen Lulu show them her method for making silver sugar dough once. Now it was up to them to learn from that and work it out on their own.

That was probably the right way to go about it.

The sun had fully set, but not a single one of them was ready to leave the workspace.

Over and over again, the crafters kneaded their silver sugar dough and spun their spindles.

The workspace was illuminated by lamplight, but the glow offered no warmth. The interior of the tower, which was surrounded by lingering snowdrifts, was cold enough to chill their toes, yet none of them seemed concerned about it. Far from it—each had a thin film of sweat on their forehead.

"Aww, it broke again!"

Elliott, who had been twirling his spindle, let out a strange cry. At his feet, the tool, with silver sugar thread wound around it, rolled and rolled on the floor.

Stella snapped back at him, "Why you… Stop whining over there. Now mine's all tangled!"

He was carefully unwinding thread from his spindle and placing it on his workbench. It had tangled into knots in several places.

"Well, I'm not gonna let you blame me for that." As he picked up his spindle, Elliott peeked over at what Stella was doing. "But you're actually getting pretty good, Stella dear."

"Of course I am!"

"Maybe ladies really are better suited for this kind of work."

“Wait a second. What did you just say?”

Ignoring Stella, who was glaring daggers at him, Elliott peeked over at Anne’s work next. “Sweet Stella is doing well,” he said, “but Anne’s thread is the finest and the longest.”

As she spun her spindle, Anne forced a smile.

“I don’t think that’s true. There’s still some unevenness in the width. But this is work that demands patience, so girls probably are better suited for it.”

There wasn’t that much difference in their threads. Given that they were all first-rate crafters, they had all basically figured out how to do this difficult task already.

They just hadn’t mastered it yet. There were inconsistencies in the thicknesses of their threads, and if they lost focus, their threads quickly snapped. Anne was facing the same issues.

But she wasn’t as exhausted as the men. Persevering and repeating the same minute movements over and over again seemed to be better suited to the feminine temperament. Men seemed to get more fatigued by it than women.

It was the first time that something actually came easier to Anne than her peers.

When making sugar candy, Anne had always been aware of the difference between men’s physical strength and her own. It had always taken all her effort to complete tasks that men could do with relative ease. But now their positions were reversed. Anne didn’t feel all that tired, but dark circles had formed underneath the men’s eyes.

By the time nine days had passed, the crafters had started to master the skill of spinning candy thread, and their results had improved dramatically. They’d gotten to the point where they could spin smooth strands of silvery thread from their fingertips, and the tops of their workbenches had quickly been covered in mountains of thread.

On the morning of the tenth day, Anne entered the workspace and looked down at her mountain of thread. She touched it gently, and all the threads except those that she had spun the night before crumbled into bits and scattered across the top of the workbench.

“What am I supposed to do with all this?”

She frowned. Then Keith approached her, holding up his spindle.

“It dries out as quickly as they say, huh? If you’re going to make something out of this, you probably only have one day to do it, don’t you think?”

“You’re talking about making something out of it, but how do you even begin turning this into a candy sculpture?”

“It’s got to be for animal fur, right? Other than that, is there any other way to use it?” Elliott said jokingly from behind them. He and Killean had been carrying barrels of cold water up the stairs.

They set their barrels down, and both Killean and Elliott came over to Anne and Keith.

“I know Collins was just joking, but to be clear, I also can’t think of any other way to use this stuff in a sculpture,” Killean muttered. He sounded tired.

“Well, you’re not gonna figure it out standing around looking at each other, are you?” a voice said from the spiral staircase. It was Stella. He seemed to hate mornings, and he always showed up in a bad mood around the time that Anne and the others were nearly done getting ready to work. And he didn’t appear the least bit ashamed of it, either. Untangling his silvery hair with his fingers, he walked over to them.

“Hey, listen… That candy sculpture,” Stella said, suppressing a yawn. “The one that Lulu showed us in the beginning. What if we look at that?” he suggested gruffly.

“Oh, that’s right!”

Anne ran over to the candy sculpture that had been sitting in the corner of the room and returned carrying it in her arms. She placed it on her workbench and removed the protective cloth.

The translucent flag bearing the Millsland family crest. With its vivid colors, it was swathed in light, as if woven from a rainbow. However—

“It’s not a very showy motif, is it? I wonder why Lulu chose this design?” Elliott said, frowning as he stared fixedly at the candy sculpture.

Anne looked down at the candy again.

Certainly, as a work of art, it was pretty plain. But the quality of the light and the vividness of the colors shone through

wonderfully. Lulu had probably chosen the motif because it would be easy for anyone to understand.

Easy to understand?

Suddenly, something clicked.

"A flag…"

She felt like she was on the verge of grasping something. She mumbled to herself, and Keith cocked his head.

"A flag? What about it?"

"What makes a flag special?"

"What makes it special…? Well, let's see—it's a symbol."

"What else?"

"People get mad at you if you get them dirty," Elliott said jokingly.

Killean, on the other hand, answered after a moment of serious thought. "It waves in the wind."

Sounding bored, Stella said, "In the end, it's just cloth."

Anne started.

"Cloth…!"

She quickly looked around at the other four candy crafters.

"Flags are made of cloth!"

"And so?"

Anne turned to Stella, who was frowning and looking annoyed at Anne's exuberance, and said in an even louder voice, "Cloth is woven from thread!"

At that very moment, the expressions on the four candy crafters' faces changed.

"Weaving…," Stella muttered.

Elliott swiftly looked around. Then he seemed to hit upon something and whacked Killean on the back.

"That's it! Killean, come with me!"

From the messy jumble of tools in one corner of the workspace, Elliott and Killean pulled out a wooden machine of some sort that was about the size of a workbench. They carried the heavy-looking thing over. Anne had seen something like it before.

"This looks like a loom."

"We're weaving!" Elliott was keeping his voice low, but it still had a ring of excitement to it. "We're going to weave our silver sugar threads. But it's not going to be easy to do, I bet."

The wooden machine that Elliott and Killean had pulled out was indeed a loom. Its frame was about the same size as a workbench, and its legs were like a table's. The wooden frame was built so that warp threads could pass through it, and down at the feet were plank-like pedals for moving those threads up and down to advance the weave.

Lulu had said something after showing them how to spin the silver sugar threads. *"The tools are all here."*

"So you finally took that thing out, huh?" a voice said from behind the crafters, who were all overcome by their discovery.

Hugh had come up the stairs and was slowly walking over to them. After looking around at the speechless crafters, he ran a finger across the frame of the loom.

"This machine is finicky. The silver sugar threads break easily. You have to treat them carefully, but if you take too much time, they dry out and fall to pieces. Even getting the threads into place is difficult. Do you think you're up to the task?"

As the Silver Sugar Viscount, Hugh had learned all these techniques from Lulu. But he didn't seem inclined to teach the crafters a single thing himself. He would only give them hints. He had barely even shown his face the whole time they'd been there. Even now, he'd just dropped by to stir them up. But Anne understood that this, too, was a way of mentoring.

Lulu and Hugh are very similar.

Neither of them coddled the candy crafters. They didn't have time for people without enthusiasm or skill. They just scolded the crafters to come meet them where they already were. They wanted their pupils to show their true abilities.

"We are. We will," Anne mumbled as if she was speaking to herself, and the other four crafters nodded.

Hugh ordered them bluntly, "All right then, try."



The crafters show up at the workspace in the Cocoon Tower early in the morning, and they stayed there until the middle of the night. They struggled the entire time, spinning thread with their

spindles, then trying to weave the thread they had spun into cloth. They did not rest. They showed surprising perseverance and focused only on their silver sugar.

They kept this up for ten days.

Challe stayed on the top floor of the Cocoon Tower the whole time, gazing out at the snowy scenery from its sole window. From time to time, he would hear Anne's voice from the lower floor. Whenever he heard her lively, clear voice, his feelings were soothed.

He could tell that she must be engrossed in learning a new skill and that all unnecessary thoughts had vanished from her head. She might not even have realized that he hadn't even shown up once the whole time they'd been working. That was just like Anne.

"Hey, you okay?"

Challe heard Mithril Lid Pod's voice, so he turned around just as Lulu was wobbling up the stairs. Mithril was standing close to Lulu, looking worried.

"Don't you worry. I want to get some outside air," she said.

She staggered forward unsteadily, so Challe rushed over to support her.

As soon as he did, Mithril glared angrily and leaped up onto Challe's shoulder, then yanked on his hair.

"Hey! Challe Fenn Challe! Unhand her, you pervert!"

"Shut up. I'm not planning on doing anything weird to this poor woman. Instead of worrying about me, how about you fetch some water for her?"

"Oh? Ah, right. Wait a minute, please, Lulu Leaf Lean."

Mithril disappeared downstairs. Lulu watched him go and smiled wryly.

"He's a good fellow, that one."

"He's just loud, but if you like him so much, you could ask him to marry you."

"I think I'll refrain."

Challe guided Lulu over near the window, where she could lean against the wall. Lulu narrowed her eyes, looking pleased.

"The crafters are working hard. I'm sure they must be having a difficult time of it."

"Why did you make it seem like you were so angry with them?"

Lulu had not shown her face in front of the candy crafters since she had yelled at them. But Challe knew that she hadn't really been angry when she did that. She had made a scene on purpose. His proof was that there hadn't been any of the characteristic shaking in her wing that occurred with an outburst of anger.

"How much capacity does the human animal have for learning, I wonder? I still don't have any idea," Lulu mumbled, not answering Challe's question. Then she asked him one of her own. "What about you? Has your time here allowed you to collect your thoughts?"

Challe also looked out the window.

"When the time comes, I'm going to need to be ready to negotiate."

"'Negotiate'? With who, over what?"

"You'll see when the moment arrives. There's something I need to check, too…"

Challe was still hamstrung by doubt.

Lulu smiled at him. "Anne, is it? You still haven't made up your mind to find out how the girl feels? Plumbing the depths of a human's heart is a scary business, even when you've lived for hundreds of years. Especially when it's someone you love."



Anne and the other crafters continued attempting to work things out.

Everyone had made a certain amount of progress in spinning the silver sugar into thread. But weaving the thread into cloth was many times more difficult than making it.

They'd tried to pass hundreds of threads of silver sugar through the loom. But they all quickly broke into bits. Even when they thought they had gotten them safely threaded through, before too long, someone would end up handling them too roughly, and they would all break. Even when they successfully threaded the warp threads through, the threads had snapped when they tried to move to passing in the weft threads. And even when they

managed to weave a weft thread, it broke as soon as they tried pushing it down.

If they were too careful, too much time would pass, and the silver sugar threads would dry out and crumble.

Yet the crafters kept at, trying again and again and again.

As usual, Lulu did not make an appearance.

And neither did Challe, who never went back to Anne's room. Mithril had gone to her room once to make a puzzling announcement. "Don't worry. I'm keeping an eye on that Challe!" he'd said before beating his chest and leaving again. Apparently, Mithril was also staying with Lulu. Anne was relieved to know that. At least that meant he hadn't been captured as an intruder.

The fairies were all spending time together.

It must have been comforting, to feel like they were back in the age of legends, when the fairy king was still around. Since Challe was staying put, that must have meant he was spending his nights as Lulu's lover.

That's a good thing.

She felt herself wavering and told herself that many times over. She was grateful that working with the silver sugar would stave off such unwelcome thoughts.

If she didn't concentrate, she would never make anything out of the silver sugar threads.

After twenty days had gone by, and the snow in the circular garden had dwindled further, the earth began to show its face. Once again, Anne and the others got to work in the morning and continued toiling away until the middle of the night.

Anne ate her late dinner with the other candy crafters, then went back to her room. She was exhausted. Day by day, a heavy fatigue had been building up in the core of her body. She couldn't wait to lay down in bed.

As soon as she stepped into her bedroom, she stopped, startled. Challe was sitting by the far window. He had one leg up on the frame and was looking out the window.

Challe!

The faint light of the Cocoon Tower made Challe's long eyelashes stand out in sharp relief. He noticed Anne standing

there and turned listlessly to face her. In the dim light, he looked eerily gorgeous. He was so beautiful, he seemed like he could seduce the gods themselves.

Challe, Challe!

Anne was flooded with a deluge of joy and yearning. The feelings sprang up so strongly in her that it felt like they might fly right out of her. But she stifled them firmly.

Challe had spent twenty days with Lulu, and during that time, he must have become her lover. It was wrong for Anne to yearn for him now.

“Challe…it’s been a while… It feels a little strange even to say your name. What made you come here so suddenly?”

Anne smiled, trying to look as natural as possible.

“And how is Lulu’s condition?” she asked. “We’ve been working on our crafting. I don’t think it will be long before we can make sugar candy for Lulu.”

“Unfortunately, Lulu isn’t going to eat any candy.”

“Why not?! Doesn’t she want to be with her lover even just a little while longer?! You’ll be all alone if she refuses, won’t you?! I’ll persuade her. I’ll talk her into it, for your sake!”

If Lulu was going to continue being stubborn even now that she had a lover, soon Challe would be left behind. Anne was sure that he would be heartbroken. She whirled around, intending to head to the Cocoon Tower. But Challe got down off the window frame and grabbed Anne’s wrist to stop her.

“Wait! What you’re saying doesn’t make any sense. Why did you say you would do it for my sake?”

“Because if Lulu lives longer, then you can be with her forever. You are lovers, after all.”

“Who are lovers?”

“What do you mean who? You and Lulu.”

“How did you come up with that?”

“I mean, you said you were going to go find out whether or not you could become lovers, and you left and never came back again. You’ve been with her for twenty days, so naturally…uh…? Am I wrong?”

“Oh yes, there was someone else caught up in that ridiculous misunderstanding… I guess I forgot…”

Challe looked up at the ceiling and sighed. He looked sincerely annoyed.

“Lulu was just joking about that. And yet Mithril Lid Pod also made that same strange mistake.”

“Joking?”

“That’s right. I have absolutely no such feelings for Lulu.”

“A joke? That was…a joke… So I’ve been…”

She felt her body go weak. For the past twenty days, she had been praying hard for Challe and Lulu, but apparently, she had been a fool. Little wonder, then, that Lulu still wasn’t interested in extending her life. In which case, Anne wondered, how were they going to get Lulu to eat some sugar candy? She suddenly felt even more exhausted at the difficulty of it all.

“Mithril Lid Pod seems to have gotten the wrong idea about something, and he’s still camping out in Lulu’s room. He says he’s keeping watch over me.”

“Mithril Lid Pod… Is that what he meant when he said he has eyes on you?”

Mithril had probably assumed that there was something going on between Challe and Lulu and barged into Lulu’s room. Anne was sure he had been getting in the way to interfere with Lulu and Challe’s relationship. She had no doubt that it was all part of his funny notion about repaying his debt to Anne by making her love come true. She was afraid that Mithril might have said something to Challe about her being in love with him while he was over there.

“By the way, did Mithril Lid Pod say anything? About me.”

“Nothing much.”

She was relieved to hear that, but her blood ran cold when she heard Challe’s next words.

“But he did say that you had been crying. What for? You’ve been acting strangely ever since we came here. You’ve been crying a lot, for no discernible reason. Why all the tears?”

It wasn’t really true that it was for no reason, it was just that she couldn’t tell Challe why.

“Why? Well, that’s…um…”

“I don’t want you to cry. I promised to protect you.”

Honestly, she had absolutely no idea what to say. How could she, when the person who was telling her that was also the very

source of her tears?

“S-so anyway, Challe. Tell me, why were you with Lulu for twenty days? It seems rude to stay that long in a woman’s room when she isn’t even your lover.”

When Anne changed the subject, Challe stared at her with a serious look on his face.

“I was thinking. About the fairies…and also about you.”

Challe covered Anne’s cheek with his hand. It felt like it had been a very long time since he’d touched her.

That night in the fortress in the wilderness where Lafalle had taken them, when they’d felt strangely close—that had been the last time Challe had touched her so firmly.

Challe’s eyes were gentle, and in the soft light of the Cocoon Tower pouring through the window, his wing gleamed pale blue flecked with silver.

“I probably shouldn’t have come back,” he said. “I’m still confused. I’m not sure whether I should ask you.”

With both hands, Challe tilted Anne’s head back, peering into her eyes. Her heart was racing. She felt like she would be swallowed up by his seductive black eyes.

“Ask me what…?”

That’s when it happened. The door swung open with great force, and a small figure came bounding in. It was Mithril.

Simultaneously, Anne and Challe both took one swift step backward, but Mithril seemed too worked up to notice how unnatural this was. Pale in the face, he rushed over to them and jumped up on Anne’s shoulder.

“Terrible news! Lulu Leaf Lean isn’t looking well!”

Anne looked up at Challe. He, too, was wearing a grim expression.

“I’ll go to the Cocoon Tower. Anne, you inform the proxy maestro of the Mercury Workshop and tell him to get a message to the Silver Sugar Viscount. He ought to know how to get in contact with the Viscount. Mithril Lid Pod, you stay here. It’ll cause trouble if you’re discovered.”

After Challe said all that, he dashed out of the room.

Anne also left, just behind Challe, and headed for Killean’s quarters. As soon as she informed him of the situation, he immediately ran off to tell Hugh. Soon, the other crafters heard

all the fuss and woke up. Once they learned Lulu's condition had taken a turn for the worse, they immediately headed for the Cocoon Tower.

Anne also ran over to the Cocoon Tower. She burst in and dashed up the spiral staircase to the top room of the tower.

Challe was standing by Lulu's bedside.

Together with the other crafters, Anne approached the bed. She was startled by Lulu's appearance.

Her eyes were closed, and she looked limp. The strength had left her body. What's more, the tips of Lulu's hair, which was spread out across the bed, were dissolving into beads of light, as if they were melting softly into the air. The disintegration was happening so slowly that it was almost imperceptible. A chill of fear crept up Anne's spine.

"Lulu!"

When Anne shouted the fairy's name, Lulu opened her eyes slightly. "I'm sorry," she said. "I owe you an apology. About Challe…I was just teasing you with that."

Anne couldn't even answer her. She felt tears well in her eyes. Then someone grabbed her shoulders and roughly shoved her to one side.

It was Stella, and he was staring down at Lulu with an extremely angry expression on his face.

"You told us to think things over, and now we have. We're doing it. Aren't you going to stick around and see the results? You must have more to teach us after we're done thinking."

"I don't care. Polish your skills by yourselves. That's how practice works."

"So you're just throwing everything away? How can you be so irresponsible?!"

As soon as he started shouting, Stella had a violent coughing fit. Keith tried to rub his back, but Stella brushed his hand away and raised his voice again.

"Anyway, you have to eat some sugar candy!" Stella insisted.

But Lulu burst out laughing. "What are you so angry about, Mr. Nobody? You hated the sight of me, and soon I'll be gone."

"It's not like that, and besides, you…you have to eat some sugar candy! Right this minute!"

"I'm not eating anything. Sorry."

“Don’t mess around! I’ll force you to eat some if I have to,” he threatened in a low voice. “And while I’m at it, I may as well say, my name isn’t Nobody. It’s Stella.”

Then Stella ran off, headed toward the workspace.

Keith watched him go, then followed after him with a determined look on his face. “I’m going, too.”

“We’ll get you to eat something, Lulu,” Elliott said with an earnest expression. Then he clapped Killean on the shoulder. “Let’s go, Killean.”

“Got it.”

Elliott and Killean also headed for the workspace.

Anne also stepped forward, intending to go with them, but Lulu grabbed her wrist.

“You don’t have to go, Anne.”

“Just wait for us, please, Lulu,” Anne replied. “We’ll bring you sugar candy soon!”

“Given how weak I am, a candy sculpture would have to be made with the greatest expertise to prolong my life, and it would have to be made in a shape that has some meaning to me as well. No matter how fine the candy sculpture you all make turns out, there’s no way for you to know what you should craft when you don’t know my desires. So don’t waste your effort.”

“Then please tell me—what would be meaningful to you?!”

“My lips are sealed.”

“Please tell me! Let us make candy for you, please! We’ll use all the skills you taught us! We may just be pupils, but I hate the idea of you dying without us being able to do anything!!”

“I’m not telling you.”

“Lulu! Why not?!”

Anne felt so hopeless she could cry.

Just then, Challe knelt down next to Lulu’s pillow. “Would you still give up on life if you had the chance to teach fairy knowledge to other fairies?” he asked.

Lulu’s expression changed. Her grip on Anne’s wrist slackened.

“Riselva entrusted me with our future,” Challe continued. “I still don’t know exactly what I’m supposed to do about it. But just now, I’ve figured out one thing that I ought to do.”

Challe spoke quietly. His profile was elegant and dignified, filled with imperturbable beauty.

“What do you think you can do, Challe? Don’t tell me that bargain you were talking about…was for my sake?”

“Not for your sake, no. For the sake of fairy culture.”

Challe stood up. Anne looked up at him, wondering what he was planning on doing, and Challe spoke to her gently.

“Anne, you learn all the fairies’ skills and techniques from Lulu,” he said. “I have a feeling that you can handle it. Lulu needs to live in order for that to happen. I’m going to need a strategy. If I fail, I may not be able to stay by your side as I have until now. But no matter where I am, I will keep my oath to protect you.”

“Strategy? Huh? What for? What are you planning to do, Challe?”

She wondered what Challe had made up his mind to do. She felt shaken by his words.

Just then, Challe’s face went blank. She saw him glance behind her.

“Silver Sugar Viscount. And…His Royal Highness, ruler of the Kingdom of Highland, Edmond the Second…?”

Anne turned around in surprise, and there was the Silver Sugar Viscount, Hugh Mercury. In front of him were Queen Marguerite and the Earl of Downing, along with King Edmond II.

Anne was astonished when she laid eyes on King Edmond.

“It’s him…!”

Challe slowly turned around to confront them.

Chapter 7
AN OATH BETWEEN FAIRY AND HUMAN

“Mr. Eddie?”

Standing there alongside the queen and the Earl of Downing was the queen’s attendant Eddie, whom Anne had encountered several times in the castle keep at night. But he was standing in front of both the queen and the earl, as though he was of higher status than them. And there was only one person who ought to stand in front of them like that.

His Royal Highness, the king of Highland, Edmond II.

“Mr. Eddie… Wait, Eddie? Don’t tell me…”

It finally dawned on Anne. Eddie was Edmond’s nickname. In Anne’s mind, the king had no other name but His Royal Highness. It hadn’t even occurred to her that the king would have a regular name.

Edmond II had given Anne her royal medal at the Royal Candy Fair. She must have seen his face on that occasion. But his presence in everyday clothing was completely different from how he came across when dressed in the official attire of the king. The formal garb made him look a decade older than he actually was.

Plus, she had only ever met Eddie at night, in the dim hallway of the castle.

She had never connected the man standing in the darkness, dressed in modest clothing, with the figure of the king, resplendent and full of majesty.

Even so, if Anne had just given it a little more thought, she might have realized it sooner. Eddie knew about the existence of the silver sugar fairy, and he had been the first to know that she

didn’t have long to live. There was no way that a normal retainer could have known about the silver sugar fairy, whose existence was a royal family secret, even if he was one of the queen’s servants.

King Edmond II seemed to notice Anne’s surprise, and a tender look appeared in his blue eyes.

“I’m sorry for startling you, Halford. I thought it wouldn’t be an issue, since I never planned to appear before you as king, but it seems we find ourselves in a situation that demands otherwise.”

Anne raced to get down on her knee. She couldn’t stand upright in front of the king.

Edmond II frowned and looked past Anne, at the bed behind her.

“I knew that she didn’t have much time left, but I wasn’t expecting her to go so quickly. Is there nothing that we can do? Someone my family has protected for five hundred years is vanishing before my very eyes…”

Edmond II took a step toward the bed. Challe moved swiftly and elegantly into his path, blocking the way.

Anne was alarmed. Challe wasn’t kneeling before the king. Not only that, he was blocking the king’s path. She wondered what he was trying to do. Fear surged within her, the feeling so powerful it seemed like it would crush her chest.

“What do you think you’re doing…Challe…?” Anne heard Hugh grumble the question through his teeth.

“Who are you?” Edmond II looked puzzled.

The Earl of Downing answered swiftly. “He’s a fairy that the silver sugar fairy summoned. The bodyguard of that candy crafter, Halford. Step aside, fairy. Know your place.”

Challe’s wing glistened like tempered steel, and his expression remained calm, like the surface of a lake in winter. As if he hadn’t even heard the order from the Earl of Downing, he parted his lips to speak.

“The silver sugar fairy’s life is nearly at an end. But she has yet to finish teaching everything to her successors. The candy crafters will have no option but to learn her techniques on their own, through trial and error. When that happens, will you really be able to say that the fairies’ skills have been passed down to the five of them, without anything lost?

“With nothing lost, you say?”

Edmond II looked back questioningly at Hugh, who made a bitter face.

“Even I am but a novice compared to the silver sugar fairy,” Hugh said. “I doubt I would be able to convey everything to the five candy crafters accurately.”

“It is possible to prolong the silver sugar fairy’s life,” Challe said, “and give her time to actually teach the five of them her skills.”

At Challe’s words, the Earl of Downing took a step forward.

“Fairy! If you’d been listening earlier, you would never speak so rudely to His…”

Edmond II put up his hand to silence the Earl of Downing. “Enough, Downing! That’s enough. How can we extend the life of the silver sugar fairy?” he asked Challe.

“By crafting an exceptional piece of sugar candy in a form that is meaningful to Lulu and getting her to eat it.”

“Well then, it is fortunate that we have five candy crafters here, is it not? Have them make the piece at once.”

“Only the silver sugar fairy herself knows the shape that will be most meaningful to her. And she’ll only eat the candy if she wants to. Right now, she doesn’t seem inclined to tell us what form will be meaningful, nor does she seem inclined to eat any candy.”

“Why not?”

“She despairs at the thought that no matter how long she lives, she will only pass the fairies’ techniques on to humans.”

At those words, Hugh and the queen both made pained expressions.

“If you can give her hope, she will live. To do so, you must grant permission for the five crafters and the Silver Sugar Viscount to teach the knowledge and skills that she possesses to fairies as well. Command this and make certain that it is done. You must also return the silver sugar fairy’s wing to her. If you promise to do that, I will command her. I will order her to inform the crafters of the shape of candy she desires, to eat the sugar candy, and to continue living. And I will command her to teach her skills to the candy crafters. If the orders come from me, she ought to follow them.”

“Command her, you say?” the Earl of Downing asked quietly, a severe expression on his face. “Who…are you? You can’t fool me any longer. At that fort in the wilderness, the other fairies looked at you like you were something special. In the last five hundred years, the silver sugar fairy has never once requested that we summon one of her fellows. And yet she called for you. Why is that? It must be because you are important to the fairies!”

“I was born from an obsidian stone prepared by the last fairy king, Riselva Cyril Sash, to be his successor.”

The king and queen gasped. Even Hugh’s eyes went wide.

The Earl of Downing mumbled in astonishment, “It can’t be… But that shouldn’t be possible. The sword, along with the chapel, five hundred years ago, it was…”

“The structure formerly known as the Saint Hyde Castle stands on the eastern side of the Birseth mountain range. The castle was built to safeguard a single sword that was kept in the shrine there—the fairy king’s sword. And into that sword were fitted three stones, meant to birth the next fairy king. The three sons of the human king Cedric feared that the next fairy king would be born from one of the stones and hid the sword. They then ordained that the second daughter born to each generation of the Lowell family should live there, as protector of Saint Hyde Castle.”

The Earl of Downing, Edmond II, and the queen were growing paler by the minute. Everything that Challe was saying was a closely guarded royal family secret. It proved his identity.

Anne’s eyes were wide with shock as she heard the story for the first time.

The royal family hid the fairy king’s sword for safekeeping?

The fairy king’s sword. And the silver sugar fairies. It sounded like the royal family had stolen the fairies’ most valuable things and hidden them away for themselves. Ancestor King Cedric had considered the fairy king a friend and had wished for peaceful coexistence with the fairies. But Cedric’s wishes had not been honored. Instead, humanity’s relationship with the fairies had become warped, even as the fate of the royal family was entangled with that of the fairies.

“One hundred years ago, the person sent to live in that castle was the second daughter of the Lowell family at the time, Elizabeth Lowell.”

“The sin…of Elizabeth Lowell…!” The one who said those words, overcome as he was with surprise, was Edmond II. “The story goes that a century ago, the young lady charged with protecting the shrine housing the fairy king’s sword committed a grave crime and was burned at the stake for it. The particulars of her misdeed were buried and forgotten. Could it be that her sin was—?”

“I was born into this world because of Elizabeth Lowell.”

“So the sin of Elizabeth Lowell was the creation of the fairy king, who was not supposed to be allowed to come into this world?”

“Mercury!” Suddenly, the Earl of Downing shouted loudly. “Summon the royal guard to surround the Cocoon Tower! Under my authority! This is the fairy king! We can’t let him get away!”

“But I’ve encountered this fairy many times before. He’s no danger!” Hugh argued.

“Obey me, Mercury!”

Hugh glanced at Challe and Anne but ran down the spiral staircase anyway.

Challe. Challe. Run.

Anne couldn’t stop trembling. Challe was going to be surrounded by soldiers, captured, and killed.

“Don’t make a fuss. I’m not going anywhere.”

Challe was calm.

“If you accept the conditions I just gave you, that will be the end of it. But if you don’t accept my conditions, the last of the silver sugar fairies will die before our eyes. And I will stop trying to negotiate with humans like I am doing now. I will gather the fairies and wage war against humanity. I don’t know how far I will get, but I won’t let things end as easily as they did with my brother stone, who was rallying fairies at a fort in the wilderness.”

Challe smiled, a sharp glint in his eyes.

The Earl of Downing said threateningly, “We can capture you right here and now. The royal guard is coming to surround the tower.”

“Do you really think you can capture me? Even if I was captured and killed, the silver sugar fairy would still die. That’s all. And even if I lose my life, there’s still a chance that another

fairy king will be born. One of my brother stones remains. Will you take that risk? Or will you take this opportunity to respond to my proposal, which benefits us both? This is a negotiation. My conditions are not unfavorable to humans, and neither do they disadvantage fairies. They give both sides something. And they are not impactful enough to shake the foundations of your kingdom."

"But if we release the formula for making such powerful sugar candy, those techniques will fall into the hands of the royal family's enemies," the Earl of Downing replied. "If we allow that, then the same good fortune that blesses us will bless the royal family's enemies! A dark threat will loom over the Millsland royal family, which I have fought to protect!"

"You're wrong!" Still kneeling, Anne raised her voice to the Earl of Downing. "You're underestimating the skills of the candy crafters!"

All eyes fell on Anne.

Around the tower came the sound of footfalls and of armor clanking together. There was also the sound of crackling torches. The royal guard had begun to gather.

He's wrong! It's not that simple!

Anne, bolstered by her confidence as a candy crafter, felt a surge of pride pouring out from her chest.

"The techniques of the fairies are the finest there are for making sugar candy. But they are simply methods of making candy! The way that someone uses those techniques is what determines if their sugar candy is good or bad and if it will bring great fortune! Even if those skills are widely known, using them to make wonderful sugar candy still comes down to the skill of the candy crafter. It all depends on someone's expertise! If the royal family wants sugar candy that can promise the greatest fortune, they should employ the greatest crafters who have mastered the finest techniques. Human or fairy, it shouldn't matter. And they should make the candy crafter with the greatest skill into the Silver Sugar Viscount! That way they have the best chance to employ the candy crafter with the very best techniques! They'll be blessed with even greater fortune than they are now!"

She wasn't afraid to raise her voice anymore.

“That’s—” The Earl of Downing tried to interrupt Anne, but she refused to be cut off and kept talking.

“You’re afraid of what you don’t know! But if you were a candy crafter, you would understand. We know! Even if everyone studies the same techniques, the difference in skill will be plain to see! If someone doesn’t have what it takes, learning some new techniques won’t do them any good! Releasing these techniques into the world is completely different from handing out weapons.”

Anne felt dizzy. She had said all of that in a single breath. Panting for air, she nevertheless raised her head firmly and looked up at Edmond II and the Earl of Downing.

“Please, don’t be afraid of the unknown. If you face it head-on, it’s not so scary.”

The room fell silent. For a few moments, the only sound they could hear was the chafing of the armor of the soldiers surrounding the tower.

Then the sound of quiet laughter broke the silence. It belonged to the queen.

“Just like ghosts, isn’t that right, Anne Halford?”

The queen slowly stepped forward to stand beside Edmond II.

“Majesty, we’ve been afraid for five hundred years. Don’t you think it’s about time we stop being afraid of ghosts?”

“But my queen, what we’ve been protecting for five hundred years—”

The Earl of Downing started speaking, but the queen shook her head slightly.

“What has become of all that we’ve been protecting these past five centuries? Ultimately, it’s dwindled, and now it could be wiped out completely. We have to do something drastic to right this wretched situation. For example…making a resolution to reveal the techniques that have been kept secret for five hundred years. If we do that, we may relight the flame that is about to expire.”

The Earl of Downing seemed to be at a loss for words, and he pressed his lips tightly together.

Without a word, Edmond II took several steps forward.

“Majesty?”

With a look, Edmond II checked the Earl of Downing's attempt to stop him. He moved to stand before Challe.

"I can understand what the queen is saying, to a certain extent," he said. "But the problem is this fairy king."

The cold glint of a ruler appeared in his eyes. These weren't the eyes of Eddie, the queen's gentle attendant, whom Anne knew.

Anne felt like the noise of the soldiers' footsteps and the clanking of their armor as they surrounded the tower was pressing in on her. She couldn't help but be afraid. But she kept her eyes raised. If anything happened, she wanted to be ready to break into a sprint and protect Challe.

"He's a danger that could shake the very foundations of the Kingdom of Highland. This is something I cannot ignore. I doubt that the fairy king's demands will end with the conditions that we've just heard. If we accept these terms, then what will he demand next? The liberation of all fairies? But the enslavement of fairies is a custom that has continued unbroken for five hundred years. We are not prepared to uproot and overturn such a popular institution. Our society is built upon the foundation of that institution, after all. Consider, too, that the fairy king cannot say with certainty he will never turn his sword on humanity. The existence of someone who can unite the fairies is a danger to us all."

Despite having been declared a danger, Challe responded to Edmond II's forceful words with a smile. Edmond II looked puzzled by his beautiful smile.

"I loved Elizabeth Lowell," Challe said. "And I know some good-natured humans. I have no intention whatsoever of turning my sword against them. It is not the case that I hate all humans. And I have no intention of throwing your kingdom into disarray. All I desire is to grant the wishes of my fellow fairies, little by little. Right now, I want to make the wishes of the last silver sugar fairy come true. That is all. I'm not telling you to overturn the world of the humans, who hold fairies in bondage. We can do it gradually. We can bring about change little by little. That is all I ask. If the foundation of your society was built up over the course of five hundred years, it will probably take another five hundred to change."

"So you're telling me to take you at your word?"

“I’ve revealed myself as the fairy king, entrusted by Riselva with the future of the fairies. So as a king, I will make a vow. To you, the human king. I pledge to have respect for you. In return, I want the human king to swear a vow to me as well. I want you to pledge that you will abide by the conditions I have laid out.”

Even the Earl of Downing was staring into Challe’s earnest black eyes, as if momentarily entranced.

Anne was shaken to the core. Challe was so beautiful and noble and so full of dignity. She felt like she was hallucinating, as if a phantom from the world of legends were standing there before her. Everything about him, from his deep black eyes to his strands of black hair to his long white fingers, was elegant and alluring.

“You have my pledge, human king,” Challe said.

Edmond II slowly opened his mouth to speak. He, too, looked entirely captivated.

“…And you mine, fairy king.”

“Majesty?! You swear a vow?!”

The Earl of Downing raised his voice, but Edmond II silenced him with a stern look.

“It’s fine, Downing. I made this decision to give him my word. So I vow this to you, fairy king.”

“I thank you, human king,” Challe murmured quietly.

The Earl of Downing let out a deep sigh. Then, with a dark, gloomy expression on his face, he slowly approached Challe.

Anne was stiff with tension, but Challe turned to face the Earl of Downing calmly.

“Fairy king. His Majesty is certain to keep the vow he made. Will you keep yours as well?”

“Of course.”

“In that case, I have one more request. I would ask that you conceal your existence. It would throw the world into chaos and cause mayhem among the fairies.”

“So long as the vows are kept, I have no intention of announcing myself.”

Brushing back the white hair that hung over his forehead, the Earl of Downing returned to his position behind Edmond II, looking exhausted.

“Your Majesty, what shall I do about the royal guard?”

“Order them to return to their usual duties. Tell them there was no emergency after all and that your orders were a mistake.”

The Earl of Downing answered that he understood, and Edmond II breathed a sigh of relief.

“My queen, we will be able to extend the life of the silver sugar fairy. For now, we should be able to rest easy. Let’s return to our chambers.”

Edmond II took the queen’s hand and smiled at Challe.

“Excuse us, fairy king… No, if your existence is to be kept secret, I mustn’t call you that, I suppose?”

“Call me whatever you like. So long as you keep your vow, I don’t expect we will ever meet again.”

“I should hope not. Now I will have the queen bring the silver sugar fairy’s wing to her. And I promise to allow the fairies’ techniques to be revealed to the world. As far as my orders for the Silver Sugar Viscount and the five candy crafters, I shall inform you of them later.”

Holding the queen’s hand, Edmond II disappeared down the stairs. The Earl of Downing turned on his heel to follow his king. He looked over at Challe before descending the stairs but left without saying anything else.

Anne’s whole body went weak, and she slumped down on the floor right where she was.

Challe chuckled, knelt down right in front of her, and peered into her face.

“What happened? Where is all that bravery you had earlier?”

“It’s gone…off somewhere… I never imagined you would do something like that, Challe…”

Now that the king and the others had left, Anne couldn’t believe she had shown such reckless courage earlier. She didn’t know how she’d done it. It was as if something had just suddenly flown out of her, straight from her heart.

“I wanted input from a candy crafter. And you told them what you think. Now I’ll still be able to stay by your side… I thank you.”

Challe placed his hand against Anne’s right cheek and kissed her left cheek. The surprising gesture sent a shock through her body. Her spine tingled.

“Ah…”

The cold lips on Anne’s cheek moved slowly across her skin. Challe’s slightly warm breath tickled her cheek enticingly.

…This is my thanks?

“You’re a fine candy crafter, Anne.”

Challe whispered this with his lips still close to her cheek. Anne went weak, and her body swayed. Challe caught her in his arms.

Sitting on the floor with Challe’s arms around her waist, Anne was captivated by his long eyelashes, which were so close. She gazed vacantly up at him. Everything about him was so lovely, from the lustrous, translucent light-blue wing that hung down his back to his sleek, flowing black hair to his obsidian eyes.

“…Challe…you’re beautiful.”

The words rose from her heart and slipped straight out of her mouth. She’d suddenly been released from the tension she’d been feeling, and nothing really seemed real yet.

Then Challe smiled wryly and put his hand on Anne’s waist.

“I’ve done my job. Now you do yours.”

“Oh…right, that’s right.”

The moment she heard the word *job*, she straightened back up. She had to ask Lulu right away. She had to ask her what shape would be most meaningful to her. And then the five crafters would have to make the best sugar candy sculpture possible.

The determination returned to Anne’s eyes. She stood up and rushed over to the bed.

“Lulu, did you hear all that? His Majesty the King made a promise. Lulu, you’re going to get your wing back. And the techniques for making sugar candy are going to be released to everyone. He said he will allow them to be taught to humans and fairies alike.”

Lulu smiled, albeit feebly.

“Yeah. I heard,” she replied. “After five hundred years, I never thought I would hold my own wing in my hands again.”

“Please tell me, Lulu. Tell me the thing you love, the thing you feel is most precious. Tell me what it is.”

“I guess I’ve got no choice, if it’s an order from the fairy king… Something special to me, huh? Let me see.”

As if she was thinking it over, Lulu gazed up into the air. The tips of her hair, which were slowly but steadily dissolving into light, looked even brighter. Wearing a smile on her lips, Lulu said, “A garland…a flower garland. When King Riselva looked at me and gave me life, he celebrated my birth by crowning me with a flower garland that he made out of wildflowers. I was so happy.”

“What kind of flowers were they?”

“Star lilies.”

Star lilies bloomed in bunches of cute yellow flowers in the spring fields. They had long, neat stems and leaves with small white splotches. They were cheerful, adorable flowers that swayed in the breeze, as if the spring sunshine made them exuberant. Six hundred years in the past, the newly born Lulu must have been so animated and adorable, just like those flowers.

“Please hold on, Lulu. Challe, stay with her.”

Anne squeezed her hand firmly and looked back at Challe.

Once he nodded at her, Anne seemed reassured, and she dashed down to the workspace downstairs. Challe watched her go, then took a seat on Lulu’s bed. He breathed a sigh of relief.

“Looks like I have to continue living, eh?” Lulu asked.

“That’s right. We need you to keep going on, even if you don’t want to. I made a vow to the human king.”

“I have no objection. I’m also curious to see how things will shake out. And since it’s an order from my own king, I’ll obey. But…I wonder whether you value my life because I’m one of your own kind or because of what I can do for Anne? That girl has set you on a new course. She is the first silver sugar.”

Challe stared at her in wonderment.

“The first silver sugar?”

“Don’t you know what the first silver sugar is? Maybe you don’t.”

“I’m aware it’s something that brings about change. I heard that it was a term passed down in the Paige Workshop, the oldest of the humans’ candy making factions.”

“It’s a term that comes from the silver sugar fairies. It spread to the old human workshops. Just one little handful will change everything in the barrel, little by little. You’ve come far since meeting Anne. And it seems you’ve changed my circumstances, too, which stayed the same for five hundred years. Your love is part of your fate, fairy king.”

Lulu smiled and let out a long sigh.

“But I am tired… I am…”

She folded both hands over her chest and closed her eyes. All the strength had gone out of her hands.

“Lulu?”

Challe called her name, but there was no answer. He peered into her face and touched her neck. She still had a little bit of strength remaining. But—

“Hold on, Lulu. Just a little longer,” Challe whispered encouragingly.



As soon as Anne went down to the workspace, the other four candy crafters rushed up to her.

Blanching, Keith asked, “Anne, what happened?! The king and the others came, and the royal guard surrounded the tower!”

“It’s all right. It was nothing. Just know that Lulu now feels like eating some sugar candy. And she told me the shape she wants it to be in.”

“What kind of thing is it?!” Stella asked with excitement.

“A garland of star lilies.”

As soon as he heard that, Stella dashed off to his workbench. Keith looked like he wanted to ask more questions, but when Stella moved, he seemed to realize that he ought to do the same. He followed Stella.

Just as Anne was about to head off to get started working, Elliott grabbed her arm.

“Anne, there’s no way that it was nothing. What really happened?”

Elliott whispered to her in a thin voice. Killean was standing beside him, looking down at Anne with a similarly bewildered expression.

“I can’t tell you. I think we’ll hear the details from the Silver Sugar Viscount after everything calms down.”

“Must be something major.”

Killean nodded gravely. Elliott and Killean both were close to becoming the maestros of their respective factions. Even if they didn’t know the particulars of the events that had just taken place, they seemed to have sensed something in the air.

“Probably, yes. But right now, we have to make sugar candy for Lulu.”

“Well, you’re right there.”

Elliott shrugged in acceptance and let her go.

“We’d better get crafting, huh? I wonder how close our skills have come to the fairies’? It’s time to find out.”

In response to Killean’s words, Anne nodded firmly.

Over the past twenty days, they’d searched through the workspace and found a stash of colored silver sugar. It was much too beautiful to use simply for practice, so they’d hesitated to touch it.

For the first time, the crafters pulled out the barrels filled with blue, red, and yellow silver sugar.

The blue silver sugar was bluer than a clear summer sky, and the yellow color was bright enough to lift one’s spirits just by looking at it. The red color was deeper than the most richly colored ruby yet had a transparent quality. And the white was whiter than snow—the true color of sugar candy.

Elliott opened the lid of a barrel and flashed a smile.

“Okay. We’re doing this work to preserve the life of our lovely teacher. We can’t cut any corners, but we don’t have much time.”

As he rolled up his sleeves, Killean picked up a stone bowl. “Let’s get started. We’re wasting time.”

Stella sounded irritated as he asked, “What colors? Green for the leaves and yellow for the flowers, just the two?”

Keith answered him. “Let’s mix several shades of each color, both the yellow and the green. The green is a more complicated color, so let’s three of us work on that. The yellow can take two people.”

“That sounds good. I’ll work on the green.”

Stella walked off, so Anne also put her hand up.

“Me too, I’m on green.”

“All right, me too, then,” said Keith.

Elliott and Killean looked at each other, silently agreeing to make the yellow flowers together.

Anne scooped up blue, yellow, and white silver sugar into stone bowls.

The colored silver sugar looked like vibrant minerals that someone had ground up into a fine powder. When Anne spread it smoothly across the top of her workbench, she could see its luster. It was like the bench was covered in grains of light.

She mixed the silver sugars, and the colors changed like they were melting into one another. Anne focused on making a soft yellow-green hue, almost chartreuse. Stella also added a little bit of red to make a dark green. Keith made a color in between Anne’s and Stella’s.

Anne glanced over at the colors that Killean and Elliott were making together and saw them quickly mixing up every shade that it seemed like they might need. They had their minds set on their respective hues and were working in silent harmony. Their movements were swift.

The crafters mixed their colors and kneaded their silver sugar dough. Over and over again they kneaded, until the sugar dough showed fine, glossy striations.

Then they took up their spindles and began spinning threads of silver sugar.

Smoothly they traced their fingertips along the thread, feeling the texture of the silver sugar strands that flowed easily onto their spindles. They had gotten quite used to that texture over the past twenty days.

It was pleasant work. It felt like Anne’s very thoughts were flowing out of her fingers and turning into thread.

The thread was glossy, like a spider’s silk with light shining through it, and it very quickly twined around her spindle.

“Honestly, Lulu really spared us. If she had asked for something bigger, there’s no telling how much time we would have needed. Though I’m still not sure we’ll be able to make it with our novice

skills. But it also helps that the colors are simple," Killean said as he spun his thread.

He was certainly right. The only thing they'd learned from Lulu was the technique for making silver sugar thread. And the five of them were still fumbling their way through it.

Lulu didn't really teach. Hugh was the same way. They seemed to want the candy crafters to learn on their own.

Anne had the feeling that Lulu was testing them. She had showed them the most basic of fundamentals and had then stepped aside to watch how far the human crafters could take it. She didn't have very high expectations for humans. But that was all the more reason for them to use all their skills to help her. They wouldn't want to make her any more disappointed in humans than she already was.

They were holding on to the life of a fairy who had been held captive to make sugar candy for five hundred years, and they were using sugar candy thread.

If they couldn't pull it off, it would impugn their honor as candy crafters. Visible in the crafters' expressions were their stubbornness and pride as artists.

Once the thread was spun, the crafters set about using the loom.

Anne quickly looked over the green thread they had spun and decided which color to use for the warp and which for the weft. For the warp, she would use a vivid dark green and a subdued pale green. She laid the two varieties of green out in an irregular pattern. Then the weft thread would be the yellowish chartreuse. By weaving the three colors together, she hoped to produce a complex shade that appeared to glow.

The crafters carefully carried over their selected threads and set them into the loom as the warp threads.

"How many varieties of each color are we making?" Elliott asked restlessly as he loaded the threads.

They really had no time. If they didn't finish weaving the silver sugar threads and immediately form them into the shapes they needed, they would easily crumble.

"These are the leaves of the star lily, right? We need subtle coloring in the leaves, so I'd say five or six varieties. Maybe three for the yellow that we're using for the flower petals. How's that

sound? Let's at least make a good variety of colors. We might be able to keep adding more if time allows."

The other crafters nodded in agreement with Keith's briskly devised plan. They were totally in sync with one another.

Whenever one of them made a suggestion, it was basically in accordance with everyone else's opinion. There was almost no disagreement among them, even when it came to the shapes of the pieces they were making. They had been well trained.

When Killean and Elliott were finished loading the threads into the loom, they picked up their spindles again and continued spinning more silver sugar threads.

Anne, Keith, and Stella contended with the loom. They divided the duties up among the three of them.

Stepping on the pedal that raised and lowered the warp threads of silver sugar was Keith's job. Anne assumed the task of passing the weft threads of silver sugar between the raised and lowered warp threads by hand. Stella was the one using a presser bar to slowly press the threaded weft threads down and reduce any gaps between them.

It was the same principle as weaving anything else. But while weaving with cloth was a one-person job, it took the three of them working in sync to do the same with sugar. Each had their position.

Whenever Keith stepped on his pedal, the hundreds of silver sugar threads lined up in the machine would move up or down. The way the silver sugar threads moved together was elegant and beautiful, like the ripple of a tiny wave. If he stepped on the pedal too forcefully or too quickly, however, the sugar threads would break from the vibrations. So he stepped carefully, with just the right amount of speed and force.

Anne passed the weft threads through slowly. Then Stella pushed them down with the presser bar to perfectly close up any gaps between the threads. Again, Keith carefully stepped on the pedal. The threads of silver sugar all moved simultaneously. They rippled and shone.

All three of them were holding their breath. They couldn't even blink. If a single one of them was out of sync, the silver sugar threads would snap.

Carefully. No rushing. No cutting corners.

Anne could sense the words that were passing silently among the three of them.

Step on the pedal. Pass the weft threads through. Press down.

Repeat.

Sweat began beading on her forehead, but she didn't have a chance to wipe it away. She held her breath, repeating all her movements one by one. Joy flooded her chest as she looked at the material they were producing. Since they were using different colors for the warp and the weft, the shades looked a little bit different depending on what angle she viewed it from. She wondered how much of an effect the variation would have once they shaped the material into something.

Thread by thread, they made the green material. And then the yellow.

Once a piece of material was woven, Elliott took it from the loom and started to work on it. Holding a paring knife, he cut out small leaf shapes. He used green thread to add veins to the leaves he had cut.

After he finished spinning all the thread they needed, Killean also took hold of his knife and positioned himself at a workbench with a swath of yellow material. He began carefully cutting out small flower petals.

It had taken quite a long time, but they had woven all the material they needed.

The moment Anne stepped away from the loom, she felt dizzy. But there was no time to rest. If they didn't make this sugar candy sculpture quickly, it would break apart.

"You make the stems, Anne," Killean instructed.

Anne picked up some of the green silver sugar threads. There were several varieties of green in front of her, so she gave it careful thought. She decided it would be good if she could combine all the shades together, just as they had done with the colored threads to make the material.

She placed three strands of green thread together and squeezed them tightly to merge them into a single stalk. It did form a stem, but the lines where the colors connected in an unnatural way caught her eye. It wouldn't work unless she could intertwine the threads more fully.

The threads have to entwine. Entwine.

Then she suddenly had a thought.

Entwine—in other words, crochet?

She looked down at the threads. If she could loop the bundle of silver sugar threads she'd made together like a piece of crochet, their colors would intertwine in a complex way.

But where to get a crochet hook? Especially one small enough for such fine threads?

After a moment's thought, something suddenly occurred to Anne. She opened her own tool case and picked up the tool that Emma had given her a long time ago, which she had never used even once before. The tool with a metal fixture on the end of it like a needle with a bent tip. It resembled a crochet hook. Gripping it tightly in her hand, she turned back to the candy threads.

She bundled up a bunch of different-colored threads and held them tightly, with the tip of her tool against the collected threads. She hooked them, passed them through, and pulled. She knotted them together using a crochet chain stitch. In doing so, she produced a small loop. When she tightened the threads, that loop disappeared. Then the colors in that spot blended in a complex way.

This tool, whose purpose she had never understood, was evidently meant for crocheting threads of silver sugar.

Anne didn't know why Emma had been given such a tool by her teacher. After all, this technique was supposed to have been a closely guarded secret, kept away from the public for five hundred years. So what was that lonely little tool doing in Anne's collection?

But she didn't have time to wonder about it.

The threads would dry out quickly. Frantically, she crocheted the slender stems. Vivid yet complex in its coloration and able to let light pass cleanly through it, the thin stem in her hand grew longer and longer.

Killean noticed how Anne was doing her work and raised his head as he wiped his sweat away. His eyes went wide.

"Anne, are you crocheting? Crocheting the threads?" Killean looked amazed. "I never would have expected… I thought you'd just twist the threads together into a single stalk…"

“I tried that. But it made unnatural streaks of color that stood out too much.”

Elliott burst out laughing.

“I’d also like to watch her closely, but we don’t have time to be impressed. We’ve got to hurry up and put everything together.”

The slender stems. The leaves. The petals. They put each piece together.

They gathered the small petals to make round flowers about the size of the tip of someone’s thumb. Then they stuck a stalk on each flower and leaves on each stalk. And they bundled those together, weaving them just like they would to make a flower crown.

If they made a mistake in the amount of force to use, the flowers, stalks, and leaves could all be crushed, or come apart, or shatter.

It was Anne’s duty to braid the many flowers together into a flower crown. A girl with slender fingers and less strength was best suited for that work.

Paying careful attention as she worked, Anne wove together the flowers that the boys made.

I have to hurry. It’s all going to dry out.

She bit her lip to keep her impatience in check.

But I have to work carefully. It would take too much time to remake it. I mustn’t even imagine that we can remake it.

Bundle the flowers…weave them together…make sure it’s neat…

As she wove in the final bunch, Anne set the leaves in place and adjusted the way the flowers were facing.

She heard someone breathe a sigh of relief.

Anne gazed down at the sculpture in her hands, looking at the placement of the leaves and flowers. Checking that the balance was all right. Examining the colors. She thoroughly inspected every last blossom, then looked over the whole thing again from a distance.

The flower crown in her hands didn’t feel like it had any weight to it at all. It was as light as a wing.

Before anyone noticed, the morning sun came streaming in through the windows of the workspace.

The light passed through the glass panes of the windows and landed on the flower crown. The light then went through the

flower crown, illuminating the sculpture with a translucent radiance.

Both the green leaves and the yellow flowers were gently colored with blends of many shades, and it looked like they were wrapped in light. The flower crown seemed like it might break into beads of light and dissolve in the morning sun at any moment. Like the sword that Challe had conjured, this sugar candy sculpture itself was glowing.

Anne understood why fairies had sought out this kind of sculpture. They loved the light that it produced. It was the divine light that shone when a fairy was born. That was why they wanted this kind of radiance in their sugar candy.

The flower crown beamed, as if blessed by the morning sun. A garland made of adorable, sparkling, happy little flowers.

The crafters stood there staring at the sugar candy garland for a few moments.

“We have to…give this to Lulu.”

Anne had spaced out, as if enchanted by the candy, but after a moment, she snapped out of it and rose to her feet.

When she did, the other crafters also looked toward the upper floor.

“Will we make it in time?”

Looking sick with exhaustion, Stella mustered all his energy to mumble the question.

“We’re okay still. Let’s go.”

She didn’t have much confidence herself, but Anne nevertheless put all her hope into her answer. With Anne at the front holding the garland reverently in both hands, the candy crafters ascended the spiral staircase.

Challe was there in the bright room. He was looking down at the bed.

“How’s Lulu, Challe?”

He turned around with a grim look on his face. The crafters could tell from his expression that Lulu might be beyond saving. Anne nearly stopped, but Challe encouraged her in a way that sounded like scolding.

“Hurry. You might still make it.”

Anne walked quickly over to the bed and knelt near Lulu’s pillow. Lulu’s eyes were closed, and her face was pure white. Both

of her hands were folded over her chest, and she didn't move. Anne couldn't even tell whether she was breathing.

Holding back her tears, Anne placed the candy flower garland onto Lulu's chest.

"This is for you, Lulu. We're your pupils, so we made it together. So…"

Please.

Anne interlaced her fingers, hung her head, and prayed.

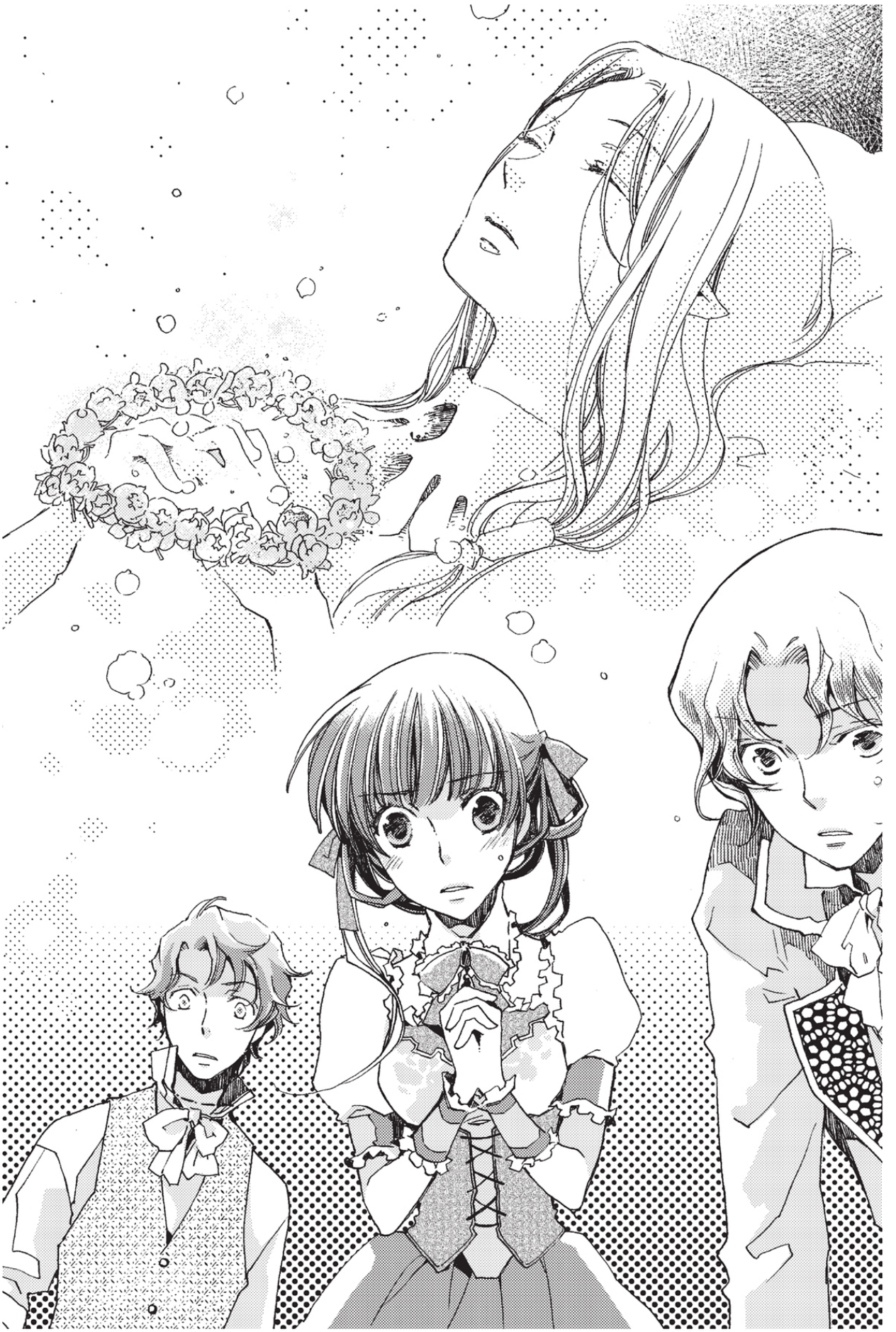
Please open your eyes, Lulu.

Only silence filled the bright room illuminated by the morning sun.

You can't die, not when something important is about to happen for the fairies.

"…Ah."

Keith let out a little noise.



At the sound of his voice, Anne raised her head and saw that the garland she had placed on Lulu's chest was enveloped in a faint light that was different from the sun's rays. And starting from the parts that were touching Lulu's hands, the garland was crumbling, becoming beads of light that sank into her chest.

The sparkling light dissolving off the sugar candy entwined around the ends of Lulu's hair, the tips of her fingers, and the ends of her eyelashes. It was pure and sublime, just like the radiant light that shone when a fairy was born.

Lulu opened her eyes. Swathed in light, her awakening was so beautiful, it made Anne tremble. She wondered how a creature as lovely as her could really exist.

"Lulu!!"

All at once, the candy crafters called the name of their teacher.

"Ah…you're so loud," Lulu grumbled, sounding irritated.

Then she glared sharply at Anne and the other candy crafters.

"I expected something sweet and delicious enough to impress me, but that's not what I got."

She turned to the astonished candy crafters, and though her eyes were still bleary, Lulu grinned at them.

"But it wasn't bad. Listen up, pupils. It seems I still have a great deal to teach you."

The snow around the Cocoon Tower had completely melted. In the circular garden, low star lily shrubs were in full bloom, covering the ground. Originally wildflowers, they had been gathered and planted there on the queen's orders.

A spring breeze blew into the top floor of the Cocoon Tower. Gazing outside through the only window that opened, Lulu smiled.

"Marguerite doesn't have to do such pointless things. Like going out of her way to make wildflowers bloom here," she complained with a smile on her face.

Anne stared at her in fascination.

"The queen was so very happy to see you in good health again, Lulu."

The fairy frowned in displeasure again.

“So that’s her way of making merry? She’s still just a little girl, Marguerite.”

Lulu had recovered somewhat after eating the sugar candy.

But shortly after consuming the candy, she’d grown pale again, which was a startling thing to see. So for nearly a month, the candy crafters had been making sugar candy for Lulu nonstop. It had obviously been strengthening her and keeping her alive.

The crafters would make sculptures for her and listen to her feedback. That was how they practiced and how Lulu gave them guidance.

Every critique that Lulu made was exact, and all her criticisms were worth hearing. She critiqued both their technical skills and their aesthetics. The candy crafters’ creations had already gotten noticeably more refined.

This was the first time that Anne had encountered this method of instruction.

Lulu did not teach them everything step-by-step. But she certainly was showing Anne and the others the way.

Without her guidance, they probably would have needed several years to reach the level they had attained in the past month.

In that brief period of time, both Anne and her colleagues had gained a considerable degree of mastery over their skills.

Hugh had also examined the sugar candy they were making and seemed to have concluded that it was about time for them to leave Lulu’s side. He had ordered the candy crafters to collect their things.

Then, the next morning, they had all gotten word to gather in the big room in the castle keep because Hugh was going to hand down new orders to all the candy crafters.

Anne wondered what they could be. She could be pretty certain that they had something to do with the promise between Challe and the king. That left her feeling excited and scared at the same time.

“Lulu, we all have to leave this place today. We decided it would probably be rude for everyone to come up here together, so I was told to come say good-bye for the whole group.”

“You’re their representative? Even though you’re the youngest?”

“They said I should do it because we’re both women.”

“Women, huh? Interesting. But I feel like you’re still just on the verge of becoming a woman, Anne.”

“…You’re probably right.”

That was only too accurate. Anne had no words.

“What about Challe?”

“He said he didn’t need to say good-bye.”

“He’s so cold, that Challe. But that’s fine. I didn’t want to say good-bye to him anyway.”

“Ah, and Mithril Lid Pod said he’s sorry for his weird misunderstanding.”

“Oh, that little water droplet? Sure. It’s no problem. It was a novelty to meet a fairy like that after so long.”

“Um…Lulu? Why won’t you leave this place? Now that you’ve got your wing back and all.”

As soon as Lulu had recovered, she had taken back her wing from the queen’s own two hands.

They’d been informed that, as a result of a discussion between the queen, the king, and the Earl of Downing, Lulu would now be permitted to leave. If she wanted to, she could depart the castle and live her life.

But Lulu had refused. She’d said she was staying. Everyone had found that strange, but she had replied that it would be too much hassle to leave at that point.

“I craved freedom all the more strongly while I was bound, but now that they’ve said I can go, I’ve somehow lost interest in leaving. Though I will go stroll around outside the castle.”

“But you were ready to try and escape back in the sugar apple grove.”

“That was just an act of rebellion. Don’t you think it would frustrating to be held captive for five hundred long years?”

“But still. After we all leave, who will make you sugar candies? Hugh doesn’t make candy for anyone other than His Majesty the King. And you don’t look like you’ve recovered enough to make it yourself, Lulu.”

“You’re right. Once you all leave, I probably won’t eat any more sugar candy.”

“Well then, I’ll make a little bit at a time and send it to you. I can entrust it to Hugh.”

“You don’t need to, Anne.”

With a smile full of affection, Lulu stroked Anne’s head.

“Even without more sugar candy, in my current condition, I have a year. With a year, I should be able to see how the future will take shape and how the vows between the fairy king and the human king are going to work out.”

“But that means—”

“Life can only be preserved via sugar candy for so long. A life extended by one year by a piece of sugar candy will only be extended by half a year the next time. And the time after, it will be a month. No matter how I might struggle, my life will eventually still reach its end. Eating silver sugar is only delaying the inevitable. If you understand everything you came here to learn, then I’m satisfied. Don’t fight things. It’s a natural process.”

She’s incredibly beautiful.

Anne felt a powerful tingling in the depths of her chest.

A noble life.

Just like Challe, Lulu harbored a special desire in her heart and was trying to stay faithful to it.

A miraculous, beautiful life.

“I wonder what you will see alongside the fairy king? You are the first silver sugar, Anne. So I have something to say for you and you alone. A secret that no one else in this world knows any longer.”

Lulu brought her lips close to Anne’s ear and whispered, “The first silver sugar was made from the first sugar apple tree. Seek out the first sugar apple tree. The chief silver sugar fairy ought to be there, protecting the first sugar apple tree.”

Anne’s eyes went wide. She didn’t really understand the meaning of Lulu’s words.

“In the exact center of Highland stands the first sugar apple tree. You can see it, but it’s invisible.”

“Lulu, exactly what does that—”

“So that’s where you were, Lulu.”

Just as Anne started to ask Lulu what she meant, Queen Marguerite came up the stairs. When the queen approached, Anne started to kneel. But the queen waved at her with her fan.

“It’s all right, Halford. You don’t need to kneel. More importantly, have I interrupted something?”

“No. Anne was just about to leave.”

With unnatural force, Lulu pushed Anne’s back, shoving her toward the spiral staircase.

Lulu hadn’t said anything about it, but Anne understood. What Lulu had just whispered into Anne’s ear couldn’t be repeated to anyone.

And she knew that Lulu had entrusted her with something very precious.



“What were you two talking about, Lulu?”

“What? Just small talk.”

The queen looked a little disappointed.

“You never tell me anything about yourself, do you? I’m always the only one talking.”

“Oh? I don’t really have any interesting stories that are worth telling, so I don’t, that’s all. Instead, let’s talk about you. You’ve got something you’ve been hiding from me, I gather,” Lulu announced to the stunned queen with a sadistic smile. “I’ve always thought there was something there, but what kind of relationship do you have with the Silver Sugar Viscount?”

The queen blushed a little, but Lulu had her gaze set on her, so there was no use denying it, and the queen opened her mouth to speak.

“Hugh paid regular visits to my family, the Cabots, as a candy crafter. I’ve known him since he was an apprentice. We were close in age, and often talked… When it comes to him, I…”

Then the queen looked in the direction of the stairs that Anne had descended.

“Looking at Halford, I’m reminded of the day my marriage was decided. When it happened, I made a request of Hugh. I told him I wanted him to make me a piece of sugar candy. But he refused. ‘I am employed by your father, Count Cabot, not you,’ he said. I was so disappointed and sad. I ran right out of the castle, all the way to a field in the depths of the forest where even our

gamekeeper rarely went. I fell to the ground and wept, hoping no one would ever find me."

"But it's when you don't want to be found by anyone that you are most likely to be found."

"You're exactly right. In that field, there was a woman. She appeared to be camping outdoors. She was riding in an old boxy wagon. And she had a tiny little girl with her, a girl with big round eyes. She very kindly consoled me. And she gave me a beautiful candy sculpture of a flower. She told me that it would bring me some exceptionally good fortune, so I shouldn't worry. And sure enough, it was such a beautiful piece of candy that I believed it."

"And did the sugar candy have any effect? Did good fortune come to you?"

The queen smiled bitterly.

"I wonder. When I went back to the castle holding my sugar candy, Hugh laid eyes on it and insisted I tell him where I got it from. The fact is that I forgot to ask the woman for her name, but I deliberately snubbed Hugh and said that I wouldn't tell him. He seemed annoyed by that. It was really a splendid work of sugar candy, so that probably frustrated him as a candy crafter. Not to know the name of the person who had made it, that is. That felt good… That girl. When Halford first showed her face at the Royal Candy Fair, initially all I thought was that it was rare to see women candy crafters. But I soon remembered that woman in the woods, and that made me feel like I should support women in the candy craft. Because that one time, Hugh's frustrated expression was so very amusing to me. Just getting to see his face like that was probably a stroke of good fortune in itself."

"Oh-ho! So even you behaved like a child once upon a time, eh?"

"It was mere youthful indiscretion. Surely even you must have such memories?"

"Oh yes, indeed I do. Over five hundred years ago, I was in love with my own king."

The features of the obsidian fairy resembled those of the last fairy king, who had been red in color and noble, beautiful, and kind. That had made her happy to see. When she touched the

fairy who Riselva had left behind, it was as though she was touching the king again, after five hundred years.

"I was a child then. I'm no longer an awkward young girl."

"No, you still are."

"From your perspective, I'm sure someone like me will always remain an unseemly young girl. But I'll forgive you for saying so. Because I'm very happy that you are staying here, Lulu."

"Well, as long as you're here, I'll never want for a conversation partner. You have grown up a little bit, after all."

"Lulu. What worries me about you staying here is the matter of sugar candy. If we kept just one of those five crafters here, to make candy for you…"

"It's all right, Marguerite."

Lulu gently cut the queen off. She peered out the window.

"I've seen a lot of people pass. So now, this time, I think it might be nice to have someone else see me off."

Just then, Lulu noticed something. And in spite of herself, she laughed out loud.

"So that's where those guys went. Oh, and Nobody is with them, too, huh? Nobody… Oh, what was his name? He told it to me, but I could never remember it. It was like Susie, or Stefan, or something…"

In the doorway of the castle keep, which Lulu was looking down on, stood Anne and Keith. Stella, Elliott, and Killean were there with them. Challe was there, too. And on his shoulder was the annoying fairy made from a drop of lake water.

Once the candy crafters saw that Lulu had noticed their presence, they all bowed to her.

Challe and Mithril looked up at Lulu.

Even if the five candy crafters and the Silver Sugar Viscount taught the fairies' techniques to human crafters and fairies who had the disposition to become silver sugar fairies, Lulu herself would probably not be able to teach them.

Consequently, the fairies' expertise would surely be lost over time.

But it was necessary to keep on teaching the techniques and to keep on putting them to good use.

While others were transmitting them from human to human, from fairy to fairy, someday a new master would be born. That

unknown individual would guide the others and raise the art form to a new level.

It might take a long time. But if they could teach her techniques to as many people as they could, there would be less of a chance of those techniques being forgotten.

And then, little by little, the art would be developed again, to the level that Lulu had achieved.

Don't let the skills die out. Then pass those skills into the hands of fairies. I'm counting on you.

Lulu stuck her hand nimbly out the window and waved it from side to side, slowly and calmly.

When she did, the star lilies filling the open space of the round garden moved, swaying in unison even though there was no wind. They waved back and forth, as if they were wishing good luck to the people about to step out into the future.

"How sweet. Are you doing that, Lulu?" The queen sounded a little surprised.

"One of my powers is to make plants move. I can only move them a little, as much as the breeze, you see, so it's not terribly useful. Even so, it comes in handy for saying good-bye."

Lulu no longer had enough strength to focus on the distant future. Maybe that was why she felt slightly relieved. She'd been able to pass the heavy burden she'd been carrying on to the fairy king and her pupils.

"This is good-bye, to the fairy king and his companions. And to my final class of unworthy pupils."

From the following day onward, the queen would be her companion, and she could spend her time going for walks and having leisurely conversations.

When the end came, she would be able to hold on to both of her own wings.

No matter how carefully she had been kept, she had unmistakably been held captive for the past five hundred years. But things were different now.

The air was a little chilly, but it carried the fragrances of spring. The smells of new shoots and of flowers. It smelled good.

My final days won't be so bad.

A smile escaped her lips.

Even though there was no breeze, the cute yellow flowers all waved in unison. It was like they were whispering good-bye. Anne understood that it was a send-off from Lulu. She was sure that everyone else there understood it, too.

After waving, Lulu had quickly withdrawn from the window. She didn't make another appearance after that.

A few moments later, Elliott stretched and addressed the other candy crafters.

"Well then, should we all head for the reception room?"

The crafters walked off in succession, and Challe followed them.

The other candy crafters and Mithril still didn't know the truth about Challe. Only Anne was aware of his position, but she'd been warned—not only by Challe himself, but also by the Earl of Downing and by Hugh—not to reveal it to anyone.

"Good idea. We wouldn't want to be late, not for the Viscount's summons."

Killean walked off with a strained expression, replacing his monocle as he went.

Elliott teased him, "He is your beloved Silver Sugar Viscount, after all."

"I'll thank you to stop phrasing things so that it sounds like I'm emotionally attached to the Viscount. He is the maestro of our faction…"

"Sure, sure, of course!" Elliott responded insincerely.

Killean wrinkled up his nose. He looked like he was about to lose his temper.

"You're unbelievable. Quit joking around!"

Then Stella said, "All he does is joke around—it's in his nature." He sounded bored.

"You're very perceptive, aren't you, Stella darling?"

"……See?"

Anne was watching and laughing along when suddenly Keith grabbed her hand. She stopped, wondering what was going on, and turned to face him. Keith was wearing a serious expression.

“I want to talk to you. I don’t know what we’re about to be told in there, but before that, come with me, please,” Keith whispered.

Quietly but quickly so that Elliott, Killean, and Stella, who were walking ahead of them, wouldn’t notice, Keith pulled Anne by the hand around a corner and down a nearby corridor.

“What’s the matter, Keith? And why here? Is this a delicate conversation?”

Keith made Anne stand against the wall, and he put his hands on her shoulders.

“Anne, we talked about you and I establishing a workshop together. Do you still think we should do that?”

“That’s what this is about? Well, it’s going to be delayed because of everything that’s happening, but when all of this settles down, I still think I’d like to work together. But…what about you, Keith?”

“I feel the same way. I want to build a workshop with you. That hasn’t changed. But I’ve got one more hope as well. I want to become your partner in work, but at the same time, I also want to become your partner in life.”

Anne looked at him blankly. She didn’t immediately understand the meaning of his roundabout statement. Keith saw that and smiled bashfully.

“Do you understand? Do you get what I’m trying to say? I’m in love with you, Anne. I think we will find happiness together if we move through our work and our lives together. I want to make you mine.”

Is this…a love confession?

Anne had previously received a marriage proposal from Jonas. But that had been right after Emma’s death, when things had been so chaotic, and Anne had never quite figured out whether Jonas himself had actually been serious.

But Keith wasn’t the type of person to say something like this in jest or to try to butter her up as part of some scheme. He was serious. She was speechless.

“Wh…why me?”

“You’re a good crafter and a good rival. The first person I’ve met who is talented enough to make me anxious. But after watching you work for so long and thinking about it, I finally realized something. You’re a girl…and I want to protect you. Of course, you don’t have to answer me right away. We don’t even

know what kind of orders we're about to get from the Viscount. But once all of this stuff is over and done with, I'd like you to give me your answer."

Then Keith slowly turned his head and looked toward the corner of the corridor.

"Did you hear that? Challe? Mithril Lid Pod?"

Challe was standing where the hallway turned a corner. He was looking sullenly in their direction.

"I love Anne. I want to make her my wife. I want us to work together and live together. I want to protect Anne."

"Are you serious?!" Mithril shouted from atop Challe's shoulder. "You really want a skinny, scrawny scarecrow like Anne?! Someone like you could get a much more glamorous, beautiful woman, someone intelligent and clever. Don't tell me that's not the dream!" He seemed agitated.

"I love Anne just as she is."

"That skinny, scrawny scarecrow?!"

"That's right."

"It's…a miracle."

Anne hung her head at the conversation between the two of them. She'd thought that Keith was here to confess his love for her. So why was she being insulted so badly? It was a complex mix of feelings. But surely, just as Mithril said, it had to be a miracle for Keith to suggest that he wanted to be with her.

With a blank expression, Challe asked Anne, "And your answer? Will you give yourself to this boy?"

"I don't… This is all so sudden…"

Challe was standing right there in front of her. Whenever she looked at him, she didn't feel the slightest interest in loving anybody else. Her feelings were still pulling her to Challe, as they always had. Even though she knew she would have to fall in love with somebody sometime, she was filled with nothing but confusion, even after hearing Keith's confession.

"I'm not in any rush," Keith said gently. "Well, should we head to the reception room? The Silver Sugar Viscount will have arrived by now."

The reception room was spacious and stark, with stone walls and a stone floor. It seemed like it usually went unused, and it was filled with dusty, dank air.

Challe stood off to the side of the room, and Mithril concealed himself inside Challe's jacket.

As Challe feigned calm and awaited the arrival of the Silver Sugar Viscount, he stared intently at Anne and Keith from behind them.

The candy crafters had all assembled and were chatting about this and that, but Keith was constantly by Anne's side. Anne seemed perplexed by him standing so close to her, but she didn't look uncomfortable.

Keith had plainly said that he wanted to make Anne his own.

A man who could stand right in front of her and tell her his feelings of love without averting his eyes was probably a man worthy of Anne's affection. In the event that Anne loved Keith and chose him to be her spouse, Challe would just have to protect the two of them so that she and Keith could be happy. But that would be very painful.

Mithril poked his head out from Challe's pocket.

"Hey, Challe Fenn Challe."

"Don't come out."

Challe pushed him firmly back down, and Mithril grumbled as he resisted, but he settled down before too long. Then Challe heard Mithril's voice from inside his jacket.

"Listen, earlier, Keith said that he loved Anne, didn't he? What do you think about that?"

"I think he has strange tastes."

"I know, right? She's totally flat, and lanky, and her head is a little bit… Wait, wait, wait! Hang on, that's not the issue! What do you think about Anne hooking up with somebody else like that? I've wanted to ask you this for a long time now. How do you feel about Anne?"

"She's a scarecrow."

"That's not what I mean, and you know it! Are you in love with Anne?"

He hadn't expected Mithril to ask him such a thing directly, and he couldn't give an answer. He didn't want to say no, and yet he couldn't say yes, either.

If what Lulu had said was true, and the differences between fairies and humans wouldn't lead Anne to heartbreak, then he never wanted to let her go. But that depended on where Anne's heart lay. If her heart was with Keith or another human, then no matter how much he might love her, it wouldn't matter.

Challe wanted to tell her where his own heart lay and ask her where hers was. If he knew that her feelings were with someone else, he would resign himself to that. He was sure he could carry on, biting back his pain to preserve her happiness with that other person.

He wondered if she would really give him an honest answer. Or if she would be baffled by his words and tie herself in knots trying not to hurt him.

But if he didn't discover how Anne felt, then Challe would never be able to sort out his own feelings. If that happened, he feared that his self-control could fail, and as much as he wished for Anne's happiness, he might hurt her by pulling her to him and making her his own.

Even at that moment, he could hardly stand how badly he wanted to touch her, to hold her. The moment he had heard Keith's confession of love, he had even felt something akin to rage toward the young man.

"Challe Fenn Challe?"

Just then, the door to the reception hall creaked. The person who pushed open the heavy oak door and stepped into the room was the Earl of Downing. Following him came the Silver Sugar Viscount, Hugh Mercury.

When the candy crafters saw the Earl of Downing, they all rushed to take a knee. The Earl of Downing and Hugh glanced over at Challe, who was still standing by the wall, then slowly walked over to stand in front of the crafters.

"Raise your heads."

At the Earl of Downing's order, the candy crafters all looked up in unison.

"I've heard everything from the Silver Sugar Viscount. It sounds like you all have mostly completed your training in the candy techniques and have acquired the skills to make sculptures of a certain quality. Allow me to commend you on a job well done. Now, then. Initially, we gave you orders that you were not to

speak a word to anyone about these techniques or about the one who taught them to you. However, circumstances have changed. In accordance with a decision by His Majesty the King, the restriction on teaching the techniques you have learned to others has been lifted."

Except for Anne, all of the candy crafters looked puzzled.

Despite the fact that they had been so strongly warned that these techniques must be kept secret, the ban had been suddenly lifted. It was only natural that they were suspicious about what might have happened.

"You all, who were selected from each of the candy factions, are to take upon yourselves the duty of returning to your factions and disseminating these techniques. Furthermore, the maestros of the factions will be ordered to allow a certain number of fairies to enter their workshops as apprentices from now on. In the event that those fairies acquire an appropriate degree of skill, you all will teach what you have learned here to them as well."

"Take fairies as apprentices? To what aim?"

Killean seemed confused and looked up at Hugh as if looking for guidance from the maestro of his faction. But the one who answered him in a solemn tone was the Earl of Downing.

"To produce new silver sugar fairies."

"Produce"?

Anne sensed something cold in those words. *Produce* was too similar to the words of the fairy dealers and fairy hunters, who treated fairies like objects. She wondered whether his word choice was simply due to the peculiar etiquette of a politician or whether it revealed that he, like many others, really thought of fairies as mere commodities.

Challe frowned and fixed his gaze on the Earl of Downing.

"And for those of you who do not belong to a faction, Halford and Powell, we have a different job for the two of you."

After a signal from the Earl of Downing, Hugh slowly stepped forward.

"You two, follow me. We're going out looking for fairies who have the right qualities to become new silver sugar fairies separately from the factions."

The Earl of Downing seemed to feel Challe's eyes on him and turned toward him. He stared back at Challe, as if to counter his

gaze. There was a defiant glint deep in the eyes of the old retainer.

Elliott was peering at Hugh and the Earl of Downing with an uncharacteristically skeptical and harsh expression. He looked like he was trying to puzzle out what was in their hearts.

Though Killean still seemed perplexed, he was looking at Hugh and Hugh alone, as if he was trying his best to believe in him.

Stella seemed like he was in a bad mood. He didn't seem willing to go along with these peculiar new orders.

Keith nodded, and there was a powerful light shining in his eyes. He looked ready to do his very best, no matter what task lay ahead.

Anne felt somewhat uneasy. Though she wanted to believe the men before her, for some reason, her instincts were making her anxious. Her face reflected her conflicted emotions.

Will the human king keep his vow?

It must be time for His Majesty, Edmond II to hold an audience. Somewhere far off in the castle, a fanfare played. The sonorous sound lingered deep in her ears.

AFTERWORD

Hello, everyone, this is Miri Mikawa.

In the world of Anne and her friends, the First Holy Festival has ended, and a new year has begun.

This part of the story takes place from late winter into spring. Coincidentally, the publication date of this book is the first of January. How auspicious and timely.

Volume 1 was released for sale in the spring, but in the story, it was autumn. When we got to Volume 2, it was released during the punishing heat of August, but the story was set in the middle of winter, with snow fluttering through the sky. The seasons in the world of the story and those in the real world don't have anything to do with one another, but still, rather than read a tale set in midwinter when you're sweltering in the heat, it's probably much more fun to read a story that matches the season. Or at least, that's what I've always imagined.

So it may have been a coincidence, but this time the seasons matched up perfectly. It's ever so slightly gratifying.

With this volume, we enter a new part of the story. That said, the story has continued unbroken from the beginning, so this is just a division that I came up with in my mind. Incidentally, the other divisions I've made so far were breaking off Volume 1 through Volume 3 as the Silver Sugar Master saga and Volumes 4 through 6 as the Paige Workshop saga.

The new arc that starts with this volume could be something like the Silver Sugar Fairy saga, maybe?

Yes, it's the Silver Sugar Fairy saga (provisionally). I'll be delighted if you all enjoy it.

I rack my brain every time I'm putting together a new story, but I think that my manager must be even more perplexed with every new volume. Once again, the story just wouldn't come together well, and I caused you all kinds of headaches, starting with the plot. As always, thank you so very much.

One especially big issue this time around was the "Keith problem." I took it a little too far, and the delightful young man Keith wound up coming off as bizarrely lustful toward Anne. If we had published the story without any changes, Keith would have… Well, I am truly grateful that we were able to prevent that. Again, I give my thanks to my manager.

To Aki, who draws the illustrations for me: Once again, thank you so very much. I'm always, always so grateful. I got to take a look at the rough sketch for the cover, and Anne is just as cute as always!

I said it was a rough sketch, but the quality was so high that I couldn't believe it wasn't finished. I'm someone who can only draw along with the Anpanman doodling songs. I think Aki's rough drafts are probably about a thousand times better than my best efforts. I swoon over them every time.

My feelings of gratitude for the people who purchase these books are boundless, every time. And so I want to produce stories that are always just a little bit better, just a little bit more fun. That's the only thing on my mind.

Miri Mikawa

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