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Miri Mikawa

Illustration by Aki

Sugar Apple Fairy Tale

The Silver Sugar Master and the Gray Wolf

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NEW YORK

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Miri Mikawa

TRANSLATION BY NICOLE WILDER
COVER ART BY AKI

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The Silver Sugar Master and the Gray Wolf

Sugar Apple Fairy Tale

Story & Characters



Silver Sugar Master
Anne



Warrior Fairy
Challe



Fairy
Mithril



Candy Crafter
Keith



Silver Sugar Master
Kat



Silver Sugar Fairy
Lulu

Senior Statesman
The Earl of Downing

Queen
Marguerite

King
Edmond II

The **Royal Castle**
of the Kingdom of Highland

The Story So Far

Anne accepts an invitation from her dear friend Keith to start a new candy workshop together, but just when they are about to begin, they are summoned to the royal castle by the Silver Sugar Viscount, Hugh Mercury. To their great surprise, they are assigned a task of utmost importance: to inherit the secret techniques of a silver sugar fairy whose existence the royal family has hidden for five hundred years. Though Anne and the others are able to learn crafting methods the likes of which they've never seen before, their fairy teacher, Lulu, despairs that only humans would inherit her skills. Thanks to the efforts of Challe and the other candy crafters, her techniques can now be passed on to fairykind as well, but Anne and the other successors' work is far from over…



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



Proxy Maestro and
Silver Sugar Master
Elliott Collins



Proxy Maestro and
Silver Sugar Master
John Killean



Candy Crafter
Stella Knox

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 FAIRY…fairies who make incomparably wonderful sugar candy and whose techniques have traditionally been inherited only by the Silver Sugar Viscount. At present, Lulu is the only silver sugar fairy in existence.

Chapter 1

MEETING AT SILVER WESTOL CASTLE

Anne awoke to the sound of a bell ringing. When she opened her eyes, she was in a dimly lit room. The ceiling, slanted with beams running across it, was unfamiliar.

Huh? Where am I?

For a moment, she wasn't sure where she'd fallen asleep, but then she heard even breathing coming from under the covers beside her. It was the water droplet fairy, Mithril Lid Pod. This calmed her down somewhat. Then she remembered.

Oh, right. This is Lewiston.

Anne slipped out of bed and walked barefoot across the wooden floor to the window. Then she pushed the curtains aside and flung the windowpane open.

A whole flock of pigeons that had been sitting on the roof all took flight at once, and a gust of fresh air flooded in. The gentle spring breeze brushed against the collar of Anne's nightgown, which was decorated with cotton lace.

From the window, she could look down on the reddish-brown roof of the neighboring house. A tabby cat had woken early and was sauntering leisurely across the ridge. Beyond, the roofs of other houses continued into the distance.

Anne was on the second floor of a building near the West Marketplace in Lewiston.

The light-purple morning sky spread out above the row of stone-built houses. The tower of the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell poked out of the otherwise-flat city. Within it, countless large and small bells were ringing, their shrill and deep tones competing with one another.

"…Morning, is it?"

Anne heard Challe speak, so she turned to face him.

Along the far wall of the room stood a bed with a fretwork pattern of tiny flowers carved into the headboard, as well as a trunk for clothing and a shelf for toiletries. And beside the door was a couch.

That was where Challe Fenn Challe, the obsidian fairy, had slept the previous night. His long legs hung over the edge from the knees down.

Challe slowly sat up and wearily combed his fingers through his bangs. As his hair fell into place, it brushed his eyelashes. Even in the dim light, his black eyes and hair and his pale skin were striking. His wing, spread across the couch, was a pale-green color that gradually grew fainter toward the edges. The air around him seemed to glow slightly. Everything about him, from the tips of his fingers to the lines of his cheek to the curve of his neck, was beautiful.

"Good morning, Challe. Did you sleep well? You must have been cramped over there. Should we go buy a bed today?"

Challe set his blanket on the edge of the couch and took his jacket from the backrest. He slid his arms through the sleeves, then pulled on his boots and stood up.

Walking over to the window to stand next to Anne, he gazed aimlessly out at the brightening eastern sky.

"No need. After all, the boy is bound to come and meddle."

Just then, there was a knock at the door.

"Anne? Are you up?"

The kind, genteel voice belonged to Keith Powell. Anne answered him through the door.

"Oh, yeah. Good morning! I just got up."

"Breakfast will be ready soon, so come down to the first floor. Let's eat before it gets cold."

"Huh?! You made breakfast?! Did I sleep in that long?! Wait a second, I'll get changed right away."

On the other side of the door, Keith laughed.

"You don't have to rush. I simply woke up too early, that's all. I had time to kill, so I got breakfast ready. Also, about Challe's bed—just before I fell asleep last night, I remembered someone who I think will give us one. Let's go pick it up today."

"Thank you."

"All right, see you later."

As they listened to the sound of Keith's footsteps moving down the stairs, Challe shrugged as if to say, *See?*

"Challe, that was amazing. It was like you read Keith's mind. How?"

"The boy was in such high spirits last night. He seemed overjoyed, like he would do anything for us."

At Challe's words, Anne was a little taken aback. But he simply looked out the window again as if nothing had happened.

I wonder how Challe feels about Keith telling me he loves me…

Anne glanced at his profile, but he didn't seem to be feeling anything at all.

Well, of course he isn't. Keith confessing his love to me doesn't have anything to do with Challe.

One day had passed since Anne and the other chosen successors to the silver sugar fairy had returned from the royal castle.

When they'd left, the Earl of Downing and the Silver Sugar Viscount had declared they would work toward training more silver sugar fairies. Apparently, the five crafters who were to succeed the silver sugar fairy had a duty to help out as well.

The Silver Sugar Viscount had said he would have more detailed instructions for them in due course, and the five of them had been instructed to return to wherever they'd come from and wait.

Three of them—Elliott Collins, proxy maestro of the Paige Workshop; John Killean, proxy maestro of the Mercury Workshop; and Stella Knox, a crafter from the Radcliffe Workshop—had gone back to their respective factions.

Keith was already in the process of opening a workshop of his own, so that was where he had returned.

The problem was Anne. She belonged nowhere and had no home of her own, nor any place to settle.

So Keith had invited her in, saying it was all right for her to live with him at the workshop he was building. They were already planning to manage it together, so there was no issue with her moving there now. Moreover, Keith had already prepared a room for her as co-owner. Even Hugh had recommended she reside at Keith's workshop since it would be easier to get in contact with her if he knew where she was staying.

On top of all that, as Anne had been puzzling over what to do, Keith had said with an easy smile, *"I won't expect you to be my girlfriend just because we're living together, so set your mind at ease. I understand perfectly well that we're just business partners."*

Hugh was in favor of it, and if she intended to run the workshop with Keith, it was probably better for her to start living there as soon as possible so she could get used to the space. Moreover, Keith had assured her that he saw love and work as separate issues.

She'd felt like it would be rude to refuse after so much encouragement and that it might seem as though she was overly hung up on Keith's confession.

And so, Anne had gone to Keith's workshop, accompanied by Challe and Mithril.

As Challe had said, Keith seemed very pleased to have her there. He had indeed been in unusually high spirits as he'd shown her around the workspace, living quarters, and back garden.

"I wonder…if he's happy."

Anne contemplated this as she took down her dress from where it was hanging on the wall.

She couldn't quite grasp that she was the object of another person's affection. It felt like someone else's problem. She genuinely found it baffling that anyone could have fallen for someone like her.

Anne didn't think she was hideous or anything. But her looks were only average. She was lanky, and nobody would describe her figure as "charmingly feminine," even as empty flattery.

If I were beautiful and amazing like Challe or Lulu, I would understand, but…

When it came to Challe, just being with him was enough. She was happy simply to have him by her side and even happier when he seemed to be enjoying himself. Considering this, she felt disheartened by her lack of progress.

It's no use. I can't help Challe at all if I'm so in love with him.

Challe's vow to protect Anne was a heavy burden that tied him down. In order to set him free, Anne needed to fall in love with somebody else and find her own happiness.

And yet no matter how much time passed, her feelings for Challe never faded.

"Get up, Mithril Lid Pod."

Challe turned toward the bed and called out to Mithril, who was curled up under the covers. Mithril wriggled sluggishly and groaned.

"Challe Fenn Challe… Last night, I barely got any rest because of you. Let me sleep a little longer in recognition of my thoughtfulness…"

"Because of me? Why's that?"

"I stayed up so I could cheer you on with all my might in case you got any ideas and went over to Anne's bed…"

The moment he heard that, Challe ripped away the blanket with a blank look on his face and grabbed Mithril by the scruff of his neck, lifting him up off the bed.

"Guh…gahhh! M-my neck! You're strangling me! I'm gonna die!"

"If it's more sleep you want, I can put you to sleep forever."

"Challe!! You have to go easy on him!!"

Anne had no more time to spend lost in thought. She leaped up and rushed over to the two of them.

Afterward, Anne finished changing and went down to the dining room on the first floor with Challe and Mithril.

The workshop looked out onto a main avenue near the Lewiston West Marketplace. The part of the shop facing the road had been

turned into a workspace with a hearth, millstones, and workbenches. It was filled with the pleasant scent of Saint Ellis Nut.

Sandwiched between the workspace and the hallway was a combined dining room and kitchen. Just beyond the kitchen stove, one could exit into a small back garden enclosed by a wall. The cold, clear water needed for sugar candy crafting could be taken from a well there.

There was an external staircase in the garden, and by climbing it, one could reach the living space on the second floor. The upper story had a total of four rooms, all of which were bright and clean, with wooden floors and paneling.

The building had once been a bakery. But apparently, it had been standing empty for several years when Keith had purchased it.

He had repaired the dilapidated areas, reconstructed the hearth so it could be used for making sugar candy, and done everything necessary to turn the place into a fine workshop.

The section that faced the road, in particular, had been renovated and thoroughly cleaned. The floorboards had all been repainted with lacquer and polished. The door handle and other hardware had been replaced, as had the counter, which was now glossy and bright and smelled of wood. The old and the new went together nicely, creating a calm, clean impression. It wasn't extravagant, but the time and effort taken were quietly evident in the finishing touches. It showed exactly the sensibility Anne expected from a born aristocrat.

"You have good taste, don't you, Keith? The shop looks so lovely."

Keith smiled bashfully at Anne's praise as he brought a plate of fried bacon and eggs over to the table. The appetizing smell of oil filled the dining room.

"I don't know," he said. "It's nothing special, really."

Anne laid out the forks and poured the tea. A loaf of rye bread and an herb salad were already set out on the table, along with some wild-strawberry jam.

Mithril and Challe sat down as a matter of course, waiting for the meal preparations to be finished. Anne was pleased Keith wasn't opposed to eating meals with the fairies.

"Keith, why are you so good at cooking?" asked Mithril, his eyes glued to the plate of eggs and bacon set in front of him. "Do they teach cooking classes at the State Church Independent School?"

Challe nodded. "It's much more appetizing than a certain someone's pitch-black bacon."

"I—I only burned it that one time! It was hard to judge the heat when I was frying over an open flame."

Anne blushed as she arrived at the table. Keith took a seat as well.

"I didn't learn to cook in class," he said, "but I picked it up while living in the dormitory. Ordinarily, a cook would prepare meals for students living in the dorms. But during long breaks, the cook would go home, and the students staying at school had to take turns doing the cooking. I had to help out. But I can't make anything too elaborate."

"This is plenty, though! You'll make a good bride someday, Keith!"

With an excited look on his face, Mithril held his hand over his plate and offered his highest praise.

"Thanks. But I don't really want to be anybody's bride."

Anne was grateful for Keith's carefree attitude as he answered.

He had told Anne he loved her, but now he was avoiding the subject as best he could. When he'd replied, his demeanor hadn't changed at all. Anne thought he was acting almost too natural. It was easy to forget he had just confessed to her.

Challe and Mithril were the same and never said a word about the matter. They didn't seem concerned about it one bit. It was as if they had all reached an unspoken agreement that it wasn't the right time to bring it back up.

Just as they were about to start their meal, someone knocked wildly on the shop's door.

"Who could that be?"

Anne and Mithril were puzzled, while Keith and Challe looked suspicious.

"I doubt it's a customer wanting to buy sugar candy."

At Challe's words, Keith nodded and stood up.

"You're right. And I'm still setting up the shop. I haven't announced anything to the neighborhood or even put out a sign."

Someone was striking the door firmly and repeatedly. The knocker's frustration seemed to come through with every blow. The four of them put their breakfast on hold and headed into the shop. The whole time they were moving, the pounding continued.

When they got close, they heard a familiar voice shouting at them from outside.

"Hey, open up! Open up!"

Anne and Keith looked at each other, then both rushed to open the door. When they did, the knocker's excess momentum caused them to tumble inside.

"Kat!"

"Mr. Hingley?!"

The young, slender man pitched forward and stumbled a few steps before righting himself. Then he straightened up and stuck his chest out proudly. He had grayish hair and blue, upturned eyes. His refined, aristocratic features reminded one of a well-bred cat. This was the Silver Sugar Master Alph Hingley, also known as Kat.

"You idiots! Don't open the door so suddenly! Who does that?!"

Despite his elegant appearance, Kat pointed at them and shouted rudely. He was wearing his usual high-class attire. Everything fit him well, and the lace and embroidery at his collar were especially fine.

"Never mind that," said Challe, exasperated. "What kind of person goes banging on someone else's door hard enough to break it first thing in the morning?" Then he smiled maliciously. "Oh, my mistake. It wasn't a person, but a cat."

"Who're you callin' a cat?!"

Thinking nothing of his master's shouting, Benjamin, the little green-haired fairy atop Kat's shoulder, continued to doze. Eventually, however, his surroundings became too noisy, and he opened his eyes and yawned. He turned, his soft green ringlets bouncing, and slowly looked around.

"Huhhh? Kat, where are we? Why did we come here?"

"That's what I'd like to know!" Mithril grumbled in exasperation.

Benjamin's face softened into a smile. "Wow, and Surusuru's here, too. Long time no see."

"Benjamin… I doubt you'll correct yourself at this point, but let me remind you that I am Mithril! Mithril Lid Pod!"

"Mm. I know. Surusuru Hat Bu…… What was it again?"

"You've got every bit of it wrong…" Overwhelmed, Mithril seemed to deflate, placing both hands on the floor.

"What's going on, Kat?" asked Anne. "You're here so early. Actually, why are you here at all?"

Kat ran his own shop in Southcent, and he didn't belong to any faction. Anne didn't think he had any responsibilities outside managing his own affairs. Not to mention, she couldn't imagine the sort of errand that would require him to pay such a spirited visit to their new workshop, which wasn't even open for business yet.

Kat pulled an envelope out of his pocket and thrust it at Anne.

"Read this. It came yesterday."

Anne took the envelope and looked it over. She saw the name *Hugh Mercury*, accompanied by the Silver Sugar Viscount's seal. It was a letter from Hugh to Kat.

She opened it and unfolded the contents. Keith peered down at the letter with her.

Dear Kat, I'm sure you're still busy minding your little shop with its utter lack of customers, but have you been well? A few days ago, the ban was lifted on the candy making techniques that had been concealed for five hundred years by the royal family. Five crafters were chosen to inherit those techniques, and they have now finished doing so. As a matter of fact, you were one of the candidates I considered, but due to your lack of charm, I excluded you. Keith Powell and Anne Halford did a splendid job in your place. Best regards.

That was the entirety of the letter.

"In other words, he's just saying, *Hey, loser, serves you right—ha!* " Anne twitched as she summarized the gist of the message.

Keith looked exasperated. "…The Viscount…is so immature…"

"Exactly! And it pisses me off! That's why I came rushing over from Southcent!"

Kat snatched the letter out of Anne's hands and roughly stuffed it back inside his jacket.

Why did Hugh harass Kat and only Kat in such childish ways? Anne had always been curious about that. Hugh had once declared that bullying Kat had been his hobby for the past fifteen years. Idly, she wondered what their training days must have been like.

"So? Why did you come here? Aren't you yelling at the wrong people, Mr. Kat?"

Challe purposely attached *Mr.* to Kat's nickname, and the latter lashed out at him.

"You're a good match for that dim-witted bastard!"

"Challe! I told you not to do that!" In a panic, Anne jumped in between Challe and Kat. "I'm sorry, Kat! But really, why are you here?"

Teasing the man wouldn't get them anywhere. After all, he always shot back with full sincerity. Doubtless, that was the source of Challe's amusement.

"Thought that was obvious, shrimp. To learn those techniques from you and Powell, of course."

"……Huh? Learn?"

"That bastard said the techniques were concealed by the royal family for five hundred years. That means nobody knew them. Of course I have to learn them!"

Kat was also an experienced candy crafter. His abilities were on par with Hugh's, so he was far more skilled than Anne or Keith. It would be inappropriate for them to teach him anything.

"But we can't just…"

Keith was understandably taken aback, but Kat scowled at him sternly.

"You moron! You know something I don't! It only makes sense for the person who knows something to teach the one who doesn't! Or are you tryin' to say there's some reason you can't teach me?"

"No, not at all."

"Then there's no problem. Let's get to it. There's no way these techniques are something basic I can pick up in just two or three days, either. So I'll be staying here for a while."

Keith was dumbfounded by Kat's selfish announcement.

Kat didn't care about his reputation. Though he had skills comparable to those of the Silver Sugar Viscount, he was only interested in the art itself. Whenever he saw sugar candy, his eyes would light up and he'd get lost in his work, just like a novice crafter.

"Excuse me… Is this the Powell and Halford sugar candy workshop?"

An unfamiliar man appeared at the door, which had been left standing open. His clothing was perfectly tailored, and he had the appearance of a servant who worked at an aristocrat's manor.

"It is. Who might you be?"

Keith approached the front door, and the man took three envelopes out of his breast pocket.

"I came from Silver Westol Castle on behalf of the Silver Sugar Viscount. I have letters from the Viscount for Mr. Keith Powell and Miss Anne Halford, who reside here. Also, the Viscount said the Silver Sugar Master Alph Hingley was likely to come by, so I've brought a letter for him as well. If Mr. Hingley is here, I'd like to deliver it to him."

"I am Powell," said Keith. "She's Halford, and Hingley is the one over there. Why did the Viscount think Mr. Hingley would be here?"

"I'm not sure. Though he did seem confident. Well, if everyone is present, that's good news. I will now officially hand over the letters."

The man passed all three letters to Keith, bowed politely, and left, closing the door behind him.

Keith passed Kat and Anne their letters.

"Why did a letter addressed to me come here?" Kat reached for his and frowned.

I get it, thought Anne. *Hugh sure can be devious.*

She now understood the meaning behind the rude letter he'd sent Kat: Ultimately, Hugh wanted them to teach the fairy's techniques to Kat immediately. But it had been nasty of him to incite Kat with cruel taunts rather than simply inviting him to come learn.

Hugh must have anticipated that after reading that letter, Kat would be too restless to stay put and would come straight to Anne and Keith. He understood how to handle the man, and Kat, for his part, was fairly easily manipulated.

Keith opened his envelope and looked down at the letter.

"This is…an invitation."

They'd been told a summons would come from Hugh at some point, but this was much earlier than they'd imagined.

Anne opened her envelope as well and read the letter inside. It was a notice calling on her to come to Silver Westol Castle in three days' time.

"Mine is the same. And…"

At the end of the invitation addressed to Anne was a postscript reading, *Challe is to accompany you*. When she read that line, Anne glanced at Challe. He seemed to understand the meaning behind her look and nodded slightly.

Hugh's invitation was connected to the lifting of the ban on the silver sugar fairy's techniques and the plan to train more silver sugar fairies. This was all due to the pledge made between Challe and His Majesty King Edmond II, so it was only natural that Challe would be invited.

Kat opened his envelope just like the others and frowned.

"He's telling me to come, too. But what for?"

Anne made eye contact with Keith. "Kat as well? I wonder why…"

The royal capital of Lewiston was located in Harrington Province. Silver Westol Castle, where the Silver Sugar Viscount resided, was located in Westol, the capital of the neighboring Charmae Province.

The castle's tower was elegant and beautiful, clad in polished white stones. A nearby lake reflected the image of the structure as well as its surrounding forest, lending it a dignified, sacred air. The beauty and sanctity of the place echoed the qualities of sugar candy, making it a fitting abode for the Silver Sugar Viscount. The people he'd invited would be gathering there, at this location holy to all sugar candy crafters.

Immediately after they'd received their invitations, Anne and Keith had talked to Kat about the secret techniques they had learned and

about the silver sugar fairy Lulu, who had transmitted them. They'd also explained why the Viscount was summoning them.

At this, Kat had declared, *"From what you've told me, there's no reason I should be included in this summons."* He was exactly right.

The only people connected to this matter were the five candy crafters who had learned the silver sugar fairy's techniques and possibly those at the top of the factions, such as the maestros or proxy maestros, along with the head crafters, who were next highest in rank.

Kat had not received the fairy's techniques, and he didn't belong to any faction. It wasn't clear exactly why he had been summoned. But as a crafter, he was curious about Hugh's intentions and developments related to these new techniques, so he had joined Anne and the others at Silver Westol Castle.

Challe and Mithril had naturally come along as well. Challe had received an invitation from Hugh, but there was no such summons for Mithril. However, Mithril had decided independently that Hugh wouldn't mind.

The two fairies were asked to wait in a separate room while Anne, Keith, and Kat entered the great hall.

The hall stretched back a considerable distance. From the doorway, Anne and the others could see that the walls on either side were lined with tall, fixed windows that went all the way up to the ceiling. The spring sunlight coming in through the panes brightened and warmed the space.

Several long tables were arranged in a square, and seated at them were the maestros or proxy maestros of each faction, along with their head candy crafters.

Proxy maestro John Killean and head candy crafter Grant had come from the Mercury faction. The two of them greeted Anne's group with smiles when they entered the hall.

Marcus Radcliffe and the Silver Sugar Master serving as his head candy crafter had come from the Radcliffe faction. They both glanced at Anne and the others briefly, but they didn't offer any greetings. Keith bowed to Marcus, but the other man responded with only a slight, sullen nod.

Proxy maestro Elliott Collins and head candy crafter Orlando had come from the Paige faction.

It had been several months since Anne had last seen Orlando. The leather patch covering his left eye was painful to look at, but his demeanor was as calm and confident as always. When he saw Anne, he raised his hand slightly. It was a curt greeting considering how long it had been, but Anne knew that, from him, it was an expression of deepest affection. She smiled and waved back.

Aside from the faction leaders, the silver sugar fairy's other pupil, Stella Knox of the Radcliffe Workshop, was in attendance. As always, Stella glared at Elliott as if they were sworn enemies. He glanced over at Anne and Keith and greeted them slightly with his eyes. He looked somewhat sluggish. Perhaps he was feeling unwell with the changing of the seasons.

Everyone in attendance seemed equally surprised by Kat's presence. The very idea that Kat, who hated the factions and had a reputation for doing his work however he pleased, would come to a place like this seemed highly out of character.

As soon as Kat made it to his seat along with Anne and Keith, Elliott jumped up.

"Anne, Keith. What's going on? Why did you bring someone like Kat along? Kat, did you eat something bad? Are you feeling sick?"

"Shaddap. And put away that stupid grin," Kat spat, sinking into his chair.

Keith answered in his place. "Mr. Hingley also received an invitation from the Viscount."

Elliott frowned slightly. "This is like an executive meeting for the heads of all the sugar candy crafting organizations. The faction maestros haven't met up since the conference about the sugar apple crop failure last year, and this time, even the head crafters are in attendance. It's clear the Viscount is looking to make some big organizational moves. And yet he's summoned Kat, who's totally averse to all that stuff. What is he thinking?"

"We don't know, and neither does Kat. The invitations didn't state a reason," Anne answered.

Elliott brushed back his red bangs and thought. “Hmm. I wonder what the Viscount has in mind.”

Just then, four men serving as aides to the Silver Sugar Viscount entered the great hall. They prompted Elliott to take his seat and told everyone to stop their conversations.

Once the room was quiet, the aides lined up along the wall beside the door and stood at attention.

As if everything had been timed, as soon as the aides took their places, the door to the great hall opened.

“The Earl of Downing is entering!” came a voice from beyond the door.

The crafters all looked at one another.

The Earl of Downing stepped gallantly into the room, his black cloak fluttering and cutting through the beams of sunlight. He was getting on in years but still had the imposing air of a vigorous soldier.

While everyone was gazing at the earl in wonderment, Hugh appeared, dressed in the less formal version of his Silver Sugar Viscount attire. The two of them came to stand at the end of the table farthest from the door, then looked around at those in attendance.

The Earl of Downing spoke first.

“Faction representatives, thank you all for coming. I am the Earl of Downing, and I am here today in my capacity as the Silver Sugar Viscount’s guardian. I have one thing of which I must notify you, as well as one order to pass on.

“I’m sure some of you are already aware, but the other day, according to the decision of His Majesty the King, it was determined that the candy crafting techniques concealed by the royal family for five hundred years shall no longer be kept secret. I would like those techniques to be taught to all sugar candy crafters by way of each faction. The techniques, which belonged to the silver sugar fairy, have been passed on to the Silver Sugar Viscount and the five crafters chosen as the fairy’s successors. These five crafters have a duty to teach the techniques to each faction, as well as to any

crafter who desires to learn them—even those who do not belong to any faction. That is all I have to say about the lifting of the ban."

The Earl of Downing turned his gaze on the candy crafters.

Those present had likely already heard this news from the successors after they'd returned to their respective workshops. Instead of answering out loud, everyone at the table nodded slightly to show they understood.

The Earl of Downing confirmed their responses and continued.

"Now then, on to the main topic. As I said earlier, I have an order for you all. A royal order."

When they heard those words, everyone's expressions grew tense.

"The royal family wants to have fairies that excel at crafting sugar candy, worthy to be called silver sugar fairies. And in order to make these fairies, they are issuing the following order to each sugar candy crafter faction." After a pause, the Earl of Downing continued at a deliberate pace. "You must allow fairies into your workshops as apprentices and train them to be candy crafters."

These words, spoken with utmost gravity, astonished everyone aside from the five successors.

Sugar candy was a sacred food, and neither the people who made it nor the places where it was made could be sullied. One hundred years earlier, even women hadn't been allowed to touch silver sugar. For the crafters who revered the old traditions, this order to train fairies, whom they worked like slaves, in the art of making sacred sugar candy must have had them doubting their ears.

But this was a royal order, and though the crafters looked shocked, no one objected. They simply stared at the earl, wide-eyed.

"As for how to produce more silver sugar fairies, that is up to the Silver Sugar Viscount. You all must follow his instructions." The Earl of Downing once again turned a strict eye on those in attendance. "Am I understood? This is a royal order." Then he quickly turned and withdrew.

After the earl left, Marcus Radcliffe, the maestro of the Radcliffe Workshop, could no longer hold in his reaction. Raising his eyebrows, he turned to Hugh and shouted, "Viscount! Do you mean to tolerate such an order?"

Holding up a hand to suppress the man's outburst, Hugh took a seat. Then he placed his elbows on top of the table, put his hands together, and rested his chin on the back of one hand, a comfortable smile on his face.

"Well then, do you intend to lodge a formal objection with His Majesty, Master Radcliffe? Will you complain to him about his order?"

Cowed by Hugh's words, Marcus shut his mouth.

"It was the fairies who originally made sugar candy," the Viscount continued. "I don't see a problem with involving them in its production. I've also confirmed the matter with the state church. Nowhere in the holy books is it written that the presence of fairies defiles sugar candy. There is no issue with it in terms of religion."

Seated next to Killean, Grant, the head crafter of the Mercury Workshop, made a pained face. "That may be, but the candy crafters will most likely see things differently."

"Naturally so. Hence the royal order. His Majesty understood that if he started by asking the candy crafters, it would be difficult to get the fairies trained. That is why he made it an order. No one can disobey an order from the king. Going forward, every faction will be expected to admit fairies as apprentices."

"These fairies—how will you choose them, and where will you get them?" Elliott sounded troubled as the corners of his droopy eyes drooped even further.

"You'll choose and secure them yourselves."

At Hugh's answer, Marcus crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair.

"In that case," he said, "we can just promote one of the fairies we use for housekeeping to the position of apprentice. That would work, right?"

"I have no intention of letting you get by with mere formalities. Half of the new apprentices you admit to your workshop each year must be fairies."

Marcus stared at Hugh, startled. Elliott and Killean followed suit.

Elliott immediately turned to his head crafter, Orlando, seeking his opinion. Orlando shook his head, adjusting his black leather eyepatch.

"I can't say it will be easy. It's hard enough to obtain worker fairies with good temperaments. Seeking out fairies who want to learn to make sugar candy will be difficult. How should we go about finding ones who are interested? And even if we find them, we'll need money to purchase them."

"You must ensure that half of your apprentices are fairies," Hugh said firmly. "As a general rule, each faction is to select and secure fairies on its own. However, the Paige Workshop's head crafter is quite right. I will also make arrangements of my own. Whenever the number of fairies at a given faction is too low, I will dispatch some of my own. But in those cases, I cannot guarantee the fairies will remain at the same workshop forever, even if they develop into skilled candy crafters. You'll have to resign yourselves to the idea that if it becomes necessary, I may withdraw a fairy by the authority of the Silver Sugar Viscount."

"I'm grateful to hear that, but, Viscount…have you already begun receiving fairies?" Killean asked anxiously.

Hugh shrugged. "I will begin gathering them presently. That's why I've summoned Powell and Halford. I plan to give the task to them. The fairies will need a certain amount of training as well, bearing in mind that they may be dispatched to various workshops."

Anne was astonished.

Gather up fairies? From where?! And then train them?! How?!

This job sounded absurdly hard. She didn't have the slightest idea where to recruit fairies or how she would gather them. Even if she and Keith worked together, they were both young—he was only nineteen years old. Compared with the maestros and proxy maestros sitting at the table, they had no experience and no power. Surely, this job was too much for the likes of them.

"Viscount. Are you sure the two of us are qualified?" Keith asked with a frown.

Hugh smiled wryly. "Normally, I would also prefer to assign this task to Killean or Collins, but the two of them are proxy maestros. They need to focus their energies on preparing to admit fairies into their workshops. And Knox is the sole successor in his workshop. It's purely a practical matter: You two are the only crafters who inherited

the silver sugar fairy's techniques and don't have any faction work. You're not the most suitable candidates, true, but I'm expecting great things from you."

Anne could see his point, but she was still flustered. She was glad to hear he was confident in them, but she didn't feel the same.

"B-but with just the two of us—"

"Of course, it would be too great a burden for you and Powell alone. That's why I arranged for one more person to work with you. He has lots of experience as a crafter that you lack, so he'll be a great help."

"Who would that be?"

"Why, the guy sitting next to you with a surly look on his face."

Keith was sitting to Anne's right, which meant to her left…was Kat.

That's ridiculous!

Kat, who always took his own path, was unlikely to do anything aside from making sugar candy. And there was absolutely no way he would listen to orders from Hugh.

Sure enough, Kat's thin eyebrows arched sharply.

"What'd you say?"

"Kat. I'm giving you as much authority as I can in my position. Become my lieutenant and act in my stead as you proceed with the work of recruiting and training fairies."

"What the hell're you sayin'?! Ya can't just use me for whatever you want!" Kat pounded on the table with both hands and stood up.

Hugh shot him a sharp look. "This task is how you will fulfill the royal order issued to all candy crafters. If you refuse, there's simply no way I can recognize you as one. I will issue notice of your expulsion from the profession, and you'll be forbidden from calling yourself a candy crafter."

Red-faced, Kat let his anger explode. "That's a dirty trick, Hugh!!"

Hugh's tone was matter-of-fact. "I recognize my tactics are underhanded. However, we need your assistance. That's why I'm assigning this task to you. What will you do, Kat? Help me with this job, or quit being a candy crafter?"

"Hugh… Viscount! Why do you have to take things so far?" Without meaning to, Anne cried out in protest.

"Control yourself, Halford," he said, glaring at her.

His low, threatening voice startled her. He wasn't playing around as he pressed Kat for an answer—that much was clear.

Kat groaned. "You wanna lick the nobles' boots that bad, huh?"

"If you think it's bootlicking, then fine. This is my job. Now, Kat. Answer me. Will you do it? Or not?"

Kat clawed at the surface of the table with his nails and squeezed both his hands into fists. His eyes blazed as he glared at Hugh. Forcing out his words, he said, "…I'll do it."



"Wonderful," replied Hugh, face devoid of expression.

When he heard this, Kat flopped back down in his chair.

As soon as the matter with Kat was concluded, Hugh looked at the maestros and proxy maestros of each faction in turn.

"Every workshop must negotiate the matter of admitting fairies independently. That is all. Time to get to work."

Thus prompted, the maestros and proxy maestros stood up and left Silver Westol Castle, looks of distress on their faces. Though they were disoriented by the sudden order, they had no time to dwell on it. They had to consider how to receive the new fairies and get ready for their arrival. The first issue they would have to confront was their own candy crafters' reactions. Even if they could force compliance on account of the royal order, it was obvious the atmosphere inside the workshops would be chaotic.

"Keith, Anne, and Kat, come to my office," commanded Hugh. "We'll discuss the details."

One of his aides showed the three of them to the Viscount's private quarters. For his part, Kat spent the whole walk in sullen silence.



Challe and Mithril had been brought to Hugh's office a little earlier.

It was a spacious room with a balcony. There was a large desk and a bookshelf, and in the center of the room sat a low table flanked by a sofa and a chair with armrests. The room was plain; there were no paintings or sculptures decorating the walls. The space around the desk was a little messy with papers and books, but overall, it was relatively tidy.

Hugh had shown the two fairies to this room before the candy crafters had started their meeting.

Fresh herb tea was set out for them. Mithril took up a position on top of the table and began enjoying his tea. It was thoughtful of the castle's servants to set out tea with a fresh scent fairies liked.

Challe stood by the window, gazing out at the surface of the lake with its reflection of the castle.

When Hugh had left the room, he'd said, *"After the meeting, I'm bringing Anne and the others here. You also have the right to hear our discussion. It's what you asked for."*

The human king, Edmond II, had vowed to make it so fairies could inherit their own kind's candy making techniques. And in order to fulfill that vow, those in charge were preparing to train new silver sugar fairies.

The leaders of the factions had all been summoned, and the royal order had been issued. The human king was trying to keep his vow to Challe.

But Challe wondered whether it was really all right to believe in him.

Downing used the word make*.*

He'd said they needed to "make" silver sugar fairies. Challe couldn't help but feel like he'd glimpsed the men's true motives through the earl's choice of words. He wondered whether they weren't simply trying to create a new class of slaves capable of doing more specialized work for the royal family's benefit. Challe's wish might be warped by these humans into something else entirely.

The thought made him feel empty and sad rather than angry.

"Huh?! Challe? Mithril Lid Pod?"

Just then, he heard Anne's voice. When he turned around, Anne and Keith, as well as Kat, were being shown into the room by one of Hugh's aides.

Challe had been lost in melancholy thoughts, but as soon as he saw her smiling face, something bright sprouted in his chest. He had always found it curious how he seemed to sense a bright future ahead whenever he looked at Anne. He even got the feeling that somehow, she might change the future for the better. He smiled wryly at himself for these silly thoughts.

Ridiculous. What can this scarecrow brain possibly accomplish?

Chapter 2
A WOLF CARRYING A COFFIN

"Why are the two of you here?"

When Anne and the others entered Hugh's office, they saw Challe and Mithril were already there.

Challe answered the question, looking annoyed. "I was told I have a right to hear your discussion."

"I wonder why," Mithril said naively. "Do you think that guy Hugh has big plans that need the amazing energy of the great Mithril Lid Pod and his entourage?"

Mithril, who didn't know Challe was the fairy king, threw out his chest and flared his nostrils.

Unlike Mithril, Hugh was aware of Challe's identity. The fact that Hugh had summoned Challe made it clear to Anne exactly why she had been chosen for this mission.

"I see. It's because we need Challe…"

Hugh was counting on Challe as well for this mission.

They would need his power and his position as the fairy king as they developed deeper relationships with the other fairies. The job of finding the fairies had not been left to Anne and Keith simply because they were the only two crafters not working for a faction. It must have been because Anne was close to Challe and they trusted each other. It seemed Hugh's confidence was in Anne and Challe's work as a pair.

Challe once again turned his gaze out the window. There was a lonesome, melancholy look in his eyes, as if he had doubts about the future.

"It seems the human king intends to honor his oath," he said. "For now, that is…"

Challe had put himself at risk to make it possible for fairies to receive these candy crafting techniques. However, human crafters would likely be resistant to the idea. Despite the royal order, the crafters' traditions might undercut the king's plans and hamper results. King Edmond had said as much himself.

Don't make that face, Challe.

Anne didn't want to see Challe's worries about the future become a reality. She wondered what she could do to prevent that from happening.

"Good, you're all here. Kat, Keith, Anne."

Hugh came into the room, now in his regular brown jacket. Behind him was a young man with tanned skin, his bodyguard Salim. The latter went to the wall and stood by silently.

When Hugh sat down in one of the chairs, Anne, Keith, and Kat each took a seat nearby. Challe leaned against the window frame, crossed his arms, and closed his eyes.

Hugh glanced at Challe out of the corner of his eye, then began to speak.

"As I said during the meeting, I'm assigning the three of you the task of finding and gathering fairies with the dispositions to become sugar candy crafters. Furthermore, you will educate those fairies to a certain extent about sugar candy. I'm expecting you to work to establish a system that can accomplish that."

"But, Hugh…how can we recognize who has the right disposition?" Anne grumbled.

Anne felt like she was being told to wade through raging rapids. She was at a loss for what to do.

"The same way you do with humans. Just let them touch some silver sugar, and you'll know which ones have the knack for it. Once you let them apprentice with you at your workshop for about a month, you'll be able to distinguish the best of them. I don't

suppose we can pursue fairies already owned by someone else, so I'm thinking you ought to start your search at the fairy markets, looking there for any who have talent."

When he heard Hugh's answer, Keith responded immediately.

"But that will be quite difficult. Those fairies are for sale. The merchants will demand payment, even if we just want to borrow them as apprentices for a month. And we'll need a considerable sum if we are to purchase them for good. Is the kingdom going to provide us with the money for all those costs?"

"The kingdom is not prepared to allocate a significant budget for this plan."

Keith had immediately brought up practical issues. He had the ability to steadily advance step by step. Anne might have been assigned to this mission because of her connection to Challe and the need for his power, but she figured Keith had been chosen for his cleverness.

"In that case, Viscount, what do you intend to do about the expenses?"

"You won't incur any. You will borrow any fairies who seem to have talent for a month, for free. Once you have confirmed they have the gift, I expect you to take possession of them for, say, a tenth of the market price. I will issue these two commands to the fairy merchants."

Challe had been silent up until then, but at these words, he chuckled.

"Fairy dealers are more loyal to gold than to the king. Even if you tell them it's a royal order, I doubt those lowlifes will simply go along with it. They'll slip right through your fingers. They're good at that kind of thing."

"True. I doubt we'll get anywhere by negotiating with individual fairy dealers. That's why I will negotiate with the representative of the Fairy Merchants Guild and make them accept it as a matter of guild policy. The other merchants are certain to obey a warning from their representative."

There were artisan guilds and merchant guilds for all manner of professions. Each region had its own organizations for locals to join.

Fairy dealers were also a type of merchant, so one would expect them to join their local merchant guilds. However, fairy dealers alone had no place in such organizations. Because they dealt in fairies, they were considered cruel and coldhearted, and other merchants despised them. For that reason, they had organized their own guild for fairy merchants, and that group served to regulate them.

Only one Fairy Merchants Guild existed for the whole kingdom, and this singular organization had jurisdiction over all the fairy dealers in Highland. For that reason, solidarity across the Fairy Merchants Guild was quite strong.

At that point, Kat, who had been sullenly refusing to look at Hugh, finally turned to face him.

"Idiot. Do ya even know what yer sayin'? The big boss at the Fairy Merchants Guild is—"

"Yes. I know…"

Anne cocked her head. She wasn't sure what they were implying. "What about the head of the Fairy Merchants Guild?"

Mithril, who was sitting on top of the table with his legs stretched out in front of him, made an incredibly unpleasant face. "That guy? Even I've heard about him, though just in passing. You mean the Wolf, right?"

"The Wolf?" Anne blinked, unsure what he meant.

Challe answered her. "'The Wolf' is his nickname. His real name is Reginald Stowe. Even among fairy dealers, there are few who know his face. I've never seen him myself. There are rumors he never settles in one place but instead travels around the kingdom, going from one fairy market to the next. However, no one knows for certain." Although his voice was calm, there was obvious disgust in Challe's eyes.

"Exactly right," said Hugh. "As I expected, Challe is already well-informed. First, we will find this Stowe and negotiate with him. I expect I will need to make an appearance, given who we are dealing with, but you'll be on your own after that. Then if negotiations go well, you can start to take more concrete action. What do you think should be the next step? If it was up to you, what would you do, Kat?"

As Hugh asked this question, he comfortably draped both his arms over the armrests of his chair. Kat looked annoyed.

"Why're you askin' me?"

"I told you, didn't I? You're my lieutenant. Put that rusty head of yours to work for a change. Really, your mind is wasted on you."

"Who the hell d'you think you are, huh?!"

"As I said, I'm counting on that head of yours. If you don't feel like using it, I can write up your orders of expulsion at any time."

Counting on his head?

At those words, Anne and Keith looked at each other.

Hugh propped one elbow up on an armrest and held his chin in one hand as he waited in silence for Kat's reply.

Kat snorted and averted his eyes. But after a few moments, he spoke.

"We'll need to establish a workshop where we can gather the fairies, as well as facilities where they can stay. We'll have them work there until we can determine which ones have talent. We'll need people to gather them from the fairy markets and to take them back, and people to judge their aptitudes. We'll need a head of staff, too, in order to facilitate smooth exchanges with the fairy dealers. If possible, that same head of staff should have control over the whole process."

Anne was surprised by Kat's answer. Keith's eyes had gone wide.

Kat is really…

In spite of herself, Anne stared at Kat's sullen profile. It had never occurred to her that Kat, who was always engrossed in sugar candy, was capable of such pragmatic thinking. If anything, Anne had always figured Kat was just like her, completely useless at anything other than crafting candy.

Hugh had used coercion to get Kat here and make him participate. But he'd done so because he had that much faith in the man's abilities. Because Kat was such a skilled candy crafter, he understood what steps they needed to take to train others in the field.

Hugh grinned. "Good answer. It was worth calling you here."

"Why're you always actin' so stuck-up?"

"Listen more carefully to what people say, Kat. I complimented you—I said it was worth bringing you here. I have confidence in you. You are devoted to sugar candy and nothing else. If you weren't, you wouldn't be able to do this job."

"I'm afraid yer praise doesn't make me very happy."

"You don't have to be happy about it, but you *do* need to clarify the number of necessary personnel and the skills they should have, as well as what is needed to make a facility suitable for gathering fairies. Write up a report and submit it to me."

"Why've I gotta do somethin' like that? What a pain!"

"Would you prefer a notice of expulsion?"

"Dammit! Fine!" Kat spat, brushing back his bangs in irritation.

"But first, we must start negotiations with the leader of the Fairy Merchants Guild, or we won't get anywhere," said Hugh. "Anne, Keith, Kat, I'll lend you all the help I can. So go and find out where the Wolf is."

One week had passed since the meeting at Silver Westol Castle.

Anne and Keith, who had returned to Lewiston, had been searching for the whereabouts of Reginald Stowe, the leader of the Fairy Merchants Guild. Hugh had lent them three of his castle guards to help with the hunt.

But so far, they hadn't come up with any helpful clues.

Once again, Anne and Keith headed for the corner of the Lewiston West Marketplace that was home to the fairy market. They visited the place's manager, but he'd never seen Reginald Stowe's face, either. He told them since Reginald was always on the move, only the man himself ever knew where he would be.

Walking around day in and day out was even more tiring when they had no results to show for it. By the time they got back to the workshop that evening, Anne was exhausted.

Kat seemed drained as well. He had left the search for Reginald Stowe up to Anne and Keith and was working on his report for Hugh.

He had researched the location and scale of each and every fairy market in the kingdom, as well as the rough number of fairies being sold at each one. He was trying to use realistic figures to determine what they would need, both in terms of the number of staff and the size of the facility.

Ultimately, Kat was incapable of doing things in half measures. Even when it was something he didn't want to do, when compelled by necessity, he undertook his tasks thoroughly and persistently. His experience as a candy crafter aided him in the project, and even more unexpectedly, it seemed once he put his mind to something, it worked quite well.

"No wonder Hugh wanted Kat on this. He's so focused! Right, Benjamin?"

Anne had brought Kat some tea as he continued his work upstairs. When she got back to the dining room, she sat down with the tray still in her hands. Mumbling earnestly, she slumped over and rested her cheek on top of the table.

With Mithril's help, Benjamin was bustling about, preparing dinner.

It appeared they'd be having beef shank stew that evening, and the aroma of the rich meat and spices wafted through the air.

As Benjamin and Mithril stirred the soup using a large ladle, Benjamin answered dreamily, "Kat can only do one thing at a time… but he does that one thing with everything he's got."

"He sure is simpleminded, huh?" Mithril said bluntly.

With a strained smile, Keith poured tea for himself and Anne, then sat down at the table.

"It's true—I'm quite surprised," he said. "If only he felt like it, Mr. Hingley could probably even serve as Silver Sugar Viscount."

"I could never do it," said Anne. "I'm no match for the Viscount. The only thing I can do is make sugar candy."

This new job Anne had been dragged into had implications for the future of all fairykind. She felt a heavy sense of responsibility. But she still wasn't clear on how they would make it through without the humans betraying the hopes of Challe and the other fairies.

Being weary and exhausted made Anne want to craft sugar candy, to touch silver sugar. That was all she wanted. She felt ashamed for

always thinking about herself.

Whenever she was tired, she had a special desire to see Challe's face. It would remind her that she had to keep trying her best and help cheer her on. But Challe had gone out for a walk and had been away since morning.

For the past week, Challe had been leaving early in the morning, saying he was going for a walk, and only returning in the evening. Anne didn't know what he was doing, but she wasn't particularly worried given how strong he was. And she doubted there were any fairy hunters reckless enough to attack him in the middle of Lewiston.

"Tired?" Keith asked her sympathetically.

Still face down on the table, Anne was absently watching the steam rise from the cup of tea he'd poured for her.

"Yeah…I guess so. But I want to touch silver sugar," she said without thinking.

Keith burst out laughing. "I thought you were tired," he teased. Then he stood up and placed his hands on Anne's shoulders. "Listen, Anne. Can we do a little experiment? I'm curious about something. When we reground the hardened silver sugar at the Paige Workshop, the quality of the sugar went up, right? Plus, didn't Lulu tell us she ground her sugar ten times over? What if we grind up silver sugar we've intentionally let harden and then, on top of that, grind it ten more times? Aren't you curious to see how much that would improve the poor-quality silver sugar we have on hand right now? Want to try it?"

Anne's head shot up from the table. "I do! Keith, what a great idea!"

Suddenly, her body was buzzing. Even as he cast a wry smile at Anne's overblown enthusiasm, Keith took off his jacket, hung it on the back of a chair, and began rolling up his sleeves.

"All right then, let's get to work."

"Yeah!" Anne stood up cheerfully.

The two of them drew cold water from the well and carried it into the workshop. Once there, they put it into a large pot and boiled it on the stove. As it began to boil, they placed a colander over the pot

and set a stone bowl full of silver sugar on top of that. They were trying to make the silver sugar absorb moisture from the steam. Anne was excited to be touching silver sugar again after so long.

Avoiding the steam rising from the pot, Anne kept watch over the silver sugar with Keith. They met each other's gaze.

"Look," said Anne. "It's starting to sparkle around the edges. It's hardening."

"I wonder how much it will change. If we can get it to the same quality as a normal year's harvest, that would be ideal."

They smiled at each other, their faces blurry through the steam. Anne thought back to when she'd refined silver sugar with her mother, Emma. The two of them had worked like this together, laughing or losing their tempers.

She enjoyed being able to do the same thing in the same way with somebody new.

Suddenly, a thought crossed her mind: *If I were with Keith, maybe we could become a family.*

Whenever she spent time with Mithril and Challe, Anne felt relaxed, like she had when she'd been with Emma. The two fairies were already like family to her. It was normal for the three of them to be together all the time, and it felt natural. For the moment, she was satisfied with that.

If Keith and Anne spent more time together, maybe she would start to have familial feelings for him as well. And maybe, in the same way her romantic feelings for Challe had grown from those other, initial feelings, she might one day have similar feelings for Keith.

If that happens, I can find happiness and release Challe from his oath.

"Anne? What's the matter?"

As she thought, Anne had been gazing absentmindedly at Keith's face. He tilted his head to the side with a kind smile.

"I was just thinking. If I keep working with you like this, Keith, someday, we might start to be like family…"

Keith looked startled, but soon, the expression turned into a soft, inviting smile. Then he gently touched Anne's hand, which was

resting on the edge of the stove.

"I'm happy to hear that," he said.

"But being family…isn't the same as being in love…"

"What you just said is proof you don't dislike me, though, right? The feelings you have now may be different from love or attraction, but you still like me. So I'm happy. One day, your affection for me might turn into something romantic. I'm not impatient, and I'm not going to rush you. I'll wait."

Anne felt deeply moved by Keith's kindness. If only she were able to change her own feelings, she could set Challe free and respond in kind to Keith. She wished so fervently that she could change how she felt.

Just then, she heard someone come in through the door, their footsteps headed toward the workshop.

When the door between the front and the back of the shop opened, she saw it was Challe. Apparently, he had come back from his walk. He stood there, looking surprised. His gaze fell on Anne's and Keith's hands, which were touching.

It was then that Anne first became conscious of Keith's hand on hers. She felt embarrassed and tried to pull away. But Keith did the opposite, squeezing her hand tightly.

"Hey, Keith. Your hand, your hand is—"

Paying no attention to the flustered Anne, Keith kept his hand where it was.

"Welcome back, Challe."

With a smile, Keith greeted the blank-faced fairy. However, his usual gentleness was absent from his eyes, replaced by a provocative glint. He was still gripping Anne's hand.

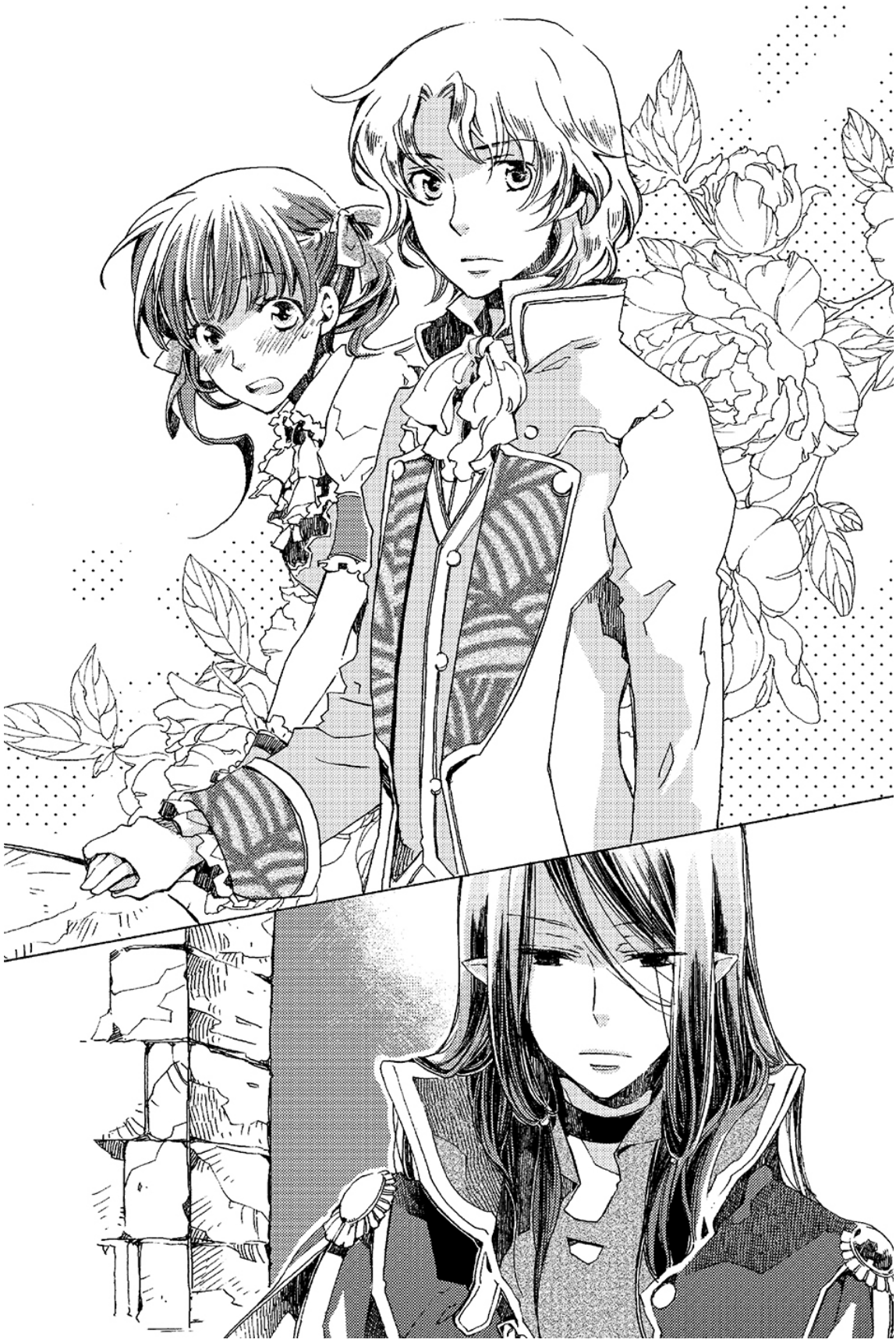
Anne couldn't tell what Challe was thinking from his expressionless face. He briskly approached them and reported, "I've learned the whereabouts of Reginald Stowe."

Surprised, Keith loosened his grip, and Anne seized the opportunity to quickly pull her hand away.

"You have? How?" Anne asked.

Challe answered her matter-of-factly. "The fairy dealers have a stubborn sense of solidarity, and there is no way they would tell an

outsider the location of their guild leader. But they do talk about him among themselves. There are dealers who know his whereabouts as part of their job. I got my information from others who overheard them."



"Oh, that's right. The fairies!" Anne shouted, finally realizing what he meant.

"Of course. The fairies up for sale would have been close enough to the dealers to overhear their conversations. I never thought of that…," Keith grumbled, criticizing himself.

But it was only natural the two of them were clueless. Challe had spent a long time being bought and sold by fairy dealers. It was precisely because of that experience that the idea had occurred to him. Plus, it was probably only because Challe was a fairy himself that the others had agreed to talk to him.

It seemed Challe had been busy trying to make his wishes into reality.

"It sounds like he recently appeared in Northern Blow, the capital of Gillum Province. He was seen riding in a wagon with a coffin."

"A coffin?"

Anne frowned at the inauspicious word, and Challe nodded.

"There is speculation about it even among the other fairy dealers."

"Northern Blow, huh? Thank you, Challe. Now the Viscount should finally be able to make a move."

Keith smiled in relief, but Challe remained stony.

"You make your report to the Silver Sugar Viscount, boy," he said, grabbing Anne's hand.

She didn't even have time to ask him what was going on before Challe had left the workshop, forcibly pulling her along. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Keith's startled expression as they left him behind.

"Ch-Challe?"

Flustered, she called out his name, but he didn't even look at her as he pulled her straight through the dining room.

Benjamin and Mithril, who were preparing dinner, stared in wonderment at Challe's momentum. But he paid them no mind and kept on going, first out into the back garden and then up the stairs.

The evening sun was starting to sink behind the townscape, tinting their surroundings with vermilion light. Challe opened the door to the bedroom and tossed Anne inside, letting go of her hand and closing the door behind them.

Challe slowly approached her, silent and expressionless. Anne could tell he was angry. Feeling cornered, she slowly moved toward the window until her back was touching it.

"Thank you for finding out about Reginald Stowe. We probably never would have found him on our own…"

Tentatively, she tried talking to him as she always did and thanked him with a smile. But Challe didn't smile back. He came right up to Anne, and as if to block her escape, he placed both his hands against the wall to either side of her.

His black eyes were beautiful and beguiling as he peered down at her. The red light of the sunset streamed in through the window and landed on his long eyelashes, where it glittered like so many tiny beads. A fresh, grassy aroma wafted off his body, and Anne's heart pounded at his closeness. She wanted to grab hold of him and cling to him tightly.

"What were you doing?" he asked abruptly.

Anne was stunned. "Huh? What was I…? We spent the whole day walking around the market, trying to get information…"

"No, idiot. I mean back there, in the workshop. What were you doing with that boy?"

"Oh, back there? We were doing an experiment to raise the quality of our silver sugar…"

"By holding hands?"

"That was… It just sort of…"

Anne faltered. She was embarrassed they'd been spotted in a position likely to invite terrible misunderstandings.

Challe sounded irritated. "'It just sort of' what?"

This was the perfect opportunity. There was a chance Anne could alter the oath binding Challe. If she could explain that to him, maybe it would cheer him up.

"We just sort of got to talking. About how I think someday Keith and I could become like family. Right now, that's all I feel, but maybe one day, that could turn into love. If that happens, I could accept Keith's confession and let you have your freedom, Challe. And then everything would work out nicely."

Anne looked up at Challe with a smile. But the fairy's expression remained as cold as before.

"Family, huh…?" Challe mumbled, sounding resigned as he removed his hands from the wall. "When I first met you, you were lonely and looking for someone to replace your mother. You just happened to meet me and Mithril at that time, and you've stayed with us until now. I'd almost forgotten that. If what you want is a family, then…I suppose you'll only get that with the boy."

She didn't understand what Challe meant. "But I think of you and Mithril Lid Pod as family…"

"We are fairies. We are born alone. We don't comprehend the meaning behind these families you humans make. So we don't understand what it is you want."

His words stuck sharply in her chest.

He doesn't know what I mean?

Anne felt like Challe had dismissed her feelings as the words of a conceited child.

But maybe he's right. Maybe I'm the only one who feels this way.

It was true she had been lonely. At first, she probably would have been happy for anyone's company. But now no one could replace Mithril and Challe. However, maybe things were different for them.

Maybe the fairies stayed with Anne out of kindness, because they were worried about her. But if Anne could find someone to depend on, maybe they would want to leave her with that person and regain their freedom without delay.

Humans were born from other humans, but fairies were born from nature. It wasn't strange for fairies to desire unrestricted freedom. Home and family weren't necessarily comforts for them as they were for humans.

"If Keith has what you seek, then you'd better accept his feelings," said Challe.

Anne's mind went blank. It was as if he had slapped her across the cheek.

"I'd like to… But right now, I can't."

"Why not?"

She couldn’t tell him the reason. She felt like if she confessed she loved him, he would be disgusted with her.

Challe stared at her briefly, as if waiting for an answer, but Anne only hung her head. Perhaps fed up with her behavior, he left the room.

I want to be with you, she thought.

But that was probably just Anne being selfish. She felt hopelessly lonely.



What Anne wanted was the ordinary, humble joy of stable happiness as a human.

Hearing her say “family” had brought that fact home. The idea of family, where people shared blood, spent time together, and showed affection toward one another didn’t make intuitive sense to Challe. He didn’t understand the feeling of special intimacy meant by the word.

Even if Challe and Anne fell in love, she wanted family. He couldn’t understand what that meant, so he could never make her truly happy. The one who could was Keith, not him. And if Challe couldn’t give Anne what she wanted for her future, then it was better for him to suppress his own feelings of love.

He went down the stairs and stood in the back garden. Keith came out the rear door from the kitchen and joined him there.

“Ah, Challe. I was just thinking of coming up to your room. I asked one of the Viscount’s soldiers to deliver the report about Reginald Stowe. He’ll be able to inform the Viscount sometime tonight. Thank you.”

“It’s not something worth thanking me for.”

Challe started to pass in front of Keith, but Keith grabbed his shoulder to stop him.

“Wait, Challe. There’s something I want to ask you.”

Challe fixed him with an intense glare, but Keith didn’t even flinch. He stared back at him with clear brown eyes.

“Challe. Do you love Anne? Are you in love with her?”

The warm evening breeze blew softly past them, ruffling Keith's bangs. The stirring of the early evening wind mirrored the commotion in Keith's heart. But Challe envied his ability to honestly express his feelings, even ones like these.

"Only someone like you with your strange tastes would be interested in that scarecrow brain."

"I don't believe you. All your words and actions are telling me you love Anne."

"You're soft in the head, boy."

"It's fine if you won't admit it. I love Anne, whether you do or not. I don't intend to give up on her. That's all I wanted to say."

"I expect that will make her happy as well."

Keith blinked in confusion as Challe, swallowing the pain that filled his chest, moved into the dining room.

"Chaaalle, dinner will be ready soon!"

Benjamin called out buoyantly from across a steaming pot of stew. Mithril, however, looked a bit down.

"Hey, Challe Fenn Challe. What was that earlier? Anne looked startled…"

Challe couldn't be bothered to respond and left the dining room without a word. He continued down the hall and through the door of the shop.

Smoke rose from the chimneys of the surrounding houses. Though it was spring, once the sun set, the air grew chilly. But the aroma of roasting meat and soup filled the streets, as if to relieve the cold.

Challe saw the cheer on the humans' faces as they hurried down the road toward home, as well as the warmth of the lights beginning to appear in the houses' windows.

This was the scenery of human happiness, something Challe, as a fairy, could not create. And this was what Anne wished for.

I swore an oath to protect her happiness. And in order to do that…

Just then, he felt a shiver run down his spine.

He turned around, ready to fight, but the only people behind him were a man who looked like an artisan hurrying home and a housewife walking along with a shopping basket. There were any

number of alleys leading off the main avenue, but he didn't see any suspicious figures there, either.

Over the past few days, Challe had been walking around the fairy market asking for information on Reginald Stowe. During that time, he'd felt many times as if someone was following him. However, no one had picked any fights with him, so he hadn't been too concerned.

But now he was sure he sensed bloodlust.

There was good reason for someone to target Challe. He had called himself the fairy king in front of Edmond II and his queen, as well as the Silver Sugar Viscount and the Earl of Downing. Even if they kept their pledge to have the fairy techniques passed on to other fairies, that was no guarantee they would let Challe be.

Challe had no intention of breaking his part of the vow. But he wasn't sure about the human king. Though he trusted Anne and her associates at the Paige Workshop, Challe couldn't fully trust Edmond II.



"Good morning, Anne."

As Keith was readying the table for breakfast, Anne poked her head into the dining room. Keith immediately greeted her. Anne cheerfully said good morning back to him, then looked around the room.

"Say, where's Challe?" she asked.

Benjamin, who was heating up some pumpkin-and-goat-milk soup on the stove, answered her buoyantly. "Oh… He went out on a walk. He said he didn't want breakfast. I bet he's hungry, though."

"I see."

Anne's smile looked a little lonesome. Mithril, who was riding on her shoulder, groaned angrily and crossed his arms.

"What's his problem? He's been acting funny since yesterday!"

Just as Mithril had said, Challe's attitude toward Anne had turned cold. Even Keith had sensed it. That day, once again, Challe had gotten up alone in the early morning and left on an aimless walk to

who knows where. The night before, he hadn't come back until after midnight, apparently aiming to return after Anne had already fallen asleep.

"Hey… Breakfast is almost ready, so would you please go wake up Kat, Anne? You too, Surusuru!"

Benjamin called out to them from his position in front of the stove. Anne pulled herself together and nodded energetically.

"Sure, okay!"

Mithril sighed deeply. "Ugh… I don't think the day will ever come when Benjamin properly remembers my splendid name…"

"Don't worry. He'll get it eventually… Give him about ten years."

"Ten years…"

Anne and Mithril left the dining room, and Keith started laying plates and forks out on the table.

Challe is in love with Anne.

Keith had a feeling he was right about that. He could easily spot the gestures and glances of someone with the same feelings he had, and for the same person. But ever since the previous night, Challe had been deliberately keeping his distance from Anne.

And on top of that, he had said to Keith, *"I expect that will make her happy as well."* It was as if he was telling Keith to get together with Anne.

Does Challe mean to concede her to me?

For some reason, this thought made Keith intensely angry. He hated the idea. Frowning, he silently continued preparing the dining table—until he heard someone rapping at the shop door.

He raised his head and listened carefully. Though quiet, he could definitely hear someone knocking.

"Who could that be? It sounds like a customer. I'm going to take a look, Benjamin."

"Oh-kay! I'll finish up."

Leaving the rest to Benjamin, Keith headed for the door.

"Who's there?" he called out.

A calm, deep voice answered him. "Salim. I came on an errand for the Silver Sugar Viscount."

It was the young foreign man with tan skin who always accompanied Hugh. He was a skilled bodyguard, but he was so taciturn that Keith had hardly ever heard his voice.

Keith quickly opened the door to find Salim, expressionless as always.

"Hello, Salim. An errand for the Viscount, you said?"

"Early tomorrow morning, the Silver Sugar Viscount will come to pick up you, Anne, Challe, and Mr. Hingley. Please go with him. You will travel to Northern Blow."

"To Northern Blow? Why?"

"The Viscount wishes you to accompany him to the negotiations with Reginald Stowe."

It all clicked.

I see. The Viscount wants to make sure we understand our role.

Keith and the others were not necessary for the Viscount's negotiations with Stowe. But Hugh wanted the three of them to accompany him in order to make sure they appreciated the weight of their responsibilities as the ones in charge of organizing the fairy-recruiting operation.

At the same time, Hugh was probably trying to spur them to action. Keith could almost hear the man chiding them in that sarcastic tone of his, saying he had great expectations for them and exhorting them not to disappoint him.

"Understood. We'll complete our preparations by tomorrow morning and wait for him here."

Keith answered Salim smartly, and the latter nodded, turned sharply around, and walked off. Keith made a fist.

We'll get it done, all right.

He didn't want to look incompetent in front of Hugh Mercury.



Gillum Province was located in the center of the Kingdom of Highland. It covered an immense area that included the Birseth mountain range. However, over half of the gigantic province was a wasteland of rocky rubble. Its governor, the Earl of Tasso, tended to

seclude himself in his castle, and aside from periodic audiences with the king, he stayed out of politics.

Since antiquity, the people of Highland had tended to forget about Gillum Province. Even Anne, who had traveled around Highland with her mother, Emma, wasn't very familiar with the area.

The leader of the Fairy Merchants Guild, Reginald Stowe, had been seen in the province's capital. Two days after Challe had acquired that information, the Silver Sugar Viscount had come to get Anne and the others, and together, they had set off for Northern Blow.

The Viscount's carriage had been on the road for three days.

"I'm getting all sorts of complaints from the factions," Hugh said with a bitter smile, his elbow on the carriage's window frame and his chin propped up in his hand.

Hugh had prepared a large carriage for the journey, and Anne, Keith, and Kat rode inside it with him.

Atop Kat's shoulder sat Benjamin, dozing off as always. Mithril had curled up on Anne's lap and was sleeping as well.

It was pitch-black outside. They had decided to keep the carriage moving as long as possible, even after sunset, because they wanted to arrive in Northern Blow as quickly as they could.

Normally, they would never be able to do something so dangerous, but they had Salim and Challe attending them on horseback to either side. Challe had experience traveling with Anne across the Bloody Highway. And Hugh's bodyguard Salim was skilled enough to be Challe's equal. As long as the party had the two of them, they could afford to be a little reckless. They also had three additional soldiers riding with them on horseback.

Challe was accompanying Anne and the others on their journey, but his behavior toward her was still somewhat cold. Anne wondered if it was because he was angry with her for dawdling and putting off answering Keith's feelings.

"Complaints?" Keith asked from his seat across from Hugh.

The seats and backrests in the carriage were covered in intricately woven fabric and luxuriously appointed. Keith, looking every bit the young nobleman, was completely relaxed among such finery.

Kat was sitting next to him, and he looked just as comfortable. But his expression was extremely sour, and he kept staring out the window on the opposite side from Hugh. Kat had been in a bad mood the whole trip, starting the moment he had thrust the documents he'd prepared into Hugh's hands on the very first day.

"Crafters are revolting at the idea of allowing fairies into their workshops. Those at the Mercury Workshop have good manners, at least. But they keep asking to hold conferences night after night. It sounds like they're giving Killean quite a lot of trouble. Over at the Radcliffe Workshop, the crafters have apparently abandoned their work for three days as a demonstration of their opposition. Killean is dealing with everything very patiently, but Master Radcliffe says he doesn't know what to do."

Anne, seated next to Hugh, fixed her eyes on his profile.

"What about Mr. Collins? What's happening at the Paige Workshop?"

"It sounds like Collins waited to broach the topic until all the scattered candy crafters had returned. As expected, he was initially met with backlash. But I've had a report that they are leaning in the direction of acceptance. They're the only ones, it seems."

The carriage's wheels hit a bump, and Kat narrowly managed to catch Benjamin as he tumbled off his shoulder. "Why are they the only ones taking it so well?" he asked suspiciously.

"It sounds as if the head candy crafter and most of the others are more open-minded toward fairies. Apparently, a warrior fairy helped them out once when the Paige Workshop was in trouble, and that made a big impression. Also, I believe they have the fairy found at Hollyleaf Castle. I hear they've already started letting him work as an apprentice. He must be doing a good job."

Noah, who had been trying so hard to follow the orders of his master, Herbert, had once been frail and spiritless—pitiful to look at. But now, he had finally stepped out on his own. Anne was happy for him and felt encouraged by his progress. She could almost hear him saying, *I'm trying my very best!* with a bashful smile.

"So everyone other than the Paige Workshop is being a pain, huh? The crafters' minds aren't gonna change just like that."

Keith nodded. “You’re right. Anne caused quite an uproar just because she’s a woman. Fairies will face even more opposition.”

“There’s no guarantee they’ll change their minds, even if we grab those stubborn crafters by the scruffs of their necks and scold them.”

Hugh frowned. As things stood, the workshops wouldn’t even accept the fairies Anne and the others were currently working so hard to recruit. And even if they did, it was plain to see that the fairies would have a hard time there.

He and the others would have to do something to convince the candy crafters to make the change. But like he’d said, they couldn’t change their minds through scolding.

There’s got to be a way to get the crafters to accept the fairies.

As Anne thought this over, she used the tip of her finger to gently stroke Mithril’s head as he slept in her lap. If she could just figure something out, it would give her more hope for their current assignment as well.

She wanted to make this opportunity, which Challe had created for the fairies, successful.

What can I possibly do?



When the crescent moon had risen high in the sky, Challe and Salim brought the carriage to a stop.

They were somewhere in the middle of the Wellnome Highway, which ran between Westol and Northern Blow. It was a wasteland strewn with rubble, but they’d found a hollow in a cliff that they could pull the carriage into, so they decided to camp out there.

They lit a fire, and Benjamin made a simple meal and passed it out to everyone. Kat’s little pal, who was always dozing off, only showed his skills when it was time to do the cooking.

Anne and the others ended up taking naps in the shelter of the carriage. The coachman draped a leather canopy over the space around the driver’s platform and lay down.

Challe and Salim kept watch over the fire. When camping out in the wilderness, it was important to keep the fire going to ward off

wild beasts.

The three soldiers gathered around a second fire, avoiding Challe and Salim. They seemed to fear Salim, who always followed the Silver Sugar Viscount around like a shadow. They were also afraid of Challe, anxious that a warrior fairy with no master might get violent at any moment.

Salim was a quiet young man. His tan skin glowed in the firelight. Challe wasn't much of a talker, either, and the two of them ended up sitting silently across from one another, the fire between them.

Out in the wilderness, undisturbed by the light of even one farmhouse window, countless twinkling stars filled the night sky.

Around midnight, Anne alighted from the carriage alone. She dug through the luggage rack attached to the vehicle's side, then came over to the campfire carrying several wooden cups, a pot filled with water, and a container of tea leaves.

"I'm getting a little cold. Do you mind if I make some hot tea?"

"No, I don't mind," said Salim. "Go ahead."

He moved aside and opened up a spot for Anne to sit on the leather mat beside him.

Anne placed the pot over the fire and peered down at the tea leaves swirling in the hot water.

Challe stared absentmindedly at her profile. He gazed at her slim neck, her narrow shoulders, and her slender arms. Every part of her was so skinny that she looked like a scarecrow. Her cheeks were a little red, probably because of the cold. When he noticed one section of her neatly braided hair had become disheveled and was hanging over her ear, he was struck so badly by the urge to fix it that he could barely stand it. Her hair, the color of ripe wheat, had gotten brighter and shinier over the past year. It was turning a lovely hue.

"Here, Salim."

Once the water in the pot came to a boil, Anne scooped some of it up with a ladle and poured it through a tea strainer, filling one of the cups. When she offered it to Salim, he looked surprised.

"You made some for me, too?"

"Of course. I'd feel awkward having a hot drink by myself. It would be hard to enjoy."

Anne handed the tea to Salim with a smile, and he returned a small smile of his own as he accepted it.

"Here. You too, Challe."

Anne's expression was a little lonely as she watched Challe silently accept the cup.

She passed out tea to the three soldiers as well, and when she finished drinking her own cup, she went back to the carriage.

As soon as she was gone, Salim turned to Challe with a critical look in his eye.

"Throughout this whole trip, you've been cold toward Anne. I feel sorry for her."

"This is normal," Challe said casually.

"You're lying."

"If you feel so sorry for that scarecrow, then go ahead and dote on her. Show her how much you care. That's not my job."

"Well then, what *is* your job? Why are you with her?"

Challe glared at Salim through the dancing flames. "I'm here to protect her. I'm here for *her*."

If Challe couldn't grant Anne happiness, then protecting her was the only thing he could do.

When he heard Challe's answer, Salim's expression shifted slightly. He looked a little surprised, but after a moment, he nodded.

"I see… I'm the same." Salim stared into the flames as he mumbled, "I never had anything to offer other people. All I did was steal from them. But I wanted to do something for someone to whom I owed a debt. And so, since I had nothing I could give, the only thing I could do was protect. So that is what I am doing."

Challe didn't know what kind of life this young man from a foreign country had led or what circumstances had caused him to become Hugh's bodyguard.

He felt Salim's path so far must have been difficult, and he thought he understood the weight of the word *protect* when the other man used it.

With a sigh, he said, "You're a shadow, too, aren't you?"

Both Challe and Salim had been able to choose this path because they were strong fighters. That was probably a stroke of good

fortune. However, devoting oneself to protecting someone meant accepting you would never truly be a part of their life. A protector merely kept watch, blending into the shadows. It was lonely, but it was also satisfying.

There was something humorous about the idea of two shadows sitting down across from each other. Without their corresponding light, it was impossible for them to do anything.

"I'm going to take a look around."

Challe stood up and investigated the area near the carriage. He checked to make sure there were no signs of approaching animals and no lights coming from distant bandits' torches.

He walked through the darkness, feeling the sensation of stones rolling under the soles of his boots.

It happened suddenly. He sensed a swell of bloodlust in the blackness behind him. With no time to think, Challe opened his right hand. Silvery beads of light appeared out of the dark air, drawn to his palm.

But his opponent was faster.

Before the light could form a sword, a black figure appeared out of the darkness. The figure leaped forward forcefully, swinging their own sword in a sideways sweep.

Challe bent backward to avoid the blow as a silvery sword appeared in his hand.

His opponent immediately swung their weapon upward. Challe jumped back and knocked his opponent's sword to the side as it rushed up at him. The sharp sound of metal on metal rang out in the darkness.

He couldn't see who he was fighting, but Challe could infer their position from the direction of their strikes. He stepped diagonally forward and slashed his sword sideways with one hand.

He felt a slight resistance—he'd grazed his opponent.

They jumped away without making a sound. Then abruptly, the bloodlust vanished.

What the—?

Challe warily peered into the darkness. It seemed the other fighter had fled.

He dropped his guard and held his sword down at his side as he looked around carefully. Then he slowly stepped forward and started walking, searching for his enemy's presence in the dark.

But all he found were the fierce sound of the wind and the twinkling of the stars.

After a short search, Challe concluded that the enemy had already vanished. As he shook his hand and dissolved his silver sword, he looked toward the campfire in the distance.

Where in the world did they come from out in this wasteland?

There had been no sign of anyone following the carriage. In a place like this, with so much rubble, he should have heard something if they had approached by horse or by wagon. He definitely should have picked up their footsteps when they'd gotten close. But he hadn't heard anything.

It was as if they had sprung right out of the ground to attack Challe, then been swallowed up again by the earth without leaving a trace.

When Challe made it back to the campfire, Salim was throwing kindling onto the flames.

"Just now, did you feel the presence of anyone other than us?" Challe asked.

Salim glanced up at him and shook his head. "I didn't notice anyone."

Then he looked back toward the fire as shadows danced across his profile, illuminated by the flames.



Anne, who had gone back inside the carriage, gently lifted Mithril from where she had laid him down on the seat and placed him in her lap once again. When she did, the little fairy opened his eyes.

"Huh, Anne? Did you go outside?"

The light from the stars faintly lit up the carriage's interior. Hugh was sleeping with his arms crossed and his head hanging down, and Keith had his face pressed against the wall, breathing peacefully. Kat was holding Benjamin and sleeping with his face up toward the

ceiling. Anne lowered her voice so she wouldn't disturb them and answered, "Yes, sorry. Did I wake you? I just wanted to have some tea, so I stepped out for a bit."

"Liar. You were worried about Challe Fenn Challe, so you went to see how he was doing, didn't you?"

Mithril was absolutely right, and Anne turned bright red. The little fairy got up sluggishly and sat down on Anne's lap. Then in a whisper, he said, "Hey, Anne. Did something happen between you and Challe Fenn Challe? His behavior toward you changed about two days before we left, didn't it?"

Mithril had been keeping an unexpectedly close eye on Anne and Challe. He must have been concerned about them.

"Nothing in particular, really. But it seems like Challe wants me to hurry up and accept Keith's feelings and find happiness with him. He told me I should be with Keith."

"He did? He really said that? What a heartless jerk! To think he'd say something like that to you when you're in love with him! That does it—I'm going to go right out there and scold him…"

"H-hey, wait, Mithril Lid Pod! Wait!"

The little fairy was rolling up his sleeves, about to stand up, when Anne stopped him. She lowered her voice even more as she said, "There's nothing to be done. Challe doesn't know how I feel about him. Besides, I also think it would be best if I could change my feelings—if I could come to love Keith the way I love Challe."

Mithril looked exasperated as he pompously turned both palms upward and shook his head.

"You really are a scarecrow brain, Anne. It's not like you can just decide, *Okay, I'm gonna love this person now*, and then do it. Besides, is there any reason for you to change your feelings?"

"I mean, it's for Challe's sake, too."

"If you think like that, your love will never bloom! I worry about you, Anne! Leave everything to me! I'll come up with some really amazing plan. Okay, good night!"

As soon as he said that, Mithril lay down on Anne's lap and curled into a ball.

An amazing plan?! What could he mean?!

Anne broke out in a cold sweat, but Mithril instantly fell asleep and began snoring rhythmically.

I can only pray nothing outrageous happens…

She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the wall of the carriage to try to sleep, but there was a chill in her chest that kept her awake. Every time she closed her eyes, she remembered how Challe had acted toward her earlier.

He must have been irritated with her for being unable to take a single step down the path toward happiness, even though it was right there in front of her.

It was only natural he couldn't comprehend her feelings. Challe didn't know how Anne felt.

But if he found out Anne wasn't able to accept Keith's feelings because she was in love with him instead, he would probably be appalled. He might even laugh at her. And it would put him in an awkward position, too. She didn't want to do that to him.

I can't be thinking about things like this.

Anne was currently working to make Challe's wishes come true. Neglecting her job because she was too hung up on him would earn her even more of his scorn.

I need to focus on finding Reginald Stowe and making sure the negotiations are successful. And then I need to think about how to get the candy crafters to accept fairies into their workshops.

In the past, simply touching silver sugar was all Anne had needed to be happy. But before she knew it, all sorts of things had begun to weigh her down.

Glen had once spoken to Anne about her responsibilities as a Silver Sugar Master. Now that she had obtained that title and become a successor to the silver sugar fairy's techniques, she had many different kinds of obligations. They felt too heavy to bear.

But she didn't want to say she was only interested in making candy and run away from her duties. A crafter's life was their sugar candy, and she had to fulfill the responsibilities that came with that.

Ever since she'd been aware of the world around her, Anne had always been in contact with silver sugar. She doubted she'd gone even seven days without touching the stuff.

Even now, when Hugh had told them he wasn't sure how long their journey would take, Anne had packed a small barrel of silver sugar and her work tools to take along. Both Keith and Hugh had been astonished, but they'd still fastened the barrel to the side of the carriage with a smile.

Kat alone had been delighted. He had also cunningly concealed his own tools in his luggage.

Hugh had laughed at them cheerfully, saying, *"You're both fools, I see."*

Anne's eyelids were growing heavy.

I guess I am a fool, in all sorts of ways.

She knew this, but she couldn't do anything about it. It was just how she was. She couldn't become someone else. Anne simply had to come to terms with who she was and live her life her way.

And that was the most troublesome thing of all.

Chapter 3
THE PRICE FOR A SLEEPING FAIRY

On the fourth morning after they'd left Lewiston, Anne and the others arrived in Northern Blow.

The city appeared suddenly out of the rock-strewn wilderness before them. Its roads were unpaved, and its buildings were rustic, as if they had been built by cutting stones and then simply stacking up the blocks. It seemed the local people preferred things to be practical, simple, and long-lasting. The rugged peaks of the Birseth mountain range stood like a row of gray shadows in the distance to the north.

Hugh rented rooms at an inn in the center of the city. He got one for himself and Salim, one for Kat, Keith, and Benjamin, and one for Anne, Challe, and Mithril.

The hotel appeared to be the most prestigious in all of Northern Blow, and Anne's room contained two large, well-built beds. Even the curtains and other fixtures were made of heavy fabric. It wasn't flashy, but everything was high-quality and seemed designed to last.

Once they finished putting away their luggage, everyone followed Hugh's directions and gathered on the first floor in a space that served as both a dining room and a bar.

The large, stone-walled room contained various small groups of customers who had come to have lunch. They were all watching Anne's group, full of curiosity about this unfamiliar bunch. But that

was to be expected. As soon as they'd arrived at the inn, Hugh had changed into the informal version of his Viscount attire, and Salim and Challe were standing at the ready against one wall. Hugh seemed to be flaunting the group's presence.

"What's with those clothes? You look ridiculous," said Kat. He sounded embarrassed.

"Do I? I've gotten lots of compliments from women who think I look quite attractive."

"*Tch!* You must be a comedian! Workin' hard puttin' on the airs of a viscount and lickin' the boots of the aristocracy to get a taste of what it's like at the top, are ya?"

"Your yowling is more annoying than usual, kitty-cat."

"Who's yowlin'?! Sure as heck ain't me!" Kat seemed ready to lunge at him, but Hugh just grinned.

"Not to take Kat's side, but don't you think we stand out a little too much?" Anne tilted her head to the side.

"I told the inn's owner that we are searching for Reginald Stowe," said Hugh. "And that there is a decent reward for anyone who knows his whereabouts. I'm sure he'll spread the word for us. But if the people of this city don't believe the rumors, we'll be in a bind. I need them to see the Silver Sugar Viscount is really here looking for Stowe."

It would be a waste of time for them to walk around aimlessly asking people about Reginald. They'd learned as much making the rounds at the Lewiston fairy market.

Northern Blow didn't have any notable industries or specialty products. However, unusually for such a remote town, it did have a fairy market. The city's economy was largely propped up by customers who came to the fairy market from other provinces and fairy hunters who went out into the wilderness looking for fairies. The locals were not that wealthy. Many were sure to be excited by the Silver Sugar Viscount's promised reward.

By the time Anne and the others had eaten their lunch and finished their tea, the room was deserted.

Much later in the afternoon, a man who looked like a merchant came swaggering into the hotel wearing a brimless hat. He took in

his surroundings, and then his eyes fell on the Silver Sugar Viscount. Without hesitation, he headed over.

Salim and Challe tensed, but the man, who looked to be a merchant, stopped before getting too close. He stared directly at Hugh when he spoke.

"You the Silver Sugar Viscount?"

"I am," said Hugh, his voice utterly calm.

The man launched straight into business without any prelude. "I heard you're looking for Reginald Stowe. And I heard you're offering a reward."

Unbothered by the man's abruptness and impolite attitude, Hugh answered him.

"That's right. Who are you? Do you have any information?"

"A-yup. I got a big one for ya."

The man grinned and pulled a scrap of paper out of his jacket pocket. He held it out, and Salim took the paper and handed it to Hugh. Hugh looked down at it and frowned.

"What's this place?"

"That's where Reginald Stowe is. Go there tonight when the seventh church bell rings. There, now I've told you."

That was all the man said before he turned on his heel. Still frowning, Hugh called out to stop him.

"Wait. What about your reward?"

At that, the man turned around, one hand on his hat.

"You can give it to Reginald—he'll be there. He just asked me to pass along the message."

"What do you mean?"

"Reginald wants to meet the Silver Sugar Viscount. So he sold his own information."

The man started walking away again. Stunned, Anne watched him go.

"…Reginald Stowe…wants to meet you?" she asked.

Hugh looked down at the slip of paper in his hand. "Seems that way. Well, it saves us the labor of looking for him."

His words were carefree, but from his detached tone and unsmiling expression, it was easy to see he was wary.

Kat's sharp, feline eyes were fixed on the paper in Hugh's hand. "Yer gonna go?"

"Of course I am. We came here to meet the Wolf."

"Don't you find it suspicious? The moment you tell people you're looking for him, he wants to see you. I doubt a guy like Reginald Stowe has any business with the Silver Sugar Viscount." Keith frowned as he looked toward the door the man had left through.

"You might be right. But it's still worth going. I'm counting on you to be good bodyguards, Salim, Challe."

The two of them nodded silently.

In the Kingdom of Highland, the slave merchants did not sell human chattel. However, it was said that in the countries of the continent, where there were few fairies, people bought and sold humans as slaves instead. The people of Highland feared and loathed such continental customs.

Because fairies closely resembled humans in appearance, fairy dealers reminded people of these slavers, and most people despised them. And yet they still purchased the fairy dealers' wares. Both the act of selling fairies and the act of buying them were equally despicable.

Fairy dealers knew their business involved buying and selling lives, and in that sense, perhaps they were more honest than those who bought fairies free from guilt.

Since society disapproved of them, fairy dealers were loyal only to one another. And the person who ruled over them with ironclad control was the Fairy Merchants Guild's leader.

Reginald Stowe was the man who currently held that position—the man nicknamed "the Wolf." Many knew his name, but he rarely showed himself, and few had seen his face. He was cautious, just like a real wolf.

And that beast had taken it upon himself to invite the Silver Sugar Viscount to a meeting.

Anne had a bad feeling about it. She was apprehensive, but she knew they couldn't refuse this invitation. They had no choice but to go.

When the sun set and the church rang its sixth bell, Anne and the others left the inn.

What is Reginald Stowe thinking?

Still anxious, Anne swayed in her seat in the carriage as it proceeded down a poorly lit road on the outskirts of town.

Inside were Hugh, Kat, Anne, and Keith. For safety's sake, they had left the two small fairies behind at the inn.

Challe and Salim, as well as the three soldiers, were riding on horseback, guarding the carriage.

Due to the possible danger, Salim had recommended the two younger crafters, Anne and Keith, stay back at the inn as well. Hugh had rejected this idea, however. He'd said Anne and Keith needed to be involved in every part of the mission and ordered them to come along.

The place Reginald Stowe had designated for their meeting was an abandoned church on the outskirts of Northern Blow. It had been the headquarters of the state church in the city until about fifteen years earlier, when it had moved to the center of town. Since then, the building had gone unused due to its inconvenient location, and it had been left to fall into ruin.

They came off the road onto a small hill, behind which they could see the faint lights of the city. The wind blew past them, brushing the ground with a whooshing sound and sending the grass and weeds swaying.

There on the hill was the old church. The silhouette of a bell tower rose above it, almost melting into the darkness. Lights flickered in the windows.

They could hear the seventh bell ringing out from the new church in the distant city center. Many households used the sound of that bell as a signal to finish their evening meals and get ready for bed.

The carriage stopped in front of the church, and Challe and Salim tied up their horses nearby.

When Anne and the others disembarked, Salim stayed close behind Hugh and Kat to protect them. Challe likewise attached himself to Anne and Keith.

The darkness and the wind intensified Anne's anxiety, and she turned back to look at Challe. Though his expression remained blank, he nodded slightly to reassure her. She smiled back at him in relief. Even though he had been acting irritated and cold toward Anne, he was still ready to protect her when the time came.

The three soldiers were instructed to wait outside.

As Anne and the others approached the steps leading up to the old church's entrance, the doors opened as if someone was waiting for them.

Though the doors' exterior was rough and weathered, they moved smoothly without making much sound. It was almost like the wind had blown them open. However, flickering candlelight spilled out through the narrow opening, and a small, elderly man with a gloomy expression came out to greet them.

"Are you the Silver Sugar Viscount?" he asked, looking up at Hugh.

When Hugh nodded, the old man moved aside, clearing the way.

"Please come in. You and your companions are welcome. Please make your way to the altar."

There was a dry, sandy smell in the church as they stepped inside.

An aisle stretched out straight in front of them, with pews lined up on either side. The divine symbol of a cross enclosed in a circle was missing from the wall above the altar at the far end. It must have been taken down when the church had moved locations.

On top of the empty altar, in place of the divine symbol, there was a big box lying on its side, painted pitch-black.

It was a coffin. Candles surrounded it, projecting huge, warped shadows of pillars and pews on the surrounding walls, where they wavered and swayed. The coffin glistened, illuminated intermittently by the reddish light of the candles.

Anne's body froze at the eerie scene. Challe quietly moved up behind her.

Hugh, Kat, and Keith all frowned.

There were six or seven brawny men standing around the altar. From the swords at their waists, it was obvious they were warriors.

At the center, one man was sitting with a knee propped up, resting his arm on the coffin. He was looking at them. He picked up a nearby candlestick and rose to his feet.

Illuminated in the candlelight, his face and figure came into dim relief out of the gloom.

He was probably about the same age as Hugh. And he was tall—enough to stand shoulder to shoulder with Hugh and Challe. He emanated a wild sort of aura and had the look of a roughly carved statue.

His pin-straight, dark-gray bangs fell over his face, nearly hiding his eyes. Though Kat's hair was the same gray color, his seemed brighter somehow. The man's hair was like the wet gray ash left behind after a fire was put out by the rain. His eyes were dark gray, too, and he wore a black jacket with gray pants. The tie around his neck was the only bit of color, a vivid red.

He smiled slightly with one side of his mouth, as if he were hiding something savage behind it. They knew instantly that this was Reginald Stowe. His aura was indeed that of a wolf—a big, gray wolf they couldn't afford to underestimate.

"To whom should I pay the ten-cress reward for information regarding Reginald Stowe?" Hugh asked calmly as he walked down the aisle toward the altar.

Anne and the others followed him. Salim's back was right in front of Anne, and she could tell he was on pins and needles.

"To me," said a low, pleasant voice, full of mature charm. "Pay your ten cress to me, Silver Sugar Viscount." Reginald held out his hand.

When Hugh made it up to the altar, he dug around in his breast pocket, pulled out a silver coin, and dropped it into Reginald's palm.

"Ten cress. You are Reginald Stowe?"

"That's right. I've been waiting for you, Silver Sugar Viscount. I wanted to meet you."

"I've been looking for you, too. What a coincidence."

With his narrow, upturned eyes, Reginald looked at Hugh, Kat, Anne, and Keith in turn. Then he observed Salim before finally settling his gaze on Challe. At that point, Reginald made a noise of astonishment.

"What a rare jewel you have there! Who owns this fairy? I'll buy him for whatever you ask."

Challe remained expressionless, but the candlelight from the altar reflected off his wing, flickering vermilion.

"Silence, Wolf. I have no master." Challe's voice was so cold, it made Anne shiver.

"How unusual. A fairy with no master, and yet you're accompanying these humans? But if you're no one's property, that means I may catch you and sell you as merchandise."

"Try it, if you dare."

"That's enough, Challe. We weren't looking for him so we could fight him," said Hugh, interrupting. "I came here with a request for you in your capacity as representative of the Fairy Merchants Guild. Will you hear me out?"

"Before that, I want to take care of my own business. I called you here, after all."

"All right, you go first. What would you like to discuss?"

"I have something I want you to buy."

"Me? What is it?"

Reginald gently laid his hand on the lid of the coffin at the center of the altar.

"This."

"The coffin?" Keith muttered.

Reginald clicked his tongue and stuck his finger in the air, wagging it back and forth.

"Coffins are what coffin makers sell. I am a fairy merchant. I want to sell you what's inside the coffin."

"Don't tell me… There's a fairy in there?" asked Anne.

If so, that would mean the man had shut a live fairy up in a coffin. That would have been unbelievably cruel. Reginald must have noticed the anger on Anne's face, and he shrugged.

"That's exactly right, young lady. But don't you worry—this fairy is sleeping. It's not conscious. It's like a corpse."

"Even so, wouldn't you hate it if someone put you in a coffin while you were asleep?"

"I probably wouldn't be happy about it. But…I wonder if I should show you."

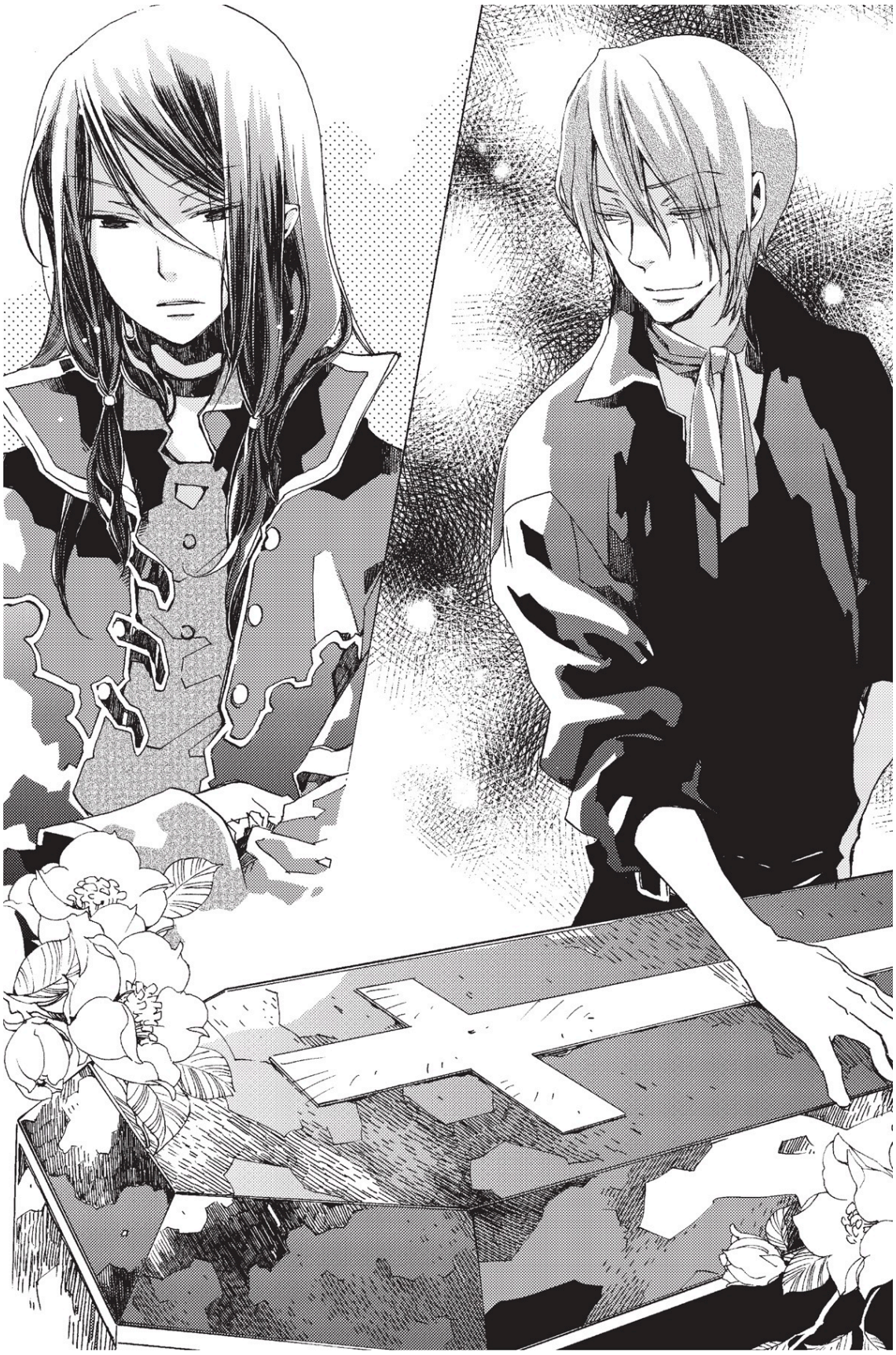
Reginald's sharp eyes glinted, and he set the candlestick in his hand down on top of the altar. Then suddenly, he put both hands on the lid of the coffin and roughly slid it back.

The lid slipped and fell off the altar, and a loud noise echoed through the church. Instinctively, Anne clapped both hands over her ears and screwed up her face.

"Take a look at my merchandise, Silver Sugar Viscount."

Reginald picked up the candlestick and held it aloft over the coffin. By the flickering light, they gazed at the contents.

"This is…"



Hugh was at a loss for words. His eyes opened wide, and his body stiffened, as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

Kat recoiled.

Anne stood on her tiptoes to look inside. And when she saw what was there, she nearly screamed, covering her mouth with both hands. Her body trembled. Challe held her shoulders from behind, but when she looked up at him, he too seemed unable to believe what he was seeing. His wing went taut, and a shiver ran through it.

"What is it about this fairy, Anne?"

Keith seemed surprised by their reactions. However, Anne was trembling too hard to answer him.

The pure-black coffin was lined with snowy-white silk, and hidden inside it was a beautiful fairy with pale skin and long eyelashes. He was so gorgeous, it took Anne's breath away, but he also seemed somehow gentle, almost inviting. The soft waves of his hair hung in front of his chest, an ambiguous blend of pale green and blue.

But Anne knew the fairy before her was more than just a pretty face.

The one sleeping in the coffin was one of Challe's brother stones. It was Lafalle Fenn Lafalle.



"You're going to buy him!" Reginald bellowed, standing between the coffin and his guests.

An irrepressible rage exploded within Challe.

"You bastard!!"

Challe spread his right hand and focused his mind. When they saw the silvery beads of light collecting there, Reginald's bodyguards started forward. But before they could move any farther, Hugh cut in with a fierce shout.

"Stop now, Challe!"

"I have no reason to take orders from you!"

Challe didn't know how Lafalle had survived. He didn't know why he was in such a state or how he had fallen into the fairy dealers' hands. He was confused and quaking with anger.

Challe had cornered Lafalle and defeated him. He was certain that, if Lafalle were to wake up right now, they would surely cross swords once more. But he couldn't forgive the fairy dealers for their barbaric treatment of his brother stone, who was so proud that it had driven him mad.

"Stop, Challe!" Anne, pale and trembling, clung to his chest to hold him back.

"Let go of me!" He tried to shake free of her, but Anne held on to him desperately.

"Challe! Of course you're angry! This is terrible! I can't understand how such a thing could happen! But if you cut Reginald down, the fairy merchants will never cooperate with us! This opportunity, which you worked so hard to create for the fairies, will instantly disappear! Please, Challe! Don't kill him!"

Tears gradually welled up in Anne's eyes as she looked at him desperately.

"I'm sorry, Challe. I'm sorry…that humans always do things like this." She hung her head but didn't let go of him. "I'm sorry."

Anne's sadness seemed to flow into his body. The heat of his rage cooled, as if a light rain had suddenly begun to fall inside his chest.

What a fool she is.

Anne was ashamed of the disgraceful acts of her fellow humans. Even more than that, their ugliness had hurt her as well. Though she hadn't done anything herself, she couldn't help feeling guilty. She was such a fool.

Challe let out a long sigh, and the light pooling in his palm dissipated. He put his hand on Anne's head. "Fine, Anne."

Challe's fury had surprised Keith, but as soon as it settled, he suddenly remembered his question. Turning to Hugh, he asked impatiently, "Viscount. Who is that fairy?"

"That is the fairy who was attacking fairy dealers and candy crafters from last autumn until the time of the First Holy Festival."

"*That* fairy?!"

Keith also went pale.

Challe put his hands on Anne's shoulders and gently pushed her away. Then calmly this time, he confronted Reginald, who was

stoically observing him with dark eyes.

"How did he end up with you?" Challe asked.

"We were gathering information on him so we could protect ourselves when we learned of the Viscount's activities. I got word that the Viscount had raided a fort on the edge of the Bloody Highway. I figured if we went there, we might learn the whereabouts of the fairies stolen from our comrades. So after the Viscount withdrew, I gathered up some people and had them search the area around the fort."

"So you're beasts who scavenge for carrion on the battlefield."

At Challe's scornful words, one corner of Reginald's mouth twitched upward.

"Exactly. However, once the fairies scattered, we couldn't catch a single one. But we found this guy as we were heading home. He was sleeping, half buried in the snow, quite some distance from the fort."

"…What're you after?" Kat frowned, not bothering to hide his disgust.

"I want to get some use out of him, since this criminal killed some of our comrades and caused others losses. I want the royal family to purchase him, Silver Sugar Viscount. I want you to talk to the Earl of Downing."

Hugh opened his eyes wide. He was clearly taken aback by Reginald's demand.

"You want the royal family to buy him? What foolishness."

"If they don't, I'll have to find someone else. So long as he's asleep, he's like a beautiful doll. Plenty of people will want him."

"What do you plan to do if he wakes up after that?!"

Keith raised his voice reproachfully, and Reginald smiled, baring his teeth. It was the grin of a wolf.

"What do I care? Once someone buys him, he's their responsibility. If they screw up and get killed, or if they release him back into the wild, that's got nothing to do with us. Our job ends at the sale."

He didn't look the least bit ashamed. If Reginald couldn't get the royal family to buy Lafalle, he would be more than ready to sell him to someone else.

It wasn't hard to imagine a buyer captivated by the sleeping Lafalle and wanting to possess him despite the danger.

"So what will you do, Silver Sugar Viscount?" asked Reginald.

"What's your price?" Hugh said quietly, as if holding back anger.

"Thirty thousand cress."

"Thirty thousand?!"

Kat's eyes bugged out of his head. To Kat, who lived in poverty, that was enough to move heaven and earth. The same went for Anne, who was likewise flabbergasted.

The Paige Workshop's yearly budget for conducting business and paying its crafters' salaries was about ten thousand cress. The idea of selling a single fairy for three times that amount was downright incredible.

"And there is something else I require," continued Reginald. "Currently, the royal tax rate imposed on fairy merchants is set at twenty-five percent. I want you to lower it to ten percent, the same as for other merchants. Now, I'm prepared to compromise on both points, but that will depend on our negotiations."

Fairy markets were only permitted to operate in specified cities. The official line was that this was to avoid unnecessarily upsetting the populace. In fact, it was a way for the kingdom to force the fairy dealers to pay their taxes by limiting the scope of their business and making it easier to monitor.

The sales from each fairy market were tallied up, and then the taxes were collected by the guild leader, who handed them over to the kingdom.

The taxes collected from the fairy markets were considerable. The cost per unit in the fairy trade was high, and most fairy dealers did a brisk business, so it was a valuable source of income for the kingdom. Suddenly lowering that tax rate by 15 percent was an even more outrageous demand than the thirty thousand cress.

"Do you think the royal family will accept such a condition?" Hugh asked icily.

Reginald made a show of running his finger around the rim of the coffin.

"I'd say I have a fairly good bargaining chip."

Not only had Lafalle attacked fairy dealers and candy crafters alike, but he had also declared himself the fairy king and gathered an army of other fairies to fight against humankind. If he hadn't been stopped, he surely would have attacked human villages and towns and expanded his influence even further. The kingdom would have had a full-scale fairy uprising on its hands. That had only been prevented by the efforts of Hugh and the Earl of Downing.

The royal family couldn't simply allow such a dangerous fairy to be released back into the wild.

Hugh clicked his tongue, clearly frustrated.

"…Very well. But you're asking too much. I don't have the necessary authority. I'll need time to approach the Earl of Downing about it. In the meantime, I can't let you move this fairy. I will post a watch over the coffin right here."

This was not the time to negotiate over borrowing fairies. Hugh seemed to have come to that conclusion and given top priority to the matter of Lafalle.

"No problem. I can't offer you any hospitality, but make yourselves at home." Reginald spread his arms in a theatrical gesture.



The old man who had opened the door for Anne and the others had moved into the priests' anteroom at the back of the church with Reginald. The rest had gone with them, leaving only two bodyguards in the sanctuary.

Just looking at the huge shadows dancing on the walls threatened to make Anne dizzy. She didn't feel well.

Seeing Lafalle had brought back vivid memories of her time at the fort in the wilderness, and Reginald's cruel methods filled her with anger. Her thoughts and feelings were in disarray.

But everyone else was in the same situation. She couldn't be the only one whining.

Pull yourself together.

Hugh had been pressed into making a difficult decision, and Anne felt pathetic merely standing there beside him.

"Salim, Challe. The two of you stay here and watch the coffin," ordered Hugh. "Don't allow anyone to touch it."

Salim and Challe nodded in unison. Anne could see Salim's expression indistinctly in the dim light; he looked tense. Challe's wing was stretched taut, faintly glistening a cold, bluish-silver color.

"I will go back to the inn now and write to the Earl of Downing immediately, summoning him to Northern Blow. Kat, Keith, and Anne will wait at the inn."

"Wait, Hugh. What will we do about the negotiations?" Anne spoke up.

Hugh frowned and kept silent.

Kat lowered his voice and said urgently, "That bastard called you here to make you do what he wants. Once the fairy deal's over, he'll leave at once. If you've got any plans to negotiate, you'd better do something now while he's here, or you won't get another chance."

Kat was probably right. Reginald seemed likely to abscond as soon as the matter of Lafalle was settled. He had only appeared before Anne and the others because he had business of his own. Otherwise, they might have never managed to meet him face-to-face. This was probably a once-in-a-lifetime chance for them.

"I know. But we can't do it now," Hugh groaned.

Anne persisted. "Hugh, I understand you have to prioritize Lafalle. But isn't there anything we can do? If there is, please tell us."

"Well then, will you negotiate with the Wolf in my place, Anne?"

Anne could feel the blood drain from her face. The thought of cutting a deal with a man like that terrified her.

"The only thing anyone can do right now is handle the negotiations in my place. Will you do that?"

Earlier, Challe had forgotten himself for a moment and flown into a rage. He'd only resisted his anger in order to keep negotiations from breaking down. Anne didn't want his patience to go to waste. If she let this opportunity get away, there was no guarantee they would get another chance.

"…I'll do it. I'll stay and negotiate with him."

Challe frowned. "That's dangerous. You should go back."

"I'm not leaving. After all, this is my job."

The furrow in Challe's brow deepened. But Hugh nodded, satisfied with her answer, and added, "As long as you only promise things I can freely grant under my own authority, you can use my name to set the terms of the transaction. Don't mess this up."

At that, Keith raised a hand. "I'll stay behind, too. Anne and I will advance the negotiations together. Two people should be better than one."

"I guess you're right. Take care of it."

"Wait one second, all of ya!" exclaimed Kat in a panic. "It's way too dangerous to leave a job like this to a couple o' kids! I'm stayin', too."

Hugh clapped his hands once. "Kat. Negotiations are the one thing you can't do. If you go with them, any agreements they make will fall apart."

"What'd you say?!"

Kat had a surprisingly sharp mind. However, dealing with others was not his strong suit. If he tried negotiating with world-wise merchants, things would probably end in an argument.

"It's okay, Kat," said Anne. "Challe and Salim will be here. Keith is staying with me, too."

Kat looked conflicted, and Anne wondered if he'd been worried about them. He seemed to think of Anne as a kind of pupil. For his sake, she put on a smile, and that finally seemed to convince him it would be all right.

Hugh left the carriage and one horse with the group staying behind, just in case. Then he and Kat mounted one horse together, and escorted by the three soldiers, they headed away from the church. After seeing them off, Salim and Challe sat down on the altar to either side of the coffin, guarding it.

As soon as possible, Anne needed to head to the back of the church, find Reginald, and begin negotiations. But she was feeling worse and worse, and she wanted to get some fresh air.

"I'm going outside for a minute," she told Keith. "Once I get some air, we can start the negotiations."

Keith rubbed her back. "I'll go with you. You don't look well."

"I'm fine… I can go by myself."

As she walked down the aisle between the pews, Challe stood up and followed behind her.

"Challe? I'm really okay," she said.

"It's dangerous to go alone. I've heard there are wild dogs in this area."

"In that case, I'll go."

Keith started forward, but Challe politely stopped him.

"You can't. If it were safe, it would be better for you to go with her. But it's dangerous outside, so I'll go instead."

It was all Anne could do to hold herself upright; not even half of their exchange made it to her ears.



Watching Challe and Anne from behind as they walked out of the church, Keith noticed a stinging pain in his chest. He sighed and sat down in a pew near the altar.

Salim watched him, arms crossed, but his expression didn't change, and he didn't say anything.

Challe seems pleased with the idea of me and Anne getting together.

That was probably what he'd meant when he said, *"If it were safe, it would be better for you to go with her."*

But Challe was, without a doubt, in love with Anne. So why would he encourage Anne to choose Keith?

Winning her this way feels miserable.

Keith knew Anne didn't have those kinds of feelings for him yet. And he also knew that, to Anne, Challe was a much more familiar and dependable partner, someone she could trust. If the trust Anne had in Challe was born out of romantic love, then Keith was nothing more than a nuisance to the two of them.

But hearts were fickle, and Keith wanted to move Anne's. He wanted to win her love through his own actions.

And so he didn't want Challe to act coldly toward Anne with the intention of giving her up. Keith wanted Challe to behave in accordance with his own feelings, just as Keith was doing.

He wanted them both to be true, and for Anne to choose him anyway.

Brooding over such thoughts, Keith smiled bitterly and mumbled to himself, "What's wrong with me at a time like this…?"

There, before his eyes, was a ferocious fairy lying in a coffin. Reginald Stowe was trying to use that fairy to win concessions from the king. They hadn't even started the negotiations they'd come here for. And even in such a serious situation, all he was thinking about was Anne.

Keith shook his head and pulled himself together.

We must go through with the negotiations. If we let this chance slip through our fingers, we'll probably never get another one.



Anne stepped outside and leaned against the trunk of a large oak tree on the church grounds. The wind was strong, and it sent the lace at the hem of her dress fluttering wildly. Perhaps due to the constant wind, the oak tree's whole trunk leaned toward the south, as if combed down by a huge hand.

But right now, Anne was grateful for the powerful wind. As she was buffeted by the breeze, the refreshing air seemed to spread throughout her body.

Challe was leaning against the same tree on the opposite side, the trunk between him and Anne. Although they were close, she couldn't see his face. Only his wing, flapping in the wind, touched her hand from time to time. It had a texture like smooth silk, and it felt so nice that it sent a shiver through her whenever it brushed her skin.

Gradually, she began to feel better.

"I'm all right now. Thank you, Challe, for coming with me. I'm going back inside."

"Rest a little longer. Don't rush. You're going to face the Wolf. Calm your mind."

Anne was glad for his encouraging words.

She slowly looked up at the roof of the church. Its steep incline seemed to cut through the night sky.

The wind was strong, giving the night a gloomy cast, but the whole sky was full of stars. The dark expanse was covered with glittering points of piercing light, as if someone had scattered handfuls of glowing sand.

Anne idly looked up at the stars for a while. Soon, however, she noticed something. On top of the church's roof, silhouetted against the twinkling stars, was a thin human figure.

Anne strained her eyes and saw that the figure was sitting on the roof's edge, letting their legs dangle. Two soft-looking wings gently spread out in the air behind them, flapping in the wind. The wings, through which Anne could see the light of the stars, glistened like a mirage. It was a fairy.

"Challe?! Challe! Is that a fairy? Look!"

She rushed around the tree trunk and, tugging at Challe's sleeve, pointed up at the church's roof.

Challe stepped away from the tree and looked up dubiously.

"There's nothing there."

When Anne glanced back at the roof, the figure was gone. In the brief moment she'd taken her eyes off them, the fairy had disappeared.

"Huh? How strange."

Had it been a hallucination? Maybe she was still disoriented after everything that had happened.

"Are you all right?"

Challe's words were blunt and cold, but Anne could clearly sense his concern.

"Yeah. I'm fine. More importantly, I need to go back inside. I have to start the negotiations."

Straightening up, Anne walked back toward the church.

I've got to pull myself together.

Chapter 4
ANNE AND THE WOLF

When Anne went back inside the church, Keith, who had been sitting in a pew, stood up and came to meet her. When he saw her face, he smiled in relief.

"Thank goodness. You're looking much better."

"Yes, I'm fine now. Sorry to keep you waiting, Keith. Let's go."

As the two of them headed off, Salim called out, "Be careful."

They turned around, and Challe, standing on the opposite side of the coffin, added bluntly, "If anything happens, yell for us."

It was reassuring to have them both there. Anne smiled and casually raised her hand. Keith nodded, and the two of them started walking again.

When they stepped through the arched doorway to the side of the altar, they found themselves in a narrow, chilly corridor. It was pitch-black, but they could see a door in front of them with light spilling out from the gaps around it. This was the room where Reginald and his party were waiting.

They walked up to the door, and Keith knocked. Immediately, one of the bodyguards opened it.

"We have something to discuss with Mr. Stowe," Keith announced. "Won't you let us in?"

The bodyguard frowned and turned to look behind him, as if seeking input from someone else.

"I was just getting bored," came Reginald's voice. "Come in."

The bodyguard moved aside to let Anne and Keith into the room.

Inside, Reginald and the old man were seated at a large table. Atop it, two fat candles sat burning beside several bottles of wine and a chipped ceramic plate piled high with dried nuts and fruits.

The bodyguards were split between a group at the doorway and another group at the window. They kept their eyes on Anne and Keith from the moment they entered the room.

The old man, who was seated across from Reginald, stood up and gave Anne and Keith a look signaling them to take his place. When they did so, sitting next to each other, the old man quietly left the room.

Reginald had a small knife, which he repeatedly tossed at the table, embedding it into the wood before pulling it back out and tossing it again.

His dark-gray eyes were fixed on the dull gleam of the blade. They appeared to glow, a bit like a wolf's eyes shining in the night. Anne thought it must have been a trick of the candlelight.

"You're the two kids who came with the Silver Sugar Viscount, right? What could you have to discuss with me? If you're paying me a special visit, I hope you have something interesting to say."

The menacing atmosphere intimidated Anne, and she nearly flinched. She swallowed loudly and was about to begin when Keith straightened up and beat her to it.

"I am Keith Powell, a candy crafter. She is Anne Halford, a Silver Sugar Master. As representatives of the Silver Sugar Viscount, we come to you with a request."

Apparently, Keith wasn't going to leave everything up to Anne. On the contrary, she sensed a strong drive from him, as though he felt he must take the lead here.

"A request? Now that you mention it, the Silver Sugar Viscount did say he wanted to talk to me…" Reginald sounded disinterested as he continued playing with his knife.

"A few days ago, a royal order came down from His Majesty, King Edmond the Second," Keith continued. "In accordance with that decree, in order to train outstanding fairies as candy crafters, plans

are being made to allow fairies to work as apprentices in the sugar candy workshops of each faction."

Keith paused briefly, but Reginald kept stabbing his knife into the table and pulling it out again. The wooden surface was starting to splinter all over.

In an attempt to command his attention, Keith raised his voice a little and continued:

"The Viscount would like to select these apprentices from among those fairies available for sale in the markets. To that end, in order to assess the fairies' aptitudes, he would like your merchants to lend them out, for a period of about a month each, at no charge. Furthermore, the Viscount would like you to sell any fairies who prove suitable at a discounted rate. Those are his two wishes. He would like the Fairy Merchants Guild to recognize them and notify all fairy dealers."

Reginald stuck his knife into the table again. Keith frowned.

"Mr. Stowe. Are you listening to me?"

Perhaps Keith's accusatory tone irritated him; he thrust the knife in especially deep this time.

"I heard you. But why should fairy merchants have to cooperate with the Silver Sugar Viscount?"

"This is in accordance with a royal order."

"A royal order?" Reginald pulled his knife out of the table and looked up at Anne and Keith through his long bangs. "Unfortunately, we fairy merchants are hard of hearing and a little slow. We have trouble making out things like royal orders, and they're hard for us to understand. Sorry about that, young master."

"What does that…?"

"And why is some unknown little rich boy the one negotiating? At least let the Silver Sugar Master over there talk to me. Her title's proof she ranks higher than a mere crafter, right? In an official negotiation, the person with the highest rank should do the talking—otherwise, it seems like you're looking down on us."

"You misunderstand me. It's just that she is a girl, and to place her on the front lines in such a negotiation gives me pause, so…"

"It's fine," said Anne. "Mr. Stowe is right, Keith."

Keith tried to protect her, but Anne stopped him. She tucked in her chin and looked directly at Reginald.

"I'll do the talking."

Reginald grinned. "Very brave of you, young lady," he said. Then he snapped his fingers.

At that signal, two of the bodyguards took Keith by the arms, pulled him to his feet, and yanked him toward the door.

"Mr. Stowe?! What is this?!"

Keith struggled anxiously as he was dragged away. Anne half rose from her seat, but one of Reginald's big, chilly hands came down on her shoulder. Without her noticing, he had come around behind the chair where she was sitting. She could see that the knife he'd been fiddling with was now pressed up against her throat.

"Me and the young lady will handle the negotiations—alone. You wait outside."

"Let me go!"

Keith put all his effort into shaking free from the bodyguards and managed to leap away. They squared up, ready to swing at him.

"No violence!" Anne shouted.

Reginald's response was cold and blunt. "As long as he doesn't struggle, we won't get violent."

"Keith! It's all right! Please, just wait outside!"

"Anne! But—"

"Wait for me! I'll be fine!"

Faced with the intensity of Anne's voice and expression, Keith bit his lip. Then he sighed, releasing the tension from his body, and nodded bitterly.

The bodyguards relaxed and approached Keith from either side. Then they lightly took hold of his shoulders and urged him to start walking again.

They led him out of the room, followed by the others of their number.

Only Anne and Reginald were left in the flickering light of the two candles. The chill of Reginald's hand on her shoulder sent a shiver up Anne's spine.

"Now then, shall we get on with the negotiations, sweetheart? But first, would you pour me a drink?"

She could hear his deep voice whispering in her ear and feel his cold breath. When he whispered, his voice was pleasant. It almost put her at ease.

Reginald seemed to enjoy the way Anne tensed up. He slid his hand across the back of her neck. After letting her go, he pulled out a chair and sat down beside her.

How frightening.

Anne was trembling to her core. It felt like she had been tossed into the room with an actual wolf. The tips of her fingers were cold from the strain.

But her mother, Emma, had taught her that when she encountered wild animals on her travels, the worst thing she could do was to let them know she was afraid. She'd told her daughter to stand up straight and show them she wasn't scared of mere beasts.

This man is a wolf.

She mustn't be afraid.

"I won't pour you anything. We don't need that for our negotiations, do we?"

"There are different sorts of negotiations. There are even ways of bargaining particular to women. Want me to show you?"

The knife in his big hand brushed past Anne's ear and touched her hair where she had tied it back. He ran the blunt side of it across the bundle of hair playfully. She nearly shuddered but firmly held herself in check.

"As everyone likes to tell me, I'm not quite a woman yet. So I can't do that type of bargaining."

She refused to entertain him, and Reginald withdrew his knife and chuckled.

"I see that now. Sure enough, you're right on the cusp. A good observation."

"……Thanks."

She wasn't sure whether to feel happy or depressed when he agreed with her. The matter was complicated.

Anne shifted in her chair, turning to face Reginald head-on.

"Mr. Stowe. I want you to accept the two requests from the Silver Sugar Viscount. Are you opposed?"

Reginald leaned comfortably back in his chair and crossed his legs. He resumed playing with his knife, spinning the handle around and around.

"There's no benefit in it for us. That boy seemed to think we should comply just because it's a royal order. But we don't care about any of that. We're not gonna go along with something if there's no profit to be had."

To Anne's surprise, he'd clearly asserted he would not follow the royal order.

"If you disobey the king so boldly, I hope you won't be alarmed when you're accused of treason."

"Oh right, you're the Viscount's proxy, huh? That was rude of me. I don't mind acknowledging the orders, but commanding the Fairy Merchants Guild is a difficult task, and there's no guarantee I can execute the king's command. There's really not much I can do about it."

Fairy merchants were loyal only to their own profits. They didn't bow to authority or prestige. Moreover, they were stubborn in their ways; they might pretend to give in while skillfully evading any changes.

This gray wolf was formidable. Anne couldn't deal with him through ordinary means. She understood why Hugh had wanted to join the negotiations himself. But for now, she had been entrusted with this job as his proxy. Now that Hugh was gone, Anne would have to fight Reginald with whatever weapons she had at her disposal.

"If the fairies become good candy crafters, then it's possible they will create even more beautiful sugar candy than we make now. And if they continue to refine their skills, both fairies and humans alike will gain access to even more incredible candy making techniques."

"That's nice, but it only benefits sugar candy crafters, doesn't it?"

"Candy crafters make sugar candy for our customers. With a good piece of candy in hand, you'll be blessed by great fortune. That goes for fairy merchants as well. Surely, that's to your benefit. Also…"

Frantically trying to think of more ways this bargain would help the fairy dealers, Anne continued:

"Also… Oh yes. If you cooperate with us, I think we can give fairy dealers priority when it comes to acquiring the candy the fairies make. And…when the fairies start to work as silver sugar fairies, each workshop will have to acquire them individually, meaning more workshops will be purchasing more fairies. I'm sure that will lead to more sales for the fairy merchants."

"Sugar candy, huh?" Reginald finally stopped toying with his knife and glanced over at Anne. "You said you were a Silver Sugar Master, right, young lady? Silver Sugar Master is the highest title among candy crafters. That means you can make candy that invites great fortune. Isn't that right?"

"Yes. I believe so."

Powerless as she was, Anne's only strengths were her ability to create beautiful sugar candy and her confidence it would bring good fortune.

"Make some and let me see for myself the vaunted power of the candy crafters."

"Uh…"

"You can't?"

"No, I have silver sugar, so I can make candy. But why?"

"I want to see if what you all believe in is worth the cooperation of the fairy merchants."

What does he mean?

She supposed he was saying he'd cooperate if she made something good for him. She couldn't infer his true motives, but she figured it was a good sign that he was showing interest in sugar candy.

Conveniently, the carriage was still parked in the front yard of the church. It had her barrel of silver sugar fastened to the side and her tools stowed on board.

"You want me to make it right here and now?"

"That's right."

"Fine, I'll get ready."

Anne immediately stood up and left the room.

When she opened the door, she saw Keith standing to one side of the doorway, his face pale. The bodyguards were with him in the hall.

"Anne! He didn't do anything to you, did he?"

"No. I'm fine. More importantly, he told me to make some sugar candy, so I need my barrel of silver sugar, some cold water, and my tools. Will you help me carry them in?"

Together, they fetched the items and brought them into the back room where Reginald was waiting, then placed a stone slab on top of the table. Anne had some colored powders with her, though not as many as usual, and she put those on the table, too.

She used a stone bowl to scoop up some silver sugar, then spread it out on the slab and added cold water. As she started kneading the mixture, Reginald watched with a blank expression. She worked quickly and smoothly, repeatedly chilling her hands as she went.

"What do you want? I'll make anything you please. What sorts of things do you like, Mr. Stowe?"

Reginald answered definitively, "Money."

"Umm… Anything else?"

"Nope. Just money."

"Fine, I'll pick what to make, then."

"Fine by me."

Anne sighed and focused on her kneading. Even if she made gold and silver coins out of sugar candy, they wouldn't be beautiful or marvelous. Maybe Reginald really had no interest in anything other than business.

Ah, but there is one thing this man cares more about than money.

Reginald had shown interest in Challe, and he had brought Lafalle back with him. He was interested in fairies who could bring him sizable profits. He might have only cared about them as merchandise, but that didn't change his interest.

"Mr. Stowe, do you like fairies?"

"They have value as merchandise. But I hate them."

"Why do you hate them? Is it because they're a different species than humans?"

"Let me tell you a story, princess," said Reginald, a ghastly smile on his face. "The first time I ever sold a fairy, it was a female that had looked after me since I was a young child. When I sold her, she looked utterly pitiful."

His coldhearted words upset Anne, and she couldn't stay silent.

"Didn't you feel like you'd done something awful?"

"Not at all. You see, that fairy stole what little money I had and tried to run away. I was only thirteen years old. If she'd succeeded, I would've surely died in a ditch. They're just like humans—some of them may be innocent, but some of them are sinful. It's not like I only hate fairies, you know. I despise both fairies and humans. But I'm also grateful to the fairy that betrayed me. Thanks to that experience, I got into the fairy-dealing business."

Anne hung her head. Of course there were good fairies and bad fairies, just like with humans. That was only to be expected. But Reginald's words were laced with malice and difficult to listen to.

"Now that I think about it, that fairy was the beginning of my good fortune, in a way. Make her for me."

That seemed like a pretty twisted idea of good fortune. But Reginald had finally voiced a preference.

He'd said he wanted to see whether the things Anne and the other candy crafters believed in were worthy of the fairy dealers' support. If he was even the least bit impressed with Anne's work, it might help secure their cooperation. She had to give it her all.

She didn't want him to put down and ridicule what she and the other crafters had so much faith in.

She kneaded tenaciously, stubborn in her convictions.

The room was dimly lit, the workbench wasn't the right height for her, and the water she was using was a little warm. On top of everything else, that year's silver sugar was poor quality.

Because of those unfavorable conditions, Anne repeatedly kneaded her silver sugar dough, spending even more time than usual to try to bring out its luster. Her lower back and shoulder joints began to ache as she worked.

She continued to knead and knead.

Reginald silently watched her. It couldn't have been very interesting to observe, and yet he didn't rush her. He simply toyed with his knife, running the tip of his finger along the blade from time to time. His patience resembled that of a wild beast concealing itself in the darkness while stalking its prey. Maybe they enjoyed even the time spent waiting. When Anne thought about such things, Reginald's presence became terribly frightening.

It was quite late at night by the time Anne achieved the luster she had been looking for. She knew Keith was probably waiting outside the door, worried about her. But she had only finished the preparatory stage of her work. She hadn't even laid a hand on her tools yet.

As she divided up balls of silver sugar dough, Anne spoke for the first time in a while.

"Do you remember the color of her wing?"

"I feel like it was a light-pink color."

"Got it."

She mixed a little bit of red powder into some of the silver sugar dough and kneaded it further until it was faintly pink. Then she combined it with pure-white silver sugar to form a gradation from light pink to white and stretched it until it became transparent. The thin film of silver sugar felt like smooth silk. Using her paring knife, she cut the film into the shape of a wing.

"What about her hair color? Did she have curly hair or straight? Was it long?"

"It was a similar color to the wing. Straight, long hair. Always tied into two bunches."

If I'm making hair, then…

She picked up a lump of kneaded silver sugar and, using both hands, stretched it out and folded it in half. She repeated that action, smoothly folding the thin band of dough over to create layer after layer. Then she pulled a spindle out of her tool kit and a bottle of oil from next to her colored powders. The oil, taken from the seeds of a sugar apple tree, was tasteless, odorless, and transparent. Anne opened the lid and lightly dipped the tips of her right thumb and forefinger into that oil.

Then she skillfully pulled on one end of the ball of silver sugar like she was twisting a paper string, wrapping it around the spindle.

Holding the ball of silver sugar, she dangled the spindle from the sugar thread she'd created and spun it gently with her right hand.

With each spin, more sugar thread spooled through Anne's fingers and wound around the spindle. This silver sugar thread could weave one's hopes and feelings.

Once she had created her light-pink thread, Anne bundled it up and cut it to the right length. She intended to make it into the fairy's hair. She would implant the hair with a needle, holding her breath as she carefully did the work.

"What about her eyes? What color were they?"

"The eyes?" Reginald frowned. "I don't remember."

"Can you remember anything else? What her presence was like, or the clothes she wore, or the expressions she made."

"Nah. I only vaguely remember her face. You can do whatever."

"I really can't just 'do whatever.'"

"That's the easiest way, right?"

"I can't make something half-hearted. But if you don't care…" After thinking for a moment, Anne continued, "…then I'll make something suited to what you've told me."

She paid careful attention to the individual strands of hair, the flow of the wing, the slender limbs, and the graceful neck. She made every element beautiful so as not to upset the balance of the whole.

By the time she was finished arranging the flowing strands of hair with her needle, Anne's forehead was damp with sweat.

All Reginald had said was that some parts of the fairy had a light-pink coloring. Apparently, he didn't even remember what her face looked like. But Anne imagined her face and presence based on that soft coloration.

In many cases, a fairy's coloring expressed their disposition and personality.

Challe, with his deep-black hair and eyes, was strong, elegant, beautiful, and dangerous.

Mithril, who was silver and blue, was cheerful and refreshing.

Lafalle, whose colors changed, was mysterious and untrustworthy.

Anne tried to imagine what kind of personality light pink implied. It didn't seem like the coloration of a mean-tempered fairy who would try to steal money from a child.

She wondered whether she should make the fairy based on the impression she'd gotten from Reginald's story or the way Anne herself imagined her based on her coloring.

Anne was torn. She looked down at the light-pink sugar in her hands and questioned herself.

Which one should I choose?

She listened carefully to hear the voice of the color, which whispered to her through her hands.



If that wolf is planning to do anything to Anne, he won't walk out of here alive, negotiations be damned.

Challe cast his gaze at the doorway at the end of the dark corridor.

Quite some time had passed since Anne and Keith had taken the barrel of silver sugar off the carriage, drawn up some cold water from the well, and headed down that hallway.

Apparently, Reginald had requested that Anne join him in that room alone and that she make a sugar candy sculpture.

Challe reconfirmed that Keith was dutifully listening outside the door for any sounds. Keith nodded, assuring Challe that he would call him immediately if anything happened. He looked just as tense.

Keeping one eye on the back room, Challe observed the two bodyguards Reginald had left outside. They never looked away from Challe and Salim. They were probably standing watch to make sure no one injured Lafalle. If someone killed Lafalle, Reginald would lose his precious bargaining chip.

But given the circumstances, Challe and Salim couldn't lay a hand on Lafalle anyway. If they killed him and angered Reginald, they would never get the fairy dealers to cooperate.

Challe hated fairy dealers so much, it made him sick. He had suffered all manner of humiliations as they bought and sold him. He had always wanted to kill them.

If not for Anne's pleas, Challe would have already cut Reginald down.

But Anne had raised her voice frantically for the sake of the fairies. She had brought him back to sanity when he had nearly forgotten himself in anger. Once he had calmed down, he'd been grateful to her for keeping him in check.

Lafalle was still sleeping. From time to time, Challe imagined he saw a change in his expression, but it was only the candles' flickering shadows. In reality, not so much as a single eyelash fluttered.

Fairies grew weak and died when they reached the ends of their life spans or when afflicted with disease or hunger—when they no longer had the power to hold their forms together. They could also die when their forms were broken by some severe physical shock.

Challe had assumed when Lafalle had fallen from the top of the fort that the shock had destroyed his body.

A fairy with a weak constitution would have scattered and disappeared the instant they'd fallen, but such things differed based on the strength of the fairy's energy. For a fairy born from a gemstone like Lafalle, it wasn't surprising that his energy was strong. But even so, the power maintaining his body should have become unstable upon impact, scattering his form after a few minutes or hours.

And yet somehow, he was holding himself together. It must have taken terrible strength to keep his body intact.

He had managed to preserve his physical form, but that must have been the limit of his power, leaving him in a catatonic state.

I should have made certain to kill you back then.

Challe spoke inside his mind to the sleeping Lafalle.

To see someone so proud fall into a state like this, neither living nor dead, seized by human hands and used as a tool, Challe couldn't help but pity him.

Lafalle may have been a troublesome, difficult, and dangerous fairy, but he was still Challe's brother.

Brother stone.

Suddenly, he remembered they had one more brother stone.

Back at the fort in the wilderness, he had been unable to find the diamond in Lafalle's possession. That had come as no surprise, since Lafalle had always kept it with him. It was probably hidden somewhere on his body.

Once he realized that possibility, Challe knelt down at the altar and peered into the coffin.

The bodyguards moved at once. They drew their swords and placed the points right against his back.

"What are you doing?"

On the other side of the coffin, Salim had also put himself on guard, but Challe stopped him with a look and spoke to the bodyguards without turning around.

"I'm just going to search him. I believe he's holding a gemstone."

When they heard the word *gemstone*, the two bodyguards looked at each other.

"Is he really?"

"If you find it, you must give it to Mr. Stowe."

Challe had no intention of handing it over if he found it, but he nodded regardless. If it was there, all he had to do was stealthily pocket it.

Challe began feeling around inside the sleeping Lafalle's jacket. He searched everywhere on his brother's cold body—in his pockets, behind his collar, under his cuffs. There didn't seem to be anything like what he was looking for, and he was about to give up. Then his hand touched the back button on Lafalle's jacket. It felt odd somehow.

He opened the jacket and saw an orderly row of back buttons. Buttons like these were often found on the elaborate garments favored by aristocrats. Metal fixtures stuck out of the lining, helping to set the decorative buttons on the front into place. The crafter would attach metal rings to the tips of those fixtures to cover the edges and make them look like buttons. It was considered tasteful to add elaborate garnishes to one's back buttons as well as the buttons on the front.

Lafalle, too, had decorations inlaid into his back buttons, crafted from stones and beads that bore a close resemblance to his front

buttons. But just one of them, the button second from the top, was a different hue. Its transparent brilliance caught Challe's eye.

The bodyguards sheathed their swords and looked delighted. Even Salim's eyes went wide.

Inlaid into the metal ring of that button was an elliptical diamond, expertly cut.

There could be no question—this stone was the same shape and had the same brilliance as the diamond from Challe's distant memories.

He understood Lafalle's intentions in hiding the diamond there. He had hoped a fairy would be born from his brother stone and had kept it close to him. That must have been the reason he'd always opened up his jacket every chance he'd gotten. He had been gazing at the gem.

Challe separated the back button's fixture from its corresponding front button and rolled the diamond around in his palm.



In that moment, a chill ran up Challe's spine.

When he looked carefully at the diamond, he could see two small white impurities at its center. But that was all. He didn't feel anything. He thought he remembered Lafalle saying the diamond's time was near. But Challe didn't feel any energy from the gemstone capable of birthing a fairy. It was empty—just a shell.

Could it be that he's already been born?! The other one of us!

The bodyguards snatched the diamond from Challe's hand as he stood in a daze.

"We're giving this to Mr. Stowe."

Challe didn't care what became of the husk. The fairy who had been born from it was far more important.

Where did you go after you were born?

Challe clenched his empty fist.



The cheerful, pale coloration spoke of gentleness to Anne. It was whispering to her that it couldn't turn into anything else.

I'll trust the color.

Anne decided to believe in the color's own sentiment over Reginald's words.

She started to assemble the fairy's body.

She carefully shaped the dough, from the roundness of the knees, thrust out to one side, to the delicate nails on the tips of her toes. The fairy's light-pink wing, which grew fainter toward the tip, was thin enough to see through. It flowed down her back, over her hips, and spread gently along the floor. Anne had made her hair using the silver sugar thread technique Lulu had taught her. The thin, lustrous strands were beautiful, and the playful loose ends added charm.

As for her face, Anne had only crafted the bumps and hollows of features, leaving it otherwise smooth and white. She'd done so intentionally because she didn't want to sculpt a face that bore no resemblance to the one buried deep in Reginald's memories.

In the end, Anne's candy sculpture depicted a soft, gentle fairy. This was the shape of the color Anne had trusted.

"I'm finished."

She carefully set the small fairy down on the table in front of Reginald.

Anne could see a sliver of faint purple, the color of the sky just before dawn, through a gap in the room's closed window. It seemed she had spent the whole night kneading silver sugar and building the fairy's form. Unfavorable conditions had caused her work to progress slower than she'd expected.

She was surprised it had taken her so much extra time, but she was even more surprised at Reginald's patience. He had been silently watching Anne work all night.

Reginald was staring at the sweet-looking candy sculpture before him. But there wasn't a single identifiable emotion in his expression —no joy nor any displeasure. It was as though he was looking at a stone.

"I see. It certainly is beautiful." After a few moments, a cold-blooded smile rose to Reginald's lips. "Sugar candy invites happiness, huh? So I'm supposed to pray to this lump of sugar? It must be nice to be a fool clinging to such superstitions. I just can't understand anyone who's desperate to get their hands on something like this."

He pulled his knife out of the tabletop and used it to poke mockingly at the candy fairy's knee. At his contempt for the sacred sugar candy, Anne finally lost her temper. It wasn't like candy crafters made sugar candy as a hobby or for their own amusement.

"Surely, you must know how much good fortune a beautiful piece of sugar candy can bring into your life!"

"No clue. I've never had one before."

Reginald thrust his knife upright into the table, yanked Anne forcefully by both wrists, and brought his face so close to hers that she thought he was going to bite her.

"My father was a retainer for House Chamber. Fifteen years ago, after the Chamber family lost the civil war, my household was captured by House Millsland, and my parents were executed. The only ones left were me and my old grandmother, whose legs were so weak that she could hardly stand. House Millsland robbed the two of us of everything we had and dumped us in the wilderness near

Northern Blow with almost nothing. All my grandmother and I had were some old clothes that didn't fit and one stupid, useless worker fairy—my nursemaid."

His gray eyes, glowing from deep within, seized on Anne.

"Sugar candy brings good fortune, you say?" he whispered, voice hoarse. "I didn't have time to wait for something like that. If I'd gotten my hands on some, would it have been able to make my grandmother, who crouched before me, trembling, stand up straight? Could it have done anything for that old woman who couldn't move, even to save herself from freezing? Who was unable to take a step no matter how I yelled or coaxed her? In the end, I was the only one who could do anything for us, and my strength and what little money I managed to earn were the only things we had. It took all my effort to keep us alive. In a situation like that, could you wait for some candy to bring you good fortune, missy?"

Overwhelmed by his brutal, intimidating countenance, Anne began to struggle for breath, as though the heavy atmosphere was suffocating her.

There was far too much pain and heartbreak in this world. She knew that all too well.

"I'm not as carefree as you think. I've got a good understanding of such things, too, Mr. Stowe," she answered him, gasping in the stifling air. Her wrists hurt where he was holding her. "It wasn't easy for my weak, impoverished mother and me to travel the kingdom. Every time we suffered through some miserable, awful experience, we were left emotionally and physically exhausted. But if we hadn't been a little foolhardy, we would have died by the roadside. We couldn't afford to wait around and hope things worked out. Just like you."

"And yet you still think it's important to get luck from some stupid candy?"

"We relied on it. We needed enough luck to be foolhardy." Anne stared back into Reginald's gray eyes. "We exhausted ourselves completely every day. Just doing that is enough to wear you out and leave you feeling hopeless. That's why we needed hope. We created it by believing the sugar candy would bring us good fortune, by

praying for it and waiting for it. It protected my heart, kept it from being worn away to nothing."

"Hope? What does having hope and saying prayers get you? Is silver sugar some kind of ambrosia that can change your whole destiny? If it were, there wouldn't be any unlucky folks left in this world."

"I never said it was a panacea. You can't know what kind of good fortune the sugar candy will bring. But when it arrives, you think, *Things like this are impossible*, or *This is a miracle*. Then you become aware of the presence of the sugar candy in your hands. Through striving and prayer, I somehow made it through. Countless times, I've felt the sugar candy's good fortune was on my side, and I was grateful. That's why I believe. I believe in the sugar candy, and I consider it the fruit of my own best efforts."

Reginald let go of Anne's wrists and thrust her away from him.

"There's nothing wrong with believing in yourself," he said. "I believe in myself, too. I don't rely on lumps of sugar. I don't give a damn whether you're good or bad at making these things. Our business is doing just fine. If you candy crafters start buying fairies, our sales will go up a little, but that's all there is to it. There's no reason for me to agree to your requests. But I suppose I got to see a rare performance. That's my response to your work, young lady."

Anne bit her lip. Ultimately, Reginald didn't see any use in sugar candy and the good fortune it brought, and he didn't care what happened to the techniques for making it or the fairies who learned them. For him, having Anne make a piece of candy had just been a way of warding off boredom, and he'd only meant to poke fun at her sincerity and mock her.

It was just like a wolf to tease a young woman like Anne, to take his time and toy with her, to make her spend all night using up her strength only to reject her efforts. Her fatigue and resignation felt even greater because of all the energy she had used.

There's nothing I can do.

Her wrists tingled where he'd gripped her. Reginald had asked Anne to craft the candy in order to make fun of her.

But the experiences and thoughts he had spoken of were genuine. It was probably natural for someone who'd been through something painful to forget how to have hope or even how to pray for good fortune. And his heart had probably been rubbed raw by his past.

But I want to believe.

It was precisely because Anne *did* believe that she gave her all to her craft.

She rubbed her smarting wrists. Reginald's plan had succeeded, and Anne felt like all the energy had been drained from the core of her body. However, she knew she couldn't surrender. She summoned every bit of her remaining willpower and spoke.

"Does that mean the Fairy Merchants Guild will not comply with the Silver Sugar Viscount's request?"

"That's right."

His words were unwavering. No matter what a young woman like Anne said to him, no matter what kinds of conditions they offered him, his frozen wolf's heart was unlikely to be stirred.

Anne's chest ached when she looked into his gray eyes, with their ferocious intensity.

Reginald had been playing with his knife all night, and that behavior spoke vividly of his convictions. He believed only in the things he could control with his own hands—things with power and a distinct form.

He trusted in things like money, merchandise, and strength. He'd stated bluntly that he didn't have any use for things he couldn't touch with his own hands. He rejected the idea of good fortune because he couldn't see it with his own eyes.

Rejecting the invisible meant he rejected compassion, love, and all other such things in the same way.

Reginald believed not in fleeting, gentle sugar candy but in hard, cold steel.

"Understood," said Anne. "That's fine for now. But I'm going to give you this piece of sugar candy. Hold on to it, please." She spoke quietly but with force.

"I don't plan to pin my hopes on candy."

"You don't have to. Just hold on to it. Even if it's not in a form you can see, that good fortune you don't believe in will come to you. I'm sure of it."

Reginald bared his teeth again and smiled. "Do you think I'm going to be grateful?"

"You don't have to be. You've never had a piece of sugar candy before, right? Take this as your first piece, please. And I hope you'll come to understand the kind of good fortune sugar candy brings."

Anne deftly gathered up her tools and held them close to her chest. She bowed once, then turned her back on Reginald and left the room.

Keith had been sitting beside the door, wide-awake, all night. He leaped to his feet as soon as he saw Anne.

"Anne. How did it go?"

The corridor, which had been pitch-black, was now faintly lit. Anne shook her head.

"…I failed."

When he heard that, Keith rubbed her back sympathetically. "You did your best."

Just hearing those words was painful for Anne. It had been a waste of time. She hadn't gotten any results.

The bodyguards, who had been waiting in the hall, passed by Anne and Keith and went back inside the room. Just before the last one closed the door, he turned to the two of them and smiled.

"Good work. That was just the thing to keep him entertained."

As soon as the door shut, Anne's shoulders drooped. Her negotiations with the Wolf had ended in a crushing defeat.

She went back into the sanctuary with Keith.

Challe and Salim were leaning against the altar, watching over Lafalle's coffin, and it seemed they had been doing so all night. The candles lining the altar had burned themselves out, and the melted wax had flowed down over the candlesticks and onto the altar.

A dim, faint light illuminated the inside of the sanctuary, making all the spiders' webs and dust glint white. To Anne's exhausted eyes, they were dazzlingly bright.

Anne stood before Challe and hung her head. Challe had held back his anger so she could succeed in her negotiations. And yet she had failed.

"Challe, I failed. I'm sorry."

"Only apologize if you intend to give up."

"Huh?"

She raised her head. With his arms still crossed, Challe said indifferently, "Apologize if you intend to give up after the first try. Apologies are for after you've thrown in the towel."

It was only then that Anne realized she didn't have to give up just yet. She was inexperienced, and failure had discouraged her so much that she had forgotten something as simple as that. She shook her head, flustered.

"I take that back. I don't apologize. I'm not done yet."

A smile appeared on Challe's lips. "Go rest in the carriage with the boy. Everyone's minds stop working when they haven't had enough sleep. Especially one like yours, scarecrow brain."

His words were as disparaging as usual, but Anne was much happier with that than the cold treatment he'd been giving her lately.

"Okay."

She nodded, then took another look at Challe. Something about him bothered her. It might have just been the pale-blue light of dawn, but the color of Challe's wing was a hard silver, and it was stretched taut. He seemed stressed.

"Challe, did something happen?"

"Don't worry about it. Nothing can be done right now, even if you kick up a fuss."

"What are you talking about? Did you pick up on something important?"

"I'll tell you after you get some rest. Go outside."

He pushed her back gently to shoo her away, and she obeyed. But Challe's words worried her.

What exactly had he realized?



Westol was the capital of Charmae Province, where the Earl of Downing governed. It was three days' travel from Lewiston, which was to the south. Northern Blow, by contrast, lay just half a day's carriage ride to the north—even less on horseback.

If the Earl of Downing was in Westol, Hugh's letter would be in his hands by daybreak. And the old retainer was sure to be startled when he read it. He would sense the impending danger and ride to Northern Blow with an escort of soldiers. If he was quick, he could arrive that afternoon.

The bodyguards had been switching out from time to time, but Challe and Salim had remained in the same spot, guarding Lafalle's coffin. They'd stood watch over it all night, and they were just as attentive now that the sun was high. Their toughness seemed to surprise the bodyguards.

As noon approached, Salim spoke up.

"Challe. Have something to eat. We should have some trail rations in the carriage. When you're done, I'll take my turn."

Neither of them had taken so much as a sip of water since dinner the previous night. Fairies could get by on less food than humans could, but Challe still felt a little hungry. He was also worried about Anne, who was supposed to be resting in the carriage. He wanted to check on her as well.

"I'll be back soon."

Challe stood up straight, and Salim took the opportunity to ask him something that had been on his mind.

"Challe, what is it about that diamond? Why did you look so surprised?"

"I'll tell you when I get the chance."

It would be troublesome to explain. At Challe's blunt response, Salim fell silent for a moment, then nodded.

"If you don't feel like talking about it, that's fine."

It was easier for Challe to breathe once he was out of the old church's stagnant air. It had been suffocating in there.

The carriage where Anne and Keith were resting was pulled up close to the church's front yard. The horses had been unhitched from the carriage and tied up separately, and the wheels were

secured with wheel stops. It was quiet, and wind rustled the leaves on a grove of trees above the roof of the carriage.

When Challe looked up, he saw the sky was a soft, springlike blue, with thin trails of clouds stretched across it.

Naturally enough, he was tired from standing watch all night. For a few moments, he stared absentmindedly up at the sky.

Then he heard the sound of footsteps on the stones behind him. It was Salim. He could tell immediately because the steps were careful, like a wild cat's. Over his shoulder, Challe asked, "Did something happen?"

All of a sudden, he felt a swell of bloodlust coming from behind his back. Instantly, Challe twisted around and leaped to the side. A silver blade grazed his shoulder. He retreated farther, jumping out of the way. Planting his left hand on the ground, he looked directly at his attacker.

There, sword at the ready, was Salim.

"Salim…?"

Though his expression was blank, the murder in his eyes was clear. And Challe could tell the bloodlust emanating from Salim was the same aggression he'd detected from his attacker in Lewiston and on the Wellnome Highway.

When the figure had attacked him on the highway, Challe had been baffled by the sudden appearance, when there had been no sign of anyone outside their party approaching.

If it had been Salim, then everything would make sense. He'd unleashed his bloodlust all at once, then dropped it when he'd realized his attack wouldn't be successful.

A normal human wasn't capable of such things. When humans were out to kill, their bloodlust was always obvious, even if they didn't realize it themselves. There was no way Challe would have missed it. But Salim could quickly hide his killing intent, just as a cat could retract its claws at will. It had to be a special ability he'd picked up somewhere.

"What are you trying to do?" Challe asked.

"I mean to kill you before the Viscount gets back," Salim replied, as if it didn't upset him in the slightest.

Chapter 5

THE EARL'S DECISION AND THE VISCOUNT'S RESOLVE

Wind swept through the churchyard on top of the hill. The only sound was the ceaseless rustling of the grass. Otherwise, it was silent.

Challe opened his right hand and concentrated his energy there. Sparkling silver beads of light gathered at his palm, condensing into the shape of a sword.

"Is this an order from the Silver Sugar Viscount?" he asked.

Salim answered matter-of-factly, "Not from the Viscount. But it's for the sake of protecting his station."

"And if I tell you to stop…I suppose you won't listen, will you?"

"No."

Challe's sword took form, and he grasped it tightly and grinned.

He didn't know who had ordered Salim to kill him or for what purpose, but he was obviously serious. There was no need to go easy on an opponent coming at him in earnest. Especially when that opponent was so skilled.

"Well then, shall we?"

Challe was a warrior fairy. Fighting suited him. In fact, it thrilled him to his core.

Salim was not an indiscriminately violent man. Challe was not fighting to protect someone else, but to preserve his own life. For

once, he was fighting for himself. This would be interesting.

His wing stretched taut with the strain, and its hard silver color grew more intense. Light flowed across its surface.

Using his left hand to spring off the ground, Challe charged at Salim from below. He swept his blade sideways, aiming for his opponent's knees.

Salim tilted his sword downward and flicked away Challe's blade. Challe rode the momentum and leaped to the side, then used one leg as a pivot to twist his body around before lunging again, this time aiming for Salim's torso. Salim jumped backward to avoid the thrust, but he immediately righted himself, took one step forward, and swung his sword up from below. Challe parried it and leaped back again.

Each fighter lifted their sword to point at their opponent's eyes as they glared at each other.

Their surroundings remained quiet; even the sounds of their clashing swords weren't enough to frighten the songbirds that sat chirping on the branches overhead.

The two of them took off running simultaneously.

Their swords clashed again. They each used all their might to push the other back. The two blades grated against each other. Then all at once, the birds scattered.

At the same time, Challe and Salim both noticed the wild beating of hooves and the whinnying of horses, and they turned their attention toward the sounds.

"What are you doing?!"

A single horseman came rushing into the churchyard. It was the Silver Sugar Viscount, Hugh Mercury. Salim looked startled. He withdrew his sword and jumped back. Challe stayed at the ready, observing Salim's behavior.

His bloodlust had vanished the moment he'd seen Hugh's face.

"What were you doing?! Salim! Challe! What happened to the coffin?!"

Hugh jumped down off his horse and ran into the yard on foot. Behind him, Kat arrived, driving a one-man wagon. He frowned

when he saw the others, then brought his wagon to a stop and didn't move any farther, still holding the reins.

Challe shook his hand and caused his sword to dissipate.

"The coffin is inside," he answered. "It hasn't been moved. Don't worry. As for what we were doing, ask Salim. He said he wanted to take my life, and I was merely entertaining him."

"What?"

Hugh frowned and pressed Salim angrily.

"Salim, what were you doing? Answer me."

Startled by the braying of the horses and Hugh's angry shouts, Anne poked her head out from inside the carriage. She rubbed her eyes sleepily at first, but then she seemed to sense the atmosphere of the situation, and her expression changed.

"Huh?! Hugh? And Kat, too? But, Challe…what happened?"

Anne clamored out of the carriage in a panic, followed closely by Keith. Then she ran over to Challe.

As he placed his sword back into its sheath, Salim answered evenly, "I was trying to kill Challe. I was following orders."

"Who gave you such an order?" demanded Hugh. "When? I don't remember issuing an order like that."

"It wasn't you…"

Salim held his tongue for a moment. He seemed unsure of what to do. But unable to withstand the silent pressure emanating from Hugh, he continued:

"The order came from your guardian, the Earl of Downing."

"From Downing? Why?"

"Challe is a dangerous fairy, and he needs to be disposed of. Although you've been aware of his existence for a year and a half, Viscount, you've neglected to handle the matter. So I decided to deal with him for you, before your loyalty was called into question by His Majesty the King. Only I could get close to Challe without putting him on guard."

I see, so that's how it is.

Challe laughed out loud. It seemed the human king had no intention of leaving the fairy king alone after all.

The human king had promised to teach fairies to make silver sugar candy and appointed the Silver Sugar Viscount to handle the job. But that hadn't been so he could keep his oath to Challe. Nor had it been for the sake of the fairies. It was simply because the humans wanted slaves with special abilities—ones they could call silver sugar fairies.

Otherwise, he would have no reason to come after Challe's life. He was probably hoping to secretly dispose of the troublesome fairy king before he could protest or fight back.

Anne clasped the sleeve of Challe's jacket protectively.

I can't believe how lovely she is.

Despite her frailty, Anne had used all her energy for the sake of the fairies, and even now, she was trying to protect Challe in her own way. Love for her flooded his heart. The fact that another human, just like Anne, could do something so vulgar and sickening filled Challe with bitterness.

"His Majesty is a coward," Anne grumbled.

Hugh shook his head, "His Majesty is not a coward. He intends to keep his promise. I heard as much directly from him."

"Then why is he trying to kill Challe?!"

"The Earl of Downing made that decision on his own. He's always taken it upon himself to eliminate any threat to the royal family."

Even if the Earl of Downing was acting alone, that didn't mean the king disapproved of his actions. It was also possible that just as Downing had secretly ordered Salim to assassinate Challe, the king had likewise secretly ordered Downing to arrange it.

"Salim. You are my bodyguard. You don't take orders from anyone but me." Hugh's voice was low, like a growling lion's.

"But the Earl of Downing is your guardian, and your position is—"

"I am not that man's pet dog, Salim. I am the Silver Sugar Viscount, a retainer to His Majesty the King. My job, as His Majesty's servant, is to safeguard sugar candy and the crafters who make it, and to produce ever better sugar candy. The Earl of Downing is my guardian, but he's overstepping by giving you orders. This could well have destroyed all my plans. He may be my guardian and an earl, but I won't forgive him if he ruins my work."

In contrast to his detached tone, anger roiled in the Viscount's eyes.

"I intend to train silver sugar fairies. I'm not doing it for the fairies' sake, nor am I doing it for the royal family. We need silver sugar fairies to make our sugar candy even more beautiful and to imbue it with even stronger power. By adding fairies to our ranks, our sugar candy will become even more magnificent."

Hugh's words surprised Challe.

The Silver Sugar Viscount genuinely wants to train new silver sugar fairies.

In spite of himself, Challe put on a wry smile.

This man is a fool, too.

When it came down to it, the Silver Sugar Viscount was just as bad as Anne when it came to sugar candy.



At Hugh's words, a shiver ran up Anne's spine. She gripped the sleeve of Challe's jacket even tighter.

He's the Silver Sugar Viscount.

Hugh was trying to train silver sugar fairies for the sake of the craft itself. He was interested purely in developing sugar candy into something even greater.

That was why he wouldn't forgive even the earl, his own guardian.

Hugh Mercury was the Silver Sugar Viscount. He existed for the sake of sugar candy and the ones who crafted it. He had thrown away the freedom of being a crafter and taken up the restrictive position of Viscount so he could protect sugar candy and its crafters, standing in front of them like a human shield.

He felt that way precisely because he was at the top of his craft, and those feelings were what made him a suitable Silver Sugar Viscount.

Kat had heard Hugh's words from the driver's seat of his wagon. He fixed his catlike eyes on the other man's back, as if looking at someone utterly unfamiliar.

"The Earl of Downing's party is right behind us. Considering the nature of his secret orders to Salim, even I can't say what the old man is thinking or what he might do. But as the Silver Sugar Viscount, I promise to use the best strategy I can to advance things in the best direction possible."

Hugh looked around at everyone present, one by one.

"Salim, you are my bodyguard. You obey me. You candy crafters also obey me. I will work to protect all candy crafters and to make sugar candy even better than it is. So obey me."

The word *obey* was powerful, and it resonated in Anne's chest.

It was the earl who ought to be on his guard.

I can't believe the Earl of Downing would order someone to kill Challe…

Anne had initially met the earl at her first Royal Candy Fair, and she had found him to be a calm and amiable person. So it was a shock to hear he was behind such a plot. It made her sad.

Challe had promised not to harm the royal family or any other humans, but the earl didn't believe him.

"Why is the Earl of Downing so afraid of Challe?" Keith asked suddenly.

Kat added his own question. "All o' you are hiding something, aren't you? Challe, who the hell are you?"

They couldn't let it get out that Challe was the fairy king. That would only make things difficult for both the kingdom and for Challe himself.

Challe jerked his chin in Anne's direction and said flatly, "I'm her bodyguard. I don't intend to become anything more than that."

The growing sound of wagon wheels and the hoofbeats of five or six horses echoed up the hill. At this, Hugh held up a hand toward Keith and Kat to stop them from talking.

"That's enough. Downing is here. I'll explain Challe's position to both of you if and when you need to know."

A large carriage, protected by soldiers on horseback, came speeding into the churchyard. The driver handled the reins skillfully, bringing the carriage to a sudden stop, and the mounted soldiers halted their horses as well.

The door of the carriage opened, and the Earl of Downing gallantly alighted, black cloak fluttering behind him.

Hugh spun around and walked over to the earl.

"My lord. After your negotiations with Stowe, there is something I would like to say to you."

"What's this all of a sudden? I'll hear it now if it's something we can deal with beforehand."

"It's regarding the orders you gave Salim."

At that, the Earl of Downing's bushy white eyebrows waggled nervously. "I'll hear you out after the negotiations."

The soldiers got down off their horses and surrounded the Earl of Downing to protect him.

"Bring to me the man called Reginald Stowe, the leader of the Fairy Merchants Guild," he said.

"Understood," the Viscount replied.

As Hugh headed into the church, the earl looked at Salim accusingly. Salim bowed quickly, then stood perfectly still, as if this would somehow repel the earl's gaze.

Soon, the door to the church opened again, and Hugh came out. Following him was Reginald Stowe, surrounded by six bodyguards. Reginald approached the earl directly, without the slightest hesitation. Then stopping at a respectful distance, he took a knee.

"Before you kneels Reginald Stowe, leader of the Fairy Merchants Guild, esteemed Earl of Downing."

His excessively polite greeting was transparently disingenuous. This was made all the more obvious when you realized he had essentially summoned the earl there himself. Clearly, in his heart, he was mocking the man.

"Stand up, Stowe," said the earl, scrutinizing him. "I hear you are in possession of the fairy that attacked myself and the Silver Sugar Viscount several months ago. And that you are demanding the royal family purchase it from you. Have I got that right?"

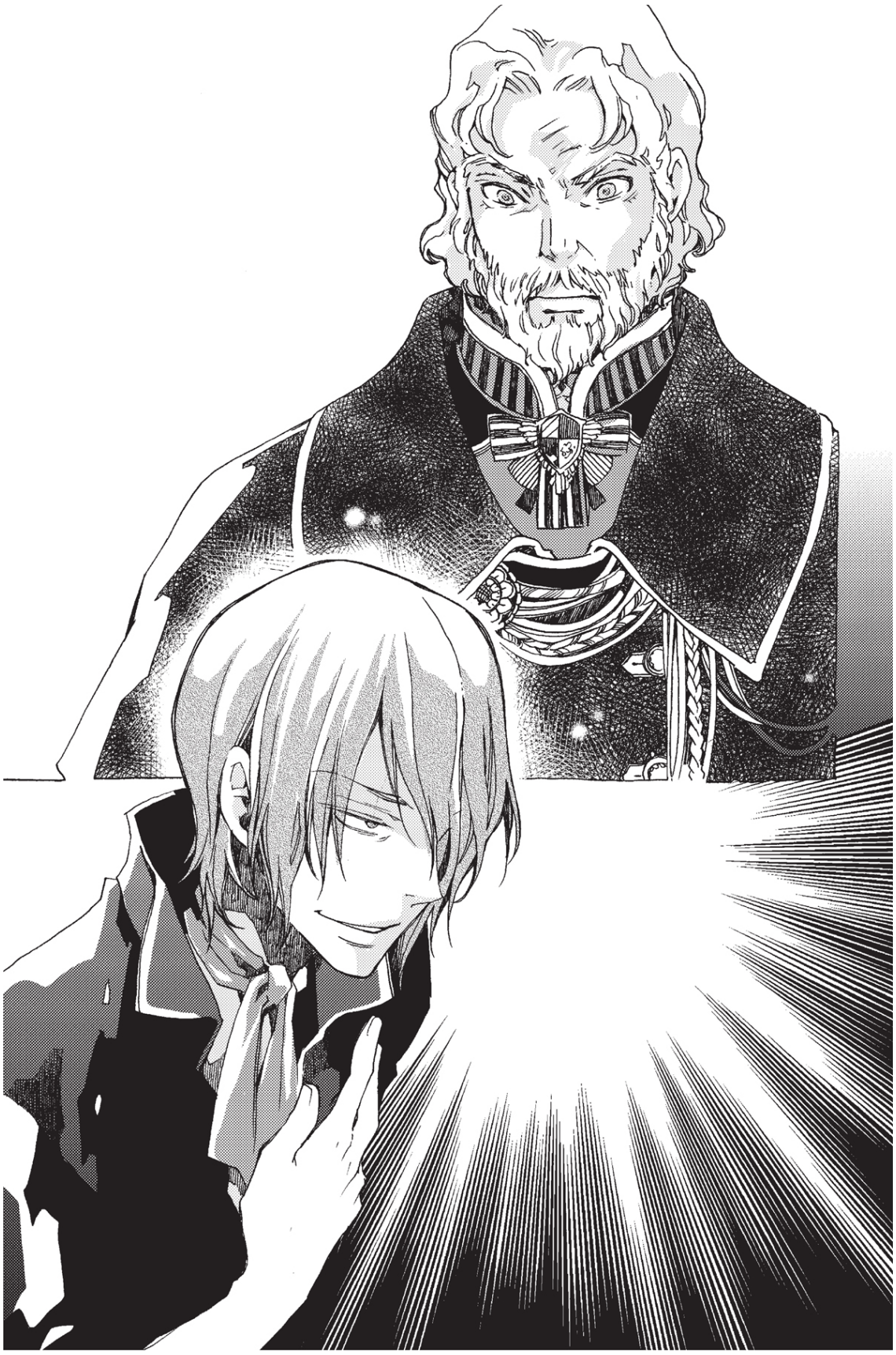
"It is indeed as you say, esteemed earl."

There was something about Reginald's low, mellow voice that seemed designed to rile the earl up, even as he appeared to be answering obediently.

"And is it true the conditions of the sale are a payment of thirty thousand cress and a reduction in the tax rate levied on fairy dealers?"

"It is indeed as you say, esteemed earl."

"That fairy is dangerous. By rights, I ought to force you to hand it over by royal decree. But as an expression of my thanks to you for recovering it, I will pay one-third of your thirty thousand cress, and you will hand the fairy over. Agreed?"



"To my great regret, I'm afraid that I am unable to accept that offer, esteemed earl." Reginald smiled, his answer full of obsequious politeness.

"What did you say?"

"I said that I cannot accept your offer. If your honorable lordship intends to ignore the other condition that we have so humbly put before you, then we must take that as an indication that your lordship has no intention of making the purchase. As such, we will take it upon ourselves to offer the fairy for sale to other customers."

"Do you hear the words coming out of your own mouth? To start with, thirty thousand cress is such a ridiculous amount of money that it hardly bears discussion. And lowering your tax rate is an issue that would impact the financial situation of the whole kingdom. Do you really think we'd give up something like that as part of the price for one measly fairy? As a merchant yourself, surely you must understand." The Earl of Downing remained calm and composed throughout, never cracking.

"With all due respect, esteemed earl, as a merchant, I *do* understand the value of my merchandise. Your lordship has come all the way out to the countryside like this. Considering the time of your arrival, may I venture to guess that you came without a moment's delay? Any piece of merchandise that could bring your esteemed lordship so far out of your way could not possibly be valued at a mere ten thousand cress."

The Earl of Downing, who had been speaking so fluently, was at a loss for words. Seizing the opportunity, Reginald continued to press him.

"Let me say now that I cannot recommend brandishing a royal decree to deprive me of my merchandise. If your honor were to do such a thing, the Fairy Merchants Guild would no longer feel confident doing business in the kingdom, and we would be forced to disband. Fairy dealers would cease to operate in public, and I'm afraid that would eliminate any taxes remitted to the royal family."

"What a foolish thing to say. There would still be a need to buy and sell fairies."

"Unfortunately, that would no longer be the concern of the former Fairy Merchants Guild. Though it is likely that after we are forced to leave the business, *someone* would continue the trade in the shadows."

Anne was horrified by Reginald's words.

Is that a threat? Against the royal family?!

The Earl of Downing's voice was low and grave. "Are you saying you would defy the royal family? You, a lowly fairy dealer?"

"As you say, we are but lowly fairy dealers." Reginald's reply was almost boastful.

In response to the earl's anger, he dropped his polite act. The subservient smile vanished from his face, and a ghastly lupine grin rose to his lips in its place. As tension filled the air, he took on the look of a rough-hewed, heroic statue.

"The fairy trade is something everyone needs, and yet they all look down on it with contempt. By mediating the act, the fairy dealer accepts the buyer's guilt along with his money. Buyers and sellers both play their assigned role, secure in the belief that it's the fairy merchant who is the despicable one. And that's fine. Even if the others despise him, the fairy merchant always gets his take. But we're not pleased with the way the royal family takes a cut of our proceeds. That has been true ever since they first stuck their noses in our business. They take advantage of the fact that people look down on us to levy higher taxes on fairy dealers than on other merchants. If they know about the disgrace we willingly shoulder, then they ought to lighten the tax burden on our trade compared with other businesses. That said, I'm sure the royal family has appearances to keep up. That's why I'm making a proposal that will give them an excuse. They can say they lowered the tax rate in order to buy this fairy."

Anne understood what Reginald was up to.

The Fairy Merchants Guild doesn't just want to sell Lafalle.

They had probably been smoldering about the royal family's taxes for many years—decades, even. They must have been searching all this time for an effective way to act out against the royal family and make them lower the tax.

And now they had concluded the most effective method was to threaten the royal family by announcing they would disband the Fairy Merchants Guild and send the trade into the shadows.

Not missing a thing, they had even factored the royal family's sense of pride into their plans. The royal family would completely lose face if they bent to the fairy dealers' threats. They would stubbornly refuse to give in, even if it hurt them. So the merchants had arranged a way out for the royals, and that was Lafalle.

Once they had Lafalle in hand, the Fairy Merchants Guild had used him as bait to summon the Silver Sugar Viscount and the Earl of Downing to negotiate with them. After provoking them by demanding that the crown purchase Lafalle, they had pivoted into negotiating a tax reduction.

This was a quiet rebellion by the fairy merchants.

"Reginald Stowe. So you are baring your fangs at the royal family, are you?"

"I'm not baring any fangs. I'm negotiating. I'm willing to make some compromises, both on the thirty thousand cress and with regard to the tax reduction. Therefore, we can call this a negotiation. I'm simply informing you that I don't intend to back down if the royal family tries to suppress us with a show of strength."

Everyone present was frozen in place by his deep, brazen voice.

Reginald and the Earl of Downing glared at each other for a few moments.

The unceasing wind continued to shake the leaves overhead. Light passed through the gaps between them, falling restlessly to the ground.

"So be it," the earl answered at last. "I'll need time to consider your proposal. While I do so, the fairy is not to be moved. It will remain in this church. That is the minimum requirement necessary for us to consider your proposal."

"I accept."

"For the time being, we will return to the inn in Northern Blow. Everyone, prepare to withdraw."

The Earl of Downing jerked his chin in Hugh's direction and signaled for everyone to get ready to leave.

Hugh quickly approached the earl, who had turned his back on Reginald.

"My lord, what are your plans?"

"I have some thinking to do. For now, we will withdraw."

Though she was uneasy, Anne followed the Earl of Downing's orders and got into the carriage. Once it started rolling, she turned around and looked through the window back toward the church. Reginald was staring at them intently with dark eyes.

"Are you all right, Anne?!"

As soon as Anne and Challe got back to their room at the inn, Mithril Lid Pod came bounding toward Anne and clung to her chest.

"That jerk Lafalle was there, right?! What happened with him?"

It seemed Mithril, who had stayed behind at the inn the night before, had heard about the situation from Hugh and Kat during their brief return. He was looking up at Anne with concern.

"He's still sleeping," she said. "He's with the fairy dealers. I don't know what the Earl of Downing plans to do."

"He wouldn't let him loose, would he?"

"No way, definitely not. But…"

"There is no way Downing will accept the Wolf's conditions," said Challe. "I wonder what he's scheming." As he spoke, he walked past the others toward the window and sat on the sill. Opening it up, he turned his gaze on the scenery outside.

The Earl of Downing had rented out the entire inn in Northern Blow where Anne and the others were staying. He had ordered the proprietor to move elsewhere for the time being, leaving only the cook and several servants.

His behavior seemed a little tyrannical, but since he was paying a handsome sum, the earl didn't appear to be bothered in the least. Anne supposed this was how a true aristocrat behaved. She was impressed that people like the Silver Sugar Viscount and Keith, the son of the former Viscount, could still have an unpretentious way about them.

The Earl of Downing hated cramped rooms and had apparently decided he'd rather relax in the dining hall on the first floor. He'd had a comfortable couch moved there and had settled into it.

For the time being, they had all been ordered to go back to their rooms and relax, so Anne and Challe had done the same. Anne, still holding Mithril, stood at Challe's side.

"Challe… Is it all right for you to be here?"

The Earl of Downing had secretly issued orders for Challe to be killed. To Anne, it seemed far too dangerous for him to be in the same inn as the earl. But Challe only snorted.

"If Salim won't act on Downing's orders, the earl will have no choice but to dispatch another assassin. It won't be that easy for him to arrange for one as skilled as Salim. I should be fine for now."

When he heard those words, Mithril turned toward Challe and hopped onto his knee.

"What did you say?! Did I just hear that the Earl of Downing is after your life?!" He grew excited and started jumping up and down. "Why?! Don't tell me you did rude things with women at the castle other than Anne and Lulu Leaf Lean?! Was it possibly…the queen?!"

Mithril leaped into the air. Challe smacked him back down, and Mithril let out a startled screech.

"Keep your mind out of the gutter!" said Challe.

Mithril, who had been knocked to the floor, staggered to his feet.

"I was right, wasn't I?! Bull's-eye! You did it! That's why you're so angry! Dammit, I'm so jealous… No, wait! How could you do such a thing?! Anyway, give me all the details!"

Challe pressed a hand to his forehead as if suppressing a headache.

"Um, I hate to interrupt when you're so excited," said Anne, trying to pacify Mithril, "but the reason really isn't—"

Just then, there was a knock at the door, and a voice called to her from outside.

"Anne Halford. The Earl of Downing summons you. Go downstairs. Leave your attendant."

It must have been one of the earl's guards. She heard him walk away without waiting for a response.

Challe looked up and frowned. “What’s going on? Why would he summon you?”

“Well, I don’t know, but…I’ll be back.”

It was the perfect opportunity. If Anne could meet face-to-face with the Earl of Downing, she might be able to explain that Challe wasn’t a danger to the royal family or to any other humans.

She immediately went downstairs.

The combined dining hall and tavern was spacious, with stone walls and a stone floor. Normally, there would have been several sets of tables and chairs set out around the room, but all of them had been pushed to one side. In their place was a comfortable-looking couch and a low table. Three armchairs had also been brought in and set in the center of the space.

The stone room’s interior was beset with penetrating cold, but a fire had been lit in the hearth, giving off a pleasant warmth.

The Earl of Downing was sitting comfortably on the couch, drinking a cup of tea. Soldiers were stationed at the windows and doors, as well as behind the earl himself.

When Anne approached and took a knee, the Earl of Downing smiled and beckoned her forward.

“I’m sorry to call on you when you’re so tired, Halford. Come here and have a seat. I’ll have someone bring you some tea.”

“But it would be rude for me to sit with you…”

“You don’t need to worry about that. We are not in the castle, and this is not an official meeting. Why are you being so modest? I would hardly think you the same girl who raised her voice at His Majesty and myself back at the castle,” he said teasingly.

Anne blushed and lowered her head. “Back then, I acted rudely.”

“It’s fine. Now, have a seat.”

The old retainer gave off the same impression he had when she’d first encountered him, a kind smile visible in his blue eyes. He had white hair and a white mustache. To all appearances, he seemed like a gentle old man.

This was the person who had eradicated the Chamber family, attempted to subjugate the Duke of Alburn, and just tried to have

Challe assassinated. Though Anne knew all this, he didn't look cruel or coldhearted to her.

She did as he asked and sat down in the armchair directly across from him. Immediately, herbal tea was set out for her. Fragrant-smelling steam rose from the cup.

"You've grown a little since the first time I met you. You've become taller and more feminine, Halford."

"Thank you very much. I'm sorry I couldn't give you that piece of sugar candy back then."

"It's fine, it's fine. I acquired a rather splendid sugar candy sculpture for my granddaughter's wedding. She's married off now, but when I look at you, I remember the way she was three or four years ago."

The earl's amicable chitchat left Anne bewildered.

How can he do such cruel things when he's so nice?

"I just adore my granddaughter, you see. After all, I raised her."

"You did, my lord? But what about her mother and father?"

"Well, her mother passed away when she was born. Her father, my son, took command of a company of soldiers during the civil war fifteen years ago, but he died on the battlefield."

"Ah… I'm sorry."

Anne hung her head, ashamed of her thoughtless question and careless prying.

"It's all right. I gather you also lost your father in the war. Just one more thing you share with my granddaughter."

Startled, Anne raised her head again. "How did you know that?"

"When we learned your mother was Emma Halford, the Viscount looked into her past. It sounds like your father was a craftsman who made wagons."

Anne's eyes went wide. This was the first time she'd ever heard such a thing. Emma hadn't told her about her father. She'd always said that doing so would make her sad, so even Anne hardly knew anything about him.

A wagonmaker? Papa?

In that case, there was a chance the shabby old wagon Anne had inherited from Emma was one her father had made. The sugar

candy workspace inside the cargo hold had been built to suit a woman's height, from the dimensions of the workbench to the placement of the shelves. Someone had made it special, just for Emma.

There must have been a reason Emma had treasured that old wagon, repairing it time and again, even as the paint had faded and the wheels had cracked.

"It's unbearable to lose people we love in battle," said the earl.

Anne hung her head low. "Yes… Yes, it is."

"I pity my granddaughter. It's a shame my son died so young, while I live on. I never want to let another civil war break out. We must never again throw the kingdom into such disorder. That's why I can't forgive anyone who would disturb the peace."

The Earl of Downing set his cup down on the table and leaned forward.

"Halford. Listen carefully," he said, lowering his voice. "That fairy you keep with you, the fairy king Challe Fenn Challe—his mere existence threatens the peace of this kingdom."

"That's not true at all." Anne clenched her fists tightly. "Challe won't do any harm to humans. He's not interested in calling himself the fairy king and throwing the kingdom into chaos. I know him. He is kind and honest. He doesn't tell lies. Believe me, please."

"I do believe you, Halford. I believe the fairy king will keep his promise. And that he's not trying to hurt anyone. But his very existence disturbs the order of the kingdom."

"How can that be?!"

"It's just like with the Chamber family and the Alburns. Once people know the fairy king exists, even if he doesn't wish for it himself, the other fairies will clamor to see him crowned. Once that happens, regardless of his own desires, he will become the seed of a growing conflict."

Anne's fingertips grew numb.

She recalled the legend of the fairy king from five hundred years ago. Challe had whispered his story into her ear at the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell. If she remembered correctly, the legend went that even though the fairy and human kings themselves hadn't

desired it, both tribes had wanted a war, and so that was what had happened.

She couldn't say with certainty that the same thing wouldn't happen with Challe.

"You've got to kill him, Halford. Even he won't expect it from you. He'll let his guard down. It's for the sake of the kingdom. We need to eliminate the danger he poses to prevent another civil war like the one that took your father."

It was an outrageous request. Anne was shocked, but she didn't feel any anger. The Earl of Downing was genuinely trying to protect the kingdom. His earnest desire to keep Highland from going to war was stronger than anyone else's.

But while that may be true, there's absolutely no way I can comply.

Anne clasped her hands together on her lap to keep them from trembling with fright.

"I can't do that, my lord. I could never kill Challe just because of a possibility."

"In the worst-case scenario, our kingdom will be thrown into chaos, and many people will die, you know."

"That's just one possibility. I cannot do it. And if it came down to it, before the fairies pushed Challe onto the throne, I would think of some way to stop it. He's suffered through a lot of hardships, but because of that, he is strong and kind. So I'm confident Challe will not become the seed of another rebellion."

"You believe that strongly in the fairy king?"

Anne formed her words deliberately, one by one. "I do, my lord. I believe in him more than anyone else in this world."

The Earl of Downing looked shocked. He stared wide-eyed at Anne's face for a few moments, then shifted his gaze to the area behind her, as if he had suddenly noticed something there.

When she followed the earl's gaze, Anne saw Hugh standing behind her.

"How long have you been there, Mercury?" asked the earl.

"For a little while. I heard about your beliefs, my lord." Hugh walked around Anne's chair and stood in front of her. "Your thoughts

about the fairy king are your own business," he said matter-of-factly. "It is not my place to object. However, I have one request. I would like you to stop trying to get other people to act on your convictions, such as Halford and my bodyguard Salim."

"Are you angry?"

"Yes. Quite angry." Though Hugh was smiling, his eyes were cold. "But I'm sure my anger is of no concern to you. More importantly, I came to hear your thoughts on a crucial matter. My lord, what do you intend to do about the transaction with Reginald Stowe? I find you sitting here leisurely drinking tea, without so much as consulting His Majesty the King. I have to negotiate with Stowe on the matter of the silver sugar fairies. So I'd like to hear your thoughts."

"My conclusion should have been clear the moment we withdrew from that church." Leaning back against the sofa, the Earl of Downing crossed his legs. "We'll attack Stowe and kill the fairy. To ensure their silence, we'll kill Stowe and his cronies, too. I'm sure they'll be there."

"No!" Anne rose to her feet in spite of herself, overturning the teacup set down in front of her.

"Stowe said he doesn't intend to concede," the earl continued. "It will cause problems for us if the fairy dealers go underground. So Stowe will be attacked by an unidentified gang of thieves and die with his fairy. Then the Fairy Merchants Guild can select a new leader."

"And you don't intend to bring this up with His Majesty the King?" Hugh asked, his expression severe.

The earl nodded. "There is no need to bring up something so minor with His Majesty."

The tea Anne had spilled on the table began to drip at her feet.

"You will absolutely be exposed," said Hugh. "And when the fairy dealers learn what you did, they will undoubtedly go underground. There will be no further negotiations."

"I won't let that happen. I will leave no evidence."

"Even without evidence, the fairy dealers will suspect something! My lord! If you continue to bend everything to your will with force,

eventually, it will all come out at once. If that happens, you'll cause the very disturbance you're so keen to stop! Please, reconsider."

"That is how I've always handled those who bare their fangs at the kingdom. And up until now, we've gotten by without any problems. There is no need for you to meddle."

"But they are not baring their fangs at us! They just want to negotiate!"

"Hold your tongue, Mercury!" The Earl of Downing rose to his feet and tossed back his black cloak. "What they are doing is no different! They would throw the kingdom into disorder! I cannot show them mercy! I am the one who protects this kingdom!" he thundered.

Hugh fixed the old retainer with a nasty glare. "Your thoughts won't change, then?"

"You're being tedious. Get out of here, Mercury."

"…Yes, my lord," Hugh answered him quietly, then gave the dumbfounded Anne a push on the back. "You too, Halford. Let's go."

Hugh urged Anne out of the dining hall and into a dark, narrow hallway.

He's serious. The Earl of Downing is going to kill Stowe and the others. What do I do? What do I do…?

Anne was pale. She felt numb all the way down to the tips of her toes. She was still half stunned. Hugh put his hands on her shoulders, peered into her face, and called her name in a low voice.

"Anne. Pull yourself together, Anne."

The sound brought her back to her senses. They were alone in the dark hallway, with only the cold, heavy air precipitating onto the walls.

"…Hugh. The earl is… Mr. Stowe…"

"He means to kill him. So I have a favor to ask of you. Take Challe with you right now and go to the Wolf. Before Downing's men can attack them, tell them to run. The best place to hide would be one of the northern villages, around Balkram. The crown doesn't have many soldiers stationed there. If the necessity arises, work with Challe to protect Stowe."

As he spoke, Hugh pulled a map out of his pocket and pressed it into Anne's hand. It was the same detailed map of the kingdom's northern reaches that Hugh had been holding during their trip to Northern Blow.

"But what if someone finds out I did such a thing?"

"They will find out. And they'll know I instructed you to do it. But you'll be fine. If anything happens, you can just say you were following orders from the Silver Sugar Viscount."

"I'm not worried about me. What will *you* do, Hugh?!"

"If I can put Stowe in my debt, that will go a long way toward the success of our negotiations."

"That doesn't answer my question, does it?! What will *happen* to you?"

"I'm defying my guardian's wishes, so in the worst case, I'll be beheaded. In the best case, I might get to live in the dungeon of the earl's castle."

"That's awful!"

"There are five successors able to replace me as Silver Sugar Viscount. You're all well acquainted with the true power of the silver sugar fairies, and you know we need them. I have no regrets. This is my duty as the Silver Sugar Viscount. If I don't protect Stowe, we won't be able to train any silver sugar fairies. Don't say no, or that you don't want to, or that we need to think of a different way. We don't have time for such things. And I won't let you refuse. I gave you an order, and you will obey. If you are a candy crafter, you will obey me."

Hugh's strong resolve quickened Anne's heart.

"…I will obey, Silver Sugar Viscount," she answered in a trembling voice.

"Good. Go."

Anne broke into a run, as if his whisper had lit a fire under her. She dashed up the stairs two at a time. Before returning to Challe, she knocked on the door to Kat and Keith's room.

"Kat! Kat! Keith!"

"Hey, shrimp. What's all the racket…?"

As soon as Kat opened the door and she saw his face, Anne's eyes overflowed with tears.

Kat seemed startled. "Hey, what's the matter?!"

Keith appeared behind him and asked in a panicked tone, "What happened?"

"The Earl of Downing is going to attack Mr. Stowe and the others. Hugh says we can't let that happen, and he told me to go with Challe and warn them. He will be in a lot of trouble, but he told me to go anyway, so I'm going. Kat, Keith, you have to protect Hugh!"

Even Kat and Keith were just ordinary crafters. She knew there was no way they could defy the Earl of Downing. But they were the only ones she could depend on.

"That dim-witted bastard. Why…?" Kat was stunned.

"Because it's his duty as the Silver Sugar Viscount," said Anne. "If he doesn't protect the other party in the negotiations, we won't be able to train any silver sugar fairies. That's what he said."

Keith nodded, his gaze firm and resolute. "Got it. We'll do whatever we can. I promise."

"Please do."

After making her request, Anne turned and dashed back to her own room.

"Challe!"



Challe spurred his horse onward, holding Anne between his arms.

Anne had come rushing into their room, leaped at Challe's chest, and clung to him. Then she'd pleaded with him to go with her and help Reginald escape. Anne was asking him to make haste in order to help out a fairy dealer—one of the people who had caused him so much misery. The prospect was deeply unpleasant for him.

But it was a request from Anne. And Anne's wishes were for the good of the fairies.

Challe understood that, so he'd taken Anne by the hand and left the room immediately.

Mithril had jumped up in a panic, demanded they take him along this time, and slipped into Challe's breast pocket. Unfortunately, Challe hadn't had time to pluck him back out.

Challe ran his horse up the low hill into the driving wind without stopping, and they quickly arrived at the churchyard. It was bright, illuminated by the afternoon sun, but the wind was as strong as ever.

This location is terrible. They could strike at any time.

Normally, if someone wanted to stage an attack and blame it on bandits, they would come just after sunset. If the Earl of Downing's troops would just wait until dark, they would have plenty of time to get away.

But the area around the church was deserted, and the strong wind could easily erase the sound of screams. There was a good chance their enemy would choose the afternoon to launch their attack so their quarry wouldn't be able to slip away into the night. They couldn't afford to tarry.

As soon as Challe let her down off the horse, Anne made a beeline for the church and threw open the door.

"Mr. Stowe!"

Reginald was perched on the edge of the altar, peering down into Lafalle's coffin. His bodyguards were gathered around him.

Reginald squinted suspiciously at Anne as she came rushing in and at Challe standing behind her.

"What's this? Well, if it isn't the little Silver Sugar Master!"

Anne ran up to the altar.

"The Earl of Downing is planning to attack this place and make it look like the work of robbers," Anne told him impatiently. "They're going to kill Lafalle and you, too. You have to run away, quickly!"

Reginald looked dubious. "You're scheming to do something after you've driven me out."

"We aren't! Your life really is in danger!"

"And why would you tell me such a thing? I don't understand."

"It's not coming from me. These are instructions from the Silver Sugar Viscount! The Viscount needs the fairy dealers' cooperation in order to train silver sugar fairies. He said he has to protect the other

party or there won't be any negotiations! That's why he told me to look after you!" At that point, words failed Anne, and she bit her lip. She looked like she was trying to keep herself from crying.

Challe stepped out in front of her and glared at Reginald. "The Silver Sugar Viscount is acting only for the sake of sugar candy," he said quietly. "The difficulties between your lot and the royal family are a mere annoyance to him. But if you die, he can't negotiate with you. So he told us to save you. If it weren't for that, I would never have run all the way here for a wolf like you."

Challe wondered what he was doing, coming here to rescue a fairy dealer like this. He hated fairy dealers so much, it made him sick. Obviously, he couldn't hide his disgust, and Reginald stared at him, searching his expression.

"The Silver Sugar Viscount would defy his guardian, the Earl of Downing? He must know what will happen to him. I doubt he would do something so stupid."

"All these guys are idiots," Challe spat.

Anne and Hugh were utter fools, both of them. And if it weren't for their foolish wishes, Challe would have liked to satisfy his anger right then and there. But as stupid as they were, everything they were doing was for the sake of the fairies.

"Mr. Stowe, please believe me," Anne pleaded with him. "Run, I'm begging you."

"So the royal family is going to make up some excuse and come capture me or kill me, huh? I expected it would be one or the other. That's why if something happens to me, the Fairy Merchants Guild will disband and go underground. I've already made the arrangements. If they attack me, it will ultimately be the royal family's loss. Understand?"

"This has nothing to do with the royal family!" Anne insisted, her voice getting louder. His refusal to believe her was irritating her. "The Silver Sugar Viscount needs you because he wants to negotiate with you!"

Anne was worried and anxious about Hugh, she was annoyed with Reginald, and she was afraid the Earl of Downing's troops were

closing in on them. Everything was causing chaos in her heart. Her voice was wavering.

"He doesn't like you at all. But he needs you. He needs you to negotiate with him."

"Couldn't he just act like the royal family and take what he needs by force?"

"Surely, you understand there are some things you can't take by force! Isn't that why you're picking a fight with the royal family in the first place?!"

Anne lost her cool and started shouting at him. She was biting her lip and clenching both her fists as her shoulders heaved with every breath. She looked like she wanted to tear the doubt out of Reginald's chest with her hands.

The sound of the wind blowing across the hill made Challe impatient. Reginald's silence was frustrating.

Move, wolf.

As he silently urged the man into action, Challe searched for any presence outside the church. He thought about how he might save Reginald if they were attacked right then and there, his brain automatically forming a plan.

Reginald slowly nodded at Anne. "All right. For now, I'll believe you. I'll get ready to leave."

Reginald signaled his bodyguards with a look, and Anne's shoulders slumped in relief.

"Hurry," said Challe, emphasizing the need for haste. "I wouldn't be surprised if they attacked this place right away."

Then he left the church, pushing Anne along in front of him.

Reginald's wagon was immediately brought out into the front yard of the church. Then Lafalle's coffin, with the lid closed tight, was loaded into the wagon's bed and secured with cords to keep it from falling. Challe stood watch in the yard and kept an eye on the preparations. Anne stood next to him, watching her own wagon.

Just then, Mithril popped his head out from Challe's pocket.

"Hey, that was Gladys, wasn't it? Lafalle Fenn Lafalle?" He looked fearfully at the black coffin in the distance.

"Mithril Lid Pod, what happened? You were so quiet in there."

Mithril made an unpleasant face at Anne's question. "That's because the esteemed Mithril Lid Pod despises seeing the faces of fairy dealers. So I hid myself in here."

"In other words, you were scared," Challe asserted.

Mithril's face turned bright red. "I was not s-s-s-scared! Hmph, not of a guy like that!"

Challe understood Mithril's feelings of disgust and terror very well. Any fairy who had ever been enslaved by a fairy dealer hated and feared them from the bottom of their heart. The horrible memories of the humiliation and abuse they'd endured being treated as merchandise never truly faded.

Challe shifted his gaze back to Lafalle's coffin. The fact that it was being shoved around like a piece of luggage was shameful. He would sooner have killed Lafalle. But for the moment, he had to endure it.

Anne gently brushed Challe's clenched fist with her hand.

"I'm sorry. Thank you, Challe. I'm asking you to do a lot of unpleasant things. But Hugh and I both will work hard to make your hopes into a reality…"

Anne herself was probably at her limit. She was dealing with matters far too heavy for a sixteen-year-old girl. And yet here she was, speaking to Challe from the heart like this. He had decided to suppress his own feelings for the sake of her happiness and had been cold to her for so long. But she hadn't changed one bit.

What am I going to do with her?

He was tired of treating her coldly. Anne's unwavering persistence had defeated him. Challe gently smoothed down her hair, which was being tossed around by the strong wind.

At that point, Reginald came out of the church. Anne watched him toss his bags into his wagon and frowned.

"Mr. Stowe doesn't have his sugar candy. He left it behind. I'm going in to get it."

Anne left her spot in a flash and ran off toward the church.

Mithril watched her go. "Anne is still Anne, after all," he said, exasperated. "All she thinks about is candy. It's the only thing she pays any attention to."

"You're right about that." Challe couldn't suppress a wry smile.

When Anne reemerged, she was holding a sugar candy sculpture of a light-pink fairy. She walked over to the other wagon and approached Reginald, who was still loading his bags.

"Mr. Stowe. Take this with you, please."

"You're really persistent, huh? Fine. Set it over there."

At that, Anne gleefully placed the candy sculpture in a corner of the wagon's bed. She borrowed a piece of thin twine and carefully secured it so it wouldn't break from the vibrations.

Just then, a strong wind blew roughly past them, and the sound of rustling leaves filled the churchyard, as if something was sweeping through the thicket of trees. Reginald covered his eyes with the end of his sleeve to ward off the sand swirling up into the air. Anne held down the fluttering hem of her dress. Mithril ducked his head and dived back into Challe's pocket, and Challe narrowed his eyes and held down his wildly dancing hair.

Eventually, the wind stopped, and everyone's eyes went wide.

There, standing in the center of the churchyard, looking as if he'd been carried in by the gust of wind, was a young man. On his back were two wings. He was a fairy.

He was just a little bit taller than Anne and looked to be around fourteen or fifteen years old. He had whitish-silver hair like the light of the stars and silver eyes. His skin was pure white. He was dressed in an oversize white shirt and black trousers that followed the lines of his body. They didn't seem to be the right size for him. There was a blue shawl wrapped around his shoulders as well. It looked like he had picked up the first set of clothes he'd come across. And yet the outfit seemed somehow refined. He was incredibly, strikingly beautiful.

The young fairy cast a leisurely, sidelong glance at Challe, and a smile crossed his pale-scarlet lips.

He emitted the unyielding strength of a gemstone. And guessing from his coloring, he had probably been born from a diamond.

My brother stone.

Challe felt it instinctively.

Chapter 6
ESCAPE

Challe immediately knew he was right.

This young man was the fairy born from that diamond—Challe and Lafalle's brother stone.

"No one is to interfere," said the young fairy.

He had a clear, ringing voice, like glass beads knocking together. But it was also somehow ethereal and weak. He sounded like someone talking in their sleep.

The young fairy slowly took a step toward the wagon.

Reginald's bodyguards, who had been standing around with blank looks on their faces, finally came back to their senses. Three of them got in front of the wagon, and the other three went around behind the fairy. Reginald, who had been staring quizzically at the newcomer, also seemed to come to a decision, and he issued orders to his guards.

"Two wings, huh? If we catch him, we'll make a pretty penny!"

The bodyguards enthusiastically drew their swords. Anne just stood there in a daze.

"Why are you interfering? I just told you not to, didn't I?"

Looking troubled, the young fairy turned both his palms upward and spread his arms out to the sides. Sparkling beads of light began to coalesce around his right and left hands. The beads condensed in

his palms, forming slim, sparkling shapes. Then those shapes solidified into narrow swords, each about half as long as Challe's.

Gripping one blade in each hand, the young fairy spoke.

"You there. Would you kindly move aside?"

One of the bodyguards slashed at the fairy from behind. He was clearly trying to incapacitate him; he swung his sword downward from overhead, aiming for the fairy's neck.



Abruptly, the young fairy spun away. He continued spinning, two, then three times, pivoting on one foot. The swords in his hands spun like the blades on a pinwheel as they sliced up the bodyguard's torso, sending up a fine mist of blood. The bodyguard staggered back and collapsed.

It'd happened in an instant.

"…He's fast," Challe groaned.

The remaining bodyguards swelled with anger and squared off, ready to attack the young fairy.

This is dangerous. If they provoke him, Anne might get dragged into the fight.

Anne's body stiffened as if she was holding in a scream. Challe leaped out in front of the young fairy, trying to block his view of the wagon.

"You idiots, stay back! Do you think you can win against him?!" he shouted over his shoulder at the bodyguards, startling them.

They seemed to have some experience—enough, Challe hoped, to understand the abilities of this young fairy far exceeded their own.

"I am Challe Fenn Challe."

When he quietly gave his name, the fairy lowered his arms and relaxed his stance. He blinked several times.

"…Somehow, I know you. You're just like Lafalle. A brother of mine?"

"That's right. What's your name?"

"Erril Fenn Erril."

"Why did you come here? Do you want to be captured by fairy dealers?"

"I don't want that. I just wasn't sure what to do. Though Lafalle told me to run away."

"Lafalle?" Challe frowned.

Erril ignored this and continued:

"I don't even know where to run, so I've just been chasing after Lafalle. I've been waiting, thinking he might wake up someday, but… he hasn't. At this point, I thought I might take him somewhere with me as he is."

His tone was vague. He didn't seem to have a clear understanding of the world around him or even of himself yet.

He must be confused.

Perhaps it was a side effect of being born late. Challe continued to reason with him quietly.

"Erril. We cannot hand Lafalle over to you. He has committed serious crimes. You should run away."

Erril shook his head. "No. I'm taking Lafalle with me."

Perhaps thinking his conversation with Challe would make Erril vulnerable, one of the bodyguards started to creep up behind him.

"Back off!"

Challe's shout didn't come in time to keep the guard in check, and the man slashed at Erril. Once again, Erril dodged the blow, and his two blades twirled. The bodyguard just barely avoided them, jumping back and falling unceremoniously onto his backside. Erril moved to mercilessly thrust his blades into the man.

Just then, the furious sound of hooves and of horses' whinnying filled the churchyard.

Erril looked around him, startled, and the bodyguards did the same, their eyes wide.

Six riders on horseback appeared from all directions, surrounding the yard. They wore regular peasant clothing along with black masks. They were made up to look like bandits, but they were all solidly built, and there was nothing knavish about the proper way they rode or the skill with which they handled their horses. They were obviously soldiers disguised as robbers.

Not now!

Challe gritted his teeth.

The six soldiers wordlessly drew their swords in unison.

"Get them!" one ordered, and they all kicked their horses' flanks at once. The six of them surged forward.

The bodyguards turned their swords from Erril toward the horses and charged.

If she didn't get out of the melee, the soldiers and bodyguards might even strike Anne in their excitement.

Challe ran over to the wagon, picked up the paralyzed Anne by her waist, and hurled her into the cargo bed.

"Lie down!" he shouted.

Anne did as she was ordered and lay face down.

"You get in, too!" Challe yelled at Reginald. "I'm not picking you up, though!"

The fairy dealer looked nervous, but he still flashed Challe a grin. Then he leaped up into the driver's seat. Challe climbed in next to him, snatched the reins from Reginald, and struck the horse with the whip. He clutched the reins as the horse neighed and reared up, and they took off.

Challe saw Erril slip away from the melee and nimbly leap up into the branches of a large oak tree. The young fairy was following the wagon with his eyes, but he merely watched them go. Perhaps he knew he couldn't catch up with them.

One of the soldiers chased after Challe and the others on his horse.

Challe kept an eye on him as he guided the wagon. Reginald, riding beside him, pulled a knife out of his breast pocket and readied himself.

"One of 'em's chasin' us!" he shouted.

The soldier was driving his horse at full speed, and he came around the wagon bed up to the side of the driver's bench where Reginald was sitting. The moment he thought he was even with them, he raised his sword. Reginald had readied his knife, but the soldier swept his sword to the side to flick it away. The knife flew through the air, and a spray of blood hit Challe's hand.

Reginald groaned and clasped the side of his stomach.

Challe clicked his tongue and stood up, stepping over Reginald, who was doubled over groaning.

Still holding the reins with his left hand, he spread out his right palm and made his sword appear. The soldier swung down again, but Challe caught the man's weapon with his own and flung it away. On the backswing, he cut deeply into the soldier, slicing him from shoulder to chest.

A line of blood ran down the soldier's torso, and he lost his balance and fell from his horse.

Challe sat back down in the driver's seat and adjusted his grip on the reins. Next to him, Reginald was still doubled over, clutching his side with both hands. Bright-red blood was pouring through the gaps between his fingers. He was seriously wounded.



A short time before the surprise attack on Reginald Stowe began…

Keith had just finished helping Anne, Challe, and Mithril leave the inn in secret, and together with Kat, he headed for the Silver Sugar Viscount's room.

Hugh was with Salim in a spacious corner room on the second floor. He had removed his jacket and loosened his collar, and he was sitting comfortably in a chair, drinking some aromatic herbal tea. He looked so relaxed that, for a moment, they wondered if they had misunderstood something. They had both rushed there in a panic, after all.

"Did Anne leave?" Hugh asked when they came in.

"Yes. She went with Challe. I don't think anyone noticed."

As Keith answered the question, Kat walked wordlessly right past him. He struck a daunting pose in front of Hugh, crossing his arms and looking down at him.

"They'll be found out immediately," he said. "When the soldiers reach the church and see it's deserted, they'll realize somebody tipped those guys off so they could get away. And the only ones who know about the attack are you and Anne."

"Rest assured, I'm arranging it so no harm will befall Anne. I forced her to act against her will, using my authority as the Silver Sugar Viscount."

"And what about you? You're defying your guardian. If things go badly, you could end up in prison."

Hugh chuckled a little and set his cup down on the table beside his chair.

"How naive you are, Kat. The Earl of Downing is more thorough than that. I'll be lucky if prison is all I get. Worst case, my head will roll."

"If you know that, then why are you sitting here leisurely having a cup of tea?!"

"Are you trying to tell me to run away?"

Suddenly, Kat grabbed Hugh by the lapels. "Why'd you go and do something like this?!"

Salim put his hand on the hilt of his sword, but Hugh stopped him with a glance. Then he looked up at Kat. "Take your hands off me, Kat."

"Answer me!"

"Let me go," Hugh ordered. There was a dignity in his voice, and Kat looked infuriated, but he pushed him away and let go.

Hugh fixed his collar. "In order to train silver sugar fairies, we require the cooperation of the fairy dealers. If Stowe is killed now, the fairy merchants will never agree to work with us no matter what we do. Obviously, we can't have that."

"Why are you so hung up on the idea of training silver sugar fairies?" asked Keith, despite himself. "This is about a royal order. The Earl of Downing is the royal family's most trusted adviser. Shouldn't we just do what he says?"

Hugh replied with another question. "When you saw Lulu's techniques with your own eyes, what did you think? Ever since I learned of her existence, I've dreamed of seeing what fairies can do as candy crafters. With their help, we could create a new kind of sugar candy, something humans could never create on their own. I'm sure of it. That's why I want to train them. That was impossible while the techniques remained the secret property of the royal family, but that ban has been lifted. His Majesty the King has made his decree. I don't think we'll ever have another chance like this."

"But if you go against the earl in your position as the Silver Sugar Viscount—"

"I'm doing it *because* I'm the Viscount. Why do you think I accepted this position? I did it for the sake of the candy. What would

I do if I lost my opportunity to transform sugar candy into something even greater?"

"You bastard. Why…?" Kat grumbled haltingly. "When you became the Silver Sugar Viscount, you never said anything about it being for the candy… Not a word… The only thing you ever told me was that it felt great being a noble, but… I was so sure…"

"I didn't?" said Hugh, casually feigning ignorance.

"Never!"

"Well, I think I know what happened. You were so funny yowling and kicking up a fuss that I deliberately kept it from you. That must be it," he said dismissively.

This only made Kat angrier. "You jerk! Back then, you turned down my invitation and accepted the post of Silver Sugar Viscount, right?! Are you tellin' me you were foolin' around even at such a crucial moment?! And let me just say, I've never once, in my whole life, 'yowled' at you or anyone else!"

"You're yowling right now."

"Now yer just messin' with me!"

Hugh stuck his finger in Kat's face, and Kat slapped it to the side as hard as he could.

With a puzzled expression, Keith interrupted their ridiculous argument. "You invited the Viscount to join you in something? You really did that, Mr. Hingley?"

Kat shut his mouth, caught out. Hugh was smirking.

"Doesn't matter what it was for, does it?" Kat said uncomfortably. "I just didn't like the idea of a good crafter lockin' himself into a boring job and not bein' able to use his skills, that's all."

"Whether you liked it or not, this was a position I wanted. I chose to live my life this way and to involve myself with sugar candy as the Silver Sugar Viscount. But I can't do much if my head gets separated from my body," Hugh said jokingly and shrugged. "My replacement will be one of the five crafters who studied with Lulu. I have every faith that one of them will take over for me, but they'll need a mediator to help secure their position. Keith, Kat—and Anne, too, I suppose—you all are my only hope. Especially Kat. You've got more experience than the others. Take over for me. I'm not telling you to

spend your whole life working away at a boring job like I did. Just a few months, a few years at most. That's all I ask of you, for the sake of sugar candy."

"Is being the Silver Sugar Viscount boring?" asked Kat.

"To be honest, it is."

"If you think so, then why'd you choose to do it?"

"My little sister liked sugar candy. That's why." Hugh looked up at the ceiling and stopped talking.

It was the first any of them had heard about him having a little sister. Keith, the son of the former Silver Sugar Viscount, knew all about Hugh's career ever since he'd entered the world of candy crafting. He'd been certain Hugh didn't have any relatives.

That means before he became a crafter, his sister must have…

Hugh was an orphan and had lived on the streets in downtown Westol when he was young. It wasn't unusual for homeless children to pass away. It was a harsh environment, especially for weak girls and small children.

However, Hugh had managed to escape life on the streets. One day, he knocked on the front door of the Mercury Workshop and asked them to take him in as an apprentice. Normally, a workshop would never take on some nameless child without a guarantor. But Hugh had been saved by the deep pockets of the former Mercury Workshop maestro and had become an apprentice there.

After that, he'd rapidly improved his skills as an artisan.

But why had Hugh chosen to be a candy crafter, and later the Silver Sugar Viscount?

"She saw the candy sculptures lined up outside the church on Pure Soul Day and said she wanted one like them. Though in the end, I was never able to buy her one. It made me happy to see her in such high spirits after seeing the beautiful candy. I wanted to make her even happier. That's why I want to create beautiful sugar candy sculptures. It doesn't matter if I'm the one who makes them or not. And so I chose a job that would let me do that."

Kat hung his head and clenched his fists. "Why do ya have to punish yourself like this?"

"It's my decision," Hugh answered with a smile.

We have to protect the Viscount.

Keith felt this intensely. Hugh was a worthy person to be the Silver Sugar Viscount, and if his future ended here, it would be a loss for sugar candy and for candy crafters everywhere. None of the five candidates could measure up to him. At the moment, there was no one who could take his place.

But how can we protect him from the Earl of Downing?!

Keith started to feel hopeless. But then he remembered Anne's face. He knew she would never give up, no matter what happened. He knew what she would say: that there had to be something they could do. Just as he was losing energy, Keith rallied himself.

I'll think of something—some possibility!

All sorts of information was rushing around inside his head. He sorted, rearranged, and connected it. At last, one single possibility occurred to him.

"Viscount. Please, write a letter in your name." Keith looked up, face full of determination, and made this firm request. "I'm sure you must have realized it as well. This is your only chance."

Hugh let out a loud, deep sigh. "It's a gamble. The earl has been serving the kingdom much longer than I have. Considering that…it might be a fool's errand."

"It might be a gamble, but you can never win if you don't play the game," Keith asserted firmly. He held out his hand and made the request again. "Write a letter, please. Let's roll the dice, Viscount. I'll take on the challenge."

Keith had been chosen by Hugh Mercury and bore the weight of his expectations. He wanted to carry this through.

Anne can't do it. Neither can Challe nor Mr. Hingley. But maybe I can. I'm sure they haven't yet forgotten my face. I'm the son of the former Silver Sugar Viscount, who held the position for over twenty years!

Keith had hated being teased for growing up in a noble household, but in that moment, he was glad for it. His status as Keith Powell, son of the former Silver Sugar Viscount, was going to give him an advantage.

"I alone can pass through that gate."

Hugh broke into a smile. “I see. All right, let’s gamble.”

Several hours later, Keith secretly left the inn alone, carrying with him a single letter.



The sun was already beginning to set.

They were driving the wagon as quickly as possible, but even so, Anne was impatient.

North of the old church was a crossroads where the road forked into nine paths.

Three of them took major turns and stretched east, west, and south toward the coasts. The fourth and fifth roads passed through the northern suburbs of Redington and Ribonpool—large cities to the west and east respectively. The remaining four roads spread out like the ribs on a folding fan, leading even farther north into a region known as the Bleak Wastes.

Hugh had suggested Balkram, one of the larger villages in the Bleak Wastes, would be a suitable direction for their flight. Just as he’d said, there was little traffic on the road, and they didn’t encounter any patrolling soldiers.

No one was following them, either. Any pursuers had probably lost them at the crossroads, unable to tell which of the nine paths they had taken.

Reginald’s injury was quite serious. They’d laid him in the wagon bed, and Anne had been pressing down on his wound with both hands the whole time, using whatever fabric they had. But she hadn’t been able to stop the slow bleeding, and Reginald’s complexion kept getting paler. Moreover, his body had begun to shiver and shake.

“Mr. Stowe, are you cold?” she asked.

Reginald bared his teeth, which were chattering loudly, and put on a confident smile. “Where…are we headed? It must be far.”

“Balkram. Do you know it?”

“I do… I lived in Northern Blow…when I was a kid… That’s where I sold her, at the fairy market in Northern Blow…” His mumbling voice

sounded hoarse and delirious.

We've got to get him to a doctor soon.

The large black shadow of the Birseth mountain range stood tall before them. The setting sun was sloping toward the west, and the dark-indigo sky was pressing in on them from the east. The temperature was dropping. It was getting chilly.

If they let Reginald die now, all the risks Hugh was taking would be in vain, and the fairies' hopes for the future would be lost.

"There are lights up ahead."

Challe pointed forward. When Anne stretched up to look, she could see the flickering lights of a village.

"Mr. Stowe! It's Balkram! There will be a doctor there. It's just a little farther."

A bit of life came back into Reginald's eyes.

Challe whipped the horse even harder, urging it on. As they sprinted down the road toward the village, a two-story house with a spacious garden came into view right at the entrance. The garden was enclosed by a stone wall, and the mark of a doctor—a design featuring a medicine vial and a knife—was carved into one of the gateposts. When he saw that, Challe pulled on the reins and slowed the horse down. Steering the animal skillfully, he brought the wagon inside the gate.

As soon as they stopped in the garden, Anne jumped down from the cargo bed and ran up to the front door of the house.

"Excuse me! Hello! We have an injured person! Please open up!"

She knocked forcefully on the door many times, practically clinging to it. But there was no answer, nor any sign of someone moving around inside. Thinking this strange, Anne backed away from the door a little and looked around at the state of the house. She was shocked.

There were no lights burning, nor any sounds. Nobody was home.

And when we finally managed to get here, too!

She felt a chill run from her head down to her knees.

"Is there another village nearby?" Challe called to her from the driver's seat.

In her head, Anne pictured the map she had gotten from Hugh. “I think so. If we go straight north from here, there should be one more village.”

“We’ll go there. Get in.”

Anne did as she was told and got in the wagon, but the chill in her body’s core remained.

There ought to be a doctor in the next village. But no matter how optimistic they were, they knew they wouldn’t arrive until the middle of the night. In his current condition, Reginald wouldn’t last that long.

“Mr. Stowe. It looks like the doctor here isn’t home. There’s another village nearby. We’ll go there.”

Anne kept her emotions out of her voice as best she could, and Reginald groaned out a laugh from between his teeth.

“We won’t make it… We won’t…”

“You’ll be fine.”

“…I won’t make it.” His voice was growing thinner.

“Mr. Stowe!”

Just then—

“You there, what’s going on?”

—they heard a puzzled voice. Looking down from the wagon with a start, they saw a little old man come tottering through the stone gate. His long, white beard stood out in the night.

“This is my house. How dare you barge in like this?”

Anne jumped down from the wagon and ran up to the old man. He looked startled, and his eyes opened wide.

“What’s the matter with you?! Your hands! You’re covered in blood!”

“Please, I beg you! We have an injured person! Hurry, you need to treat him right away, please!”

The doctor instructed them to carry Reginald into the house and immediately began tending to his wound.

He let them pull the wagon into the barn, and they carried their things into the house. They left Lafalle's coffin tied down in the wagon in the barn, but Challe stood watch over it, so there was no need to worry.

Stowe's wound was deep, and he had lost a lot of blood. The doctor stitched up the wound and stopped the bleeding. He told them this first night would be the worst. Reginald had a fever and was drifting in and out of consciousness, so things were touch and go. But the one saving grace was that the cut had not reached any of his internal organs.

Reginald was on the bed in the treatment room. He'd lost consciousness and was sleeping. The room was filled with the smell of disinfectant.

Anne took a seat on a stool near the head of the bed, silently praying.

"Something to drink?"

From behind, someone offered her a fragrant, steaming cup.

The doctor looked at Anne with kind eyes. He resembled one of the saints decorating the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell. Unfortunately, Anne had forgotten that saint's name.

She accepted the cup and took a sip. The steaming tea, which had a dry astringency to it, tasted like it had several drops of some strong alcohol tipped into it. It was very calming. The doctor pulled a stool over and sat down next to Anne, then looked down at Reginald. He was holding a cup of the same tea.

"Who exactly is this man?" he asked. "With a beautiful fairy and a coffin in tow, you lot are terribly suspicious."

"I'd like to tell you, but it's not…something I can talk about yet, I don't think…"

The doctor took a big swig of tea and shifted his gaze to something near the head of the bed.

"Hmm. Well, it doesn't change the fact that someone is hurt. By the way, which of you owns that candy statue of the fairy?"

The sugar candy statue Anne had made was sitting by Reginald's pillow. Anne had placed it there, clinging to the hope that it might help Reginald hang on to life.

"It belongs to him. I made it in the shape of a fairy he knew long ago."

"Was this fairy called Amy or something like that?"

"Huh?"

"A worker fairy I bought about fifteen years ago looked just like that little statue. The face isn't filled in, but otherwise, it's the spitting image of her. How strange."

Anne stared at him blankly.

The doctor went on, gazing at the statue with its light, gentle coloring. "She wasn't much help. She couldn't even cook, and she was bad at cleaning. She was a bit useless, but she was great at one thing: calming kids down. She was a gem whenever I had a crying kid come in as a patient."

Anne recalled Reginald saying the fairy who had betrayed him was a nursemaid. He'd added that she was stupid and useless.

It can't be.



"Silver Sugar Viscount. The Earl of Downing summons you."

Several hours after Keith had sneaked out of the inn, someone called to Hugh through his door.

Hugh stood up, fixed his collar, and quickly checked his appearance in the window glass.

Salim silently approached him and whispered, "Viscount. If you command me to do so, I will get you out of here. I'm confident I can."

Hugh chuckled softly. "If you do something like that, we'll be fugitives for sure. Give up on it. We'll go downstairs, and no matter what happens, you're not to get involved. That's an order."

Hugh started walking toward the door, and Salim followed, prepared for the worst. Kat, who had also been sitting, got up and went to stand next to Hugh.

"What is it, Kat?" asked the Viscount.

"I'm going, too."

"To do what?"

"That oughtta be obvious. I'm gonna watch you suffer."

"Then I shall say this to you as well: Don't get violent. Though I doubt it would amount to much if you did."

"Who's getting violent? I'm just gonna see what happens. Dumbass." Kat stared straight ahead. He sounded angry.

Kat was a good-natured person. He always had been. He hadn't changed since they'd first met. Hugh put on a wry smile and headed for the dining hall on the first floor, accompanied by Kat and Salim.

There were soldiers standing watch near the windows and doors. Several of them had bandages wound around their arms and heads. They were probably the ones who had attacked Reginald. Based on how beaten they looked and the state of their injuries, Hugh deduced that Reginald had probably managed to escape.

The Earl of Downing, who was sitting on the sofa, received Hugh with an expression of irrepressible rage. He was angrily fidgeting with a horse whip held in both hands.

He sure is angry. He can't wait to punish me.

Hugh gestured for Kat and Salim to wait near the door. "No matter what happens," he reminded them, "don't make a move."

Then he stepped forward in front of the Earl of Downing.

"You called for me, my lord?"

"A short while ago, I sent several of my soldiers to that church. Stowe was there, preparing to flee, and what's more, I'm told Halford and Challe Fenn Challe were with him."

"I suppose they were, my lord. And what became of Stowe?"

"He got away."

"Glad to hear it."

The moment Hugh responded, the Earl of Downing stood up.

"So, Mercury, you were the one who dispatched Halford and her fairy and let Stowe escape."

It wasn't something Hugh could hide, so he readily admitted it.

"That's right."

"Why did you do such a thing?!"

"Because I am the Silver Sugar Viscount. If you kill Stowe, we'll never be able to negotiate with the fairy dealers ever again. If that

happens, the plan to train new silver sugar fairies will fall through. I needed to prevent that."

Perhaps because he was so angry, the Earl of Downing's hands trembled as he held the whip. He was probably angrier at Hugh's betrayal than at Reginald's escape. He'd always looked after the Viscount.

"My lord. Using force to make your enemies submit doesn't necessarily help matters. In some cases, the very fact that you had to force obedience can be a source of instability. That's the way the common people's minds work. So once again, I'd like to ask you to reconsider."

"There is no room for reconsideration. Protecting the royal family and preserving the kingdom are my duties. I've always taken them very seriously, and in discharging them, my methods have yet to fail me. I simply cannot capitulate to threats from fairy dealers!"

"It wasn't a threat. The fairy dealers wish to negotiate."

"Their negotiations and their threats both look the same."

"You're wrong."

"They are the same, I said! I simply cannot see things your way."

At the earl's unwavering words, Hugh let out a deep sigh.

"It seems you truly can't."

"Where was Stowe headed?"

"Well now, I'm not sure."

"Answer me, Mercury!"

The whip bent through the air and cracked against Hugh's shoulder. Salim started to move, but Kat grabbed his arm. Hugh's shoulder stung with pain where the whip had struck.

"There is no way I can tell you something that I don't know."

"You would still defy me, your guardian?"

"I never wanted to defy you. I respect you. However, I am the Silver Sugar Viscount. In order to fulfill my own duties, I had no choice."

The Earl of Downing let out a low growl, like he was trying to restrain his anger. He signaled with his eyes to the soldiers waiting in the background.

"Arrest this man. I'll get an answer from you yet, Mercury."

"Wait!"

Just as a soldier was about to put his hand on Hugh's shoulder, Kat raised his voice. Salim looked at him dubiously. But Kat's eyes were fixed on the earl as he took up a position next to Hugh.

"This man is the Silver Sugar Viscount. You've gotta treat him as befits his station, don't you? I reckon it should be up to His Majesty the King to decide what happens to him."

Hugh looked up at Kat in surprise. Kat was standing face-to-face with the Earl of Downing, interposing himself between the earl and Hugh.

"And you are?" asked the earl. "I've seen you before. Are you a candy crafter?"

"Alph Hingley."

"Hingley. In our society, if a man defies his guardian, that guardian can punish the offense."

"But I doubt you can strip him of his standing. The title of Silver Sugar Viscount is granted by His Majesty, after all. So as long as he hasn't had his title revoked, you need to treat him like a viscount, don't you?"

"I just remembered. You're…"

The Earl of Downing narrowed his eyes as if he was sifting through distant memories.

The earl may not have known Kat personally, but when Hugh was selected as the Silver Sugar Viscount, Kat's name would have come up as a candidate for the post. Hugh had heard as much from the earl after he'd received his appointment.

Kat had been a candidate for Silver Sugar Viscount along with Hugh, but because of his difficult personality, he had been quickly removed from consideration. However, since he had been raised as a possibility, the Earl of Downing must have been familiar with Kat's face, as well as his work and his abilities.

"This guy is still the Silver Sugar Viscount," Kat said again.

The Earl of Downing nodded gravely at Kat's words. "I see. Hingley, what you say is correct. Very well."

As he spoke, the Earl of Downing sent the whip flying again. It struck Hugh across the face. After the intense shock, a line of blood

ran down Hugh's cheek. His face contorted in pain.

"I will treat him like a viscount. I won't bind him. However, I will enact punishment. Given my station, it is within my rights to mete out discipline to any viscount who defies me."

The whip bent through the air; this time, it struck the opposite cheek, and a fresh line of blood ran down Hugh's face.

Kat nodded blandly. "The Silver Sugar Viscount is prepared. Go ahead."

Even as he gritted his teeth against the next blow, which fell across his shoulder, Hugh smiled on the inside.

"Go ahead," huh? You're such a jerk, Kat.



"This is spooky… Super-duper spooky. Terrifically spooky. What should we do, Challe Fenn Challe?"

"How should I know?" Challe spat. He was getting fed up with his companion.

Three days had passed since they had rolled into the doctor's house in Balkram.

No pursuers had come for them yet. They had probably dispersed at the nine-path intersection and were still unable to determine which way Challe and the others had gone. But sooner or later, they would find them. He needed to work out a plan before then.

Reginald had awoken on the second night of their stay. Then one day ago, Anne had reported that he had finally eaten a little bit of porridge. She had been nursing him diligently.

In the meantime, Challe and Mithril were staying in the barn with the wagon.

Challe was there to protect Lafalle's coffin. Mithril stayed with Challe in the barn because he loathed being in the same house as a fairy dealer.

Mithril seemed to find the presence of Lafalle's coffin unnerving, though, and wouldn't come out of Challe's pocket. And despite his gloomy mood, he nevertheless kept rattling on and on about how

scary it was. Challe had wanted to smother him countless times already.

Lying on top of a large pile of hay, Challe looked up at the high ceiling of the barn.

Light spilled in through the gaps in the boards overhead—the radiant light of spring. Even the way the dust danced in its glow was beautiful. The black coffin, too, was made less intimidating by the light. It still sat in the same spot in the wagon's bed.

The only thing Challe could think about was the fairy they'd encountered four days earlier—the one who had come from his brother stone, Erril Fenn Erril.

He was probably searching for Lafalle and would eventually come to find them. He was considerably skilled. If he and Challe fought one-on-one, neither of them would come out unscathed.

It sounded like Erril adored Lafalle and was trying to wake him, but that was far too dangerous. If Erril came looking for Lafalle, Challe would have to fight him.

Do I really have to fight Erril?

It was an ironic fate for two brother stones. As for Challe, while he had taken Lafalle's coffin and Reginald and escaped, he was still considering what to do next.

First, they needed to contact the Fairy Merchants Guild and hand Reginald over to their leaders so they could keep him somewhere safe. Then they'd go back to Northern Blow. If they didn't, Anne's position would likely be in jeopardy.

Hugh had defied the Earl of Downing. He'd done so knowing he might be arrested, stripped of his rights, and imprisoned. But Challe was hoping the same wouldn't happen to Anne. Anne was innocent; she'd simply followed an order from the Silver Sugar Viscount. At least, that was probably what Hugh was thinking.

Challe needed to get Anne back to Northern Blow as quickly as possible so Hugh's courage and his consideration for her didn't go to waste.

But I'm not sure that scarecrow brain will go along with things the way the Viscount hopes…

That was the issue. He knew Anne wouldn't be happy foisting all the responsibility onto Hugh and walking away scot-free by herself.

In the spare moments between nursing Reginald, Anne brought Challe and Mithril food and tea. Though she'd seemed happy when Reginald first woke up, on the following day, her expression had become somber. Now that Reginald was out of immediate danger, she couldn't stop herself from worrying about Hugh.



Reginald ate his breakfast sitting up, leaning back against the bed's headboard. After he finished his sweet porridge and fruit, Anne took the tray from his hands.

"Was it good?" she asked.

"It's fine; it's edible. I didn't exactly have high hopes for the cooking of an old country doctor."

The village doctor at Balkram was a kind man, and he had agreed to let Anne and the others stay even though he didn't know anything about them. No matter how suspicious they were, he'd said, he couldn't turn an injured person away.

"…Um, actually, I made that," Anne admitted.

"Well, I didn't have high hopes for some teenager's cooking, either."

"Sorry for being a teenager."

Anne sulked, but she was relieved to see the lupine strength in Reginald's voice and expressions steadily returning.

Alongside that feeling of relief, Anne was increasingly worried about Hugh's safety. That fear had been smoldering in one corner of her heart all this time, and now it was growing stronger. She wondered what was happening to him now that he had helped Reginald escape.

Hugh had been prepared to accept all the responsibility himself.

Anne didn't know what she could do with no power or authority of her own. But she felt she had to return to Northern Blow, scope out the situation, and find some way to help. She wanted to save him.

I can't afford to dawdle.

The more time passed, the more precarious Hugh's situation became, and the more danger he was in.

"Mr. Stowe. Let's tell the leaders of the Fairy Merchants Guild that you're here. It would be better for you to move to a safe location together with your guild mates. I'm sure if we ask at the village post office, they'll send a letter for us."

Reginald cast a sharp glance at Anne with his gray eyes.

"And then? What will you do afterward?"

"I will go back to Northern Blow to help the Silver Sugar Viscount."

"What can you do?"

"Probably nothing. But the Viscount is the guardian of us candy crafters and of sugar candy. Right now, Hugh is the only person suited for the job. So…I'm going to do my best."

Reginald held his tongue and thought. With a grim expression, he turned to look out the window beside the bed.

"There's a pen and paper on the side table," said Anne. "Go ahead and write a letter to the Fairy Merchants Guild. I'll take it to the village post office today. Then I'll return to Northern Blow."

She stood up with the tray in her hands, then headed to the kitchen to clean up the dishes.

She was planning to go back to Northern Blow, but she couldn't take Challe with her. His life was still under threat from the Earl of Downing, so she wanted him to go someplace safe.

She couldn't depend on Challe, who had been her protector ever since their first meeting. The thought made her anxious and scared, like she was stepping barefoot into a thicket of briars.

But Anne had to go. There was no way she could abandon Hugh.

She headed for the barn. Quietly sliding open the door, she peeked inside.

At one end was the wagon with the coffin in it. At the other, hay was piled up against the wall with Challe stretched out on top of it. When he saw Anne's face, he sat up. Bits of hay fluttered off his hair and shoulders, glowing beautifully in the light.

Anne climbed up the mountain of hay and sat down in front of Challe. Just then, Mithril popped his head out from Challe's breast pocket.

"Hey, Anne!"

The sight was heartwarming. The two fairies had grown so close.

"You look like a parent and child," she said.

Challe and Mithril both seemed disgusted. Even as he remained smartly settled inside Challe's pocket, Mithril clamored, "I don't want a guy like this for my child!"

"Why would *I* be *your* child?" asked Challe incredulously.

"Isn't it obvious?! Because you're the childish one… *Tch!* "

Before Mithril had even finished speaking, Challe had plucked him out of his pocket and tossed him down off the mountain of hay. Mithril let out a shout and tumbled down the pile, getting covered in hay as he went, his eyes spinning wildly.

"Challe! How could you do that?!"

Anne went back down the pile of hay briefly and picked Mithril up. Then she climbed back to Challe and gently laid the dizzy Mithril down on top of the hay.

"I wonder if he's all right… Oh, Challe, aren't you supposed to go easy on him?"

"I *was* going easy on him. He's just dizzy. If I were serious, I would have crushed him to death. Anyway, what is it?"

"Oh, right."

Anne looked around the barn aimlessly. She didn't know how to broach the subject. Then her eyes fell on Lafalle's coffin, and she remembered that other fairy—the one who had said he would take Lafalle with him. He had called himself Erril Fenn Erril.

"That boy, Erril Fenn Erril—he's one of your brothers, isn't he?"

Challe's expression turned melancholy. "He is."

"It seemed like he was trying to wake Lafalle up. Do you think he'll come here?"

"He probably will. If he does and tries to wake Lafalle…I'm going to fight him."

Anne felt like a cruel fate had been set aside specifically for Challe. He would have to fight his brother fairy, the one person who probably understood him better than anyone else.

Anne didn't want to see Challe and Erril fight. As she'd thought, it would be best to leave as soon as possible.

"So listen. About Mr. Stowe. I thought we could contact the Fairy Merchants Guild and tell them he's here so they can come get him."

"That's a reasonable idea."

"And then I'll head back to Northern Blow as early as today." Anne was relieved she'd been able to say it smoothly and calmly.

"Why?"

"I'm worried about what's happened to Hugh… I just want to see what's going on."

"You just want to see? There's a good chance the Earl of Downing has arrested him. If Downing finds you, are you going to tell him you were only following orders from the Silver Sugar Viscount?"

"Well, I was…planning to." Anne faltered for a moment, then looked up with determination. "That's why I'm leaving today. I'll rent a wagon from the shop in the village. You and Mithril Lid Pod can stay here. Once I've checked things out, I'll come right back," Anne said with a smile.

Challe sighed. "Liar. There's no way you'll let Hugh take all the blame. You're planning to go back to help him despite the danger, aren't you? That's why you want to leave me and Mithril Lid Pod behind."

"I won't. It's fine. Once I see how things are going, I'll come right back…"

Anne tried to hurry down the mountain of hay, but Challe grabbed her right wrist.

"I won't let you go. If you go, I'm going, too."

"But, Challe, it's dangerous…," she began before quickly stopping.

"There, you confessed. Let me remind you, since you seem to have forgotten. I vowed to protect you, and that is what I will do. If you forget again, I'll say it over and over, every time."

He squeezed Anne's wrist with his long, shapely fingers. His obsidian-black eyes stared directly into hers. Everything about him was so beautiful and lovely, she could hardly stand it. He was so kind.

That was what made things so hard to understand.

"Challe, you're so kind… But I can't tell what you're thinking. I said you and Mithril Lid Pod were like family to me, then you rejected me

by saying you couldn't understand what that meant. You also seem irritated with me because I can't reciprocate Keith's feelings, but then why do you say such nice things, like that you're going to protect me? I don't get it."

When she said that, Challe's gaze wavered. He looked bewildered.

"I swore to protect you. So I want you to choose a path that will make you truly happy. That's all. You're going to Northern Blow, even if I tell you not to. You'll be miserable if you don't, so you will, and I understand that. If that is one of the paths you believe will lead you toward happiness, then I will go with you."

As Challe spoke, he grabbed Anne's left wrist as well. Now both of her hands were restrained, as if she were in chains.

"I won't let you go alone."

His voice was a detached whisper, as though he was suppressing all his feelings. But for some reason, his sighs seemed sweet.

That was when it happened.

From the direction of the garden, they heard the disorderly pounding of several sets of hooves and the high-pitched neighing of horses.

"Who the hell are you people?!" shouted the old doctor, who had been feeding chickens in the garden.

A man's voice replied, "Is Reginald Stowe here?!"

Anne and Challe both gasped.

Did they find us already?!

The two of them rushed out of the barn. Anne gasped at the scene in the garden, and a chill shock of fear ran through her whole body.

Six riders on horseback had come galloping into the garden, kicking up a cloud of dust. Following them, more and more waves of horses came surging through the gate.

"Challe! If we don't get Mr. Stowe out of here—!"

Challe scowled. "Impossible. They've gone around behind the building, too."

The Earl of Downing must have sent for more troops.

Some of the soldiers on horseback had the earl's crest sewn onto their shoulders, but there were other soldiers mixed in who had the

provincial flag of Gillum sewn onto theirs. The Earl of Downing must have sought support from the Earl of Tasso and dispatched their combined troops in all directions. Anne figured someone had told them about her party arriving at Balkram.

As the horses came thundering into the sunny garden, the chickens scattered in a panic of fluttering wings.

Anne grabbed the doctor by the hand. He was completely taken aback. She pulled him out of the chaos and into a safe spot under the eaves of the house.

"I'm so sorry! They followed us here!"

"But you—"

"We'll do our best not to cause you any trouble," she promised, and then she pushed him into the house.

Following the horses, two carriages were brought up alongside the gate. One of them was painted with the Earl of Downing's crest, and the other carriage was Hugh's—the one Anne and the others had ridden to Northern Blow.

Hugh?

The Earl of Downing alighted from his carriage, his black cloak fluttering. Anne glanced at the other vehicle. The carriage door opened.

"Hugh!"

Reflexively, Anne clapped both hands over her mouth.

Hugh got down out of the carriage, supported by Salim. He wasn't wearing a jacket, and the collar of his shirt was open. From his cheeks, down his neck, and onto his chest, she could see a lattice of welts crisscrossed with rivulets of fresh blood. His expression was composed, but his leg must have been injured, because he didn't seem able to walk without leaning on Salim's shoulder.

Kat followed Hugh out of the carriage. He looked angry.

Keith isn't here.

Anne noticed his absence, but she didn't have time to wonder where he had gone.

The Earl of Downing walked between the mounted soldiers, straight toward the house.

Anne put herself on guard, and Challe stood behind her.

"Anne Halford. Is Reginald Stowe here?"

She could hear the pounding of hooves from all directions. Now that they were surrounded, it seemed impossible to get Reginald out. There was nowhere to run.

We must stop the Earl of Downing right here.

Her whole body was frozen from fear and nerves, while her chest alone began to burn with strong emotion. There would be no more escape. And yet they couldn't withdraw a single step. The only choice was a showdown.

"Yes. He is. He's here." She nodded, full of determination.

"Stowe demanded that we buy the fugitive fairy," said Downing. "We took time to consider his conditions for negotiation. In the interim, Stowe promised he would not move from the church. However, he did in fact travel, without permission. We are forced to regard this as an abandonment of negotiations on the part of the fairy dealers. If the fairy dealers have no intention of negotiating, then we are left with no choice. We cannot leave the dangerous fairy as it is. For the safety of the people, we will use all necessary force to take the fairy. This is nonnegotiable. Without accepting any blame, we take this unavoidable measure for the sake of the people's safety."

Challe scoffed. "Is that the story you've decided to tell?"

Unable to restrain herself, Anne raised her voice. "Mr. Stowe ran away because he was attacked by your troops!"

"Can you prove that?" the earl said flatly. "Moreover, Halford, you conspired with the Silver Sugar Viscount to obstruct negotiations between the royal family and the fairy dealers, did you not? What were you hoping to accomplish by getting Stowe worked up and inciting him to abandon the negotiations? What you did was treason against the royal family."

Treason. What a dreadful crime he was trying to pin on her.

The Earl of Downing had concocted an excuse to forcefully seize Lafalle's coffin from Reginald, and he was trying to pin the whole thing on the Silver Sugar Viscount.

The way things were going, Reginald would probably be executed right after he handed over Lafalle's coffin. It would be inconvenient

for the Earl of Downing if he lived.

Reginald would be dead, and Anne and Hugh would be imprisoned or executed. Then the earl would muddy the waters and hide the truth by telling the Fairy Merchants Guild that Reginald had died as part of the Silver Sugar Viscount's scheme.

"After putting an end to the fairy, I will report to His Majesty the King. I will get His Majesty to officially strip the Viscount of his rank and mete out punishment. I'll arrest you, too, Halford."

"Halford was only following my orders."

Hugh pushed Salim's hands away and stepped forward, dragging one leg. He stood in between Anne and the earl.

"I ordered her to do it against her will. There is no way a lone candy crafter could have defied my orders."

"Hugh!"

"Shut up!" Hugh shouted at her over his shoulder, and Anne held her tongue. "All the blame lies with me."

Anne felt so guilty and frustrated that she began to cry. "Hugh, I'm sorry. If only we'd been able to run farther…"

If only the soldiers hadn't found this place, at least they could have rescued Reginald. Then there would still be hope of getting the Fairy Merchants Guild to cooperate. Hugh's plan and his sacrifice would not have been for nothing.

But if Reginald died here, no matter how hard the royal family and the Earl of Downing tried to put up a good front, the guild would be suspicious. They would never again be willing to deal with the royal family.

Without turning around, Hugh whispered in a voice only Anne could hear, "I heard about Stowe's injury. This was as far as you could flee. You did well."

Anne shook her head vigorously. She didn't feel worthy of praise like that. She was deeply frustrated she hadn't produced the results they needed.

"Royal authority is a nasty thing, huh?"

They heard a low, mellow voice coming from the front door of the house. At some point, Reginald Stowe had come out, and now he was leaning against the doorframe and holding his side, his lips

curled into a smile. The injured wolf was staring at the Earl of Downing. Despite his condition, his eyes still had an aggressive, lupine glint to them.

"Reginald Stowe," said the earl. "You abandoned our negotiations. For the safety of the people, we have no choice but to confiscate the fairy's coffin from you."

"I don't intend to give it up. If you're gonna take it, you'll have to kill me first." With his dark-gray eyes, Reginald stared intently at the Earl of Downing. "The royal family robbed me of everything I had. I was a child back then, so all I could do was watch it happen with my thumb in my mouth. But now I'm a businessman. I can't hand over merchandise without compensation. If you want to steal something from me without paying for it, you'll have to kill me. Like a thief would. And I'm sure you know what the Fairy Merchants Guild will do as a result."

"I don't need to kill you. We will not kill anyone, in fact. It's the possibility of another bandit attack that should concern you."

"You'll make enemies of the Fairy Merchants Guild."

"We aren't going to kill anyone. And there will be no evidence to lead the Fairy Merchants Guild to suspect the royal family, should you die."

The Earl of Downing's words and expression were as cold as ice. He didn't even seem like the same person as the old man who had told Anne about his adorable granddaughter.

Anne knew two souls could not dwell in a single body. So how was it possible for the earl to have two sides that were so different? There had to be something at his core that fueled both his love for his granddaughter and his drive to ruthlessly eliminate his opponents.

"This kingdom is finished," Challe said quietly.

As he moved slowly forward to stand in front of Anne, he opened his right hand slightly. Glittering beads of silver light began to gather in his palm.

The Earl of Downing frowned at Challe's words. He could not overlook them. Keeping Anne behind him so he could protect her, Challe walked around Hugh and confronted the earl.

"What did you say, fairy?" asked Downing.

"A kingdom that can't even negotiate with its people over honest grievances is doomed to perish. And it's foolish to follow the laws of a kingdom that will, in time, fall to ruin… Salim."

Still staring directly at the Earl of Downing, Challe called Salim's name.

"You protect the people you need to protect," Challe said. "And I will do the same."

Hugh saw Salim's startled expression and shouted frantically, "Salim! Don't listen to him!"

Salim bit his lip and shook his head forcefully. He stood in front of Hugh and placed his hand on the hilt of his sword.

"Viscount, I beg your pardon. But I *will* protect you."

Challe had his sword in hand, too.

"Challe! Wait! Not yet—wait!" Anne ran over and clung to Challe's arm.

"We can't change this man's thinking," he said. "If he does things like this, the kingdom will fall to ruin. That part, I don't mind. Why should I care? Let Highland perish. But I will not let him harm you."

The Earl of Downing promptly leaped aside, and his soldiers drew their swords. The bright spring sunshine reflected off countless blades.

"Earl of Downing!" Anne shouted as loudly as she could. "Strength alone won't get us the results we need! I'm begging you! Please!"

"I will protect the royal family and preserve the kingdom!"

Anne was startled by the earl's answer.

This man is also protecting something!

It was precisely because he loved his granddaughter that he wanted to preserve the kingdom's stability. And to do that, he was willing to be ruthless.

Anne pulled away from Challe, stepped out in front of him, and spread both her arms.

"I won't let you through! None of you!"

The soldiers looked at Anne in confusion. Even they would probably feel ashamed to trample an unarmed young woman with their horses. All Anne could do was make herself into an obstacle.

"Halford, move. You'll be crushed!" the Earl of Downing shouted angrily, and Anne shouted right back.

"Go ahead and do it, then!"

"Why must you go to such lengths?!"

"For the sake of the kingdom and the future of sugar candy!"

The Earl of Downing made a pained expression. "I don't understand you!"

"If you don't understand, then believe! My lord! No one here wants any conflict!"

The earl frowned intently as she shouted. But when he replied, his voice was tired. "Halford…I also don't want there to be any upheaval. That's why I can't let this alone!"

Abruptly, his expression changed. His eyes turned cold, and he raised his right hand high in the air.

Just as he did, the soldiers standing near the gate shouted and began to scatter.

Startled, the earl turned around to look. Anne's eyes went wide. A one-horse wagon was plowing into the garden, heedless of all the people filling the small yard.

Horses and soldiers alike fled its path. Challe picked a stunned Anne up in his arms like a baby and jumped out of the way.

Anne stared in surprise at the young man gripping the reins of the intruding wagon.

"Keith?!"

The wagon's driver was indeed Keith. He pulled on the reins and brought the wagon to a sudden stop right in the center of the garden, sending up a cloud of dust.

Then he got up on the driver's platform and raised his voice.

"This is an order from His Majesty the King! Everyone is to withdraw!"

Chapter 7

AN AGED LION AND INVITED HAPPINESS

Keith must have sensed that the Earl of Downing was about to take a step forward, for he shouted again.

"Withdraw now! This is a royal order! Withdraw, please!"

Keith was dripping with sweat, probably because he had been manning the reins the whole ride, urging his horse along. With heaving breaths, he pulled out a rolled piece of parchment from inside his jacket and quickly unfurled it. The parchment bore a large signature from the king, as well as the sovereign's seal.

"The chancellor, the Duke of Collette, and the treasury minister, the Count of Bygott, have both approved the negotiations with the Fairy Merchants Guild! Reginald Stowe, representative for the guild, is to appear for an audience at the royal castle along with the coffin, by order of His Majesty the King!"

Keith held the parchment up high to show off the royal seal.

Approved?

Anne stood there in the middle of the garden, in front of a row of soldiers, stunned as she listened to Keith's words.

The Earl of Downing pushed his way through the soldiers and hurried over to the driver's platform where Keith was standing.

"What is the meaning of this, Powell?!"

As he tried to steady his ragged breathing, Keith answered, "Regarding the matter of the fairy in the Fairy Merchants Guild's

possession and their terms of exchange…the Silver Sugar Viscount wrote directly to His Majesty to ask for instructions… I delivered that letter to the king…and this is his response."

The Earl of Downing snatched the parchment from Keith's hands and took a long, hard look at it. His face went pale.

"His Majesty…wrote something like this despite knowing of my decision?"

Dragging his injured leg, Hugh walked over to stand beside the Earl of Downing.

"He knows. I took the liberty of writing a letter informing him of your course of action and that you were already moving to execute it."

"Telling him you disapproved of my decision. Is that it?"

"I merely wrote that the Earl of Downing has his own ideas about the limits of his authority."

Keith seemed to have finally steadied his breathing. Next, he pulled a sealed letter out from inside his jacket. When he spoke again, his expression was severe.

"This is for you, my lord. It was entrusted to me."

The Earl of Downing accepted the letter and smiled bitterly at Hugh.

"The limits of my own authority, hmm…? Implying that I myself might turn traitor if His Majesty's will differed from my own. Mercury, you bastard… You've ruined me."

"If His Majesty's will was in accordance with yours, then I would be the one branded a traitor. Things would have turned out exactly as you'd scripted them. This was a gamble for me, too." Hugh's tone was sympathetic.

Finally, Anne grasped the situation.

Keith must have taken Hugh's letter to Lewiston. Even if he was carrying a letter from the Silver Sugar Viscount, it was no easy task for a mere candy crafter to pass through the gates into the royal castle. But Keith was the son of the former Silver Sugar Viscount, Edward Powell. It had been only two years since the former Viscount's passing. Keith's face was known around the castle, and if he'd shown up bearing a letter from the Silver Sugar Viscount, it

would have been possible for him to get an audience with the king on short notice.

Keith had then given the letter to His Majesty, King Edmond II, and informed him of the Earl of Downing's actions.

"His Majesty… But why?"

The old retainer sounded exhausted, and Hugh answered him quietly.

"He must have thought it over himself."

The Earl of Downing was a senior statesman who had backed the current king's ascension and commanded the same respect as a member of the royal family. Hugh, on the other hand, hadn't even been Silver Sugar Viscount for two whole years. The Earl of Downing clearly had much more influence over the king.

Hugh was not in a good position to question the earl's judgment. There had been a good chance Edmond II would accept the earl's way of handling things and strictly punish Hugh for his insubordination. That must have been why Hugh had called it a gamble.

But His Majesty didn't choose the easy path.

Anne recalled the king's face and his kind blue eyes.

If he had wanted to shirk his responsibility and leave the thinking up to others, he could have easily accepted the Earl of Downing's decisions out of hand. But Edmond II must have considered the issue for himself. He'd thought it over and drawn his own conclusion.

He had judged the Earl of Downing's decision to be wrong.

Thank you so much.

Anne wanted to kneel before the king in respect, but he was far off in Lewiston at the moment.

"His Majesty…" As he spoke, the Earl of Downing gave a tired smile. "Well then…I'm sure His Majesty will have some choice words for me, traitor that I am."

He opened the envelope and looked down at the letter. His hands trembled. The earl stood fixed to the spot, staring at the paper in his hands. Then he squeezed his eyes tightly shut for a moment, and his shoulders drooped with exhaustion.

The letter fell from his grasp. The wind picked it up, and the paper danced lightly through the air, landing at Anne's feet.

When she looked down, she saw that she could read it. It had been written in an elegant, flowing hand.

Downing. I am sorry for causing you such ceaseless worry. It seems that on this occasion, too, you made your decision with great care and difficulty. You have looked after me since I was a young child. And I'm sure that in this case, as always, you acted in order to protect myself and the kingdom. But I am king, and I am no longer a child. I am the one who must make these decisions; I mustn't burden you with such responsibilities. I'd like you to leave this matter in my hands. I am grateful for all your hard work.

That was it. Words of gratitude and resolve.

The garden was quiet, as if the earlier mayhem had been some kind of mistake.

Two white butterflies frolicked, flying all around the soldiers.

The Earl of Downing didn't move. For some reason, Anne thought he seemed almost pitiful.

She picked up the letter at her feet and walked over to the earl.

"These are His Majesty's feelings. It would be terrible if they got lost."

She held the letter out, and the Earl of Downing slowly raised his head and took it. Then he looked back and forth between Anne and Hugh and put on a sarcastic smile.

"His Majesty states he is no longer a child. In that case, I suppose I've grown old… His Majesty is of the same mind as you all. I do not understand it."

"It's not because you've gotten old. It's because you know fear," Anne said. "My lord, you were an adult at the time of the civil war, and you had responsibilities then. You went to the battlefield. You personally fought and suffered. It's only natural you fear that outcome more intensely than we do. It's just that we don't feel as much fear, so we have more paths to choose from."

It was understandable that a person who had lost his beloved son on the battlefield, as well as so many of his fellows, would never want to experience that again. Anne was certain the Earl of Downing

was truly a compassionate person and that was why he was so terribly afraid of the possibility of another war.

"You all are unafraid. I'd forgotten that the young know no fear. I'd forgotten, too, how that can help us forge new paths. And that means I am old. Don't you agree, Mercury?"

Hearing his name called, Hugh answered with his usual generous smile. "Perhaps…"

"I won't apologize. I followed my convictions. But…heal up quickly. It will be some time before a new guardian for the Silver Sugar Viscount can be chosen. Until then, you must recover your health."

"Did you say a new guardian for the Silver Sugar Viscount, my lord?"

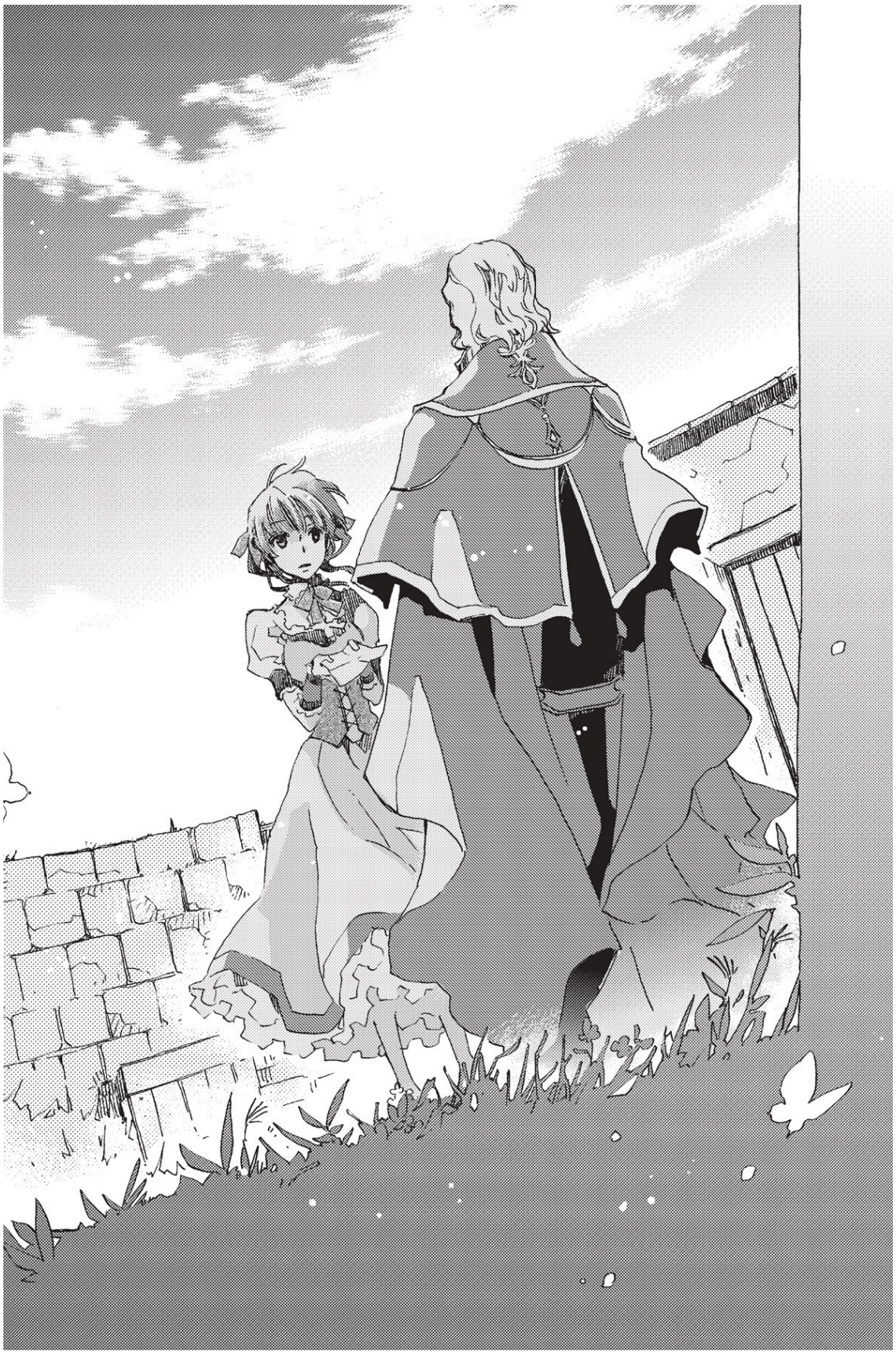
"Surely, someone too old to align with His Majesty's spirit can no longer serve as his right hand. I will suggest to His Majesty that it is time I retire."

"But that means—"

"That is my way of taking responsibility," the earl asserted. "This is my last order as your guardian. Silver Sugar Viscount, in accordance with His Majesty's wishes, present Reginald Stowe, the leader of the Fairy Merchants Guild, at the royal castle. Make sure that you take the fairy's coffin with you. Then follow the orders given by His Majesty and continue the work of training silver sugar fairies. That is all. I will withdraw."

The Earl of Downing turned on his heel and raised his voice toward the soldiers. "Withdraw! The soldiers of the Earl of Tasso are to return to the prefectural castle. My troops are to return to Westol!"

At the earl's orders, the soldiers all wheeled their horses about. The door to the earl's carriage opened to usher him in. Without thinking, Anne called out after him as he walked away.



"My lord!"

The old retainer turned around, and Anne said to him, "I wasn't able to provide you with a candy sculpture for your granddaughter's wedding. So I will make a piece of sugar candy for you."

One thought spontaneously overflowed from her chest: *I want to bring people joy.*

The Earl of Downing had been left deeply hurt and fearful after fighting in the kingdom's civil war. Afterward, because he wanted to protect that hard-won peace, he saw danger lurking everywhere and was always ready to fight it, even now. He tried to eliminate people who made him nervous, like Challe and Reginald.

Fifteen years had passed since the civil war ended, but those shades of sorrow were probably still wrapped tightly around the earl's heart.

And in that case, Anne wanted to invite happiness into that heart full of sorrow. If the earl was going to retreat from the center stage of politics, she wanted to offer a prayer that, after he stepped down, he could finally find some peace.

The Earl of Downing smiled at her, looking somehow relieved.

"I'll take you up on that, Halford. Make a beautiful sugar candy sculpture for me."

Anne nodded deliberately, then offered him a curtsy.

"Yes. I shall make one for you, my lord, the man who protected our kingdom for so long."

The old retainer walked away with powerful steps. He was a guardian who had continued protecting his kingdom even into old age.

Hugh's injuries were less serious than they looked. In the old doctor's opinion, the surface wounds would heal perfectly in about two weeks. The most worrisome injury seemed to be the sprain to his right ankle, but even that would apparently recover completely within a month, without any lingering effects.

After the Earl of Downing withdrew, Hugh stayed at the doctor's house in Balkram. Salim, Kat, Benjamin, and even Keith all wound up accompanying him, making the place quite lively.

The doctor was very generous, allowing all of Hugh's companions to stay while he treated him.

Ostensibly, Hugh was there to heal his injuries. But it was obvious what he actually wanted was to continue negotiations with Reginald. This was an opportunity he couldn't pass up.

But Reginald never came out of his assigned sickroom, citing his own injuries. Whenever Hugh tried to go in, he refused to negotiate, saying he didn't feel well or that his wound was hurting. And yet he still managed to write a letter to the Fairy Merchants Guild instructing them to come and retrieve him.

Reginald was probably trying to avoid a face-to-face meeting with the Silver Sugar Viscount before other members of the Fairy Merchants Guild came to get him. He likely didn't intend to negotiate at all.

Even Hugh was scowling about it. He needed to get Reginald to come to the bargaining table, but it wasn't something he could force.

On the afternoon of the fourth day after the Earl of Downing's departure, a letter came for Reginald. Anne had been bringing him his meals three times a day, and she took the letter to him when she went to clear the dishes from his lunch.

Reginald took it and immediately opened the envelope. Then he smiled with satisfaction.

"Hey, princess. Thanks for lookin' after me. They're comin' here to get me tomorrow. Tell the Silver Sugar Viscount for me. Tell 'im we're going straight to Lewiston to start negotiating with the kingdom."

"Got it."

Anne nodded, then she sat down on the stool beside the bed, still holding Reginald's tray.

"What are you doing?" he asked. "Go give my message to the Viscount."

"Before that, I have to talk to you."

Anne shifted her gaze to the small table beside the bed. Sitting there was the small sugar candy statue of the fairy that Anne had made.

Hugh entrusted me with the negotiations, and I failed. But if I can just give it one more try…

Reginald wasn't interested in meeting with Hugh. But maybe because he thought of Anne as nothing more than a maid, he had been allowing her to take care of his meals. Anne was the only one there who could speak to him.

"Won't you agree to talk things over with the Silver Sugar Viscount? He gambled his own standing just to negotiate with you."

"And I'm grateful I narrowly escaped death because of it. But that's one thing, and this is another. It doesn't matter one lick to us fairy merchants whether or not you all can make good sugar candy."

"But it does matter. After all, happiness did find you in the end."

"You call getting my guts slashed open and almost dying 'happiness'?"

"But you didn't die. You defied the royal family, and you didn't die. What's more, you secured the right to negotiate your tax rate."

"That was lucky, I guess. But are you trying to say the sugar candy did that?"

Anne gently picked up the statue of the fairy with its pale, gentle coloring and held it out in front of his eyes.

Reginald grimaced.

"Her face. Can't you remember it?" asked Anne.

"What's this all of a sudden? I told you I forgot. So what? What are you trying to say?"

Reginald sounded irritated, but Anne didn't let up. She kept staring straight at him.

"Amy was good at getting children to stop crying."

The moment she said that, Reginald's face went blank.

"But she was clumsy," Anne continued. "And she was weak. She couldn't cook or clean. She wasn't very useful as a worker fairy. But if nothing else, she was good at comforting children…"

"Wait!" Reginald looked almost angry; there was doubt and suspicion in his eyes. "Why do you know her name?"

"A fairy by the name of Amy was sold to this household."

The night they'd brought Reginald to the doctor's house, the old doctor had related the story to Anne, nostalgically talking at length about the fairy named Amy who had lived there.

"Apparently, the doctor was also annoyed by her clumsiness and ineptitude for housework. But she was good at getting children to stop crying and a great help with young patients, so he let her stay here for the rest of her life. He said the whole time Amy was here, she worried about the little boy she had looked after before she'd been sold."

The candy sculpture of the fairy in Anne's hand had a gentle coloring, from the white on the curves of her lap to her perfectly straight, delicate, pale-pink hair.

"That boy's parents had been executed for treason, and he had been left alone with only his grandmother. She said he lived in Northern Blow. A child and an old woman had no way to make money, and what they had soon ran out…so Amy asked the old woman to sell her to get some money. But apparently, she refused. She said there was no way she could sell Amy, because her grandson wouldn't understand. But at the same time, they were almost broke. After giving it some thought, Amy decided to pretend to steal from them. She arranged for the boy to catch her. He got angry and sold her."

"There's no way that's what happened," Reginald groaned. "You can't claim his Amy and my Amy were the same fairy."

"The doctor saw this candy statue and said it looked exactly like her."

"Even though it has no face?"

"That's right. Its gentle color and presence were exactly like hers, he said. But maybe the doctor was making too much out of nothing. Maybe they were different fairies who just happened to have the same name and similar colorings. You don't know what her face looked like, after all. But"—Anne stood up and placed the candy sculpture in Reginald's lap—"the doctor said the Amy who lived here had blue eyes the color of the spring sky."

Reginald looked startled and peered down at the candy sculpture.

"What color were Amy's eyes? Can you remember?"

Reginald didn't answer her. He was staring at the candy fairy's face, which was just a blank area with gentle rises and hollows.

"Maybe it's a coincidence we ended up here. And maybe it was a happy accident that saved your life, Mr. Stowe."

No one could say for certain that Reginald's turn of good fortune had been invited by the sugar candy. But when sugar candy brought people good luck, it tended to do so in these sorts of unexpected ways.

That was why everyone wanted it. Everyone had times when they needed to count on unexpected coincidence and good luck.

If only he felt it at work.

"Sugar candy will invite good fortune to anyone. If you think that's something of value, won't you come take a seat at the bargaining table with the Silver Sugar Viscount?"

Reginald didn't move, and he didn't respond.

Maybe it's impossible after all.

Even so, she was glad she had gotten to tell him about Amy.

Anne cleaned up the dishes and started to leave the room. When she opened the door, she heard Reginald's voice behind her.

"Amy's eyes were light blue. Like the spring sky."

Somewhere under his low, charming, grown-up voice was a hint of boyish innocence.

When Anne turned around, Reginald was still staring at the sugar candy sculpture. His hands encircled it, stopping just short of touching it. His gray, wolfish gaze wavered.

"I'm glad you were able to remember," she said.

"What happened to Amy?" Reginald asked blankly as he stared at the sculpture.

Anne shook her head.

"It sounds like she died and disappeared several years after she came here. But all the young patients Amy comforted absolutely adored her. Apparently, they built her a monument. Her body vanished, but in the corner of the garden, they piled up little rocks and made an offering of flowers. Some of those children have now grown into fine adults."

After leaving the room, Anne leaned back against the door. She smiled and closed her eyes.

Amy. Mr. Stowe grew into a fine adult, too. He can be a little nasty, though.

It had probably been Amy who had called Reginald to this place. Anne couldn't help but feel like the sparkling fairy light that had formed her body was even now drifting through the air inside this house and out in the garden.

Reginald had not given her an answer about whether he would come to the bargaining table. But she didn't intend to give up. She would hang around him and keep asking, time and again. She wanted him to sit down with the Viscount at least once. Getting him there was a job Anne could do.



While all this was going on, Lafalle's coffin had been sitting in the bed of the wagon parked in the barn. Not a single sound had come from it.

Once Challe finished hitching up the horse, he walked around the wagon bed, running his finger across the lid of the coffin.

"Lafalle."

Even when he called his brother's name, no answer came.

The light footfalls of little birds hopping across the eaves of the barn grated on his ears.

Reginald Stowe's companions were coming to get him that day. He would go to Lewiston along with the leading figures in the Fairy Merchants Guild, and they would take this coffin with them and negotiate with the king.

Hugh had also decided to leave the doctor's house and head to Lewiston with Reginald. Apparently, he meant to escort the fairy dealers safely to the royal capital, protecting their party along the way. Challe and Anne would be accompanying them. All of them would depart that day.

Things were chaotic inside the house, especially since Anne, Mithril, and Keith were in a hectic rush to pack their things and

procure food for the journey.

Kat wasn't very skilled at making detailed arrangements for things in his daily life, such as luggage and meals. Instead, he wandered around aimlessly with Benjamin dozing on his shoulder.

Hugh behaved like the Viscount he was and left all his own preparations up to Salim.

Challe didn't want to handle any of the annoying details and didn't feel like helping, but Anne had asked him to get the wagon ready, so he'd reluctantly come out to the barn.

Once they departed from Balkram, they could probably make it to Lewiston within five days. Once there, negotiations between the Fairy Merchants Guild and the king would begin.

In all likelihood, there would be compromises on both sides. Then this coffin would be turned over to the royal family, Lafalle's wing would be cut off without delay, and he would dissolve into nothing.

If the result was the same, Challe would have preferred that Lafalle vanish at his hand rather than at the hands of the humans.

But that wish couldn't come true. Lafalle was part of the terms of this transaction. And it was understandable that the humans hated him and wanted to kill him themselves.

Lafalle had murdered many humans in cold blood and ordered others to do the same. He had to pay for his crimes.

In the end, Erril never appeared. Maybe he hadn't been able to find the place. Lafalle would pass into human hands and vanish without Erril ever knowing. That was a pity, but it was unavoidable.

Keith stepped into the barn. "Challe? Did you finish preparing the wagon? It's about time for the people from the Fairy Merchants Guild to arrive."

"It's done. Take it out to the garden."

"Thank you."

Keith took hold of the horse's bridle and started to lead it away. But then as if an idea had just struck him, he stopped and turned around.

"Oh right. Challe? I wanted to tell you something. There's no need for you to treat Anne coldly."

"What are you talking about all of a sudden, boy?"

Challe frowned.

"It seems you got some idea in your head that it would be best if Anne and I became a couple. I appreciate the sentiment, but I'm not happy about your behavior. I'm on equal footing with you when it comes to loving Anne, and I want her to choose me of her own free will. I don't want to imagine Anne ending up with me just because she can't be with you. So please don't be so cold toward her."

Challe was shocked by his words.

What is this boy thinking?

Obviously, it would be better for Keith if he didn't have any competition for the woman he loved. And yet here he was, intentionally telling Challe not to treat Anne coldly. It was like they were arranging some carefree gentleman's duel, promising to fight fair and square before crossing swords.

However, Keith's earnest expression was very serious. He probably wanted things to be fair precisely because he was so earnest. Challe snorted with laughter.

"I envy you, boy."

To Challe, Keith's sincerity seemed like the straightforward honesty of a child. It was cute, even.

Keith obviously didn't like being laughed at, and he pouted.

"If you continue treating Anne so coldly," he said, "I'm going to tell her about you. I'll tell her you love her so badly, you can't stand it."

"Get lost. Don't do things that aren't called for and confuse her."

Keith smiled at Challe's irritation. "By telling me to get lost, you've just admitted it, Challe. You love Anne, don't you?"

Challe was going to put on a sour face and deny it, but Keith continued as if to prevent him from doing so.

"The Silver Sugar Viscount told me it's a good thing to be honest. Listen, would you make me a promise, Challe? Say you won't be cold to Anne. Promise me you'll be honest with your feelings around her."

Challe had been born over a hundred years earlier. In contrast, Keith was a young man of only nineteen. But it seemed in the realm of love and romance, he was Challe's equal. Challe may even have been at a disadvantage, given he had lived the majority of his hundred years indifferent to soft and warm emotions.

Challe found humans interesting. In matters of love and romance, this young man was as bold as a seasoned warrior. Perhaps because humans lived such short lives, they absorbed everything very quickly and had a striking capacity for growth.

Challe had to respect anyone who faced him directly. It would be cowardly of him to evade the boy's questions and hide his feelings.

"I'll make that promise." Challe shot him a teasing grin. "But what will you do if she falls for me?"

"It'll be all right. Anne's going to love me, I know it. I'll show you. I'm not worried," Keith declared. He adjusted his grip on the horse's bridle and walked off.

The comedy of it overcame him, and Challe laughed for a while, keeping his voice down. He found the whole thing oddly amusing.



Reginald Stowe got Anne to help him out the front door of the doctor's house. He squinted, as if the light outside was too bright. Keith had brought the wagon with the coffin out into the garden, but the men from the Fairy Merchants Guild had not yet arrived.

"Do your injuries hurt?" asked Anne.

Reginald, who had been clinging to her narrow shoulder, muttered sarcastically, "Yeah, they do. If only you'd filled out a little more, it would've helped me keep my mind off the pain."

"…Really…"

Anne slumped in disappointment as Challe emerged from the barn. When he saw Anne stooped over, struggling to support the heavy-looking Reginald, he frowned and approached them.

"Pass him here."

"Uh, but—"

"It's fine. Switch with me."

Challe forcefully wrenched Reginald's arm and pulled him away from Anne, so the man had to lean on Challe instead.

Reginald grimaced at the rough handling.

"Fairy, be a little more careful," he said in a commanding tone he clearly used a lot.

Challe turned a piercing look on him. "I have no reason to take orders from the likes of you. I'll let it pass for now, but after things are resolved, I don't know what I might do."

"Do whatever you want," Reginald answered casually. "A fairy merchant expects fairies to hate him. That's the nature of our business."

Just then, the door opened behind them, and Hugh appeared. He wasn't wearing his Viscount's attire but rather his ordinary clothes. His twisted right ankle must have still hurt, because he was leaning against Salim's shoulder.

"Salim. Bring our carriage around to the garden. The fellows from the Fairy Merchants Guild will be here soon."

Salim looked a little conflicted by Hugh's order. "But, Viscount, who will take your shoulder?"

"There's one more person here who will make a pretty good cane." Hugh turned and shouted back through the open door behind him. "Kat! Come lend me your shoulder."

"…Huh?" Kat poked his head out, looking extraordinarily displeased. "Why should I hafta lend you my shoulder?"

"Salim has to get the carriage ready. Or are you going to do that instead? If you're confident you can skillfully handle that huge carriage, then…"

Kat clicked his tongue, then changed places with Salim and supported Hugh's shoulder. Once Salim had vanished around the back of the house, Hugh ordered Kat with a grin, "Come on, do a proper job supporting me. Let's go over to Stowe."

Kat clenched his teeth and took a step forward. It looked quite difficult for the slender man to support Hugh, who was not only tall but also had a muscular build.

"*Tch…* You jerk. I bet you're purposely putting your weight on me."

"It's your imagination. You're just a weakling."

Mithril and Benjamin came scurrying out the front door. When he saw Kat supporting Hugh, Mithril turned to the other fairy and said, "Hey, Benjamin. Kat's being bullied."

"Uh-uhhh, Kat is gladly lending his shoulder to help the Viscount!"

"Do I look like I'm enjoying this?!"

Kat glanced over his shoulder, eyebrows raised, and Benjamin nodded, sending his green curls bouncing.

"Mmm, you look happy to meee. That's wonderful, Kaaat!"

"Benjamin, why you—! Quit jokin' around!"

It was hard to tell whether Benjamin really believed what he was saying. Maybe it was just Kat's imagination, but he detected a certain air of mockery behind the fairy's carefree smile.

Even as he fumed, the faithful Kat helped Hugh over to Anne and the others. When they came to a stop in front of Reginald, Hugh forced himself to smile.

"Finally, we're face-to-face, Stowe. Though you really tried to give me the slip, claiming you had a headache or that your injuries were hurting you."

"I don't like when people expect favors just because they saved your life or whatever."

"I would never. I simply want to negotiate."

"I don't feel like negotiating with you."

Anne's shoulders drooped at Reginald's blunt words. She had expected as much. But she didn't intend to give up. She looked at the man's gray eyes as if to say, *Just wait, I'll bring you around yet.*

Hugh shrugged. "Well, whatever. We're all headed to Lewiston together. There's still time."

Just then, a black carriage with a single red line painted across it crested the top of a distant hill. It approached them directly, stopping in front of the gate. Two men stepped out.

One of them was the old man who had been with Reginald in the abandoned church. The other was the one who had come to the inn to tell Anne and the others Reginald's whereabouts. This man approached them with a relieved expression.

"We came to get you, Reginald."

The two men were both wearing smart-looking jackets with ties. They seemed like they had everything in order and were ready to go to the royal capital and take part in negotiations.

"Thanks for going to the trouble," said Reginald. "As I said in my letter, we'll go straight to Lewiston from here."

He let go of Challe and took the shoulder of the younger man. The old man seemed worried and walked closely behind them. Hugh spoke to their backs.

"We're also going to follow your wagon and head to Lewiston. It is my duty to escort you as far as the royal castle. After we get there, I will pay you another visit. I am determined to get you to the negotiating table at least once while we're in Lewiston, Stowe."

"Stop badgering me. I refuse."

"I'll convince you yet."

Hugh wasn't giving in, either. However, Reginald looked back over his shoulder and continued:

"There's no need to negotiate, Silver Sugar Viscount," he said, irritated. "I accept your requests."

Anne looked at him blankly. She didn't understand what he'd said. Hugh seemed similarly puzzled. However, like a piece of ice slowly melting, the meaning of his words started to sink into Anne's mind.

She was astonished.

"You accept, Mr. Stowe?! But you just said you didn't feel like negotiating with the Viscount."

"Of course I don't feel like negotiating. I already decided to accept your requests." Then Reginald turned around and smiled, baring his teeth. "That doesn't mean I believe the things you all believe or that I'm grateful to you. But we are businessmen. We always deliver something equal to what we've been paid. That's what it means to do business. It's one of our rules."

The candy crafters had paid him by risking everything they had to protect their negotiation partner, all out of determination to preserve the future of sugar candy. And the fairy dealers felt bound by the rules of their profession to repay that debt.

He accepted…

Just like when the morning sun lit up the world, a bright light spread through Anne's chest.

He accepted!

When Hugh finally understood the meaning of Reginald's words, he, too, was stunned. But his expression soon turned to one of relief, and he let out a deep sigh from the bottom of his heart.

"I appreciate that, Reginald Stowe."

Reginald waved his hand casually. "I'm just following the rules."

He turned around and resumed walking, then came to a sudden stop, as if something had caught his eye. A glint of heartbreak flickered across his face.

"Miss Silver Sugar Master." With his broad back still turned to her, Reginald called out to Anne in a low voice. "There are stones piled up in that corner of the garden. Go offer a flower or something in my place, will you?"

Over where Reginald was looking was a small monument made of three stones stacked one on top of the other. The various flowers of spring had grown up and blossomed all around it, almost hiding the humble marker.

The doctor had told Anne about that pile of stones.

"You should be the one to do it, Mr. Stowe."

"I'm not qualified. You go make an offering."

Reginald started walking again. As he slowly climbed into his carriage, Salim brought Hugh's around from behind the house. Challe went to the stable and led out a horse to ride on.

"I guess we're setting out, too," Hugh announced with a sunny smile. "Things are going to get busy once we get back to Lewiston. We've secured the cooperation of the Fairy Merchants Guild. It's time to get to work."

As everyone started preparing to leave, Anne hurried around to the back of the house. She knew there were cute pink flowers with large blossoms there. She plucked a sprig of them and ran to the marker in the corner of the garden. Then she crouched down and placed the flowers, gently touching the stones.

"Amy. Here are some flowers for you from Mr. Stowe."

A gentle spring breeze blew past, and the flowers surrounding the grave swayed like they were laughing.

The church in the village was ringing its bell, and the pale-blue sky soaked up the sound. Everything seemed to sparkle in the spring sunshine.



After escorting Reginald to the royal castle, Hugh returned to his Lewiston residence. As expected, his injuries seemed to be taking a toll on him, and he said he would rest for several days.

Anne went back to the workshop with Keith. Challe and Mithril naturally went with Anne, and Kat and Benjamin headed in after them as if that was where they belonged.

That evening, they were able to eat a leisurely dinner for the first time in what felt like ages. Benjamin was in high spirits, and he prepared many dishes with Mithril's help. They served a fragrant herb salad, tender simmered chicken, potato soup, and bread pudding, all of which lifted the humans' spirits.

The fairies were also in good humor, and Mithril drank himself silly on too much wine.

After dinner, Challe took the drunken Mithril with him back to Anne's room. After tossing the smaller fairy onto the bed, he went over by the window.

He opened it and took a seat on the sill, then gazed up at the springtime night sky. The light of the dimly twinkling stars reminded him of Erril's eyes. He wondered where Erril was now and what he was thinking.

Challe hoped Erril would not come to resent and despise all humans like Lafalle had.

Humans weren't all bad. At that very moment, the human king Edmond II was trying to fulfill his promise to Challe. If they could trust the human king, then maybe it was possible, bit by bit, to alter the future of fairies and humans. Challe would need to watch the king's actions very carefully.

After a while, Anne finished cleaning up after dinner and returned to her room. When she saw Challe by the window, she cut straight across the room and went to him.

"Challe? What's the matter? Couldn't sleep?"

"No. Just a little…absorbed in my thoughts."

He looked at the stars, and Anne followed his gaze upward. Then her mind seemed to land on the same thing as Challe's, and she said haltingly, "Your brother stone, that boy. Erril, was it…? I wonder if he's still searching for Lafalle…"

Anne put both hands against the windowsill and leaned forward to look up at the night sky.

Her profile was beautiful as she gazed at the stars. She was gradually becoming a woman. Her hair, which had been dry and rough like barley heads when Challe first met her, was now much glossier. She had grown a little taller, and while she was still slender, her figure was more feminine. Her eyelashes covered her pensive hazel eyes, and he wanted to kiss them.

For the sake of her happiness, Anne ought to be with Keith. Challe still believed that. But Keith had made Challe promise to be true to his feelings.

That was a stupid promise.

At the same time, he also found it amusing.

Take this girl's heart for your own, Keith.

Even as he wished for Anne's happiness and hoped Keith would claim her heart, Challe would act according to his feelings. When he imagined a future in which Keith had won Anne's heart, Challe felt upset, as if his whole body were being constricted. Challe loved Anne so dearly that he couldn't stand it. And yet he was hopeful for Keith and Anne's future.

The future his rational mind hoped for and the one his heart yearned for were at odds.

He wondered what would happen if he acted on his feelings despite this internal conflict. What kind of result would he get if he left everything to fate, keeping both his reason and his emotions out of it?

It couldn't be a bad thing to accept the end that fate decided, no matter what that might be.

The thought made him feel like he was picking a fight with his own destiny.

He gently touched the back of Anne's hand where it rested on the sill. Anne looked at him, startled.

"You don't need to worry about him. Just use these hands and do what you need to do."

He slid his fingers up her arm, tracing his way up her shoulder, touching everything from her neck to her cheek.

"If I'm right, your work will lead us to exactly the world I'm hoping for."

Anne's cheeks flushed red enough that he could see the color clearly even in the dim light. He found it funny that she turned red from only a light touch. It made him want to tease her more.

Just then, they heard the sound of horses' hooves racing down the street. When Challe looked toward the noise, he saw a single rider on horseback galloping down the shadowy road. The rider was someone they knew.

"Salim? He's coming this way." Anne cocked her head.

Challe had a bad feeling about this, and he squeezed Anne's hand. "Come."

Taking Anne with him, Challe left the room and ran down the stairs, then passed through the dining room and workshop. He opened the door facing out onto the main avenue right as Salim arrived in front of the shop.

Salim pulled on the reins to bring his horse to a halt. He seemed surprised that Challe and Anne had come out with such perfect timing. But soon, relief washed over his face. He got down off his horse and said gladly, "It seems the two of you are safe."

"What's going on, Salim? Did something happen?" Anne asked.

Salim frowned and said, "Lafalle has vanished."

Vanished?

Challe felt a chill pass through him, and his wing tensed and shook.

"His body disappeared, so the Viscount was worried the two of you might be in danger. He ordered me to check on you."

"Vanished… What do you mean?"

"It happened in the middle of the negotiations between the fairy dealers and the royal family. Lafalle's coffin had been carried into the royal castle, and another fairy broke in. That fairy had silver hair and the appearance of a young man."

It was Erril. There could be no doubt. He hadn’t given up. He must have stubbornly waited for Challe to leave the coffin’s side and infiltrated the royal castle.

“Apparently, the young fairy managed to wake Lafalle. Then the two of them escaped.”

Anne looked up at Challe uneasily and instinctively squeezed his hand. Challe squeezed back, as if on reflex.

Lafalle is awake.

The spring night was quiet, and the stars above twinkled with silver light.



AFTERWORD

Hello everyone, how are you getting on? I'm Miri Mikawa, and though I'm having some emotional ups and downs, the world around me is on such an even keel that it's kind of disappointing.

In my last afterword, I was presumptuous about dividing certain volumes into sets and calling each group the "such and such saga." But those divisions actually got picked up, and starting with Volume 7, I get to break the books up into little sections on the cover fold, where it lists my previous works! I wonder if anyone else has noticed. It looks a little cool, and I'm delighted with it. *Sugar Apple Fairy Tale* is one lucky series to have people paying such close attention to it.

That means we've removed the *(provisional)* marker from the saga names, and this volume is officially part of the Silver Sugar Fairy saga. It's the second book in that section.

This time, Hugh and Kat worked quite hard.

I think this is the first time Hugh has been at the center of the story for a whole book, from beginning to end.

And then there's Kat, who doesn't appear much but, for some reason, gets a great reception from everybody. He also had an active part to play, for once.

This was the first time I wrote a scene with Kat and Hugh meeting face-to-face, but I really enjoyed it. I thought their friendly banter was so much fun.

Anne and Challe are both still feeling uncertain, but considering it's their first love, I hope you'll watch over them kindly. Even so, I fear

Challe's endurance is about to run up against its limit… So I hope you'll tune in next time to see what happens.

Now, then. It's already been two years since everyone in Anne's little group made their first appearance. I'm deeply, deeply grateful to the editor, who has looked after me ever since my debut. If it wasn't for you, I would never have been able to write this much. I'm truly happy that I'm able to work with you like this.

To Aki, who draws the illustrations—this year, I got my greatest wish granted when I was able to meet you for the first time. I'm so happy. I got to have a conversation with you, which left me feeling even more motivated. But more importantly, this cover! I've only seen the rough draft, but Hugh is so unbelievably cool-looking! A real man! I was deeply moved. Every single time, your art makes me sigh in admiration. Thank you so much.

To all you readers—it is only because every one of you read my books that Anne and the others have been able to grow so much and add so many people to their story that it surprises even me, the author. It is thanks to you that the story has come so far. I truly feel that their world continues to grow through the power of your readership.

I wonder where all these characters are headed… I'll be delighted if you stick with them until they get to their destinations. Okay then, see you later!

Miri Mikawa

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