



AQUA Scans & Icarus Bride present:

Sugar Apple Fairy Tale vol. 2

“The Silver Sugar Master and the Blue Duke”

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Chapter 5 - Captive

—*Where should I go?*

Morning glow dyed the eastern sea a light purple.

Shall Fen Shall was at the base of the cape where Philax Castle stood.

In order to prevent the ocean winds from plowing the road, the evergreen forest along the coastline had been preserved. He rested in that forest till dawn, and rose with the morning sun.

He began walking along the road, but with no purpose; his gait was slow. The night before, falling snow had mixed with the strong ocean winds, covering the narrow road in a thin layer of ice.

He walked idly while listening to the regularly resounding sound of the waves. The irritation that felt like swallowing a foreign object persisted still, annoying him.

Suddenly, he sensed a thirst for blood coming from behind. Standing his guard, he turned around.

There stood three men, carrying long swords at their hips. They slowly walked his way, as though evaluating him. Behind them, standing a head taller, were two fairies with rough red-black skin. They both had a single poorly crumpled wing fluttering on their backs. They were warrior fairies owned by the three men.

The men were fairy hunters, likely in the middle of their hunt. Many fairies were born in the morning, so fairy hunters rose with the sun and started hunting. The three men walked up to a point where they could clearly discern Shall's face, then halted.

"Well, if it ain't a beauty walking all alone. Must be our lucky day."

One of the men smirked. The other two rounded Shall from behind and to his left.

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One of the warrior fairies went right, while the other stood in waiting behind the man who spoke.

"What do you want?"

"Looks like a high class pet fairy you don't normally see in this area. Who's your owner?"

"I asked you a question first. Answer. What do you want?"

"What a spirited fellow."

The fairy hunters laughed in amusement.

Even without them saying it, Shall knew what their aim was. They were planning on hunting him.

Or, perhaps it was more accurate to say that they were planning on *stealing* him.

Fairy hunters hunt fairies and sell them. But some nasty fairy hunters stole fairies that others own and sold them arbitrarily.

Of course, one of the fairy's wings would remain in the hands of the original owner. But another would still be on the fairy's back. A stolen fairy was enslaved by having a sturdy string tied to the base of the wing on their back, like a rein.

If the fairy acted up, the string was pulled, and the wing came off. If a fairy lost both their wings, even if the wings were unharmed, they became weakened, and shortly thereafter, they disappeared. It was an absurdly savage enslavement method.

However, from the start, a stolen fairy couldn't be owned for long, because the original owner still had the fairy's wing in their possession. If that owner thought the fairy had run away and disposed of their wing, the fairy would die at that moment. It wasn't strange for a stolen fairy to suddenly die.

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Yet many were satisfied with buying a fairy cheaply and owning it for a short time—especially pet fairies, as one wouldn't be too troubled with or without them. They were easy to sell, saying it was enough to just temporarily enjoy them.

Shall had a single wing on his back. Normally, he would indeed be owned. No doubt the fairy hunters thought he was as well.

But with Shall's appearance, even stolen, he'd sell for a high price.

"Fairy, won't you come with us for a bit?"

Shall showed a wisp of a smile at those words. He gently opened the palm of his right hand, where he began amassing energy. Particles of light gathered by his palm.

"What would you do if I don't?"

The pesky irritation made Shall belligerent. He smiled fleetingly, feeling he was about to enjoy this.

One of the warrior fairies spoke with a nervous voice, "Boss, please be careful. That guy isn't a pet fairy."

"What's it look like to you other than a pet fairy?"

"The same as us. A warrior fairy."

"What?"

By the time the man looked at Shall with a face saying, 'It can't be,' Shall was already gripping his sword in his hand.

He kicked against the ground and charged straight at the man before him.

The warrior fairy jumped in front of the stunned man, and whipping out the hatchet-like sword he carried on his back, he repelled Shall's thrust.

"You bastard!!"

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Aiming for Shall's back as he dodged, the other two fairy hunters came at him with their swords.

He lowered his body to avoid the attack just in time, and pushing his bare left hand against the ground, he used his arm's recoil to jump aside. Leaving a few paces' worth of distance, he stood facing the fairy hunters.

One of the warrior fairies spoke in a groan-like manner.

"Boss, this guy's impossible. Let's withdraw."

Shall grinned. The wing on his back tensed, making a buzzing sound and taking on a glossy bluish tint.

"You were the ones who invited me. I'll have you entertain me."

"...Of course. It's not like we could let such an expensive-looking fairy get away, after all. And you, don't go saying stupid things! We're going to hunt him!"

The fairy hunters' leader pulled out his sword, raising his guard while slowly closing in.

The remaining two fairy hunters and warrior fairies, reading the leader's intention, slowly surrounded Shall.

The two fairy hunters returned their swords to their hips and grabbed a chain that had a weight at its end. They split into rear and front, and while spinning the chain, aimed for Shall's arms and legs.

As expected, they didn't group together to hunt fairies for nothing. They had no openings. These five didn't seem to be opponents that could be defeated easily. Shall felt a thrill of enjoyment.

With a strong air-piercing sound, the weighted chain flew from front and back simultaneously. Where he tried to dodge to, the warrior fairy swung down his sword. Breaking his posture, Shall jumped to the side, but the chain wound around his ankle. Having his ankle forcefully pulled, his right hand hit the ground. Using that recoil, he aimed for the man holding the chain that caught

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his ankle, and came at him while remaining in a low posture.

Swinging the sword from the area of his knee, he aimed for the wrist of the fairy hunter that was holding the chain.

The fairy hunter let go of the chain at once and jumped out of the way.

Heading towards the fairy hunter whose posture had collapsed, Shall lunged an attack with his ankle still tangled in the chain.

"That's enough, Shall Fen Shall!!"

Shall started upon hearing his name being called.

The fairy hunter that escaped Shall's blade by a hair's breadth retreated backwards in a crawling fashion.

"As you might expect, a fairy that kills a human, no matter the reason, will be disposed of."

The fairy hunters that had stopped moving looked puzzled at the sight of the young nobleman that came calmly riding his horse from the direction of the road. Behind him, on horseback as well, was a young man with brown skin that looked like a guard. Following them were several cavalry soldiers.

The fairy hunters didn't know the young nobleman's status, but it seemed they determined it was safest to act obedient. They each returned their weapon to their hip.

Shall undid his posture and went to meet the young nobleman with a cold expression.

"You sure do have a lot of free time, Silver Sugar Viscount."

"Haven't I been saying how incredibly busy I am? You're as uncute as ever. Aren't you at all happy at our chance reunion?"

Hugh advanced up to Shall on his horse, where he climbed off. Salim climbed off his horse as well and slowly walked behind Shall. With the faithfulness of

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protecting his master, he placed his hand on the handle of his sword and stood on the lookout for Shall.

Hugh declared to the fairy hunters, "I am Hugh Mercury, the Silver Sugar Viscount. Were you trying to steal this fairy?"

"That's absurd. None of us were thinking such a thing."

The leader of the fairy hunters pliantly lowered his head. Hugh waved his hand in displeasure.

"I'll pretend I didn't see anything, so hurry up and leave."

After warding off the fairy hunters, Hugh looked around. "You're alone? What about Ann and Mythrill?"



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The question made Shall feel incredibly unpleasant. He looked away from Hugh.

"What happened to them, Shall? They're not with you? Did something happen?"

Answering was also irritating.

He suddenly felt like he did the other night when he faced Ann.

"What about you? Why are you in a place like this?"

"I have some business in Philax Castle. So, weren't you there with Ann? I heard this rumor in Lewiston that you guys headed to Alban's castle."

With his face still turned away, Shall remained quiet. Hugh shrugged.

"Don't feel like answering, huh. Well, that's fine, though. By the way, Shall—" With a casual gesture, Hugh suddenly reached for Shall's chest. It was a quick move with the characteristic smoothness of a sugar craftsman. As his face was turned, Shall's reaction was late.

He was startled by that hand's movement. While simultaneously pulling himself back, Hugh took out a leather bag the size of a palm from the breast pocket of Shall's coat.

"You bastard!"

Hugh sprung back from Shall, who was about to create his sword.

"Woops, what's wrong? That's unlike you, Shall. You're full of openings."

Hugh held the leather bag up high while laughing. Shall grinded his back teeth with a grunt.

"The Silver Sugar Viscount, acting like a mere pickpocket?"

"I've been told that if I didn't become a sugar craftsman, I could become a pickpocket. It's my special skill. Even so, I didn't think I'd be able to steal from

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you. But you've been strangely full of openings just now. Could it be that you trust me? I'm so happy, Shall."

There was something wrong with him. What was he distracted by, and how could he be so careless? Or was it rather, he just then realized, that he unconsciously let his guard down around Hugh?

It might be that in the few months he'd spent with Ann, her trustfulness had rubbed off on him. For the first time, he became conscious of Ann's influence over him.

"This is your wing, right?"

Folded inside that bag was indeed his wing that Ann returned to him.

"In Highland, when you find a fairy that isn't owned by anyone, the first one to get his hands on that fairy's wing has the right to own them. Well, those are rules that humans thought up. So, for a fairy, I guess it means whatever but..."

Hugh grinned.

"It looks like I'm your owner now, Shall Fen Shall."

*

When morning came, Jonas came over to Ann's room.

"I asked Dale for a meeting with Duke Philax. We'll be able to see him later. I'm having you come as well, Ann." Jonas looked horribly nervous.

The other night, with Shall's leaving, Ann had somehow lost her strength.

She was anxious, but she didn't think there could be anything worse than Shall leaving after rejecting him herself. That was why, no matter what Jonas was scheming, she didn't care. She had such a 'so-what' feeling.

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"Your face is pale, Jonas," Ann said coldly, and Jonas sternly glared at her in return.

"You, stay quiet. Okay? Just stay quiet!"

His reaction lacked composure. Looking worried, Kathy got on Jonas's shoulder and patted his cheek. "Don't worry, Jonas-sama. It will go well, I'm sure."

Contrary to their behavior, Ann herself was surprised. That wasn't the behavior of someone with the upper hand.

Dale came to pick Jonas and Ann up and led them not to the usual hall, but to what looked like Alban's private chamber.

It was a suit of rooms, with the bedroom in the back of the living room. Ann and Jonas were led into the living room.

With a fire burning in the fireplace, the room was warm.

It was a simple room, with only a single couch in front of the fireplace and a large office desk by the window. A long-haired carpet was placed in the middle of the room, but as it was made of wool, it wasn't particularly luxurious.

From a noble family with Grand King Cedric as their ancestor, the simple room told of how the Alban house had their corresponding authority taken away.

The King who lived in the towering castle in Lewiston and Alban—they were so different; one wouldn't think they shared the same blood.

—I wonder what it feels like, having to go to Lewiston every month for a courtesy visit, she suddenly thought. If Alban were a genuine fool, he might feel no pain whatsoever. However, if he had some degree of pride, no doubt it was an awful humiliation.

Alban was lying on the couch, wistfully gazing at the flames.

Prompted by Dale, Jonas and Ann knelt on the spot.

Once Dale announced their visit, Alban glanced their way and said, "Craftsmen.

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I don't believe you're here because the sugar sculpture is already complete. What did you come for?" He said to Jonas and Ann in an emotionless voice.

Jonas licked his dry lips many times, but—looking like he'd made up his mind—he opened his mouth.

"Ah, I. I mean, I¹, want you to allow me to quit this job."

Alban slowly got up and turned his body in their direction.

"Quit? Six days ago, you said the same thing, didn't you?"

"Ye... Yes."

"Back then, what did I say?"

"That you won't allow it."

—*The Duke said that?*

Ann looked at Jonas's face in surprise. Jonas couldn't afford to look her way.

"That's right. Have you forgotten? If you've forgotten, I'll remind you of the pain from six days ago. You two are being monitored. If you try to escape, you'll be caught and chained up. I believe I said that as well."

Ann was shocked by the words Alban further added.

—*Monitored!?! Chained!?! What is he saying!?!*

Alban stood straight up and grabbed the slim sword that was propped against the couch.

Without placing his hand on the handle, he simply gripped part of the sheath and walking their way in a brandishing posture.

Startled by that behavior, Ann pulled back.

Then, she finally realized the cause of the bruise on Jonas's cheek.

—*The Duke hit him.*

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Six days ago, Jonas had completed his work and called Alban. However, without being acknowledged by him, as Ann was, Jonas had been undoubtedly baffled. That was when Jonas must have said it. That he wanted to quit. And, having angered Alban by saying that, he was hit.

—He said he even had us monitored. Meaning, after finally getting his hands on craftsmen he likes, the Duke won't allow us to quit.

For the first time, Ann felt the strength of that obsession firsthand.

Alban, approaching with a sword in hand, radiated killing intent. While in the warm room, that entirely hardened cold figure felt clad in a bluish atmosphere.

Would blue be the color of madness? A chill ran down her spine.

—This man is serious.

Jonas further prostrated himself.

"I² can't do it. It's true. Please forgive me!! But she can do it. She is many times better than me. Even the Silver Sugar Viscount acknowledged that. If you have her, you don't need me! She doesn't mind staying in the castle until she makes the sugar sculpture you want. I got rid of her escort yesterday, so even if she wanted to quit, she has no way of leaving. I'm begging you, please let me go!"

Hearing the words Jonas rattled in one breath, Ann couldn't believe her ears.

In order for him to escape, Jonas had presented Ann to Alban.

That was why he distanced Shall from her.

"Jonas, you!"

She tried to shout, but as though he'd forgotten about her existence, Jonas remained flat on the ground, shivering. She was so frightened; she hesitated to yell at him.

With his apathetic eyes turned lurid and a sword in hand, Alban didn't look sane. It wouldn't be odd if he pulled out his sword and came slashing at them

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at any moment.

"Please let me go. I'm begging you. Please let me go. Please let me go..." Jonas repeated in a trembling voice. Seeing his strenuous figure, Ann withdrew her complaints.

She even felt pity for the completely frightened boy.

—But... What Jonas is saying might be true. If he's this scared, it's impossible for him to make a sugar sculpture.

Jonas had a place to go back to. If he returned to Lewiston, as one of the craftsmen of the Radcliff guild, he would probably get jobs. Furthermore, if he wanted to be even more spoiled, he could return to his birthplace of Knoxberry Village, where there was a sugar sculpture store he was meant to succeed, and where his parents were.

There was probably no need for someone like him to obstinately make a sugar sculpture for such a dreadful client whose request wasn't clear.

On the other hand, Ann had no place to return to. No money. And now, no Shall.

In that situation, she felt she had no choice but to stay and make the sugar sculpture.

Furthermore, Ann had already accepted the job. No matter the reason, she couldn't abandon it. She didn't want to throw away her only weapon.

Alban was approaching slowly.

With a sword in hand, the man in front of her whose next action was unpredictable made her well up with terror.

But her only path was here. She instinctively knew that.

She gulped, and kneeled between Alban and Jonas to interrupt them.

"It's as this man says. I will make the sugar sculpture. So please let him go. I

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will make it."

Alban halted, and Jonas raised his head in surprise. Alban knit his eyebrows.

"You're saying you'll make it?"

"Yes."

"Do you have confidence?"

"Yes."

"I won't let you leave the castle until you make a sugar sculpture that satisfies me. If you can't do it, you'll never be able to leave."

"I don't mind."

Having said that much, Ann raised her head.

"I promised from the beginning. That I can do it. So I'll make it. If I can't ever make it, that is my responsibility. I'll keep working forever."

For a while, Ann and Alban stared at each other. Ann endured, trying to absolutely not divert her line of sight.

Then, Alban slowly removed his gaze. He lowered the poised sheath of his sword, and his eyes returned to their usual apathetic calmness.

"Very well. I'll allow it. The craftsman there, leave the castle."

"Thank you very much."

Ann lowered her head once again.

As though with that he'd lost his interest, Alban turned his back to them and returned to the couch. Placing the sword beside him, he once again directed his eyes towards the flames. Silence fell upon the chamber. The sound of the popping wood in the fireplace resounded loudly.

Jonas was in a daze, looking like he'd lost all his strength.

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Prompted by Dale, Ann and Jonas took their leave.

Dale brought the two of them back to the tower's staircase, and told Jonas to quickly gather his luggage and leave the castle on his own. However, towards Ann, he directed a severe glare.

"You won't be allowed to leave the castle. As you've heard, you're also being monitored. It's pointless to try running away."

"I know. But Dale, are you alright with just faithfully carrying out your master's orders like this? Is that really what a loyal serving retainer is?"

She couldn't go on without saying it. Alban's way of doing things was too despotic.

As a retainer, it was natural to admonish an erratic and obsessive master—even more so if you took pride in serving the Alban house.

She looked up at Dale, prepared to at the very least be beaten. As she did, Dale suppressed a laugh.

"Well, aren't you being cocky. But, what you're saying is correct. We also advised him a little. But, that man... He probably can't withstand it anymore. Because we know that, we make it our number one priority to grant the Duke's wishes."

"Withstand?"

"That has nothing to do with you. Understand? The Duke desires a sugar sculpture. Make it."

"I promised, so I won't run away. I'll make it," she said clearly, and started climbing the tower's stairs to return to her room.

As she walked up to the room, Jonas came running after her.

"Ann!"

Ann turned around and abruptly held out her hand.

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Jonas blinked at the silently held out palm.

"W-what?""

"Mythrill Reed Pod's wing. Give it back."

"O, oh. Right."

Jonas hurriedly searched his chest pocket, took out the wing, and placed it in Ann's palm. Once she received it, Ann felt relieved. She softly wrapped her arms around the wing.

"Thank goodness," she murmured, then turned her back to Jonas to enter her room. As she did, he grabbed her shoulder.

"Wait, Ann! Why did you say those things!?"

"Those things? I don't believe I've said anything you should be complaining about." Frowning, she turned back around.

"I'm not complaining. Why did you actively speak for me to be allowed to leave? Saying something like that unexpectedly... Why... For my sake..."

"It wasn't for your sake. It's because, looking at your state, I really thought that you're in no condition to make a sugar sculpture. So even if you stayed, it would be no use. That's all."

"But, then, you're saying you're going to make a sugar sculpture for that Duke!? Whatever you make, he's never satisfied, and all he says is completely incomprehensible! Yet, he says that if you can't make something he likes he'll lock you up forever!?"

"I said I'll make it from the beginning. That's why I don't want to run away halfway. So I'll make it."

Jonas released Ann's shoulder, raising his voice like a spoiled child. "Ann, are, are you an idiot!? What are you saying!? In this situation, that's weird!"

"But, right now, other than making a sugar sculpture here, I have nothing else

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to do."

Those were, in fact, her true feelings. Jonas's lips trembled.

"You really are an idiot!" he yelled, then ran down the stairs.

"That's right, huh. I really am," Ann heaved a sigh and muttered to herself. "But other than that, there is nothing else I can do."

Even if she quit like Jonas and left the castle, Shall was gone. She would never see him again. Thinking that, her chest ached like it was being squeezed.

She didn't want to think about it. Instead, she'd think about the sugar sculpture.

That moment, she suddenly heard the words Shall once said in her ears.

'Make a sugar sculpture. There is something you can do.'

—Sugar sculpture... That's right. I should make a sugar sculpture.

She would make the sugar sculpture Alban desired, and then she'd obtain the money and the honor.

When she had the one thousand Cress, she could travel fairly safely by staying at inns, and wander around the kingdom in search for Shall, whom she'd parted with. If she met him, she'd explain that saying she wanted him to leave wasn't what she had really felt, and that she was only threatened into saying it. That she really wanted them to be together.

She raised her head, tightening her expression.

"There is something I can do."

*

"I thought about it carefully, but your looks are really wasted, aren't they."

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The oldest inn in Philax was a three-story brick building facing the harbor. On the top third floor were only three rooms, wider than the ones downstairs.

Apparently, Hugh had reserved the entire third floor.

One room for himself, and the other two for the six escort soldiers accompanying him. It seemed he'd just now arrived in Philax, and was wearing simple travel clothes.

After entering the room and cleansing himself with a hot bath, he put on formal attire.

As it seemed he wasn't accompanied by a labor fairy, Salim was the one helping him with changing clothes. Shall was in Hugh's room. As his wing had been seized, he had no choice but to do as told.

However, he didn't really care about that.

He felt that, no matter what Hugh was thinking by seizing his wing, he could do whatever he wanted.

The room had six extravagant chairs that had a unique fabric native to the continent used for the seats.

Shall, wearing a sullen expression, was sitting cross-legged on one of those chairs with his back leaning against the backrest. That attitude, which showed no sign of leaving, had not a shred of cuteness.

"I'm your owner, you know? Shouldn't you be a bit more amiable towards me? I won't ask to snuggle, but at least do something about that sour face."

Hugh came out from behind the partitioning screen while fixing the cuff of his wrist and sat opposite of Shall across the table. Shall gave him a piercing glare.

"Did Ann leave you for making such a scary face?"

Angered by those words, he raised one leg and plumped it down on the table.

Hugh beat the tip of the boot aimed at him. "What's with this?"

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"My leg feels heavy."

"I get it. I get that you're irritated. Honestly, what happened?"

He didn't feel like answering. Hugh then asked calmly, "Is Ann still in Philax Castle? If so, it'll be bad if we don't get her out. If I fail to persuade Alban, Philax Castle will experience imminent military action."

Hugh seemed pleased by Shall's reaction, who had knitted his eyebrows.

"Come. I'm going to go to Philax Castle and meet Alban now. As you're my warrior fairy, I'm bringing you along as my escort."

"I don't feel like going," he answered. Hugh then inserted his hand into his inner chest pocket.

"I have your wing here. It's not a hobby of mine, but if you don't feel like listening to what I say, I don't mind hurting you."

"You bastard, are you even human?!"

Shall groaned.

Stretching the wing and pulling it with the strength to tear it causes the particles that bind a fairy's entire body to twist and the body's bond to burst, which gives them a taste of the pain and fear of dispersing at once.

It was a pain and fear that humans couldn't understand.

"Sorry, but I'm a genuine human. If you understand, come."

As he got up, Hugh ordered Salim, "Preparations are complete. We're heading towards Philax Castle. Arrange the carriage."

It seemed that Hugh had rushed from Westhall to Philax in quite a hurry.

As it took time to move by carriage, he rode on a horse himself, taking only Salim and six soldier escorts with him, and came to Philax.

Apparently, the rumor that Ann had entered Philax Castle passed through

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Lewiston and reached his ears.

"That's why I was in an extra hurry..."

Having rented a luxurious four in hand carriage that was apparently owned by traders, Hugh headed towards Philax Castle. It seemed that no matter the circumstances, the Viscount visiting the Duke on horseback would have a bad appearance.

Riding inside the carriage were Hugh and Salim, and Shall as well.

Directing his eyes at the ocean spreading outside the carriage's window, Hugh muttered, "This past year and a half, Alban, Duke of Philax, hasn't shown his face in Lewiston once."

—*Not once?*

Shall inadvertently looked back at Hugh's face.

He didn't care about things like the power struggle in the human world, but regardless of your personal interest, if you lived in Highland, you heard about the complications regarding the royal family.

Of course, he knew about the royal family of Millsland, the relations with the Alban house, and what position the head of Alban held.

Hugh looked his way and nodded.

"Even you know what this means, right?"

The head of Alban was the last flashpoint of the kingdom. In order to make sure that flashpoint remained obedient, all trade related taxes were paid to the royal family, and once a month, the head of Alban headed to Lewiston for a courtesy visit. Those two were their obligations.

It was a ritual with the purpose of showing submission and proving there was no intention of disobeying the King.

One of these obligations had been neglected for a period of a year and a half.

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"Before I became the Silver Sugar Viscount, I was often called by Alban. I'd make him... Or rather, I'd make the woman at his side, many sugar sculptures. I know the Duke's character. That's why I also know very well that he's a man who's indifferent to ambition. But Earl Downing is different. Earl Downing has always been aiming for an opportunity to annihilate the Alban house. The Duke's character doesn't matter. The mere existence of the head of Alban is unpalatable for him. Because the taxes are paid, it didn't become a problem immediately. His Majesty, Edmond II, is defending Alban as well. However, it's been a year and a half. If he neglects the greeting obligation for a year and a half, even the King can't suppress Earl Downing's opinion. Alban has ignored repeated summons. I don't know why he suddenly stopped coming to Lewiston, but..."

He took a short pause, then continued.

"This is an opportunity for Earl Downing. He probably won't wait anymore. Even His Majesty, King Edmond II, unable to protect him constantly, gave Earl Downing permission to subjugate him. Earl Downing is bringing soldiers from Westhall Castle and coming to Philax."

—To extinguish the flashpoint, huh.

It was a human-like approach. Completely ruthless. But it was probably because they were like that that the humans won against the fairies.

"If Alban goes to Lewiston before that, it would still be alright. His Majesty, Edmond II, can protect him. But there's no time. Earl Downing moves well for his age. It'll be fine if I can persuade Alban before then."

Hugh once again directed his gaze outside the window with an awfully worried face, uncharacteristic of him.

"Why did you come to persuade him? Was it the King's order?"

"His Majesty isn't the kind to work behind the scenes in order to revoke a permission he'd granted. This is my decision. I have an old debt towards Alban."

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Because I don't want him to die, I want him to at least only quickly go to Lewiston for a greeting. Though, since I've become the Silver Sugar Viscount and became unable to make sugar sculptures for anyone other than His Majesty, we've become distant... What happened during that time?"

Concerned about his friend, Alban, who'd been strangely still and obsessed like he'd been possessed, Hugh came. It was surprising. Was that man worth worrying over?

Upon arriving at Philax Castle, the carriage entered the gate with no trouble. Apparently, a previous notice had been given. Hugh headed towards the castle tower, bringing only Salim and Shall with him.

Upon setting foot inside the tower, Shall became concerned with their surroundings, thinking whether or not Ann's presence would be there. Though he wanted to see her, he also didn't want to see her. If he saw her again, would he be able to hear the reason for being rejected?

The place they were led to was not the hall. It was Alban's private chamber—probably because it wasn't an official visit, and because Hugh and Alban shared a close relationship.

Alban was sitting on the couch in front of the fireplace. Upon sensing the door open, he looked their way, but wouldn't get up. Looking bored, he murmured, "I was wondering who it was. Mercury, huh. It's been two years."

"Long time no see, Duke."

While greeting him, Hugh's face couldn't hide his surprise. "You've... lost a lot of weight... You look tired."

"I have no business with the current you who can't make sugar sculptures for anyone other than the King. What did you come for?"

"To give you an invitation. Won't you go on a trip with me? The destination is Lewiston. Well, it'll be a round trip lasting three, four days."

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"You're saying that too, huh. Dale would sometimes say that as well. I have no intention of going to that place."

"It'll be fun."

"Like hell it will."

"It'll be fun. Lady Christina should come as well. She likes the lively Lewiston, doesn't she? Where is she?"

Alban returned his gaze to the fireplace's flames and stopped moving.

"Duke?"

"Leave."

Hugh shrugged, changing his thus far carefree demeanor. Walking briskly, he approached Alban's side, and kneeling by his feet, he looked up at him.

"Duke, for a year and a half, you have neglected to offer your greetings to His Majesty the King. You should know what this means, right? Right now, Earl Downing is preparing soldiers and heading this way. His Majesty gave permission for your subjugation, but that's not His Majesty's real intention. If you show submissive behavior from now on, His Majesty will protect you. He is fond of you and your late father. The same goes for me."

"Leave."

"Duke!"

"I told you to leave!"

Suddenly, Alban stood up and gripped the sword that was placed beside him.

Hugh himself stood and retreated a few steps back. Salim quickly blocked the way in front of Hugh, placing his hand on the handle of his sword. Shall stood on guard as well, examining the situation.

"What... happened to you, Duke?" Hugh, who seemed unable to hide his shock,

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let out his voice.

Alban, still gripping his sword, said in a intimidating manner, "No one will order me. No one will tell me what to do. Including you, Mercury."

"...I understand." Hugh nodded with a light sigh.

"We'll go. But, I have a request. A sugar craftsman named Ann Halford should be staying in this castle. I want to take her back with me."

"I know nothing of it."

"It's the girl who entered this castle with the fairy waiting over there."

"Several craftsmen entered this castle with fairies, but I kicked them all out. There isn't a single sugar craftsman in this castle."

—*That can't be.*

Until the night before, Shall had been looking over Ann, who was here. As he was near the castle till that morning, he'd immediately know if she'd left. Ann was in this castle. To prove it, Ann's box shaped wagon was still being kept by the castle's outer wall.

"Are you sure?"

While confirming with Alban, Hugh questioned Shall through his eyes, 'Is what the Duke saying true?' Shall shook his head slightly, saying, 'No.'

"This is tedious. Leave, Mercury."

Saying nothing more, Alban once again returned to the couch. He threw his sword on the floor and entwined both his hands' fingers in his golden hair, hanging his head as though enduring a headache.

Hugh silently bowed before Alban who wasn't looking at him and turned on his heel.

Salim followed after, and Shall left the room as well.

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Before closing the door, Shall turned back once more. Alban was still in the same posture.

He was keeping her in the castle and hiding her presence. Just what was Alban seeking in a sugar sculpture? Whatever it was, Shall was only concerned with Ann. What was that petite obstinate girl doing at that moment? Had something happened to her? His impatience gave him the urge to go look for her. However—

'Don't ever return, to where I am.'

He remembered Ann's words.

Why was he thinking about going to look for her even though he'd been rejected?

He didn't feel indebted to her. Nor did he have any obligations towards her. Then why did he want to find her? Why was he so impatient, worrying only about her? Regardless of her behavior, he sought her out.

*

Jonas had left the castle.

Ann was in the hall with Mythrill. They came there straight after seeing Jonas off from the tower's window, and she continued gazing at the portrait of the fairy on her feet.

The coldness of the atmosphere made her fingers and toes numb.

Mythrill sat on the floor, letting out a big yawn. Despite that, he perseveringly accompanied Ann. She told him he could go back to the room, but he said he would stay with her and wouldn't comply.

The sun was setting, and orange light shined diagonally on the floor from the

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hall's window.

"Why is it this portrait?"

Having continued to gaze at it, she was tired. That tiredness suddenly made her inadvertently speak those words.

"Why, isn't it because it's a nice picture?"

Myhtrill looked up at the portrait as well, in a manner suggesting he didn't quite understand.

"Why? If you wanted a beautiful picture, there are countless in this world. Why this one?"

"It's not the picture, is it? In the eastern tower, there are lots of similar pictures, aren't there?"

"Yeah, that's right. The Duke wants to give shape to the fairy painted in the picture, not the picture, right? But why this fairy?"

The rays of the setting sun shining through the window gradually grew longer. Crawling on the floor and reaching Ann's feet, they illuminated the portrait she was facing.

The evening light illuminated the back of the fairy in the portrait. Brightened by that light were a pair wings.

"Oh!!"

Instantly, she was astonished.

Why didn't she notice it till now? No, she noticed it. But she didn't think it was important. Though thinking carefully, it was really strange.

"Two wings... This fairy has two wings on her back. She wasn't owned by anyone."

"What about it?"

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"Why is there a portrait of a fairy like that? A fairy born in nature, without being owned, mingling in the human world. That's not considered normal."

"Now that you mention it, I guess that's true."

"Why does the sugar sculpture's model have to be this fairy? I haven't heard the reason for that. What if this fairy is special? The Duke has special feelings... Because he has those feelings, he didn't like my sugar sculptures. If I ask about it, I might be able to understand the foundation for making the sugar sculpture."

That's right. One night, Shall too, muttered while looking at this portrait, didn't he? *'Perhaps Duke Philax isn't looking for something extraordinary in a sugar sculpture?'* That was exactly it. Ann hadn't noticed the hint Shall gave her.

It was not that, from Ann's eyes as a craftsman, the sugar sculpture needed to be perfect and extraordinary. It was that she needed to make what Alban was looking for by looking through his eyes.

"Have you lost it, Ann?" Mythrill shuddered. "Even Jonas ran away in fear. If that Duke is displeased, he's quite capable of hitting even a woman like you... Heck, while he's at it, he might even kill you."

"But if I don't ask, I won't understand."

Still, she wasn't confident that she could make something that would please Alban. She was up against someone who was nearly losing his mind. It could be dangerous.

"Hey, Mythrill Reed Pod." Ann crouched before Mythrill, peeking into his face. "You should leave the castle too."

"Don't joke with me! As if I could run away on my own." Mythrill stood up in anger.

Ann gently held both his little hands with her fingertips in a pinching manner.

"But, thinking that you may face danger, I can't be at ease. After all, this is a

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job I started, so it's my responsibility. Staying here, too, is of my own volition. That's why I don't want to get you involved."

"Ann..."

Ann smiled sweetly.

"It's okay! I'll make that sugar sculpture. So, if you'll say you'll wait for me, wait somewhere in Philax city. Because I'll definitely get that one thousand Cress and leave this castle."

Mythrill looked at her as if exploring her feelings. He seemed to have realized that she didn't declare that carelessly.

It was Ann's job. Staking her pride as a sugar craftsman, she couldn't give it up.

"I understand."

Mythrill nodded. His blue eyes took on an earnest color.

"I'll leave the castle. In exchange, until you get out of the castle, I'll look for Shall Fen Shall. I'll tell him you weren't serious by saying those things and bring him back."

"You'll do that? But Shall may already be far, though."

"I'll look for him. I'm the great Mythrill Reed Pod, after all. Leave it to me."

With his chest puffed up with pride, the little fairy raised his chin. Just hearing him say that made her happy.

"Thank you. I'm counting on you, Mythrill Reed Pod," she said, from the bottom of her heart.

Translator notes:

¹Jonas first uses the informal 'Boku' for 'I', then corrects himself to the formal 'Watashi'.

²He goes back to 'Boku' from here.