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Miri Mikawa

Illustration by Aki



Sugar ★ Apple Fairy★ Tale



The Silver Sugar Master and the Green Workshop



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Illustration by Aki


NEW YORK

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Miri Mikawa

TRANSLATION BY NICOLE WILDER

COVER ART BY AKI

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Sugar Apple Fairy Tale



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STORY & CHARACTERS



SILVER SUGAR MASTER
Anne



WARRIOR FAIRY
Challe



FAIRY
Mithril



SILVER SUGAR MASTER
Kat



CANDY CRAFTER
Jonas

THE STORY SO FAR

Anne, a girl who aspires to become a Silver Sugar Master, has been traveling with the help of her capable bodyguard, Challe, and the boisterous Mithril, dedicating herself to making sugar candy along the way. At her second Royal Candy Fair, Anne finally becomes a Silver Sugar Master, but Challe secretly sacrifices himself to make it happen. In order to save Anne from a trap set for her at the Royal Candy Fair, Challe sells his freedom to Bridget Paige, the daughter of the maestro of the Paige Workshop. And when Anne finds out...?!



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



MAESTRO'S DAUGHTER
Bridget



CANDY CRAFTER
Keith

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.

Hey, Mama. Houses are so nice. I want a house, too.

Huh? This is a house?

But it's a wagon. It's not a house.

Wherever Mama and I are together is home? Is that true?

Home is a place where family and loved ones and friends are together? No matter what kind of place it is?

So then if you and I lived under that tree over there, that tree would be home, Mama? If we lived in the shade of that rock, then the rock would be our house?

Okay then, okay then, so even if we lived in a place that was huge, super huge like a giant's bedroom, with a hundred friends, that would still be called home?

I get it. That's great, Mama! We can make a home wherever we are!

For now, this wagon is home for the two of us. But listen, someday, I will live in a big, amazing house that has lots of flowers, with you and a hundred friends.

That kind of house sounds nice. That's the kind of house I want.

Yeah. Someday for sure, I'll live in that kind of home!

Chapter 1

TO MILLSFIELD

She couldn't move.

"Anne?! What's the matter? Anne?"

Keith had come running over, and he knelt in front of Anne and peered at her face.

"Uh-oh, oh no, sorry! Looks like that was too much of a shock."

Elliott shrugged frivolously.

The plaza in front of the royal castle was still crowded. Anne was sitting on the ground, and people were glancing at her as they passed by. Her gaze was still fixed on the crowd into which Challe had disappeared with Bridget. Her mind was blank.

Kat, who had come over with Keith, grabbed Elliott by the lapels.

"You bastard, what'd you do?"

"How disgraceful, Kat. I haven't done a thing, not out in public like this."

"Then I bet you must've said somethin'!"

"Ah, that is correct!"

"What'd you say?!"

The look in Kat's eyes was unusually harsh. Glaring at Elliott, Keith held Anne's shoulders as she sat there in a daze.

Mithril hopped from Keith's shoulder to Anne's. He stroked her cheek over

and over again.

“Anne. Anne? What happened, Anne?”

She heard Mithril’s concerned voice and finally grasped the situation before her.

She felt the cold and rough texture of the cobblestones under her knees. Whether because of the chill from the stones or because of her fear at having lost Challe, a deep shiver ran through her body.

“I told you, I didn’t say anything bad. I simply enlightened her as to what happened. It was an act of kindness!”

“Kat...that really is what happened. So stop it, please.”

Finally, Anne managed to say something.

She gently pushed Keith’s hands away and stood up in front of Elliott. Keith looked at her with concern.

Kat snorted and released Elliott.

“For your sake, that fairy sold his freedom.”

Elliott’s words echoed in her head like the clanging of a bell.

“Mr. Collins just told me. Bridget knew where my silver sugar was, and in exchange for that information, Challe handed over his wing to her.”

“His wing?!” Mithril shouted in shock.

Kat grabbed Elliott by the collar again. He forced Elliott to turn toward him.

“How’d that happen when you were right there?!” he demanded.

“Is it such a problem? Anne’s silver sugar came back to her, didn’t it?”

“And the price for it was Challe?!”

“Listen, Bridget and Challe made a deal, all right? I didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“But surely, any normal person would warn his fiancée against doing something so foolish?!” Standing next to Anne, Keith also expressed his anger.

Elliott laughed flippantly. “They came to an agreement while I was out of the

room. Sorry.”

“I misjudged you,” Keith growled.

Kat thrust Elliott aside and spat, “What the hell were you thinking?”

“For your sake, that fairy sold his freedom.”

The voice echoing loudly in Anne’s mind made her head spin. She wanted to scream. But she suppressed the urge and tried to remain composed.

“Mr. Collins. Tell me, please. What do I need to do in order to set Challe free?”

If nothing else, she sounded calm.

“Well, normally, you could save up some money and buy a fairy back, but I suspect that’s not going to work. You could dump enough capital to buy the whole kingdom in front of Bridget, and I don’t think she’d let him go. I’m sure of it.”

“What is she going to do with Challe?”

“Not much, I’m sure. In fact, she’ll probably treat him with care. She’ll keep him by her side, give him tasty treats every day, and pet his head, I imagine.”

His words made Anne see red.

“Just what does she think Challe is?!”

Elliott frowned with pity at Anne’s reaction. But unmistakably, he was enjoying himself. The gleam in his eye was all too obvious.

“I don’t really understand why Bridget wants to treat him like a pet, either. This is truly unfortunate.”

He was making Anne angry on purpose. Hearing his words and looking into his eyes, she was convinced of it. Did he simply enjoy provoking her? Or did he have some other objective? At any rate, she hated being the object of his amusement. She held her tongue and just glared at Elliott.

Elliott cocked his head.

“Oh, are we done, then? Well, whatever. I’ll be returning to the main studio of the Radcliffe Workshop. I abandoned my job overseeing the refining of the

silver sugar to come here. Kat, won't there be trouble if you don't go back as well?"

"You head back first. Every once in a while, you should take the initiative and actually do some work."

"Yeah, yeah."

Elliott turned on his heel, and Anne tightly gripped the royal medal that she had just gotten in front of her chest with both hands. She hung her head.

It would have been better if Challe had left of his own free will. She would have been sad, but there would have been nothing she could have done about it.

Yet he had sacrificed his own freedom so that Anne could obtain the royal medal.

"Why did he go that far for me? He didn't have to do such a thing. I failed last year, too, after all. Even if I had failed this time, there would have still been next year."

Keith heard her mumbling. "I'm sorry, Anne," he said. "It's because of what I told him."

Anne looked up and saw Keith biting his lip apologetically.

"You... After what happened with the Duke of Philax, your name became widely known. Because of that, you became an object of envy among other candy crafters. If you had gone on without the qualifications of a Silver Sugar Master, you would have faced so much hostility that you wouldn't have been able to make a living as a candy crafter. If there hadn't been special measures in place this year, it probably would have been difficult for you to obtain enough sugar apples to enter the candy fair, even."

Anne felt like the wind had been knocked out of her, and she started to stumble.

"Anne?!"

Keith panicked as he pulled her toward him by the arm. If he hadn't done so, she probably would have fallen to her knees again.

Now that he had mentioned it, it was so obvious. If Kat hadn't informed her, she would have never known about the special measures regarding silver sugar that year. Furthermore, when she'd been boarding at the main studio of the Radcliffe Workshop, if Keith hadn't put in a good word for her, she wouldn't even have been allowed to set foot on the campus.

If that situation had continued, it would have been impossible for Anne to make a living as a candy crafter on her own. If she hadn't gotten help from people like Kat and Keith, and especially Hugh, she would not have been able to even procure any silver sugar.

She was always receiving help or asking for assistance. She couldn't have done her job without relying on others.

She wondered whether a person like her could really call themselves a full-fledged candy crafter.

I don't want it to be like this. I can't take pride in myself as a candy crafter if that's how I operate.

Now that she had attained the rank of Silver Sugar Master, other crafters would not be able to carelessly mess with her any longer. If anyone interfered with the job of a Silver Sugar Master, a candy crafter who had been recognized by the king, they would be severely punished by the Silver Sugar Viscount.

It was a shock to realize that the path to her future had nearly been blocked because of malice.

Her skin prickled in horror at how spiteful people could be.

Even more shocking was the fact that she'd carelessly failed to realize the situation she'd been in. She felt so pathetic, she wanted to cry.

And Challe had helped her, in all her foolishness.

Challe is the one who gave me this royal medal.

She held back her tears.

It was not the time for tears. Crying out of pity for how naive she'd been would be even more foolish.

"Don't apologize, Keith. This is all my own fault."

She gazed in the direction that Challe had followed Bridget. There was neither a sign nor shadow of him in the crowd of people. A strong wind from the north blew across the plaza, fluttering the lace on the hem of Anne's dress.

Mithril had been overcome by surprise, but he seemed to have finally come back to his senses, and he tugged at Anne's hair.

"Hey, Anne. Let's go to the main studio of the Radcliffe Workshop, too. If that woman took Challe Fenn Challe there, we ought to be able to talk to them if we go there, right?"

"But—"

Anne had been kicked out of the studio by the maestro of the Radcliffe Workshop, Marcus. She wondered whether it would be acceptable for her to shamelessly show her face again. She was still thinking when Keith took her hand.

"Oh right, good idea. Let's go!" Keith said encouragingly. "It's all right. The incident with Sammy has come to light. Even Marcus ought to be wanting to apologize to you. So let's go!"

"Go on, shrimp," Kat agreed. "At any rate, if ya don't go find the girl, ya won't get anywhere," he continued. "I'm takin' Powell's sugar candy back to the studio. After that...I got stuff to do. You two go on ahead."

"Let's go, Anne."

Keith repeated himself a third time and squeezed her hand tightly. It was very comforting.



They were in Bridget's room at the main studio of the Radcliffe Workshop.

It was a guest room on the second floor of the building where the faction's maestro and their family lived, commonly called the main house. Bridget stayed there while she helped with kitchen duties and other jobs.

Unlike the private rooms for the candy crafters, the guest room's walls were plaster, and the wood paneling had been painted with lacquer. The curtains that hung over the windows had a woven pattern. The room was tidy and well-appointed.

Challe had been taken straight to this room. As soon as he was inside, he had leaned back against the wall beside the window and been gazing out of it ever since.

He had not spoken a single word. He looked annoyed. Bridget was perplexed and did not know how to interact with him when he was like that. She quickly lost patience with his silence.

"Challe."

He heard his name. Before he realized it, Bridget was standing before him wearing an anxious expression.

"Are you angry?" she asked.

Am I angry? What a ridiculous question.

Challe chuckled quietly.

"Challe? Answer me. Are you angry?"

Once his chuckling abated, Challe wore a thin smile.

"You are my master. Why should you care about the feelings of someone under your control? Order me to do everything. Tell me to pay attention to you, to act like I'm in a good mood, and that if I don't, you'll punish me. That's what you should say. If you don't intend to order me around, give me back my wing."

As if frightened by the sharp glint in his eye, Bridget stepped back. Then she raised her hand to protect the leather pouch that was hanging from her neck, hidden underneath her clothes.

"I will not. Absolutely not."

"Then order me around."

When he said that, Bridget looked frustrated for a moment. Then after a brief pause, she spoke.

“Stop it with the defiant attitude.”

“This is normal. I’m not defying you.”

“I don’t like the way you’re talking to me. Be nicer! Speak tenderly to me, like you did with that girl. If you won’t do that for me, then I really will punish you.”

Bridget fled even farther to the edge of the room, as if she was afraid of Challe. There, she took out the small pouch containing the wing from underneath her clothes. She opened the mouth of the pouch and produced the wing from within.

Bridget tightly grasped it, which was long enough to dangle down to her feet, in both hands and pulled it tight. The instant she did, Challe was assailed by a terrible agony that wrenched his entire body. He groaned and grimaced.

Bridget quickly eased her grip.

The pain subsided.

Challe took a deep breath.

Bridget looked back and forth between Challe and the wing in her hands with a guilty expression.

“I’m sorry... I didn’t mean to make you suffer...”

Bridget folded the wing carefully and returned it to its pouch, then replaced it beneath her clothes. She timidly approached Challe.

“Listen, treat me like you treated that other girl. That’s all I want you to do. This is a first for me. The first time I’ve ever cared for someone so much.”

Looking into Bridget’s teary eyes, Challe felt nothing but a cold sensation spreading through his chest. It was a very familiar sensation. He had lived every day of his life with that feeling before he met Anne.

There was a knock at the door.

“Bridget? Are you in there?”

It was Marcus Radcliffe’s wife. Bridget jumped, as if she had a bad premonition about that voice.

“Y-yes. I’m here. What is it?”

When Bridget opened the door, Mrs. Radcliffe was standing there with a concerned look on her face. She held out an envelope.

“An urgent letter came for you. From Millsfield.”

Bridget took the letter, immediately cut the seal, and began reading. Her face quickly clouded over.

Mrs. Radcliffe stayed and watched Bridget finish reading the letter, then asked, “Bad news?”

Bridget furrowed her brow.

“It seems my father had a seizure this morning. He hasn’t had one for a while, but...”

“How’s his condition?”

“Not too good, apparently.”

“Then you must go home to Millsfield. If you leave now, you can arrive by evening.”

It was a kind suggestion, but Bridget looked torn.

“But my duties here—”

“The kitchen will be fine. We can always borrow a helper fairy from one of the studios in our faction. Even without you, we won’t have any trouble.”

At those words, Bridget hung her head.

“But...does that mean I’m not needed?”

“Isn’t it best if they let you go home, Bridget?”

Suddenly, there was a voice from behind Mrs. Radcliffe.

Mrs. Radcliffe turned around in surprise. “Oh!”

Standing there was Elliott, who had shown up unnoticed.

“Mr. Collins. Did you hear what we were just discussing?”

“I did. So Glen had a seizure, did he? If possible, I’d like to send Bridget back to Millsfield; would that be all right?”

“Yes, no problem at all. Let’s summon a carriage right away, shall we? What will you do, Mr. Collins? Will you go back with her as well?”

“I would really like to, but unfortunately, I have a job to do, and I can only go after getting permission from Marcus. So for the time being, I’d like to at least have Bridget return, so could I ask you to arrange the carriage? Oh, the fee will be paid after she arrives at the main studio of the Paige Workshop. Take this for the deposit.”

Elliott pulled several copper coins from his breast pocket and handed them to her. She accepted the money and headed down the stairs, saying she would prepare a carriage immediately.

Once Mrs. Radcliffe had gone, Elliott stepped into the room.

“What’s this? My darling little Bridget looks upset; what’s the matter?”

Bridget glared at Elliott.

“I have a job here. Don’t decide I’m going back without even asking me.”

“Your father had a bad seizure. I think you have a duty to return, don’t you?”

“Don’t I have a duty to do my job as well?”

“You heard Mrs. Radcliffe, right? They won’t have any trouble even if you’re gone, so it’s totally fine. They can find a replacement to do the kitchen work, but there’s no one to replace you as Glen’s daughter, is there?”

Hearing Elliott’s words, Bridget turned her face away.

“The only value I have is as Glen Paige’s daughter, I suppose.”

“I don’t know what you’re getting so bent out of shape for, but your life is looking pretty rosy right now, isn’t it, Bridget? After all, you got your hands on Challe, who you wanted so badly. Hey, Challe. You look like you’re in a foul mood.”

Looking amused, Elliott approached Challe and peered at his face. After flashing him a big grin, Elliott turned around to look at Bridget again.

“I hastened your return home out of kindness, you know? As long as you’re here, Anne will come, no question about it.”

Anne will come.

Bridget was startled by his words.

“Anne already knows Challe gave you his wing in exchange for her silver sugar. She’s aware he sacrificed himself for her sake, but she’s not the type to simply say thank you and let it go. She wants him back, so she’ll definitely come. She’ll press you to set him free and may even make a scene, you know? In which case, wouldn’t it be best to take Challe and go home to Millsfield?”

Bridget’s face stiffened.

“I won’t give him back.”

“Well then, shouldn’t you get packing?”

Bridget sprang into action.

She pulled down outfits that were hanging on the wall one after another, draping them over her arm. She balled the clothes up and tossed them onto the bed. She dragged a traveling bag out from underneath and began desperately stuffing dresses into it.

“Hurry now. They’ll have the carriage ready soon, so you’ve got to get out of here before Anne shows up.” Elliott seemed to be enjoying himself as he nonchalantly provoked her. “...Although,” he added, “that girl will definitely come chasing after you. No matter how far you go.”

He mumbled that last part quietly so Bridget wouldn’t hear him. It sounded like he was expecting Anne to come chasing after Challe.

Challe stared at Elliott, scrutinizing his face. He couldn’t understand what on Earth the man was thinking. But as he’d said, Anne was definitely on her way.

Challe had predicted Anne would quickly learn the reason why he had left with Bridget. He knew that once she learned the truth, she was unlikely to accept it so meekly, because she was a good-natured girl.

He had no doubt that Anne was going to strive to set him free.

But there was no way Bridget was going to allow it. Anne’s efforts would be futile.

Instead, now that she had the title of Silver Sugar Master, she ought to embark on her new path. She had plenty of people she could rely on. Even with Challe gone, she would be able to make it as a Silver Sugar Master.

Anne would set off on a journey with her new title with the others. That was a joyful thing, not a cause for sorrow.

But to the contrary, his feelings were hopelessly somber. He wanted to be happy for her, but in the depths of his heart, there was a part of him that couldn't find any joy in it. Those were his own selfish feelings. He knew that perfectly well.

Don't come, Anne.

He softly closed his eyes and implored her. He had made his decision for the sake of her future. He didn't want Anne to ruin her future and her hard work by getting mixed up in his business.

But no matter what he did, he was overcome with emotions.

Visions of Anne's myriad expressions appeared vividly in his mind. Her puzzled looks, her absent-minded stares, her flushed cheeks. The very mature and serious expressions that she showed him sometimes. He wanted to see her again.

Don't come.

Even as he calmly prayed for her not to come, he wanted to see her. The emotional turmoil was agonizing.



Anne ran all the way to the main studio of the Radcliffe Workshop with Keith pulling her by the hand. They were both out of breath when they arrived, but they passed right through the gate and headed straight for the main house.

When they rang the doorbell, a worker fairy came out to greet them. After announcing they had business with Bridget, the fairy told them where to find

her room and let the two of them inside.

They had headed upstairs and were standing in front of the door when Anne suddenly felt nervous.

She didn't know what to say or how to say it. More than anything else, she knew she would probably burst into tears of relief once she saw Challe. At any rate, she wanted to see him.

She gathered herself and knocked on the door.

"Hey, hey. Come on in."

From inside came Elliott's voice. Anne opened the door with suspicion and saw him sitting on the bed in the empty room, grinning.

"Welcome, you two!"

Bridget and Challe were not there. Anne looked around the room, confused.

"Mr. Collins. Bridget and Challe are...?"

"They went back to the main studio of the Paige Workshop, in Millsfield. Glen had a seizure this morning and is in poor condition, so it was necessary for Bridget to return home. You just missed them."

"No..."

Atop Anne's shoulder, Mithril raised a clenched fist.

"Hey, you! Why didn't you stop them?!"

"I mean, I didn't have any obligation to do that, so..."

"Don't you have any empathy?!"

"I think I'm the type of person who hasn't got much of that. Sorry!"

"You're the lowest of the low!"

Elliott just laughed at Mithril's indignation.

Let's go after Challe. At least, for now. As far as Millsfield.

The town was only a half day's distance from Lewiston by wagon. It wasn't that far.

“Well, then. I think I’ll go get permission from Master Radcliffe and go back to Millsfield myself. I’m also concerned about Glen’s health.”

Elliott stood up and walked over to Anne.

“Right. Are you coming with me, Anne?”

Not understanding his words, she blinked repeatedly.

Elliott continued, “You’re a Silver Sugar Master now, right, Anne Halford? Will you come with me to the main studio of the Paige Workshop in Millsfield? If you work there as a Silver Sugar Master, you might find an opportunity to get Challe back. How about it?”

Keith stepped in front of Anne as if to protect her and asked warily, “What are you scheming, Mr. Collins?”

“Nothing. I’m not planning anything; I’m just being nice!”

“Are you suggesting I join the Paige Workshop and work at the main studio?” Anne asked.

“I am, indeed.”

Mithril gave Elliott a sidelong glance as he whispered to Anne, “This guy’s got some kind of ulterior motive. Definitely.”

She didn’t need the warning. She was perfectly aware that Elliott wouldn’t make such a proposal out of kindness.

Her mother, Emma, had always hated the factions. When Anne had asked her why, she had only ever answered that she didn’t like their way of doing things. And now Anne understood the reason behind her mother’s response. Emma had most likely dealt with the factions once, and perhaps in the same way as Anne, it had left her with a sour taste in her mouth. If she could, Anne didn’t want to have anything more to do with any of the factions.

But. But...that doesn’t matter.

Anne stared straight at Elliott.

“I’ll go. To Millsfield.”

“Anne, you ought to think this over carefully! There’s undoubtedly a catch to

such a convenient proposal. What if they have something bad in store?"

Keith anxiously advised Anne against her snap decision.

Elliott frowned. His droopy eyes looked all the more charming.

"So harsh, Keith! Do you really think of me as such a villain?"

"Yes!"

Keith glared sternly at Elliott.

"So quick to answer..."

Without taking her eyes off Elliott, Anne said, "I don't care if there's something bad waiting for me there, because either way, I want to go to where Challe is. If you say you'll let me work at the main studio of the Paige Workshop, then that's what I want."

"Anne, you..."

At her words, Keith held his tongue in apparent resignation.

Elliott flashed a broad grin.

"Wonderful. That's what I was hoping for."

"How should we go about this? Will we set off for Millsfield immediately?" Anne asked, challenging him.

"First, I need to get permission from Master Radcliffe to take off work. You ought to speak with him as well, to make sure you're able to secure yourself enough silver sugar for next year. So you should come with me, too. Then once we've settled on an agreement, we'll pack our things and be on our way. Though, it's dangerous to travel at night, so we'll probably leave tomorrow morning."

"Understood."

"So that's it, then. Keith, I wonder if I could ask you to go back to the workroom?"

Elliott waved his hand as if to shoo Keith away.

"Why is that? Am I not allowed to be here?"

“Keith, didn’t you leave the silver sugar refining work without telling anyone? Playing hooky, are you? I’m your supervisor. Surely, it’s only natural that I would tell you to go back to work.”

“But I’m asking you, why now?”

“Keith, go. It’s fine,” Anne said, smiling to reassure him.

Keith frowned and looked worried. But in the end, he nodded obediently. Then he put a hand on Anne’s shoulder and tried to encourage her.

“Anne, remember this. Both me and Mr. Hingley are here to help you if anything happens.”

“Thank you.”

She was delighted enough just to hear his offer. The whole series of incidents, including the situation with Challe, were Anne’s problems. Yet Keith had been so kind, worrying about one thing or another and running around on her behalf. She felt bad about it. She didn’t want to presume upon his and Kat’s kindness any more than she already had.

Once Keith had left the room, Elliott put his hand on his hip and asked, “Okay, ready? We’ve got all sorts of arrangements to make. Master Radcliffe should be back by now.”

Anne nodded and followed Elliott out of the room.

Anne shoved a dress and a few towels into her small clothing trunk and closed the lid.

She didn’t have many personal effects and finished packing in a flash.

She was in the same room at the Weather Vane where she had spent the previous night. The sun had completely set, and it was pitch-dark outside.

As one could only expect in the royal capital, there were glass windows even at such a cheap inn. The glass itself had many impurities mixed in, and it wasn’t very transparent, so the view was warped. Despite that, having this separation where she could enjoy the scenery outside without being exposed to the open

air felt like a luxury to Anne, who had been raised on the road, traveling between rural villages.

Mithril had thoughtfully lit the lamp for her.

Its light reflected softly in the windowpanes.

Anne sighed and sat on the bed.

It had been several hours since she had left Bridget's room with Elliott, and it was a whirlwind of events.

They first had to find Marcus. But he was apparently running around because of the incident with Sammy, and it had been very difficult to determine his whereabouts.

By the time Marcus finally returned to the main studio, it was nearly evening.

Right after leaving the Royal Candy Fair with Sammy in tow, Marcus had gotten in touch with Sammy's relatives and arranged for them to come collect him. Following that, he went to the Silver Sugar Viscount, Hugh Mercury, and got him to issue a notice of expulsion forbidding Sammy Jones from calling himself a candy crafter. After arranging for the news to be shared with all the crafters belonging to the Radcliffe Workshop, Marcus then drew up official letters for the maestros of the remaining two factions, informing them that one of his crafters had received a notice of expulsion.

He had apparently taken care of all that in half a day.

His swift actions, without the slightest delay, showed the degree of his anger.

When Anne went with Elliott to see Marcus, the maestro quickly explained all the steps he had taken to deal with the incident. After which he added morosely, "We will split next year's silver sugar harvest with Ms. Halford. I won't ask for your forgiveness, but as an apology, this is as much as I can do."

Anne was satisfied with that. She had secured her silver sugar, and the person who had been so cruel to her had received an appropriate punishment. That was enough. And she was relieved to hear that Jonas had been exonerated.

As one would expect, Marcus also seemed pained by his poor treatment of his innocent nephew. He mentioned he had written a letter to Jonas's home,

apologizing and inviting him to come back to the main studio of the Radcliffe Workshop.

Elliott had also received permission to take off work.

The refining of the silver sugar would be finished within the next three days. Even without Elliott there, they would have no difficulty getting it done. And the reason that he was leaving had to do with the maestro of a faction. Marcus seemed to be in favor of Elliott prioritizing the maestro of his own faction.

They made arrangements for Anne to travel to Millsfield with Elliott the following morning.

“Anne, aren’t you hungry?” Mithril asked.

Anne wasn’t hungry at all.

“How about you, Mithril Lid Pod? Are you?”

“So hungry. I’m on the verge of starvation,” he complained in a miserable voice.

Anne then remembered that she and Mithril had not had lunch.

“Ah, sorry! You were keeping me company and didn’t eat lunch, did you?”

Flustered, she stood up and pulled several copper coins from her wallet, which she had tossed into her luggage.

She handed the coins to Mithril, who was standing beside the lamp.

“Take these and go eat something in the dining room on the first floor.”

Mithril took the money, and his face lit up in a smile. But then he looked up at Anne with concern.

“You’re not eating, Anne?”

“I’m not that hungry. It’s fine.”

Anne forced herself to smile, but Mithril stared intently into her eyes.

“I guess you’re not interested in eating, huh? What you’re interested in is Challe Fenn Challe. But I also understand his feelings really well, okay? If someone like me was able to do what he did, I would have done the same

thing. He did it because he wanted to. You don't have to worry about him, Anne."

Mithril's kindness gently touched her heart. Her chest ached all the more.

"I understand perfectly well that he was thinking of me. I also understand he wouldn't want me to worry about him. But I want to help Challe. I want to set him free."

When Mithril heard that, he looked a little troubled.

"I'm not really sure whether this is something I ought to tell you, Anne, but if I was in Challe Fenn Challe's position, I think I would have prepared myself before handing over my own wing. And since I had resigned myself to it so you could become a Silver Sugar Master, I wouldn't want you to come save me. I would be happy so long as you made a name for yourself and lived a pleasant life as a Silver Sugar Master. I wouldn't want you to come set me free. Because of who he is, even if you go help him, he might say it was none of your business."

"He probably will. But I want the three of us to be together—Mithril Lid Pod, Challe, and me. I can't stand being apart. This isn't for Challe's sake; it's for mine. I'm sure I'm being very selfish, but I just want the three of us to be together again."

"I see... Mm, okay."

Mithril nodded several times, looking satisfied with her explanation.

"It's for your own sake, you say? That's why you're going to Millsfield, Anne? In that case, it's fine. Let's get him back, that Challe Fenn Challe guy. Everything will be fine, then, won't it? So cheer up! Let's eat some dinner. If you don't feel like going downstairs, I, Mithril Lid Pod, will help by bringing food and mulled wine to our room. No matter how much you insist that you have no appetite, once a tasty feast is laid out before your eyes, you will certainly feel like eating! Guaranteed!"

Mithril bounced out of the room.

Anne rubbed her cheeks roughly with both hands.

“Come on, cheer up!”

The next day, she would go to Millsfield. But from there, she had no idea what she should do.

Elliott had said she might be able to find a way to take Challe back.

But it was hard to tell what Elliott was thinking. She couldn't pin him down.

Her eyes landed on the royal medal, which she had set down by the window. The silver medal was beautiful and untarnished, and its beauty and the weight of its presence were delightful. Yet at the same time, it made her chest hurt. It was hard to look at, like it was a symbol of Challe's consideration and her own foolishness. She walked over to the window and picked it up.

With it in hand, she opened the lid of her small trunk. She pulled out a scarf that she had inside, carefully wrapped it around the medal, placed it at the bottom of the trunk, and closed the lid again. She looked down at the trunk.

If Challe is the one who gave me this royal medal, then until I set Challe free, I can't say with pride that I have earned my title as a Silver Sugar Master.

She was reluctant to take full ownership until she was able to get Challe's wing back. It seemed appropriate to lay it carefully to rest at the bottom of her trunk.

She had wanted to obtain the royal medal for so long. But why had she wanted it so badly? Why had she wanted to become a Silver Sugar Master? Why had she wanted to make sugar candy in the first place?

The fact that Challe had lost his freedom in exchange for her royal medal raised some fundamental questions.

All Anne had ever thought about was wanting to make sugar candy, and her only goal had been to become a Silver Sugar Master. She had never wondered why or questioned herself. The joy of creating something beautiful with her own hands drove Anne to make sugar candy. But beyond that, a strong urge to create had taken root in Anne, the true nature of which wasn't clear to her.

Why do I want to make sugar candy so badly? Becoming a Silver Sugar Master is what I wanted, right?

Just then, there was a knock at the door.

Anne snapped out of her reverie and rushed over to open the door. When she opened it, an unexpected person was standing there.

“Yo, it’s the fresh new Silver Sugar Master!”

“Hugh?!”

Standing on the other side of the door was Hugh Mercury. As always, he was accompanied by Salim, who was close behind him. Hugh was dressed not in the attire of the Silver Sugar Viscount, which he had worn that afternoon. Instead, he was wearing an inconspicuous brown jacket. Dressed in such simple clothing, his wild intensity was all the more striking.

“What are you doing in a place like this?” Anne asked.

“I’ve got something to discuss with you. Can I come in?”

“Ah, sure. Please.”

Anne moved aside to let him enter. Hugh told Salim to wait in the hallway and stepped inside.

He closed the door and looked around the room.

“Wow, it’s tidier than I thought. Maybe I’ll use this place when I’m traveling incognito.”

“I recommend it; the food here is good, too. But do you really need to go incognito that often?”

“Don’t ask questions you don’t want the answers to. I go out to enjoy some adult entertainment, among other reasons.”

“I...probably don’t want to hear about that. By the way, what did you have to discuss with me? Does it have to do with me winning the royal medal?”

Hugh gazed out the window, then turned back to Anne. He was grinning.

“Well, since you asked, it does. Anne, you know how Kat hates my guts?”

“Mm. Ah...! I don’t think Kat hates you that much...”

She had almost answered honestly. But she had caught herself and hastily

corrected her statement. Even Kat had a reputation to uphold. And she was talking to the Silver Sugar Viscount.

But Hugh seemed to understand and waved his hand dismissively.

“It’s fine. I’m aware of his dislike for me. He’s so childish. Just because I gave him a nickname, he’s been sulking about it for over fifteen years. Anyway, since he’s such an immature fellow, whenever he sees my face, he just tells me to beat it or says I make him sick. But today, in a rare move for him, he came to see me of his own volition. That alone was surprising enough, but what business do you think he had with me?”

Anne didn’t have the slightest idea. Hugh continued talking.

“He came to me with a request. Honestly, I was flabbergasted. Seeing him bow to me was like some kind of miracle. And the cause of that miracle was you, Anne.”

“Me?”

“Yeah. Kat came to ask me to use my authority as the Silver Sugar Viscount to get Challe back from the daughter of the maestro of the Paige Workshop.”

“Ah...so that’s what he went to do.”

After the Royal Candy Fair, Anne and Keith had left for the main studio of the Radcliffe Workshop. Kat had not accompanied them, as he’d said that he had something else to take care of. Perhaps that was when he had gone to enlist Hugh’s help.

“He seems to feel somewhat responsible for what happened with your silver sugar, since the swap took place at the main studio. He was supervising the refining of the silver sugar and was aware of the difficulties between you and the others, so he feels like he played a part because he didn’t notice.”

“But Kat isn’t to blame for any of this.”

“I told him the same thing. But he’s a sweet guy at heart, just like someone else I know!”

Hugh burst out laughing.

“He worked alongside you and came to think of you as a kind of apprentice of

his. It sounds like he wants to get back something his darling apprentice treasures.”

Kat thought of Anne as his protégé. That made her really happy. It meant Kat acknowledged her as a true candy crafter. Both Keith and Kat accepted Anne as one of their colleagues without complaint. That was probably why they were so concerned on her behalf.

“So it is possible for me to accept Kat’s request—to put pressure on the Paige Workshop and take Challe back. Though, it would be awfully tyrannical of me.”

“That’s...”

Hugh stared intently at Anne. After thinking about it for a moment, she slowly looked up at him.

“I’m sorry, Hugh. Please don’t do that,” she said decisively. “I’m grateful that Kat cares. But if I don’t make up for my own foolishness, it won’t mean anything. If I had been smarter and more cautious, this whole thing could have been avoided. I don’t want to ask someone else for help again. I’m the one who’ll set Challe free. I’ll save him on my own. Otherwise, I’ve got no right to go around calling myself a Silver Sugar Master, holding a royal medal that Challe won for me.”

Kat accepted Anne as a fellow candy crafter and had asked Hugh to help her. That was all the more reason she couldn’t take advantage of his kindness.

The person whom Kat and Keith respected was Anne the candy crafter. She had to act like a proper crafter should. She couldn’t depend on them. She had to be strong and stand on her own two feet, or she would be embarrassed to show her face in front of them.

Hugh grinned.

“I win.”

“Huh? You win?”

“Yep, I win. Because I was right about how you’d respond. I didn’t accept Kat’s request. But he kept insisting that I do something, so we made a bet. In the event that you wanted my help, Kat would win. I would become the tyrannical

Silver Sugar Viscount he wanted me to be and put pressure on the Paige Workshop to return Challe. But if you didn't want me to interfere, it would be my win. So now Kat's going to do whatever I ask of him."

Hugh's mouth curled into a terribly sadistic smile.

"Kat lost?! So that means... Hugh, what are you going to make him do?"

"I'm going to carefully think about it. I'll get him to do something he hates and really make him cry."

Hugh looked absolutely delighted and thrilled, which made Anne worried.

"I'm begging you. Don't torment Kat too much. He's a good person."

"I can't promise you that. Bullying him has been like a hobby for me these past fifteen years, after all."

"What a dreadful hobby to have!"

The thought that maybe Hugh deserved Kat's enmity flashed through Anne's mind.

"No helping it, I'm afraid. He always starts yowling right away, so he's fun to tease," Hugh said readily.

Then he suddenly put on a serious expression.

"Anne. You intend to go to Millsfield and get Challe back? I'm sure you know this already, but I'll still say it: The first year after becoming a Silver Sugar Master will be an important time for you. It's when you should be figuring out your crafting style and building your reputation. The world is going to be curious about its newest Silver Sugar Master, at least until the next one is announced next year. During that time, you have to work hard to pave your path in this profession."

A new Silver Sugar Master was crowned every year. In the period before the subsequent one was selected, that year's new Silver Sugar Master received a lot of attention. If they didn't use it to their advantage and create a solid reputation, rumors would spread that they did not deserve that title. Excluding Anne, there were currently twenty-three Silver Sugar Masters. Several of them had poor reputations.

Anne's mother, Emma, had a very good one. Immediately after becoming a Silver Sugar Master, Emma had gotten in her horse-drawn wagon and started traveling. Apparently, she had visited as many places as she could in her first year, drawing people's attention by hanging up a sign identifying herself as that year's new Silver Sugar Master. She had established her reputation across a wide area.

Anne was well aware that the first year was important.

"This is your time to establish your standing as a Silver Sugar Master. If you mess this up, people will say your win was a fluke. Especially because you're a girl. The world is harsh. Give up on Challe or at least go after him once this year passes and your standing is stable."

Anne bit her lip. She shook her head forcefully.

"I can't do that. I said this before, but as things stand, I can't proudly call myself a Silver Sugar Master. There's no way I can establish myself as one like this. I can worry about my standing and other such matters after I help Challe."

"That's naive."

"I know. But I have to do what I have to do. I'm going to set Challe free."

She had resolved herself to all that.

Hugh saw her expression, and the harsh look in his eyes immediately softened.

"I see. You're hopeless, you know."

Then Hugh ruffled Anne's hair.

"Go do it, then. Get him back, Anne. I guess for you, that's the first step. So that you can call yourself a Silver Sugar Master."

Anne nodded firmly.

"No matter what, I'll get him back."

Chapter 2

THE WORKSHOP AMONG THE LAKES AND GREEN HILLS

“Wow, what a huge help! You saved me the carriage fare!”

Elliott sat beside Anne, looking like he had expected nothing less.

Anne left Lewiston with her old boxy wagon and took the road headed northeast.

The highway connecting Lewiston and Millsfield was well traveled by wagons and pedestrians. The road was wide, and wagons could pass each other with room to spare.

To either side of the road was woodland, broken up by small settlements of two or three farmhouses and their wheat fields. It was a clear sunny day, so the aroma of the forest was refreshing.

The farmers looked cheerful as they harvested the heavily laden ears of ripe wheat.

Elliott seemed to be in a good mood. In the bright sunshine, his red hair looked even redder.

Anne was somewhat less than happy. Mithril had taken up a position between Anne and Elliott and was on guard, glaring suspiciously up at Elliott.

I doubt this guy told me to come work at the main studio of the Paige Workshop just to save himself the carriage fare...

That morning, Anne had finished all her preparations for the journey. Kat and

Keith had come to see her off as she headed out from the main studio of the Radcliffe Workshop, steering her boxy horse-drawn wagon.

Elliott had not made any arrangements for a carriage of his own, as if neglecting to do so was unavoidable. It seemed he had intended to ride along on Anne's wagon from the start.

"Anyway, poor Kat didn't look well at all, huh? I wonder if he ate something bad?" Elliott sounded carefree.

When Kat had come to see her off, Anne had told him about Hugh's visit the night before. She had declined his proposal and thanked him for his kindness.

"I heard all the details from that dim-witted bastard last night," Kat had said, adding that he didn't expect any thanks for sticking his nose where it didn't belong. But he looked dispirited. Anne couldn't help but worry and asked Kat what Hugh had demanded of him. Kat made an extremely unpleasant face and simply said, *"I don't want to talk about it."*

She wondered what on Earth the Silver Sugar Viscount had demanded. Hugh had said that Kat was a good-natured person, but despite that, he couldn't help but take advantage of him. He was quite mean.

Speaking of nasty people, the man sitting beside Anne was just as bad. At the moment, she had absolutely no idea what he was planning.

"How nice this is! Traveling together with a girl. Truly delightful."

"Hey! The two of you aren't alone together, pal! I'm right here!" Mithril said with an angry look in his eyes.

"Ah— Sorry, sorry. It's a two-person trip with a girl, plus you, so two and a half?" Elliott rephrased, looking fed up.

"Why am I an extra?! And only half, to boot?!"

"Just calling it as I see it. Ah, well, maybe not half—maybe more like a tenth, then?"

"Who do you think you are—?!!"

Mithril grabbed Elliott by the collar and shouted at him. But Elliott ignored the angry fairy, crossed both arms behind his head, and leaned back against the

seat.

“Anyway, Anne. Do you have a boyfriend?”

“Huh?! What kind of question is that, all of a sudden?”

Elliott’s puzzling question was so abrupt and so flippant that she was almost impressed by his brazenness.

“Well, that’s the kind of thing people are curious about, right? It’s perfectly normal.”

“I’m not curious about those things.”

“Well, I am. So how about it? Am I right in thinking your boyfriend is Challe?”

“N-n-n-n-no way!!”

“So I guessed right? I knew it!”

“Are you even listening?! Didn’t I just flatly deny it?!”

“Okay, so he’s not your boyfriend. Unrequited love, then? How dreadful. Why don’t you abandon such a fruitless pursuit and go out with me instead?”

“Just what is wrong with your gray matter?!” Mithril lashed out at Elliott for his proposal. “Is it rotten in there?!”

“Terrible words from a tenth of a man.”

“Don’t call me a tenth of anything! Even half was better than that—!!”

Anne felt deflated by the foolishness of it all.

They were in the northeastern part of the kingdom known as the Strand region, which had several lakes.

It was a place where many royals and nobles owned villas and vacation homes, a retreat for the upper classes.

There were no craggy mountains—just gently sloping hills and meadows, lakes, and forests. The area was full of peaceful, beautiful scenery.

Millsfield was in the center of the Strand region. It was the provincial capital of the Sant Province, which made up half of the area.

The town was just a half day’s distance from Lewiston by wagon, and it was a

fairly bustling place for its size. The surrounding countryside was dotted with lakes and patches of forest, giving the area a relaxed atmosphere. There were no city walls or fortifications, and the town hadn't been carefully planned, but the roads were wide, so it didn't seem too chaotic. Having developed organically, the place had a serenity to it. The provincial governor's castle was somewhat distant from the town, as if standing guard over Millsfield from afar. Its watchful presence was one of the primary reasons that the place felt so peaceful.

The main studio of the Paige Workshop was on the east side of Millsfield, on the outskirts of town. It was located right where the town ended and the road became a country lane.

The studio sat atop a gently sloping hill, and at the foot of the hill was a small copse of trees and a lake. The broad leaves had changed colors, and the yellows and reds were reflected on the rippling surface of the water.

Aside from the copse of trees, it was all grass. The grass was withered, but a dry, pleasant breeze blew over the extensive fields.

This scenery was typical of the Strand region.

In the middle of the property was a large brick building with a steeply pitched roof. The building looked like it was calmly gazing out over the foothills and lakes spread out before it.

And clustered around that structure was a group of seven long bungalows, two small two-story houses, one hut that looked like a storehouse, and one stable for horses.

"All the buildings over there make up the main studio of the Paige Workshop. The one in the middle is the main house. That's where Glen, the maestro of the faction, lives. Bridget and I live there, too. The Silver Sugar Masters, and folk with important roles in the workshop, live over there. All seven of the single-story buildings near the main house are used for the production of sugar candies and the refining of silver sugar. At the Radcliffe Workshop, production and refining are done in separate buildings, but here, they're in the same one. Out of the seven workrooms, only one is currently in use. The two-story houses are where the candy crafters live together," Elliott said, pointing out each

structure.

Among the three factions of candy crafters, the Paige Workshop had the longest history.

About three hundred years ago, the land that was now the Kingdom of Highland was ruled by various feudal lords who were constantly warring with one another.

In order to draw in good fortune for themselves, the lords controlling each area competed to employ candy crafters.

During that era, a candy crafter named Enoch Paige appeared. He established the first-known candy workshop. There was a limit to the amount of candy that he could produce alone, so he gathered other crafters to work under him and made candy after candy to suit the desires of the feudal lord who hired him.

The family that employed Enoch Paige became the present-day royal family, the Millslands.

This was the start of the Paige Workshop. They continued to work for the Millsland family, and two hundred years later, the Millsland family united the Kingdom of Highland.

The Radcliffe Workshop was founded just before that happened, while the Mercury Workshop was established around the same time as the unification of the kingdom. Each of the other workshops had originally been a branch of the Paige Workshop. Over time, the number of subordinates who branched out from each workshop increased, building out the structure of each faction.

In short, the Paige Workshop was the origin of the other candy factions.

Anne's first experience with a big candy studio was the main studio of the Radcliffe Workshop. Because of that, she was under the mistaken impression that they were imposing places.

As such, she expected the main studio of the Paige Workshop, which held three hundred years of history, to be the same and look like a fortress.

Instead, counter to her expectations, the main studio of the Paige Workshop gave the impression of a large rustic household on an expansive estate.

And Challe was somewhere inside those grounds. She would be able to see him again. She was overcome with happiness. They had only been separated for a single day. Yet she wanted to see him so badly that she could hardly stand it.

Anne's boxy wagon ascended the hilly road that wound gently upward through the meadow.

Before long, they arrived at the main house.

The building was larger than it had appeared to be from afar.

The raised-floor home was on top of a cobblestone foundation. It was a design often seen in regions where the winters were especially cold; the space under the floor was used for storing the firewood needed to make it through the winter.

Elliott told Anne to tie her horse to a nearby tree, then he went into the main house ahead of her.

Anne did as instructed.

A breeze blew across the meadow, rustling the blades of grass. Anne heard feet treading on the gravel behind her.

When she turned around, she found a young man there.

He had his black hair tied into a single high ponytail, where it swayed in the breeze like a horse's tail. His facial features made him seem cold, and his pale-blue eyes added to that impression.

Even after he made eye contact with Anne, the young man didn't move; he just stared fixedly at her, motionless. Anne couldn't come up with anything to say on the spur of the moment. After they stared at each other in silence for a minute, the young man frowned slightly.

"Who are you?"

He had to be someone associated with the workshop. So Anne went ahead and introduced herself.

"I am Anne Halford. I was invited by Mr. Elliott Collins to come and work at the main studio of the Paige Workshop."

“Elliott?”

The young man wrinkled his brow even further. His expression was a mixture of displeasure and suspicion.

“Um, and you are?”

The young man was silent. Anne didn’t know what to do. She wasn’t sure how to interact with him.

Then Mithril, who had been sitting on Anne’s shoulder the whole time, brought his face close to her ear and whispered, “Anne, do you think this guy is asleep with his eyes open?”

“I’m not asleep,” the young man finally said. “Don’t be rude.”

Elliott poked his head out from the front door of the main house. “Oops, you already met?” he asked. He descended the stone steps and approached them.

The young man moved aside slightly and looked at Elliott. Then—

“Elliott. What’s this?” he said, pointing a finger at the tip of Anne’s nose.

“That’s Anne Halford. She’s a Silver Sugar Master. I scouted her in Lewiston.”

The young man’s eyes opened wide.

“A Silver Sugar Master?”

“Yep. A girl! Isn’t it nice? Isn’t she cute? I’m going to introduce her to Glen now. Starting tomorrow, she’s going to be working with us. Try to get along.”

The young man cast a fleeting glance at Anne. But immediately, he turned his back to her and Elliott. Without acknowledging or denying what Elliott had said and with no parting words, he walked straight into the main house at a brisk pace.

Mithril cocked his head as he watched the young man leave. “What was that about?”

Elliott smiled at his question. “That was Orlando Langston. He’s one of our head crafters, and he supervises the whole sugar candy production. He’s very skilled. Though, he is pretty cranky for someone around the same age as me. Well then, let’s go inside, Anne. I know it’s sudden, but I want you to meet Glen.

He's the maestro of the Paige Workshop."

There were seven stone steps leading up to the entrance. At the top of the stairs, like an extension of the front porch, a terrace encircled the whole house. The eaves hung out over the terrace, which made it more comfortable for people to use. Furthermore, all the first-floor windows, except for those on the north-facing side, were sliding glass doors.

Because the windows were so large, bright light filled the interior of the house.

The entryway was a two-story atrium with sunlight pouring down from the second floor as well.

"There are six rooms on the second floor, and it's also where the crafters live, but right now, it's just me and Orlando. The first floor has the parlor, dining room, kitchen, and bath. As well as Glen's and Bridget's rooms."

Walking straight in from the atrium, they arrived at a parlor with an upholstered sofa and a large hearth. At the back of the parlor, there was an arch-shaped entryway, through which seemed to be the dining room. It housed a massive oak dining table.



Challe ought to be somewhere in this house.

Anne looked around and listened for any sign of him. But the inside of the house was frightfully quiet, and she didn't even hear any voices.

Following after Elliott, she entered the dining room from the parlor. There was a corridor to the right, with a door at the end of it. It looked to be Glen Paige's room.

"Glen? I brought the girl who I told you about earlier."

Elliott knocked on the door, and a quiet voice answered:

"Come in."

The room was just as bright as the rest of the house. There was a wool carpet on the floor and a fire blazing in the hearth. The bed was placed near a large sliding glass window.

Sitting in bed was a man with light-brown hair who appeared to be in his forties. He was leaning back against the headboard. The man was slender, and attractive for his age. His facial features resembled Bridget's. His light-brown eyes looked appropriately staid for his age.

Bridget was standing beside the bed. She looked like she had known Anne was coming and wore a tense expression. She also seemed like she had something she wanted to say to Elliott, more so than to Anne.

Elliott pretended not to notice her gaze and did not look at Bridget.

"I am Glen Paige. I serve as the maestro of the Paige Workshop."

In contrast to his daughter, Glen was smiling.

"Nice to meet you. My name is Anne Halford."

She curtsied slightly and bowed.

"I see, you are indeed a girl; there's no mistaking it."

Glen gave a wry smile.

"But perhaps that explains it," he muttered, as if trying to convince himself of something.

Then he beckoned to Anne.

“Come here, come here. You must excuse the state I’m in. I have a heart disease, you see, and can’t make any sudden movements. I hear you’ve earned a royal medal. That’s just splendid. Skilled crafters are in demand at any studio, but once they become Silver Sugar Masters, by rights, they ought to strike out on their own or find work somewhere top-class. But I hear you intend to take a job at the main studio of the Paige Workshop. Not the Mercury Workshop, which is the largest, or the Radcliffe Workshop, the next largest—but ours, the smallest of the three?”

“Yes.”

“And your motive is that fairy that Bridget brought back with her yesterday, is it?”

Bridget’s eyes flickered.

“That’s correct. I want to be near him, at any cost. Mr. Collins was kind enough to invite me, so if I’m going to work, I’d like to do so here.”

When Anne gave that answer, Bridget gave her a ferocious look.

“If you do end up working here, will you give it your all?” Glen asked.

“I do not cut corners when it comes to my craft,” Anne replied.

Regardless of her motive, a job was a job. She had never intended to slack off.

“That’s good to hear. I’ll put you to work immediately, starting tomorrow.”

Bridget’s eyes went wide, and she looked at her father. “Father?! You’re going to let her stay here?”

“I am.”

“But she’s a girl?! You’ve always told me, haven’t you, ever since I was little, that girls can’t be candy crafters? And yet you’re going to hire her? Even though you wouldn’t let me? Why?”

When she heard those words, Anne looked at Bridget in surprise.

“In your position, it’s impossible for you, a lady, to become a candy crafter,” Glen Paige said. “That reality will not change. But this girl is not the daughter of

a maestro, and her abilities have been recognized with a royal medal. She is a candy crafter. There's no issue with hiring her. Do you understand, Bridget? You are a woman of standing, so you cannot do the same. I thought I would have made you understand that by now."

As he spoke, Bridget bit her lip.

"Do you understand, Bridget? Do you understand the reason why you weren't able to?"

"Yes...I do," she answered meekly.

Surprised at what she had heard, Anne couldn't help but stare at Bridget. When Bridget noticed her gaze, she looked Anne straight in the face but then immediately turned away in a huff.

Bridget wanted to be a candy crafter? But if I can do it, why can't the daughter of a maestro?

She couldn't understand Glen's irrational objection to the idea.

Glen turned his gaze from his daughter back to Anne.

"Excuse me. Now, back to your new job. I'm going to make you the directing manager of the whole operation. The head candy crafter."

Anne was very surprised to hear she would be the head crafter.

"Just like that?"

The role was normally performed by an experienced artisan, someone like Kat or Elliott.

"Rightfully, the head candy crafter ought to be Elliott. But because of my condition, I'm having him act as my proxy, handling the many duties of a maestro. Orlando has been acting as head candy crafter in Elliott's place until now. But you are a Silver Sugar Master. It would be unthinkable for a Silver Sugar Master to work under the supervision of an ordinary artisan. If you are to work here, you must do so as the head candy crafter."

"But I only just received the royal medal yesterday."

"And once it is awarded to you, you are a Silver Sugar Master. Of course you

should be expected to work as one. That's the duty that comes with being given the royal medal."

The responsibility of being a Silver Sugar Master. She hadn't given it any thought. But naturally, such duties must exist.

Anne felt apprehensive. But even though she had no experience, even though she hadn't done it before, she knew she couldn't shirk her duty. Challe's sacrifice had gotten her where she was. She couldn't puff up with pride now and claim to have won the royal medal on her own power. If she ran away again, she would only prove herself unworthy of her title.

Challe gave me my royal medal. I don't want to do anything wretched to show that I'm not qualified to have it.

Anne pursed her lips and nodded.

"I understand. I will work as the head candy crafter for the Paige Workshop."

She decided that she would do her very best.

If that's what she had to do, then she would do it. And now that she had resolved to take on this job, she would assume her position with pride and responsibility.

If that was the duty of a Silver Sugar Master, she had no choice but to accept it.

Glen saw her expression and smiled in apparent satisfaction.

"To hear Elliott speak of you, you're like the first silver sugar. I'm expecting great things."

"The first silver sugar?"

She didn't really understand what Glen was trying to say. The meaning of the words *the first silver sugar* wasn't clear.

Glen smiled slightly, seeing Anne's confusion.

"You'd be better off hearing it from Elliott. Now, I'll consider returning that fairy to you if your work lives up to our expectations."

"Really?!" Anne asked excitedly.

Glen nodded.

“Father?!”

Bridget seemed just as surprised, and she clung to her father’s arm.

“Father! He belongs to me! How can you say that without even asking?!”

“You are the daughter of the founding family of the Paige Workshop, are you not? In the near future, you will get married to your fiancé, Elliott, and you will be the one to inherit the workshop.”

“That’s true, but that’s a different—”

“I don’t mind if you fancy and play around with a pet fairy before you marry. And Elliott is kind enough to permit it as well. But you cannot get married with that fairy in tow. Surely, you must understand that. Rather than worrying about keeping him, you ought to put that fairy to work for the sake of the workshop.”

Tears welled up in Bridget’s eyes as she listened to her father’s calm words. She looked over at Elliott for help.

But Elliott shrugged. “I don’t think I like the idea of a bride who comes accompanied by another man, even if he is a fairy.”

Bridget shook her head like she was going to throw a tantrum. “No way... No... no, you can’t! No way. You can’t just decide that for me.”

“Bridget,” Glen said gently, but in a strict tone. “Whose daughter are you?”

She looked at Glen with a start, then answered in a pained voice, as if stifling her emotions, “I am...Glen Paige’s daughter.”

“Then surely, you must understand how to act, for the sake of the workshop.”

Tears flowed from Bridget’s eyes. The pain in those green eyes full of tears pierced Anne’s chest. She really was in love with Challe. Anne was sure of it. The earnestness of a girl in love was obvious in those green eyes. It pulled at Anne’s heartstrings.

But Bridget’s romantic feelings seemed to conflict with her pride as the daughter of the Paige family.

“I get it... I am the daughter of the maestro of the Paige Workshop. But—”

Bridget raised her eyes and looked at Anne. “If that girl isn’t able to do anything, I’m not handing him over!” she declared, before hanging her head and dashing out of the room.

Glen sighed and sank into the pillow behind him. He looked exhausted. “I’m sorry, Elliott. I never expected that girl’s emotions to be thrown into such turmoil before the wedding.”

“It’s not a problem for me,” Elliott answered quietly in a sympathetic voice.

“Anne. Work hard for our workshop. If you do that for me, I will definitely return that fairy to you. Then even Bridget will have to accept it. She is the daughter of the maestro of the Paige Workshop. That is a source of pride for her as well. She might cry about it, but she should do as I say. I’m doing it for her sake as well.”

Anne cheered up at the possibility of getting Challe back.

“I will do my best as the head candy crafter,” she replied.

But the image of Bridget’s tears was stuck in her mind. She felt a slight tinge of something akin to guilt.

Glen sighed deeply and closed his eyes. His thin jawline was pitiful to look at. “I’m going to rest a bit,” he said. “Elliott, I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“Sure thing. All right then, let’s go, Anne.”

Urged along by Elliott, Anne left Glen’s room.

Once they exited the room, Mithril, who had been sitting quietly on Anne’s shoulder, stood up and danced for joy.

“Hooray! Anne, you’ll be able to get Challe Fenn Challe back! And you’ll be able to do it without attacking that girl in her sleep, sneaking around like a thief, or threatening her at all!”

“Were you planning to do those sorts of things?!”

She was startled by the underhanded tactics that Mithril had apparently been thinking of.

“Then what were you planning to do, Anne?” Mithril tilted his head.

“Well...I hadn’t thought about it. For the time being, I guess I was going to try to follow her?”

Mithril sounded disappointed.

“Anne, your scarecrow brain is showing.”

There was really nothing she could say in response to that.

“I’ll be happy, too, if things go well, you know?” Elliott said as he hastened Anne toward the entryway. “At any rate, we’re placing our hopes in you, because we can’t manage on our own,” Elliott continued while heading out the front door and down the stone steps, walking in front of Anne.

“But I don’t understand what’s being expected of me. Or what those hopes even are,” Anne said.

Even from behind, she could tell that Elliott was smiling a little. “We’re just bursting with anticipation. You might very well turn out to be the first silver sugar, Anne. That’s why I wanted to bring you here so badly, you see?”

She wanted to ask him what he meant by “the first silver sugar.” But Elliott was walking quickly and chattering away while still facing forward.

“Well—this is all your fault, Anne. There was no other way to get Bridget to reveal the whereabouts of your silver sugar, so the outcome was inevitable. But at the same time, I figured we could make use of your fairy. That’s why I kept quiet and let it happen. I knew that if Challe came here, you would likely come work for us, even if you didn’t want to.”

As she chased after him, Anne’s eyes went wide at Elliott’s words.

“Wait...that means...you took Challe in order to force me to work here?”

“I mean, I had to, because of how opposed you were to working at the main studio of the Radcliffe Workshop, you see? There’s no way you would have come if I had just invited you, right? Moreover, I knew that once you became a Silver Sugar Master, you’d be able to make it on your own just fine. I recognized your efforts, so I wanted to help you participate in the candy fair. I guess you could say we killed two birds with one stone.”

“You villain!” Mithril growled.

Elliott cackled with laughter. “So sorry for being one.”

Elliott looked to be headed toward the workrooms. He took a roundabout route that passed around the side of the main house.

“But why did you go to such lengths to make me come here?”

“I told you. I’ve got high hopes!” Elliott said as he abruptly stopped walking and turned around to face Anne. His eyes were serious.

“Hopes?”

“Yes. Not in your skills as a Silver Sugar Master or anything like that. Why, I’m a Silver Sugar Master, and I’m far from perfect. So I’m talking about ordinary hopes. Hope that something new might happen. And for the present-day Paige Workshop, that is a pressing matter.”

Hope. She was perplexed by the word. Anne wondered what on Earth Elliott and Glen expected from her.

“I’ll explain everything—come on.”

Elliott jerked his chin and signaled for her to follow, then took off walking again. Anne followed after him, when Mithril suddenly tugged at her hair.

“Hey, Anne! Look over there!”

Mithril was staring at something behind Anne’s back. When she turned around, she could see the eastern side of the main house. There was a row of five sliding glass doors along the terrace. Through one of them, she could see the profile of the person she had wanted to meet so badly that she couldn’t stand it.

“Challe!”

She was about to run over to him. But the very next moment, she noticed that Bridget was there as well, right in front of Challe. She was crying and clinging to him. And Challe was holding her in his arms.

Once Anne saw that, she froze.

Anne sensed Challe’s gaze straying over to her even as he embraced Bridget, as if he had heard Anne’s voice calling his name. But he immediately averted his

eyes.

Something welled up from the depths of her heart. Her chest tightened, and her heart felt heavy.

Challe.

She wanted to call his name again, but her voice wouldn't come out.

Anne was standing stock-still, and Elliott came up and stood beside her.

"Looks like Challe is doing a proper job playing the role of Bridget's lover, eh? I'm impressed—splendidly done."

It was hard for her to watch, so Anne turned her back to the window.

"You don't find it unpleasant, Mr. Collins? You're fine with your fiancée doing something like that?!" she shouted fiercely. She was getting angry for no reason, venting her frustrations.

Elliott also turned his back to the window and answered calmly, "It's totally fine. I mean, I wasn't particularly in love with Bridget anyway."

"Uh..."

Elliott frowned.

"I envy you, you know? It seems like you really love Challe. I've never developed such feelings for Bridget. Of course, I do like her, but the same as any other girl. Because I like girls. I like to make a fuss over them and compliment them. But I don't have those sorts of feelings for her."

"So why are you two getting married?"

"Because it's what Glen wants. And that's the same as if I had chosen Bridget myself, isn't it?"

"No way. That seems unfair to both of you."

"Well, I don't see what's so unfair about it. Not since we've both agreed to it."

"If it were me, I could never accept that."

And it looked to Anne as though Bridget, at least, had not really accepted it, either. Most likely, she had to agree because of her social position. But her

feelings were another matter entirely. No one seemed to have considered that.

“Well, the two of us have.”

“Is that really true?”

Anne stared Elliott in the eye and caught just a hint of hesitation showing through his cheerful demeanor. But the next instant, he was wearing his usual smile again.

“I’m annoyed, Anne, to be questioned so. But that attitude is precisely why I have such high expectations for you.”

Just then, there was another voice.

“Oh, Elliott?! You’re back!”

Anne looked in the direction of the voice and saw three people coming out of the workroom they had been heading toward.

One of them was waving enthusiastically; he was an incredibly tall young man with short brown hair and a burly physique. He had a scar across his temple. He looked better suited for a job as a bodyguard than as a candy crafter. But his smile was generous and cheerful.

Behind him was another young man about Anne’s age. He had dark-brown skin and white-blond hair. His ash-gray eyes looked at her with curiosity. His physical features resembled Salim’s, Hugh’s bodyguard. Anne assumed that just like Salim, this man came from the kingdom on the mainland. He had a large, amber-colored stone hanging from his right ear, a continental-style earring.

Behind him was a golden-haired young man with gentle features that were almost feminine. He wore round glasses. Maybe it was because of the glasses, but he seemed smart and composed.

The three of them headed directly toward Anne and Elliott.

“Whoa, hey, who is she?” the dark-skinned young man asked immediately as soon as they got close. He seemed immensely curious and peered at Anne’s face without reservation. Anne was taken aback.

“Come on! Try to mind your manners a little bit now, Nadir. You’re being rude to the girl.”

The man who looked like a bodyguard grabbed Nadir by the scruff of the neck. Nadir was easily pulled away by his thick, muscular arms.

“But I’m curious! Oh, and she has a fairy!”

Not discouraged at all, Nadir stepped toward Anne and, without hesitation, grabbed for Mithril, who was sitting on her shoulder. Anne was startled, and Mithril stood up in a panic and hid behind Anne’s neck.

“Wh-what the?! What do you think you’re doing?! It’s not like you’ve never seen a fairy before!”

“I haven’t seen many that are as small as you are. I just want to look at you—come on out!”

“Are you a child?! And don’t call me small!”

Nadir reached out his hand again to try to catch Mithril.

Anne shrieked and ducked her head.

“Don’t try to put your hands on a girl’s neck!”

Nadir was once again seized by the scruff of the neck and pulled backward by a set of burly arms.

The young man with the glasses smiled and looked at Elliott.

“Elliott. Aren’t you going to introduce us?”

“Oh, that’s right.”

Elliott put his arm around Anne’s shoulders.

“This girl is Anne Halford. She is this year’s Silver Sugar Master. She’s sixteen. The youngest Silver Sugar Master ever. Starting tomorrow, she’ll be working here with us, as the head candy crafter. And this fairy helps Anne with her work. He’s Mithril Lid Pod.”

All three men were evidently surprised after Elliott’s explanation.

“Halford? That’s the crafter who made the candy sculpture for the former Duke of Philax, right? So she is a girl?” muttered the young man who looked like a bodyguard.

Nadir looked up at him and tilted his head. “We’ve heard rumors about her. And she’s sixteen, which means we’re the same age? But she’s a Silver Sugar Master? Why would such an incredible girl work here? Wouldn’t she normally go to Mercury or Radcliffe or something? If she was going to work for a workshop anyway.”

When Nadir said that, the young man with glasses gently laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Nadir. There’s something surprising about her other than her age, isn’t there?”

“What?”

“She’s a girl, right?”

“So?”

“Nadir. For your own good, why don’t you go to Sunday school next time? I’ll even go with you. Okay?”

“I told you. I don’t want to.”

Nadir brushed away the other young man’s hand with an annoyed expression.

The one who looked like a bodyguard ran a hand through his hair. He seemed a little uncomfortable.

“A girl... A girl? Elliott, man, does Glen know about this?” he asked.

Elliott’s expression turned serious.

“Yes. He does.”

“What made him decide to accept a girl?”

“Probably because she’s a Silver Sugar Master. This girl’s skills have been publicly recognized.”

“I guess that’s true. Well, that sure is amazing. A sixteen-year-old Silver Sugar Master, huh? He’d almost have to accept her.”

Then the young man turned to face Anne.

“If Glen approves of you, I’ve got no objections. How do you do? I’m King.”

“King?”

It was a strange name. She didn't know how it went in the countries on the mainland, but at least in Highland, nobody would adopt a surname that sounded the same as the word for the monarch, since that would be discourteous. And if that was his first name, then his parents had some nerve.

Most people probably had the same reaction as Anne when he introduced himself. King seemed to be used to it, as he added, “That's not my real name, mind you. I've forgotten it. Everyone just calls me King.”

Anne presented her hand for a handshake.

“I'm Anne Halford. Very pleased to meet you.”

King looked startled by Anne's extended hand.

“Wh-what's this?!”

“Huh? What do you mean, ‘what’? A handshake.”

Suddenly, King's cheeks flushed red. Then looking flustered, he gripped Anne's hand.

“Right, right! A handshake, of course. A handshake. Yes, shaking hands.”

King let go immediately, as if he had touched something hot.

“Umm, anyway, I hope we get along great! And the fairy over there, nice to meet you, too. Though, we've never had a fairy to help us with our work before.”

Mithril stuck his head out from behind Anne's neck and standoffishly jerked his chin up in the air.

“I bet my job is way more important than whatever that guy over there does.”

“Is that so? We're expecting great things from you, so come on out here. I'm Nadir.”

Nadir's eyes sparkled with anticipation. Mithril withdrew behind Anne's neck in a hurry.

“No way! I'm probably going to get choked to death if a rowdy guy like you gets his hands on me!”

The young man with glasses extended his right hand to Anne with a wry smile.

“Very wise, my fairy friend. I am Valentine. Pleased to make your acquaintance, Anne.”

“Ah, very nice to meet you.”

When they shook hands, Valentine smiled, looking a little perplexed.

“You’ve got small hands. You really are a girl.”

I am. I’m female. It’s true.

She sighed quietly. But the one saving grace was that none of the men seemed to harbor any malice toward her. If anything, they seemed bewildered.

“Well, introductions are done. Including me, and Orlando, who was going back to the main house earlier, you’ve met all the crafters at the main studio of the Paige Workshop.”

Anne was shocked to hear Elliott’s words.

“Huh? There are five crafters? What about apprentices?”

“There are none. Oh, but we do have two fairies to help with housework in the main house. That’s it.”

“So let me get this straight. Only five of you?”

“Correct. Five people.”

There are only five crafters at the main studio?!

Including the apprentices, there had been over fifty crafters at the main studio of the Radcliffe Workshop. But here, there were only five. Despite how little Anne knew about the internal affairs of the factions, she was aware that such a small number at a faction’s main studio would normally be unthinkable.

“Now I think you understand our situation. The Paige Workshop is in critical condition. We have only five crafters, and our orders for sugar candy have decreased considerably.”

Anne’s mouth hung open, but no words came out. She couldn’t imagine how a faction with such a long history had fallen into this predicament.

Then Elliott casually said something even more unbelievable.

“We’re hoping that you can rebuild the Paige Workshop, Anne. We’re counting on you.”

Anne was utterly dumbfounded.



Bridget came bursting into the room. As soon as she had closed the door behind her, she moaned, “Elliott is so cruel! He keeps saying he’s doing things for my sake, yet he brought that girl here. And my father just decided... Elliott, and my father, too—everyone thinks only of the workshop. No one ever thinks about me. It’s always been this way...with everyone.”

Challe was standing by the window. He could tell something had happened. But he wasn’t particularly interested in whatever was going on with Bridget. He gave her a fleeting, sidelong glance, then immediately shifted his eyes back to the scenery outside.

The room was stifling, and he couldn’t get used to it. But he found the view soothing.

“Everyone is so cruel!” Bridget shouted.

She struck the top of a display case beside the door with her hand. One of the small glass ornaments on top fell to the floor and shattered.

“You’re making quite a fuss,” Challe grumbled.

Bridget approached him briskly.

“Elliott brought Anne Halford here.”

So she came? There was no need for her to come.

A feeling akin to annoyance arose in him. But at the same time, the anticipation of being able to see Anne made him feel like something was burning bright deep within his frozen heart.

“You’re happy, aren’t you...? I can tell.”

Bridget spotted the subtle change in Challe’s expression, and her voice wavered.

“They say Anne’s going to work here,” she continued. “She’ll probably be staying in this very house. And if she performs her job well, my father said he would give your wing back to her.”

Challe raised his eyebrows when he heard that.

“That’s only if she’s able to revive the workshop. But it’s not going to be that easy to do. Neither Elliott nor Orlando managed it. What do they think a girl who just became a Silver Sugar Master yesterday can do? There’s no way she can pull it off.”

Bridget sounded like she was trying to convince herself. As she spoke, tears flowed from her jade-green eyes.

“So you still belong to me. That doesn’t change just because she’s here. Don’t you dare go see her! That’s an order. You are absolutely not to see her. If you do, I will punish you!” Bridget shouted.

In addition to Bridget’s irritated voice, Challe heard another one.

“Challe!”

It was Anne’s voice. He realized it with a start. At that same moment, Bridget launched herself at him.

“Don’t meet her. Don’t see her. That’s an order! Don’t you dare go see her; that’s an order!”

Challe held Bridget in his arms as she repeated herself, but he directed his gaze out the window. Anne was there. She was motionless, staring at him. Her hair, the color of barley grains, swayed lightly in the breeze.

Looking at her earnest face was heartbreaking, and he averted his eyes.

Anne.

He wanted to call her name.

After a few moments, it looked like Anne met up with some other candy

crafters. She headed toward one of the workrooms with them and disappeared from his field of vision.

“Take me to my bed.”

Bridget continued to cry. She seemed like she was tired of standing. Challe did as ordered and picked her up in his arms.

They were in Bridget’s private chambers. It consisted of two adjoining rooms, and there was a bed in the back room. Challe laid Bridget on the bed, which was alongside the wall.

“Don’t leave me.”

To stop him from going, she grabbed his hand and ordered him to stay. There was nothing he could do about it, so he took a seat on the bed.

Bridget turned over to lie face down, then she buried her face in her pillow and kept crying.

She was the only daughter, a direct descendant of the founding family of the Paige Workshop. She had been cherished her whole life.

But in actuality, she had been abandoned alone on a high pedestal as the world kept moving around her.

That had probably always been the case the whole time Bridget was growing up. She had looked down from on high while events took place in spaces that had nothing to do with her, and no matter how she felt, there was never anything she could do. So when she did take action of her own, all she could do was recklessly follow her feelings, because she didn’t know any other way to successfully get things done.

Just like a child.

A long time ago, about twenty years earlier, a certain noble owned Challe. The seven-year-old boy who lived in the castle back then was similar to Bridget. The things she did and said were just the same.

For some reason, that child had also taken a liking to Challe and had never wanted to leave his side. Now Challe understood that the boy had probably been lonely. He had probably wanted Challe to be nice to him.

But the child didn't know how to show his love, flew into a fit of anger at the slightest thing, and damaged Challe's wing. Enraged, Challe grew even more obstinate. That child must already be an adult, he thought.

Bridget had stopped crying by the time the sun started to set. But she didn't show any hint of lifting her face from the pillow. Once the sun had fully sunk in the sky, there was a knock at her door. Elliott announced that dinner was ready. But Bridget remained lying face down on the bed and shouted back that she didn't want any.

Challe remained on the bed and stared out the window for a long time.

He wasn't sure how much time passed. In the dark room, the moonlight fell across the floor in the shape of the window frame.

Bridget had said that Anne had been entrusted with the job of rebuilding the workshop. Even Challe could imagine that it would not be an easy task.

If Anne could accomplish the job, Challe might regain his freedom.

But he didn't like that such a responsibility was being forced upon her. By all rights, she should be doing whatever job she wanted. There had to be one that would be more suitable for her.

Outside the window, the roofs of the scattered workrooms shone white in the moonlight. Judging from the position of the moon, it looked to be close to midnight.

Something was moving across the dark landscape. A slim silhouette with small limbs was walking toward a workroom.

Challe was startled. That had to be Anne. When he strained his eyes, he could see the white puffs of her breath.

Anne entered the workroom with a serious expression, as if she was mulling something over.

In spite of himself, Challe stood up from the bed. Bridget appeared to have tired herself out from crying and had fallen asleep. She didn't seem likely to wake from a slight sound or movement.

Challe moved into the adjacent room, opened one of the sliding glass doors,

and stepped outside.

He had been ordered not to see Anne. If Bridget found out, he would most likely be punished.

The moment they arrived at the house, Bridget had hidden his wing. She was probably afraid of Challe stealing it back. If she learned that he had ignored her order, she would surely retrieve the wing from its hiding place and use it to torture him. She didn't have the nerve to kill Challe. But if she let her anger get the better of her, she would not hesitate to make him suffer.

However, he had to speak with Anne.

I have to send her away.

Even as he walked off determined to do just that, he was thinking of something else.

I want to see her.



A revitalization of the main studio of the Paige Workshop. That was apparently Anne's job.

Anne had been a Silver Sugar Master for only two days. Moreover, she had never trained at any studio before. For the most part, she had polished her skills by watching and imitating her mother, Emma. A task as audacious as reviving the main studio of the Paige Workshop seemed far beyond her reach.

But Anne had to do it. If she could pull it off, Challe would be free again.

That thought motivated her. She didn't have the slightest desire to abandon the task before her.

Anne had been provided with a room on the second floor of the main house.

She'd eaten dinner with Elliott, Orlando, and Mithril in the dining room. Elliott had talked a lot, but Orlando had hardly said a word. He wasn't purposely

ignoring Anne; rather, it seemed like that was the attitude he took toward everything.

Glen had eaten in his own chambers, and Bridget had not appeared for dinner.

She hadn't seen Challe, either, but it seemed like that was for the best. If she saw him, her chest would hurt again, and she would have trouble thinking of anything but Challe.

Since right now, she needed to figure out how she should proceed with the job she had been assigned.

Ultimately, her success was connected to freeing Challe.

She was sure he had been terribly anxious the past two days.

Mithril said he was tired, then immediately went to bed and fell asleep.

Anne got in bed with him.

Their room was old but clean. It had lacquered wooden paneling and plaster walls. Everything was solidly built, so the room's age added to its charms. She had no complaints about the bedding, which consisted of a mattress made with plenty of soft, fluffy cotton, and a warm woolen blanket. She had even put on nightclothes, which she normally did not wear when camping outside, before getting into bed. They were comfortable, as they were not constricting.

Even so, she couldn't fall asleep.

She tossed and turned, then ultimately gave up and sat up in bed.

No matter what I do, I can't fall asleep, so I may as well go take another look at one of the workrooms.

After making up her mind, she slipped out of bed so as not to wake Mithril.

She put on a shawl over her nightclothes and lit a lamp that was in the room. She carried it with her as she stepped outside. Her loose hair danced gently around her shoulders in the wind. It was cold, and she was able to see her own breath.

The workroom was an oblong building. It had a shingle roof, and its walls

were made of stacked round stones. It was a single-story structure, but the loft was spacious with enough room to crouch and walk through it.

She opened the wooden double doors that functioned as the entrance and exit, then walked inside.

Lamp in hand, she advanced slowly from the front of the building toward the back. The workroom was long and narrow. Space stretched out between her and the darkened far end, where the light from the lamp didn't reach.

Along one wall was a row of barrels for storing silver sugar.

On the opposite wall were racks for drying sugar apples after they were cooked down.

There were four stone tables for making sugar candy. A cask for cold water was next to each of them.

Compared with the main studio of the Radcliffe Workshop, there weren't any enormous cookstoves or millstones. Instead, there were ten stone mortars, a little bit larger than those for household use. And in the very back, there were five large stoves, around the size of those probably found in the kitchens of taverns. Reasonably sized tools were neatly arranged in the spacious workroom.

Anne liked the fact that the equipment was of a moderate size, as that made them well-suited for refining silver sugar.

By refining a small amount at a time rather than making a huge quantity all at once, they are able to work more carefully and do a meticulous job, which raises the quality of the silver sugar. There were seven similar workrooms at the studio. They were probably able to refine a large quantity of silver sugar by subdividing the work, while keeping the batches small to preserve the quality of the sugar.

If the people working here understood that and had set up their equipment accordingly, then it meant the Paige Workshop was quite careful about its sugar refining.

So then how did they end up in their current predicament, where they have only five crafters?

She puzzled over the question as she looked down at one of the old stoves that had been in use for many years.

Orlando had shown her around that evening, so she had already seen it once. But she had wanted to take another look. The place was deserted and modest, but somehow, it resembled the workspace of the Silver Sugar Viscount in the Silver Westol Castle, in that the atmosphere was quiet and solemn. Perhaps it was because the intentions of past crafters had seeped into the worn mortars, workbenches, and various tools.

The workroom at the main studio of the Radcliffe Workshop did not have the same ambience.

When Anne brushed against the edge of a stove, it felt cold. She suddenly wanted to touch silver sugar.

Then the question arose again.

Why do I want to make sugar candy so badly, I wonder?

Just then, she heard the front door creaking. Startled, she held her lamp aloft and whirled around. The shawl she had been wearing over her shoulders fell to the ground as she moved.

A tall, slender figure stood in the doorway, bathed in moonlight.

Under the moonlight, the figure's pale skin, characteristic of fairies, looked even paler. The ends of his hair and eyelashes, as well as his lone wing, glittered like they had been sprinkled with silver powder. Like a blade made from polished obsidian, his features were sharp yet shiny, and handsome enough to send a shiver up Anne's spine. It was the person whose name she had wanted to call that afternoon, the person she had wanted to be next to in spite of herself.

Anne was glued to the spot, stunned by this unexpected reunion.

Challe frowned.

"Don't prowl around dressed like that. It's aggravating."

"...Ah—"

Anne looked down at where Challe was staring, scanning her shoulders and

chest.

She was wearing loose, white cotton nightclothes. There was some simple but cute lace decoration around the sleeves, hem, and bust, which she liked. She had tied a ribbon to tighten the neckline, but perhaps because of all her tossing and turning in bed, it had come undone.

Her right shoulder was fully visible, and her chest was also exposed to quite a perilous extent.

“Ah! Uh, hang—hang on!”

Anne hurriedly set her lamp down on the edge of the stove and turned her back to Challe.

She tried to quickly fix her clothes. She tugged firmly at the ribbon and covered up her shoulders and chest. But her fingers were numb with cold, and she couldn't tie the ribbon well.

And just when I finally ran into Challe, too!

She felt ashamed of how disheveled she looked.

She heard Challe's footsteps approach, then stop behind her.

“Why did you come?” he said coldly and accusingly.

Anne flinched. It felt as if she had been rejected.

Just as Mithril had said, Challe probably didn't need any help from Anne.

But he had relinquished his freedom for her sake. That was an unchangeable fact.

Even if he rejected her help, there was no way she could give up.

“I know you got the location of my silver sugar from Bridget. I've been told you handed your wing over to her for that purpose. So I came to help you, Challe.”

“I'm not foolish enough to expect help from you. The matter with the silver sugar was my own decision. It had nothing to do with you. More importantly, is this where you want to be? Isn't the first year after you become a Silver Sugar Master a crucial time period? Or are you so stupid that you don't even

understand that?”

Challe’s words were calm, succinct, and blunt.

Anne fervently searched for the words that would refute Challe’s excuses. But pitifully, she only found simple ones.

“It certainly has something to do with me.”

“I acted on my own. It doesn’t concern you.”

“Even if you say that, it doesn’t mean it doesn’t concern me. I’m telling you—I’m definitely going to set you free, Challe. I’m going to save you.”

“You must be stupid. Anyway...look at me.”

Challe sounded irritated.

“Stop calling me stupid!” Anne got flustered and struggled to tie her ribbon. “So maybe I am an idiot. But in this case, what I’m doing is not stupid.”

“I told you to turn around and face me,” Challe repeated himself.

At Challe’s words, Anne became even more flustered.

“But the ribbon—”

“Who cares about that? Let me see your face.”

His tone was getting harsher.

“The ribbon... I can’t get it—”

“Hurry up!”

Suddenly, Challe grabbed Anne by the shoulders and spun her around. He drew her toward him and clicked his tongue.

“Is this the problem?! Let’s get it done, then!” Challe spat as he grabbed the ribbon at Anne’s chest and nimbly tied it.

“Th...thank you.”

Why had he so generously tied her ribbon for her, despite being so irritated and angry? She didn’t understand, but for the moment, she just thanked him.

Challe seemed startled by her thanks. He looked down at the ribbon between

his fingers and grimaced, as if he had done something truly terrible.

“I had to, because you wouldn’t turn around to face me,” Challe angrily mumbled, letting go of the fabric.

She hadn’t thought it was such a bad thing to not immediately look at Challe. But if it had made him that upset, she felt bad about it.

“Sorry. But my ribbon—”

“Forget it.”

It seemed like Challe was showing a small degree of self-loathing. Compared with when she still had her back turned to him, his harsh tone had quickly disappeared.

“Oh, Challe. Anyway, I’m going to help you.”

“You’re still saying that?”

“This once, I won’t do as you ask. Listen, I want to be with you. I want the three of us to be together, Mithril Lid Pod, you, and me.”

“You’ll get used to not having me around.”

“I don’t want to get used to something like that!”

“Don’t be naive. If that’s your only reason, then get out of here.”

“That’s not the only thing!!”

Her voice grew louder.

“I have to save you, Challe. If I don’t, I won’t be able to say I became a Silver Sugar Master under my own power!”

Challe’s expression changed. He had heard something totally unexpected.

“If I leave things as they are, I will always feel as if I became a Silver Sugar Master by borrowing your strength, Challe. That’s why I’m determined to use my own strength to help you. Then we’ll be even. And I’ll be able to say with pride that I became a Silver Sugar Master under my own power!”

Her assertion did not skillfully convey her feelings into words. But it was the best she could do.

After a brief silence, to confirm he had heard her correctly, Challe asked, “Your own power?”

“That’s right. I want to be able to say I became a Silver Sugar Master fair and square.”

Challe had sacrificed himself for her sake; she couldn’t leave him in his current state. She wanted to be with Challe. And on her pride as a candy crafter, in order to say she had become a Silver Sugar Master on her own, she couldn’t let his sacrifice stand. If she could use her own strength to get Challe back, then she could protect her pride and say she had become a Silver Sugar Master on her own.

“I have many reasons for wanting to save you, Challe. So I can’t just give up. Even if you don’t want my help, even if you get angry, I’m going to do what I want. What’s more, it’s not impossible. Glen told me that if I can rebuild the Paige Workshop, he will give me back your wing. I don’t need money or have to use violence or anything like that. I can help you with my abilities as a candy crafter. So I have to do it.”

Challe sighed deeply.

“You have your pride as a candy crafter. Is that why you don’t want to be in my debt?” Then after a brief silence, he said quietly, “You really are an idiot.”

“Idiot? Again?”

She was about to open her mouth to lecture him when he pulled her into an embrace.

She could feel the shape of his cold, slender fingers on her back through the thin cotton and his warm breath in her hair, which slipped down over her ears.

“If you say you’re doing it for your pride, then I can’t drive you away.”

Through the thin fabric, she could sense the strength in his chest and arms as he embraced her tightly. Her face grew hot. She didn’t know what to do; her body stiffened, and she couldn’t move.

“Anne.”

Challe brought his face to her ear and whispered her name. His voice was like

a long sigh that melted her down to her core. It was nothing like the sweet voice he used to tease her sometimes when he was being deliberately mean.

Anne felt herself go weak in the knees. Her heart was pounding out of her chest.

“I’ve never been rescued by anyone before. How am I supposed to act? What should I do when you say you’re going to save me? Tell me.” Challe asked.

“I—I don’t think the person getting rescued needs to do anything. If you could just wait in the meantime, that would be good,” Anne answered, her voice trembling.

Challe hugged her even more tightly. It was hard to breathe.

“If you say to wait, then I will.”

“Okay...please do.”

“I will wait for you.” Challe whispered the words like a vow.



Chapter 3

THE FIRST SILVER SUGAR

Anne woke up with the rising sun.

“Mithril Lid Pod! Get up, okay? Get up.”

Anne opened the curtains and roused Mithril from where he was buried under the blanket. With her finger, she nudged the tiny shoulder of the fairy born from a droplet of lake water, who was curled up in a ball asleep.

“What’s the fuss...Anne? Is it time for breakfast already? But...you’re not dressed yet, are you? If you’re going to tell me not to look until you’re done changing, just let me sleep...”

Mithril slowly woke up, yawned, and tried to crawl back under the covers.

“Wait, listen to me! Last night, I was able to see Challe!”

“You saw him?”

As she’d expected, Mithril looked up in surprise.

She had actually wanted to tell Mithril about it the night before, immediately upon returning to her room after parting from Challe. But she couldn’t bring herself to wake him when he was sleeping so comfortably, so she had waited until the morning.

“I couldn’t sleep last night, so I went to look at one of the workrooms, and Challe appeared. When I told him I could save him by finishing this job properly, he said he would wait for me.”

Mithril pondered this information for a moment. “Wait. It’s him we’re talking

about; I thought he would have said it was none of your business and to get out.” Then he exclaimed, “I know! Challe Fenn Challe must really be having a tough time with that woman! I bet he’s being subjected to some awful things in that woman’s chambers, stuff that we can’t even imagine!”

“What do you mean, things so awful that we can’t even imagine them?!”

“You dummy! We can’t imagine them, so they must be terrible!”

When he said that, Anne suddenly felt anxious.

“Now that you mention it, I did think Challe’s behavior was kind of strange. Like he was angry, but he kindly tied my ribbon for me.”

“Ohhh...poor Challe Fenn Challe!”

Mithril pressed his fingers against the inner corners of his eyes, then hopped right up.

“All right, let’s get to work, Anne. If that’s how it’s going to be, then let’s get this workshop back on track as soon as possible and free Challe Fenn Challe! I’ll give it my all, too!”

Mithril seemed to be burning with brotherly love for his fellow fairy. At his urging, Anne quickly changed clothes and went down to the dining room on the first floor. Orlando was already sitting at the dining table, silently moving his fork.

“Good morning, Mr. Langston. May I sit beside you?” Anne asked.

With a look, he indicated the seat farthest away from him.

“We have so much space. It will feel cramped, so please don’t sit so close.”

“...Okay.”

Feeling disappointed, Anne moved away from Orlando and sat.

There were fourteen chairs around the dining table. But only two humans and one small fairy were present. By rights, every seat ought to have been filled by candy crafters employed by the studio. That made the atmosphere around the splendid oak dining table feel even more desolate. Anne became even more acutely aware that the main studio of the Paige Workshop was truly in decline.

The one saving grace was that the dining room was nice and sunny. Even though the room was deserted, at least the place was bright.

As soon as Anne took her seat, a female fairy who did housework in the main house brought her breakfast and a cup of tea. The fairy's hair was light orange. Anne knew there was supposed to be another fairy working in the main house, but she didn't see them.

Anne picked up her fork and was about to eat some of the scrambled eggs, when—

—suddenly, Orlando spoke.

“Also—”

She raised her head and saw Orlando holding his teacup. But he was not looking at her.

“You don't need to speak so politely to me. There's no need for you to call me 'mister.' You can call me Orlando. That's what you should do.”

“But in terms of age and experience—”

“Please be mindful of your position. You only need to use such niceties toward Glen and Elliott,” Orlando said sharply, then stood up. He continued: “After breakfast, please report to the workroom. You are the head candy crafter.”

That was all he said before leaving the dining room. Mithril stuck his tongue out at Orlando's retreating back.

“What's his problem? Actin' all high-and-mighty. 'Be mindful of your position.'”

Anne smirked at Mithril mocking Orlando's way of speaking.

“But he was right about everything he said, I guess,” Anne responded.

“Oh, you're up early, Anne.”

Elliott emerged from Glen's room. He entered the dining room with a grin once he saw Anne. He was holding two or three letters and a sheaf of papers with writing on them.

“Good morning. You’re up early yourself, Mr. Collins.”

“Well, I am the proxy maestro, after all. Every morning, I’ve got to ask Glen about the tasks for the day, then carry out the maestro’s duties. In fact, I’ll be out until the evening doing just that. Apparently, there has been some disagreement among some of our subsidiary studios, you see, and I’ve got to go mediate. And right after that, I have to go to the Crafters Guild in Millsfield. I won’t be able to touch a grain of silver sugar today,” Elliott grumbled, then sat next to Anne, as if it was the most natural place to sit.

“To the guild? You have some business there?”

Guilds are associations of merchants or craftspeople. There are guilds in every provincial capital. All sorts of artisans and merchants join them, from candy crafters and ceramists to blacksmiths. Once a crafter joins a guild, they can expect certain benefits, such as the ability to share transportation with those from different occupations and introductions to potential customers. Sometimes, they even help arbitrate disputes between different occupational groups or lend money.

“Uh-huh. Our application to extend the deadline on our debt repayment.”

“Debt?! How much?”

“About ten thousand cress, to guarantee the land the Paige Workshop sits on.”

“T-t-t-ten thousand cress?!”

With that amount, they could probably cover a year’s worth of wages for every candy crafter in a place as big as the main studio of the Radcliffe Workshop.

“Even with the loan, we had to sell off stock and liquidate quite a few things, you know.”

“But if Glen is the maestro of the Paige Workshop, isn’t he the head of the guild? The head of the guild is in debt?”

“The Crafters Guild here has three leaders. The maestro of the Paige Workshop has been one of those leaders for generations. The workshop has

done favors for the guild, and the maestro three generations ago provided the capital for the guild's founding. But by the time of the previous maestro, our cash flow was in trouble. Debt piled upon debt, and eventually, the land went up as collateral. If we can't pay it back within the year, we'll have to forfeit half our property."

"Do you expect to be able to repay the money?" Anne asked, looking pale.

"Nope," Elliott answered readily. But then he immediately flashed her a broad grin. "That's why I'm going over there to negotiate, you see? But don't let Glen catch wind of this, okay, Anne?"

"But he's the maestro, so surely, Glen also knows about the debt, right?"

"Glen himself took out the loan, so he is aware of it. The thing I don't want to let him find out about is the fact that the guild is pressuring us to repay them quick. Normally, the guild has a lot of faith in the descendants of the founders. They wouldn't typically demand full repayment all of a sudden. But Glen is ill, and the future of the workshop is uncertain, which led the other two guild leaders to say some rash things out of fear of being stuck with an unrecoverable debt."

"But if you haven't got any money, how are you going to negotiate?"

"When you borrow money, you write up a contract, right? The terms of repayment are in the contract. So I can negotiate with the other parties by going word by word through what's written there. I'll come up with something."

Elliott waved the bunch of papers in his hand, and just for a moment, there was a sharp glint in his eyes. But then he had on a playful grin and nudged Anne in the side with his elbow.

"Now, changing the subject, I was pretty convinced that I wouldn't be seeing you this morning, Anne."

"Why's that? I've always been an early riser."

"No matter how much of an early riser you are, I'm sure you didn't get enough sleep because of your little rendezvous in the middle of the night, hmm?"

Anne was startled.

“You saw us?!”

“No, no, no, don’t worry. I didn’t see whatever you were doing inside the workroom. I just saw you from the window of the main house. I resisted going down to take a peek. Wasn’t I admirable? But the idea of a midnight tryst is quite tantalizing. Want to give it a try with me playing the lover’s role next time? My heart’s already thumping!”

“Absolutely not! I’m going to work!”

Anne had no interest in such a frivolous suitor.

She hurriedly finished her breakfast and stood up.

Mithril hopped onto her shoulder, and he yelled at Elliott, “You pervert! Get your head out of the gutter!”

Anne quickly left the dining room and could hear Elliott’s cheerful laugh behind her.

When she entered the workroom, the other candy crafters were already assembled. Well, there were only four of them.

Orlando and King were each at their own workbenches making sugar candy.

Nadir and Valentine were in a corner looking after some of the tools used to make sugar candy.

When Anne stepped into the workroom, all eyes landed on her.

Her first instinct was to flinch, but instead, she smiled and greeted them.

“Good morning.”

As usual, Orlando did not respond, but Nadir gave a casual wave.

“Good morning,” Valentine replied politely, giving an awkward smile.

“Hey,” King said, grinning.

But then Anne was lost again.

So? Now what should I do?

First, she needed to make sure that she knew exactly what tasks lay before

her. It would probably be best to ask Orlando, the former head candy crafter. Then once she grasped the duties her role entailed, she knew she should give instructions to everybody.

Her thoughts made it that far before she realized she had messed up.

I should have been thinking ahead. I ought to have studied up on my new duties last night.

The four crafters had already gotten started working all on their own. They were probably continuing their tasks from the day before.

The problem was Anne. She had been given the position of head candy crafter, and today, she had to assign people jobs.

“Umm...for the time being, everyone, please keep working on what you were doing yesterday,” Anne said after some deliberation.

At these instructions, the four crafters raised their heads. They all nodded and answered with “Okay” or “Got it.” There were no complaints. But she could feel their disappointment in the air, as though they wanted to ask, *Is that it?*

Anne was disappointed in herself. *“For the time being, everyone, please keep working on what you were doing yesterday.”* Her first instructions as head candy crafter were unbelievably pathetic.

“What should I do, Anne?” Mithril cocked his head and asked from atop Anne’s shoulder.

She couldn’t think of anything. Truly, this was an utter disaster. Feeling defeated, Anne came up with a request.

“Could I ask you to...clean the workroom?”

“On it!”

Mithril hopped down from Anne’s shoulder, brimming with enthusiasm. She felt even worse.

She hadn’t expected it to be this difficult to issue instructions. She had vaguely anticipated it would be challenging, but the nature of that challenge was different from anything she had experienced before. She felt as if she’d been left with the impossible task of transforming a mass of air into a tangible

shape.

Suddenly, she noticed someone's eyes on her. Orlando was staring at her. He was probably irritated by her incompetence. Her face burned with shame. But she couldn't avoid him. What Anne needed to do now was confirm the current status of their work.

She approached Orlando's workbench and observed the sugar candy he was working on.

"What type of order are you currently making sugar candy for, Orlando?"

The piece was only about half-finished, but it was a candy sculpture of a horse with its forelegs raised fiercely in the air. The horse's strong muscles and fluttering mane were rendered magnificently. Honestly, she was surprised.

He's good.

Orlando added cold water to some silver sugar and answered her as he kneaded the mixture.

"This was commissioned by the maestro of a porcelain studio based in Millsfield. For his son's birthday celebration."

"Does his son like horses?"

"He might, or he might not. The son is one year old. No way to know."

"But then why a horse?"

"We gave him suggestions and had him choose among them. On the form, he said a horse would do."

"What was his reason for wanting a horse?"

When she raised that question, Orlando looked up. He shook his head slightly, then brushed aside the sections of hair that hung over his cheeks, as if he found them irritating. Then he frowned, looking annoyed.

"I never asked. Why would we need to know something like that? He said a horse was fine. I didn't think we needed to inquire any further."

"How can you ask me why? If you don't know what the customer wants, you can't make it, can you? Even if it's the same horse, the feeling of it might be all

wrong.”

“But I don’t think it’s right to indulge the customer and do everything they say. In order to invite good fortune, a candy crafter uses all their skills to make the sugar candy. If the crafter doesn’t make it the way they want to, then there’s no way they can produce something good, is there?”

Orlando was not criticizing Anne. She could tell that much from his puzzled expression. He simply could not understand Anne’s approach to making sugar candy.

The crafter makes it the way they want?

Until now, Anne had been making sugar candy for a living. She always listened to what her customers wanted and sold them candy that would satisfy their requests. She had always thought that was the way of things. In fact, even at the main studio of the Radcliffe Workshop, they had listened to all the details of a customer’s order and followed their wishes.

But Orlando had referred to that as “indulging the customer.” He had said that a candy crafter should use all their skills and make what they wanted to make. To a candy crafter, that was probably the most ideal form a job could take.

“Could I get on with my work? It’s irritating to have you stand there, so please back away.”

As if to say to stop bothering him, Orlando dipped his hands in cold water, then began kneading his silver sugar again.

This workshop is different from the Radcliffe Workshop. And I’m different, too.

As she watched Orlando’s hands work from a short distance away, Anne felt bewildered.

But this guy, he’s incredibly skilled.

Even though it didn’t look like Orlando was putting much power into kneading the silver sugar, it grew more lustrous before her eyes. It had the perfect sheen to depict the horse’s smooth muscles.

But the whole time that he was repeatedly kneading the sugar, the tips of his

hair, which was tied in a high ponytail, brushed against his cheeks, and Orlando shook his head many times in irritation to brush the hair away.

“If it’s that much of a nuisance, why don’t you cut your hair?” Anne asked without thinking.

Orlando raised his head. “Be quiet. It’s my hair; I can wear it how I like,” he said, looking annoyed.

That seemed to put him in an even worse mood, so Anne hastily turned to look at King, who was standing at the workbench behind her.

He seemed to be making something with a flower motif. He had produced an array of subtle colors by mixing colored powders. Every shade was beautiful. And their combination formed a hue that was harmonious overall. The piece was rich in color and well-made.

“This is lovely, too. The colors are truly wonderful.”

She mumbled words of praise as she watched King’s hands move. When she did, King became flustered and jumped aside. His face was bright red. Anne was surprised by how red it was.

“What’s the matter?!”

“No, n-n-n-nothing. J-just a little close, aren’t you?!”

“Huh?! Was I that close?!”

Hearing King’s words, Anne got flustered, too.

“No, sorry. I just imagined it; I imagined it. That’s...that’s all it was!” King said, even more agitated than before.

King turned back to face his workbench, but his ears were bright red.

“King. What if we got Anne to dress like a guy?” Nadir said as he passed by carrying the tools he had been servicing.

The moment Nadir made the suggestion, King’s eyebrows shot up.

“I’d throttle you!”

Could he be...embarrassed?

King looked tough, but maybe he just wasn't used to being around girls. Whenever Anne got close to him, he would suddenly start acting suspiciously.

"Um, Anne?"

Someone called her name from behind her back. When she turned around, Valentine was standing there with a slightly uncomfortable look on his face.

"I've finished maintenance on the tools, and I don't have a candy sculpture of my own to work on. What should I do? Is there anything I can do to assist you?"

"Ah, I see. Um...Orlando, we don't have any other orders at the moment?" Anne asked.

"No. Just these two."

Orlando answered without even looking up. Two jobs were far too few for a main studio. It seemed there was a lack of orders as well as candy crafters.

"If there are only two jobs, then could I ask you to work together with either Orlando or King?"

"Work together?"

Valentine looked like he had just heard something unbelievable.

"That is Orlando's job, and this one is King's. I'm not getting involved."

"Why not?!"

"Surely, I shouldn't stick my hands in another person's work?" Valentine said, as if that was common knowledge.

Anne was shocked. She was confused for a moment.

Have I made some sort of terrible misunderstanding?!

The strength of a studio was that it employed many candy crafters. Often for a large candy sculpture, one crafter was chosen as the project leader, and multiple other crafters contributed by working on their assigned part. In cases of works where the uniformity of the modeling was important, the leader would take charge of shaping everything, while several other crafters kneaded silver sugar and mixed colors. That way, work could progress far more quickly than if a single person completed the entire job.

Anne knew she wasn't wrong about that. She had seen the way they worked at the Radcliffe Workshop.

But Valentine was saying that was wrong.

Which meant the main studio of the Paige Workshop was not typical. They had a unique methodology.

"So then everyone completes their assignments alone and how they wish?"

"We take responsibility for our own work. We are artists, after all."

Valentine was smiling and brimming with confidence.

"But what does the head candy crafter do? What were you doing, Orlando?"

Anne had been under the impression that the head candy crafter was in charge of the other crafters to make sure that every job the studio accepted was completed efficiently and that every product was flawless and well-made.

But here, each crafter was making their own sugar candy the way they wanted to make it, not taking a hand in anyone else's work. In which case, leadership was an impossibility. In fact, it was unnecessary.

Upset that he was being frequently interrupted, Orlando looked up without lifting his head.

"Silver sugar management. Receiving customers when they come to place orders. And the most important thing is making sure the sugar candies that each candy crafter creates will not bring shame to the main studio of the Paige Workshop."

"And what do you do to ensure that?"

"If something looks bad, instruct them to fix it. To make it right. If it seems like a piece that won't embarrass us, show it to Glen. If Glen says it's good, you press the Paige Workshop seal onto the base. That's your role. It's an important responsibility, since instructing people to fix their work elevates the quality of their piece. Never let anything that would dishonor the name of the studio out into the world."

Single jobs entrusted to individual candy crafters. From the artists' perspectives, that must be satisfying.

And the jobs allowed the candy crafters to make whatever they personally wanted to make.

It was the most ideal job she could think of.

But why is it like this? Something's not quite right here.

For some reason, Anne felt a little uncomfortable.

The candy crafters here were skilled. And they had pride in their work. The fact that such a studio was in decline was heartbreaking. Anne wondered why a place that produced such fine sugar candy was not better appreciated.

She suspected the answer had something to do with the discomfort that she was feeling.

Ultimately, Anne spent that entire day working with Nadir and Valentine, taking an inventory of the studio's silver sugar reserves.

The strange thing was that the silver sugar stored at the Paige Workshop was of markedly better quality than the silver sugar Anne had gotten from the Radcliffe Workshop.

Until two days ago, the four crafters from the Paige Workshop had been working at the Sant Province branch of the Radcliffe Workshop, refining silver sugar.

The refining operation had finally finished, and they had returned with the barrels of silver sugar.

Due to their long absence, the main studio of the Paige Workshop was currently far behind schedule on the two orders they had contracted.

King and Orlando continued plugging away the whole day, hardly resting at all.

When the sun set, their work naturally came to an end.

Just like in the morning, the only people seated for dinner were Orlando, Anne, and Mithril. Orlando quickly withdrew to his room, so Anne sat at the spacious table alone with Mithril.

The main house was large and old. But it had a calmness to it, cultivated over the long years. It was a pleasant building to be in.

There were seven people living in the main house besides Anne and Mithril. But when the two ate their meals alone together in spite of that, she felt like she was a guest here.

Anne, who had always lived on the road, felt like a guest no matter where she was. This place was no exception.

The formal atmosphere made the house feel a little lonely. Anne had thought that once she started working as the new head candy crafter, she would be treated like the other crafters at the Paige Workshop. That thought was probably making her feel even lonelier.

The female fairy came out of the kitchen to clean up Orlando's dishes.

She was about the same height as Anne, and though Anne didn't know the fairy's real age, she looked to be the same age as her in appearance. Her orange hair was soft and fluffy, and she had a kind face. Her clean cotton apron and floral-patterned dress suited her well, and she looked sweet.

"Say, um—"

For some reason or another, Anne was feeling lonely, so she called out to the fairy.

The fairy, who had been piling up the dishes, looked at her, surprised.

"—did I introduce myself yet? My name is Anne Halford. Nice to meet you."

"Ah yes. I am Danna."

"Danna, have you eaten dinner already? If not, would you like to eat with us here? There's another fairy around, right? If I could ask you to invite them, too, we'll have a merry table."

After giving her a blank look, Danna shook her head, as if it was totally out of the question.

"No, I can't do that. That is the dining table for candy crafters and members of the family."

“But look, Mithril Lid Pod is eating with me. And you’re part of the same household, Danna, so doesn’t that make you like family?”

“I-it does not. Not in the least. That gentleman may be a fairy, but he is also a craftsman who helps you with your work. I am not a candy crafter, and I am a fairy, so I am not part of the family.”

Danna seemed flustered as she denied Anne’s assertion, then quickly tidied up the dishes and withdrew to the kitchen.

“Rejected. I didn’t think it would be so lonesome with everyone living in the same house.”

Anne hung her head dejectedly, and Mithril patted her hand to comfort her.

“Don’t take it personally. Most fairies would be shocked to be invited to eat a meal with a human. Most humans don’t eat with fairies, remember?”

Then they suddenly heard an explosion of laughter from the parlor. Anne looked up and saw Elliott entering the dining room as he removed his coat. He was roaring with laughter.

“What was all that? If you’re going to resort to making passes at the fairies, and the female ones at that, I’d rather you invite me to dinner, Anne.”

He draped the coat he had removed over the back of a chair and, still grinning, took a seat beside Anne.

“Were you lonely? How cute. Girls ought to be cute.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“I’m not making fun of you at all. I love those sorts of things about girls. So how were things today? Is the job going all right?”

Since he asked, she gave it some serious thought.

“The crafters make whatever they want to make. They each have their own responsibilities, and they each do their own jobs. Would you say those are the Paige Workshop’s convictions?”

“Yes. The three-hundred-year-old convictions of the Paige Workshop, and what Glen drills into his crafters, too.”

“I think it’s ideal.”

Frankly, Anne approved.

“I think it’s ideal for the crafters, absolutely. But I’m not happy with it.”

Elliott’s joking mood faded away instantly.

“Anne, are you saying you have a complaint about our three-hundred-year-old beliefs?”

“It’s not necessarily a complaint. It’s just, for some reason, I’m not satisfied.”

Anne did not understand why she felt so unsure, and she furrowed her brow.

Perhaps because he knew Anne harbored no ill will or hostility, Elliott shrugged.

“Fine, I’ll bite,” he said. “I am the one who brought you here with high expectations, after all.”

Then he smiled in a self-deprecating way. It was a little different from his usual frivolous smile.

“All of us are too close to Glen. We’re comfortable with our own way of doing things, and we don’t want to contradict him. But something is definitely wrong. That’s why I’ve got to run around every day trying to raise money. As a result, though I’m a Silver Sugar Master in name, the fact is I’ve hardly touched silver sugar in the past year. I know something is wrong, but I don’t know what it is.”

Anne felt like she was getting a glimpse of Elliott’s true face.

Glen Paige was probably an incredibly important person to Elliott. Come to think of it, the first time she had met King, he had said, “*If Glen approves of you, I’ve got no objections.*” Those were the words of someone who had full confidence in the man. Anne wondered what kind of figure Glen was to the candy crafters at the studio.

Elliott skillfully hid his true face, which she had briefly glimpsed, behind another frivolous expression.

“Well, you are *the first silver sugar*. You should try to do things your way.”

“I’ve been curious about that the whole time. What is ‘the first silver sugar’?”

“Oh, that’s right. It’s a phrase that’s not used outside the Paige Workshop. The first silver sugar is...”

A woman’s voice interrupted, cutting off Elliott as he was about to answer.

“When you refine silver sugar, you soak the sugar apples in cold water overnight. When you do, you add a handful of silver sugar to the water.”

Bridget slowly walked out of the darkness at the end of the corridor. Behind her was Challe.

Anne was aware that Challe had been living with Bridget. Even so, seeing it right before her eyes was hard to bear. Without meaning to, she looked away.

Bridget emerged into the light of the dining room and stood across from Anne with the dining table in between them.

Under the light, Bridget’s blond hair looked glossy and beautiful.

“The initial handful of silver sugar that you add to the cold water is called ‘the first silver sugar’ at the Paige Workshop. If you don’t add it, then no matter how long you steep your sugar apples, the bitterness will never come out.”

All candy crafters are aware that silver sugar is essential for getting the bitterness out of sugar apples. Nothing else can be substituted.

“It’s silver sugar that brings about change. So ‘the first silver sugar’ also means the same thing.”

Anne looked up at her as Bridget dispassionately explained the term. She thought Bridget was probably telling her the meaning of the phrase to be polite, but she couldn’t sense any affection in the other girl’s expression.

“I didn’t know the phrase had such a meaning. Thank you.”

Anne thanked her, but Bridget didn’t acknowledge it and continued to talk.

“But how did whoever first made silver sugar long ago make it in the first place? Without that initial handful, you can’t refine more silver sugar. But they couldn’t have had it from the beginning. And yet silver sugar exists. So the first fistful must have existed. But even then, without prior silver sugar, it couldn’t have been made.”

Anne was surprised.

“Oh yeah... That’s true, isn’t it...? So who...? Or rather, how...?”

Who was the first to make silver sugar? I’ve always been told that the fairies made it, but who among the fairies? And how?!

It was as if a strange door had suddenly opened in front of a familiar landscape.

Without that first fistful, silver sugar could not be refined. But the silver sugar in that initial handful also could not have come into this world without silver sugar. So exactly how did it first appear?

It was an incredible mystery. Maybe it was some kind of magic, or a miracle. Or a secret technique of the fairies that humans didn’t know about. Anne’s heart leaped in her chest just trying to imagine all this.

“That’s why ‘the first silver sugar’ also means something mysterious. Just because you’re unusual, people expect things from you. It’s not because they appreciate your abilities. What can you do for people like that?”

Bridget’s last comment was probably meant to be offensive. But it was so wordy that it lacked any real punch. Still, it was a nasty thing to say.

But Anne didn’t sense Bridget’s hostility at all. She was too excited by what she had just learned.

“That never occurred to me until now!”

“Right, so that’s why—”

“It’s so obvious if you really think about it, but I hadn’t until just now. Bridget, seriously, how did the person who refined the first silver sugar manage to do it?!”

Bridget looked shocked for a moment after Anne asked the question, as if she wasn’t sure what Anne had just said. But a second later, she flew into a rage.

“How could I possibly know?!”

Anne was startled by Bridget’s angry shout.

Ah.....she’s mad.

Of course she is. She probably thought I was making fun of her.

“I-I’m sorry. I just—”

Anne rushed to apologize, but behind Bridget’s back, Challe started chuckling.

Bridget’s face turned red, and she whirled around to face him.

“Don’t laugh!”

But Challe continued laughing. Then he said, suppressing a smile, “Seems like you aren’t very accustomed to coming up with insults. Quite the lady.”

Bridget turned even redder, all the way to her ears. When he saw that, Challe burst out laughing again. As red as she was, Bridget turned back around to Anne.

“I’m going to have dinner with Challe now,” she said. “We want to eat alone, so you need to leave the dining room. You too, Elliott.”

“Come on. That’s tyranny, isn’t it? I haven’t eaten yet, either. And on top of that, you’re going to allow a fairy, that’s not even a candy crafter, to dine at this table?”

Elliott quirked his eyebrows, and Bridget raised her voice.

“He may be a fairy, but I recognize Challe as a member of this household, so there’s no problem! This is my house! So you two should defer to me!”

Making Bridget any more upset was probably a bad idea. It was fine if her anger was directed toward Anne, but if she turned it toward Challe, that would be terrible.

In any case, Challe ignored Bridget’s order and continued chuckling.

“That’s fine,” Anne said. “We were finished eating anyway. Let’s go, Mithril Lid Pod.”

When Anne stood up, Elliott also rose and took his coat. He seemed exasperated. He headed toward the kitchen, probably to ask that his meal be taken up to his room. Anne left the dining room with him.

As she was leaving, she glanced behind her.

Challe had pulled out a chair for himself and was sitting there calmly. He was

still smirking with amusement.

Bridget looked embarrassed, and her face was bright red.

She was allowing Challe to eat at the dining table, which had always been reserved for family members and candy crafters. Anne was glad to see Bridget treating Challe like a member of her family.

Bridget probably enjoyed eating alone with Challe. After all, Anne liked eating meals with him. But meals were even more fun when Mithril was there, too. At Kat's shop, including Kat and Benjamin, they had dined with two humans and three fairies present.

Anne wondered if, unlike her, Bridget was satisfied with just Challe. She wondered if Bridget wasn't lonely, eating with only one other person in a house where so many people lived. She couldn't help but be concerned.



Anne hadn't picked up on Bridget's snide comments at all. Instead, she had gotten absorbed in the story of the first silver sugar. The whole thing was so funny, Challe couldn't stop himself from laughing. Even with bright-red cheeks, Bridget was charming. She looked much cuter now than with her usual composed expression.

"Don't laugh," Bridget said again. Her face was still bright red.

Challe finally managed to stop. He propped his elbows on the table and held his chin in his hands. He looked up at Bridget, and for the first time, he felt like having a proper conversation with her.

"Let's at least have meals with them," he said. "Why are you being so stubborn?"

"I want to eat with you and only you," Bridget replied.

"You say that, but you look awfully lonely."

"I am not lonely!"

Bridget sat in a chair and turned away from him.

Perhaps she was angry that Anne hadn't felt disheartened. Or maybe she felt pathetic because Challe had laughed at her.

After the meal, Bridget made several demands. She wanted Challe to comfort her and whined for him to fawn over her incessantly. He cradled her like a child, stroked her hair, and pretended like he wanted to be doing it the whole time.

Bridget continued giving orders, and it was nearly dawn by the time she fell asleep.

Challe was used to all the demands that humans made. At this point, none of them mattered much to him, but of course, he was tired. Even so, the scene outside caught his eye, and he stood by the window for a short while.

The sky behind the gentle slope of the hill was starting to turn light purple. Dawn was near.

Anne had not gone to the workroom that night. He had not felt her presence.

When he realized that, he was disappointed, and he smiled bitterly. Why was he worried about something like that? She was under the same roof, together with Mithril. She was in no danger and was living comfortably. He knew all that, so there was no need to be concerned.

But when they were apart like this, he wanted to see Anne's face so badly, he could hardly stand it. He wanted to feel the soft sensation of her body close to his. That desire grew stronger.

Challe heard the front door of the main house opening. Then in the bluish light of dawn, he spotted Anne walking with her back straight and tall. She was properly clothed in her dress and had her hair done as well, and she was heading for the workroom.

Challe had no doubt that she had risen early and was planning to do some work.

He turned around to look at the bed behind him. Bridget was fast asleep. After making sure of that, he stepped outside through one of the sliding glass doors and proceeded toward the workroom.

Anne was standing motionlessly in the corner of the dim building.

She was looking down at two pieces of incomplete sugar candy. She had removed the protective cloths that had been placed over them and was examining them carefully with a pensive expression.

“Nothing interesting is going to happen, no matter how long you stare at them.”

When Challe spoke up from the doorway, Anne let out a small shriek and jumped. Once she saw that it was Challe, she placed her hand on her chest in relief.

“You scared me.”

When Anne was absorbed in her thoughts, she became inattentive to noises and movement around her. As a result, she was often so startled that she jumped.

When Challe approached her, Anne smiled. But then her expression immediately turned into a look of concern.

“Challe, was everything all right last night? With the way you were laughing, I bet Bridget got mad at you.”

“It was nothing serious.”

“Well, Mithril Lid Pod said that she’s been making you do all sorts of horrible things, the likes of which we can’t even imagine, and that it must be awful and unbearable. So you might be concerned about waiting for me to save you. Have you been suffering badly?”

“No. She’s just an ordinary girl, not some deviant. Don’t take Mithril’s ridiculous fantasies seriously,” he responded.

Then for some reason, Anne’s face flushed slightly red, and she bashfully averted her eyes.

“So then, um...with Bridget, are you, uh...getting along well?”

“We are not on friendly terms, but we’re getting along in our own way.”

When she heard that, Anne looked up at Challe in apparent surprise.

“Your own way? Your own way?! What way would that be?!”

“Shall I show you? In person?”

“N-no! You don’t need to! I don’t know what you’ve been doing, but I’ve got a bad feeling about it! Don’t show me!”

Having never even experienced a kiss, innocent Anne frantically rebuffed Challe’s little joke.

Then, though she looked embarrassed by it, she asked him one more time: “But, um...whatever it is, it’s not too terrible, is it?”

“No,” he answered flatly.

Anne finally seemed relieved. “As long as you’re not suffering, Challe, that’s good. I’ll work hard at my job, so just be patient.”

As she made that assertion, her words turned into white puffs of breath and dissolved into the darkness. Her white breaths were like her life force given form. Suddenly, he wondered: If he stole one of those white puffs with a kiss, in her surprise, would Anne run away or start crying?

“Challe? What is it?”

Apparently, he had been staring at her. He was startled and slightly flustered to hear her call his name.

What am I thinking?! Kiss the scarecrow?!

Until that moment, he had never once thought of doing something like that to anyone, except when he’d been ordered to do so or planned it ahead of time.

Concealing his inner turmoil, he shifted his gaze to the candy sculptures.

“It’s nothing. More importantly, is there something wrong with these?”

When he asked, Anne also turned back to the candies and made a troubled face.

“These are incredibly well-made, don’t you think? The crafters here, at least Orlando and King, are tremendously skilled. Yet even though they make things as fine as this, they get few orders. I wonder why that is? The crafters create what they want to make, which seems ideal, and yet...why is this workshop in

such a state? It's kind of frustrating. I want to do something about it, and I think I can manage, given how skilled these crafters are."

Challe was sure that Anne had decided to work at the studio in order to help him. But once she was given a job, she became totally absorbed in it. She really sounded like she was a candy crafter of the Paige Workshop. She was an artist through and through. She lost herself in her work.

Challe thought Anne was a fool for being like that, but at the same time, he was relieved to see it.

No matter the situation, Anne was always the same old Anne.

"Challe!!"

Suddenly, they heard a shriek.

Both Anne and Challe turned toward the door simultaneously. Bridget was standing there in her nightclothes with the dim, dawning sky behind her. She had both hands clasped over her mouth, and her eyes were open wide. She looked hurt.

"I asked you not to see her," she mumbled in a trembling voice.

She found me, Challe thought calmly.

He felt no fear or guilt. The color drained from Anne's face. Challe automatically took a half step forward to protect her.

"Don't get it wrong," he answered quietly. "You didn't ask me anything. You ordered me. I have no intention of following that order. You should punish me."

"Don't you care about my feelings at all?" Bridget asked in a tearful voice.

"You are my owner. You don't need to consider my feelings. In the same way, I don't need to consider my owner's feelings, either."

"No one, not a single person... No one ever thinks about my feelings! Fine then, I understand! I will punish you! I'll punish you right away!"

Bridget ran off toward the main house.

"Wait, stop! Bridget, stop!"

Anne broke into a run and followed her.

“There’s no need! Don’t go!” Challe shouted.

Anne turned around and shook her head hard.

“I’ll get her to stop! I don’t want you to be punished!”

Anne ran out of the workroom.

“Busybody!”

He hated to do it, but Challe also gave chase.

Bridget ran up the front steps, around the terrace, and burst into her chambers.

Challe, who was chasing Anne, entered Bridget’s room at the same time as her.

Bridget was in the sitting room that served as an extension of her bedroom. There was a small hearth in there, and she was crouched in front of it. She stuck her hand in the back of the hearth, where the fire had gone out.

The night was starting to lift. The brightening sky was visible through the sliding glass doors.

The interior of the room was also getting brighter. Challe could see that there was a hole in the back wall of the hearth about the size of an average human’s face. The bricks that had been set in that hole were stacked in front of Bridget’s knees.

Bridget must have been hiding Challe’s wing there.

Anne ran up to Bridget, got down on her knees behind her, and pleaded with the girl.

“Please, Bridget. Stop!”

“Get back!”

Bridget pushed Anne’s shoulder. Anne lost her balance and fell backward. She used her hands to break her fall. Without hesitation, Bridget stuck both hands into the open hole. Her eyes widened.

“Gone?!”

Bridget groped around several times.

“Gone, gone?! How can that be?! Only I knew about this spot!”

Anne turned to look at Challe. He could see the question on her face, and he shook his head.

Challe had not known that Bridget had hidden his wing there, either.

Bridget took her hands out of the hole and flopped down on the floor.

“...How...?”

She hung her head and covered her face with both hands, then began crying quietly.

It disappeared?

For fairies, their wings are the source of their life force. If they are destroyed, the fairy loses their life. If they don't know the whereabouts of their wings, they don't even know whether their own life is in danger. Naturally, this makes them feel a dreadful sense of unease.

Anne stood up and walked over to Challe's side. She looked unwell. She was probably unbearably worried.

“Challe, your wing is...gone?”

“Seems that way.”

The only thing he could do was frown.

All three of them were frozen in place. The sky brightened quickly, and the morning sun streamed into the room.

After a little while, there was a knock at the door.

“Bridget. Is Anne in there?”

The quiet voice seemed to belong to Orlando, one of the candy crafters living in the main house.

When she heard her name, Anne was startled and looked toward the opening door. Orlando briefly surveyed the situation in the room, then turned his gaze on Anne with an emotionless expression.

“I just got a message from the boy who delivers our milk. Very soon, the maestro of the Radcliffe Workshop and Keith Powell will be here.”



“Why would Mr. Radcliffe and Keith come here?” Anne asked.

“To visit Glen while he’s ill,” Orlando informed her indifferently. “You’ll also have to be there to receive them, so I’m letting you know.”

That was all Orlando said before turning his back to them. In a panic, Anne grabbed Orlando’s arm.

“Wait! That’s just— That’s out of the question right now. Can’t you see the situation we’re in?!”

“I see that you are in Bridget’s room and that Bridget is crying. And?”

Orlando seemed annoyed as he shook his arm free. Anne couldn’t believe his cold reaction.

“Challe’s wing has gone missing. That’s why Bridget is crying! Orlando, at least help calm Bridget down. Give her some mulled wine to drink or something. Then we have to go find Challe’s wing.”

Just then—

“Everything’s fine, Anne. There is no need to search for Challe’s wing.”

Elliott came strolling in from the direction of the dining room.

“You’re a real go-getter, Anne. Making a big fuss before dawn. I could hear your voices all throughout the house.”

He stood beside Orlando and peered around the room. “Oh no, you’re crying,” he said, looking at Bridget. “Shall I console you, my dear? Or maybe we should ask Challe?”

“Mr. Collins. What do you mean by saying that ‘there is no need to search for Challe’s wing’?”

Anne pressed him for an answer, and Elliott jokingly put both hands up in the air.

“Don’t make such a scary face; I said it was fine. Glen is holding on to Challe’s wing.”

Challe became suspicious when he heard those words.

Teary-eyed, Bridget also lifted her head in surprise. “Why does my father have it?!” she demanded. “This hiding place... I thought no one knew about it.”

“You know, it’s the strangest thing. Just before Bridget and the rest of you started kicking up all this fuss, we received notice that the group from Radcliffe was coming. Orlando and I went to wake Glen, and wouldn’t you know it, sitting right beside Glen’s pillow was that fairy’s wing.”

“Give it back! Give it back to me right now!”

Bridget suddenly stood up and dashed across the room. She pushed Anne out of the way, grabbed hold of Elliott’s shirt, and started shaking him.

“Bridget.”

They all heard a quiet voice come from behind Elliott’s back. Elliott and Orlando turned around in shock.

“Glen?! You mustn’t be out of bed!”

Orlando immediately moved to support Glen, who looked unstable.

“Father.”

Looking at her ill father, Bridget let go of Elliott and took several steps back.

While being supported by Orlando, Glen stared intensely at his daughter.

“Somebody left his wing by my pillow,” he said. “I have taken the wing into my keeping.”

“Who did? But that’s impossible. I was the only one who knew about that hiding spot.”

“It doesn’t matter who. I don’t know, either. But this is a good opportunity. I will hold on to that wing from now on. Whoever left it there must have wanted me to do so.”

“Why?! Father, you said it was all right until the wedding, didn’t you?!”

“Your behavior is intolerable. Even with fairies, there are limits to how we should handle them. Locking him in your room and not allowing him to have contact with anyone other than yourself is going too far. On top of that, you’ve been closing yourself off, too, and only spending time with the fairy. It’s like you’re obsessed with him.”

Glen’s breathing sounded labored, and his voice was faint. But the anger behind his words weighed more heavily than if he was shouting.

Bridget was standing stock-still, her face pallid. Glen tried to reason with her.

“Bridget, come to your senses. Whose daughter are you?”

Anne’s heart ached when she heard those words.

Glen is correct. But he’s being harsh.

He couldn’t show any sympathy toward Bridget’s behavior. Nevertheless, confiscating Challe’s wing in this fashion was cruel. No matter how clumsily she may have shown it, Bridget was in love with Challe. Glen’s decision seemed designed to gouge those feelings from her heart.

Bridget’s face twisted into a scowl.

“I don’t know... I don’t know whose daughter I am anymore! I don’t know!!” Bridget shouted, then ran into her bedroom so she wouldn’t have to hear any more.

Glen let out an exhausted sigh, then looked over at Challe reproachfully.

“I know this is not your fault, but you should be ashamed of yourself. Your appearance misleads people.”

Challe gave a cold smirk.

His expression of contempt for people who said selfish things was ruthless, and for that very reason, it had a beguiling quality to it that naturally attracted attention. The depths of his black eyes were unimaginably sharp and dark.

“Are you my master now?”

“I am. So I will give you an order. Attend to Bridget with moderation. There’s

no need for you to respond to all her demands. However, you're also not to behave in a way that will hurt her. Aside from that, you may do as you wish. And you are to stay in Anne's room. You'll go to work whenever she has need of your abilities as a fairy."

After he said that, Glen turned his gaze on Anne.

"Anne, Mr. Radcliffe is coming. You are the head candy crafter. Go out and receive him along with Elliott."

"Understood. But, Glen, Challe is..."

"That is what I have decided to do with him. Do you understand me? I've decided."

Glen sounded intimidating. He was tacitly telling her not to defy the orders of her maestro.

Everyone treats Challe like an object. They pick up his wing and pass it from person to person.

No one seemed to care that they were playing with his life. Anne wondered what she could do to get them to understand. The cold rage that she could see in Challe's eyes was justified, she thought.

Glen broke into a bitter smile.

"You truly are *the first silver sugar*, Anne. You bring about...all sorts of changes."

The moment he finished speaking, Glen stumbled forward. Elliott rushed to join Orlando in supporting him.

Chapter 4

ONCE AGAIN, GOING AFTER THE PRIZE

As soon as Challe entered Anne's room, Mithril Lid Pod sat up on the bed and rubbed his eyes over and over again. Then as soon as he was sure Challe wasn't an illusion, his vision blurred, and he burst out crying, tears running down his face. Then he jumped off the bed and leaped across the room. He threw his arms around Challe's neck.

"Challe Fenn Challe—!!"

Challe grabbed the bawling Mithril by the collar and pulled him away.

"Stop it. You're annoying."

"Why are you here?! Did you get your wing back?!"

Anne explained in simple terms the events that had transpired since dawn that morning, while Challe held the sniffing Mithril pinched between his fingers.

Once she did, Mithril burst into tears again.

"So for the time being, you can walk free, right?! You must have had a terrible time, Challe Fenn Challe! What horrible things did that woman force you to do?! This, that, and the other thing?!"

Challe frowned, looking irritated.

"You need to do something about your ridiculous fantasies."

Challe had not yet recovered his wing. But Anne was still happy that this turn of events had brought him back to her side. She looked at Mithril, who was

trying to hug Challe even after he had been declared a nuisance, and naturally smiled for the first time in a while.

“But who could have stolen Challe Fenn Challe’s wing from that woman and gone out of their way to take it to the maestro?”

Mithril had finally calmed down and was sitting on Challe’s shoulder, which he rarely did. He was still being clingy and touching Challe’s hair and his cheek. Challe swatted him away like he would a fly, brushing him off with an irritated wave of his hand.

Mithril’s question was understandable; Anne found it curious, too.

“I wonder who it was? Bridget said no one knew about that hiding place.”

“It doesn’t matter. Regardless of who has it, it doesn’t change the fact that it’s in human hands,” Challe asserted coldly.

When Anne looked at his expression, she could hardly stand it. Even if she thought of fairies as her friends, other people were different. Everyone had their own opinions and principles, and Anne couldn’t force her ideas on them. Nonetheless, she wished she could get them to understand somehow.

Challe took a seat on the windowsill and turned his gaze outside. Then his expression slightly changed. He seemed displeased, as there were deep creases between his eyebrows.

“Looks like they’re here.”

“Who?”

Anne walked over to Challe’s side and peered out the window. A small single-horse carriage was visible on the road that ran from the bottom of the hill to Millsfield. Two men were riding on it. Without a doubt, they had to be Marcus Radcliffe, the maestro of the Radcliffe Workshop, and Keith.

“Ah! I’ve got to go downstairs and get ready. Keith is here!”

With a smile, Anne looked at Challe. But he didn’t look pleased at all.

“Challe? Keith is coming, you know? Aren’t you happy? You must want to see him.”

“Are you dumb? Why would I be happy because that boy is coming here? I have no need to see him,” he said curtly and turned his face away.

“Oh, really? Well, how about you, Mithril Lid Pod?”

“He helped you, Anne, so I’ll go see him before he leaves. But at least right now, I have to talk about all sorts of things with Challe Fenn Challe! Like, what sort of terrible things did Bridget make him do? And did you do them? Tell me all about it and don’t spare any details!”

“Knock it off with the fantasies.”

Even though she felt disappointed by the fairies’ poor reactions, Anne went down to Glen’s room on the first floor.

Earlier, Glen had been on the verge of another seizure. But apparently, it hadn’t been that serious. He was now calm and even able to hold a conversation.

Glen, Elliott, and Anne would be attending to Marcus Radcliffe and Keith during their visit. Their guest was the maestro of one of the candy factions. Etiquette dictated that Elliott, the proxy maestro, and Anne, the head candy crafter, go out and greet them.

Marcus and Keith had apparently arrived in Millsfield the night before, just as the sun was setting. It had taken a while for them to find lodging, and by the time they were settled in at an inn, it was late and would have been rude to stop by someone’s house. So in the morning, they had sent a letter with the young man who delivered milk from the Millsfield town center, informing Glen that they would be visiting sometime that morning.

“They’ve already reached the bottom of the hill.”

When Anne reported this to Glen, who was lying in bed, he looked up at the ceiling and sighed.

“A sickbed visit, huh? I suppose word has spread that I’m in poor health.”

“Maybe it’s reconnaissance now that Anne is here? So they can figure out what we’re thinking and what we’re planning to do. Also, the younger Powell is making his debut,” Elliott said in his usual lighthearted manner.

“Edward’s son?” Glen muttered nostalgically.

Keith’s father—Edward Powell, the former Silver Sugar Viscount—had been affiliated with the Paige Workshop. Glen and Edward had spent their training days together.

“Oh, look,” Elliott said, raising an eyebrow. “Here they are now.”

There was noise outside. Before long, Marcus and Keith entered the room, guided by Danna. Both were dressed in traveling attire, wearing long overcoats and holding hats in their hands.

Marcus bowed silently to Elliott and Anne. Keith did the same, then gave a small smile just for Anne. She smiled back.

“Pardon the intrusion, Paige.”

Marcus looked at Glen lying there, and his solemn face became even more grim.

“It’s been a long time, Mr. Radcliffe. Please pardon my rudeness. I nearly had another episode this morning, and there’s no way I can get up,” Glen said.

“No, I don’t mind. Don’t worry about it... Actually...you seem fitter than the rumors suggest.”

Marcus seemed somewhat surprised by Glen’s weakened state. Looking concerned, he offered some awkward words of consolation. Glen smiled bitterly.

“Thank you for saying so. Did you come here today for a sickbed visit?”

“Well, that and various other matters. I heard the newest Silver Sugar Master had started working here, you see. It’s rare for the Paige Workshop to employ an outside candy crafter who hasn’t worked their way up through the workshop,” Marcus said, then glanced at Anne. “Does accepting a new crafter when the Selection for the First Holy Festival is near mean that you’ll be participating this year?”

The Selection for the First Holy Festival?

The Selection is part of the festival put on by the state church to celebrate the New Year. On New Year’s Eve, for good fortune to visit the kingdom in the

coming year, prayers are held simultaneously at every state church throughout the land. The king himself visits the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell. It is a unique ritual, during which the whole country celebrates together.

“Certainly not. My father refused every year,” Glen said dismissively.

Marcus nodded in relief at his answer.

“Well, I thought that might be the case, but... Also, I brought Powell’s son with me.”

When introduced, Keith stood by the side of the bed. He seemed a little nervous.

“I’m Keith Powell.”

“You’ve turned into quite a good candy crafter, or so I’ve heard.”

“I...I’m sorry.”

Keith hung his head remorsefully and apologized for some reason.

“It’s fine. It’s nothing to worry about. You were free to choose.”

Glen responded without any apparent criticism, then shifted his gaze over to Anne.

“Mr. Radcliffe, Elliott, and I will talk for a bit now. Anne, take Keith to the parlor and offer him some refreshments.”

Anne curtsied slightly and took Keith with her when she left the room. They moved away from Glen’s chambers and into the parlor.

As soon as they entered the space, Anne breathed a sigh of relief and came to a halt, then turned around to face Keith, who’d been following her silently.

“Keith! You surprised me; the notice of your visit was so sudden.”

When she said that, Keith, who had also been on his best behavior, flashed his usual mellow smile.

“It’s not like it was my decision. We’re here because Marcus suddenly said he was gonna visit. I was curious about how you were getting on, so I came with him. You’re not having any trouble, are you? And is everything with Challe all right?”

“A lot of things have happened, but he’s fine. How’s the situation over there? How’s Kat doing? And did Jonas ever come back?”

“The work of refining the silver sugar is over, so Mr. Hingley went back to his own shop. It sounds like Jonas didn’t return to his hometown. They haven’t been able to get in touch with him yet, apparently.”

“I see...”

There was little that Anne could do for Jonas now. The only thing she could do was pray for good fortune to visit him.

“Anyway, why did Marcus suddenly come to Millsfield?”

“Because you went to the Paige Workshop, I guess. It seems he’s concerned the Paige Workshop might participate in the Selection for the First Holy Festival. It’s just like Marcus to worry about something like that.”

“The Selection for the First Holy Festival? What is that?”

Keith looked surprised.

“You don’t know?”

“No, I don’t. Ah, but before that, I’ll get the tea.”

Anne was about to go into the kitchen, when Keith gently grabbed her arm and stopped her.

“It’s fine. We had a huge breakfast at the inn, and I’m still full. Instead of tea, I’d like to take a walk outside since I came all the way to the Strand region. As soon as our visit is over, we have to set off for Lewiston.”

In instances like this, it was obvious that Keith came from nobility. No commoner would ever say they wanted to take a walk because they were in the Strand region. The only people who would ever think of the area as a place to go to enjoy the atmosphere and scenery were aristocrats.

But Anne also liked being outdoors better than being inside. In Anne’s case, however, it was because she had spent her whole life on the road since she’d been born and wasn’t used to the indoors.

The two of them went outside and walked toward the small lake at the base

of the hill. A gravel path led to the lake and was just wide enough for them to walk abreast. They were close enough for their shoulders to touch, and it seemed strange to walk behind the other, so they continued on, side by side. The withered, dry grass rustled on either side of them.

“So you don’t know about the Selection for the First Holy Festival, huh, Anne? You’ve never spent the New Year in Lewiston before?”

A chilly breeze blew down from the top of the hill. Anne rubbed her arms. Keith saw, and he draped his own coat, which he’d been carrying over his arm, across Anne’s shoulders without saying a word. When she thanked him, he immediately told her not to worry about it.

Keith seemed to be naturally considerate. Anne was comfortable with his attention, because she didn’t have any particular feelings for him one way or another.

“I did last year for the first time, but—”

“Did you go to the First Holy Festival at the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell?”

“Uh-huh. There was an incredible crowd around the church, and I got fed up with waiting and went back to the inn. When I asked the innkeeper about it, she told me that there was a display of amazing sugar candies inside the church for the First Holy Festival, and everyone was going to see them. When I heard that, I regretted passing it up and went out again to see them, but the doors of the church were already closed, and I couldn’t get in.”

“Those sugar candies are amazing. They fill a huge altar and all the space around it. It’s quite a spectacle. Every year, the main studio of one of the three candy factions gets a contract to produce all the sugar candy. In order to determine which one will make the candy, each workshop produces samples to show to the clergy at the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell. Then the clergy choose which workshop will make the sugar candy for that year’s First Holy Festival. That’s the ‘selection’ part.”

“That must be quite the honor.”

“That’s not all. If the workshop can deliver the goods for the First Holy Festival without issue, the state church pays them almost ten thousand cress.”

“Ten thousand cress?! That’s unbelievable!”

That amount could pay off all the Paige Workshop’s debts. It was just what one would expect from the state church.

“On top of that, the workshop chosen for that year—their sugar candy becomes very popular. People expect a lot even from the subsidiary studios, so sales increase across the whole faction. That’s why Marcus is so worried about it. I’m helping make our pieces for the Selection, too, so I’m anxious as well. The Radcliffe Workshop hasn’t been selected in a while now. Ever since Hugh Mercury—the Silver Sugar Viscount—became maestro of the Mercury Workshop five years ago, they’ve been chosen every time. The fact that they’ve been selected five years in a row has had a huge impact, and because of it, the Mercury Workshop became popular and grew into the largest faction.”

Anne tilted her head.

“But Glen said we’re not taking part in the Selection, despite all the benefits. Why?”

“The Paige Workshop stopped participating in the Selection during the time of the previous maestro. Though, I don’t know the reason why.”

Just then, they heard voices from the direction of the lake.

“It’s spilling. You’re spilling it. Get it together, Valentine!”

“You’re holding it too high! Lower it more—just above the ground should do, shouldn’t it? Why are your arms so damn strong anyway?!”

“Don’t whine like a weakling when you’re six years older than me. Men are supposed to be strong, right?”

“Are you planning on becoming a lumberjack or something?!”

Anne and Keith looked over and saw Nadir and Valentine carrying a barrel full of cold water.

Near the lake was a well where clear, cold water sprang from the ground. The water they used to make sugar candies was always carried up from that well.

Anne and Keith approached them while the two candy crafters were still yelling at each other. But as soon as Nadir and Valentine noticed them, they

simultaneously shut their mouths tightly and stopped in their tracks.

“Ah, um...pardon us. We have a guest?”

Nadir stared at Keith in apparent curiosity, and although Valentine’s cheeks were turning red, he was obliged to bow deeply enough for himself and Nadir.

“Hey, hey! Nadir. A greeting. Greet them,” Valentine whispered.

Nadir gave a pleasant smile.

“Are you Anne’s boyfriend?” he asked.

“N-no!! That’s completely wrong! And very rude to Keith,” Anne shouted.

Behind her, Keith smiled softly.

“I really don’t mind that much.”

“Hey, hey, hey! Nadir!”

After Nadir’s abrupt question, Valentine pulled on his ear.

“Oww! So who are you?”

“I’m Anne’s friend—Keith Powell, a candy crafter with the main studio of the Radcliffe Workshop,” Keith answered.

The moment he heard that name, all emotion disappeared from Valentine’s face.

“You’re Powell! Hmm, I see!” Nadir shouted in surprise.

He stared at Keith with even greater interest. Valentine, on the other hand, averted his eyes and picked up the barrel again.



“Mr. Powell. Please enjoy your stay. Now...if you’ll excuse us. Nadir. Let’s go.”

Nadir followed along after Valentine. Anne and Keith made room for them to pass, and the two of them bobbed their heads in thanks and went up the path.

“That was kind of strange, huh?” Anne muttered while watching the two of them go.

“There’s no helping it, though. To them, I’m a traitor,” Keith said regretfully.

“What do you mean by that, ‘a traitor’?”

“Anne. I’m sure you’ve noticed that compared with other main studios, the main studio of the Paige Workshop is lacking a bit of vitality.”

“More than a bit. It’s in a pretty precarious state.”

A strong gust of wind blew, carrying the fierce sound of rustling leaves from the forest. Yellow-and red-colored leaves rustled in the wind, and several of them danced up into the sky together.

Keith looked out into the distance, watching them go.

“The number of crafters at the Paige Workshop has been declining since the time when my father trained here. And the workshop’s popularity among the masses has been falling, too. The fact that the workshop was still getting orders, and that apprentices hoping to become candy crafters still gathered here in spite of all that, was because of my father, who became the Silver Sugar Viscount. Because this was the workshop the Silver Sugar Viscount came out of, you see. But then my father passed away, and I joined the Radcliffe Workshop. Rumors that the Powells had turned their backs on the Paige Workshop began to spread. And the apprentices and candy crafters became worried, so they all transferred to the Radcliffe Workshop or Mercury Workshop.”

That was the reason behind the lack of candy crafters and apprentices.

The final blow to the declining workshop must have been Keith’s decision to leave.

The sky was reflected in Keith’s eyes. They were such a deep blue that they looked purple.

“But I didn’t mean to turn my back on the Paige Workshop. I just didn’t want to live under my father’s influence anymore. I resisted following in his footsteps and did not join the workshop where he did his training. I held out when my father was alive. But I hated being known as Edward Powell’s son even after he had died. I am Keith. Not just Powell’s son. I have a name of my own.”

Keith’s voice was gentle, but he was also frowning slightly. He looked pained.

“Keith, it’s not your fault that the workshop has come to this. After all, didn’t Glen give you permission to leave? Maybe it’s just one of those things? If Glen thinks it was fine, then I’m sure the other candy crafters do as well. I’m sure their heads understand, but their hearts just haven’t caught up yet. They probably feel like they were abandoned. But once those feelings settle down, they won’t hold any ill will toward you. I know it.”

Hearing Anne’s words, Keith smiled gently, as he always did.

“Thank you, Anne.”

If she could manage to rebuild the Paige Workshop, that might ease Keith’s feelings of guilt. It might even dispel the ill feelings the candy crafters of the Paige Workshop harbored. If she could do that, she might be able to pay back just a little bit of the kindness that Keith had always shown her.

I have to revive this workshop. But...I wonder how I can do it?

Anne looked up at the pale autumn sky. A cloud, which looked like it had been painted overhead in a single stroke, stretched from north to south.

“Keith!”

It was Marcus’s voice. He was shouting from the direction of the main house.

“I guess we’re leaving already? Marcus is rather anxious, probably because we’re not done with our preparations for the Selection. But it’s understandable since there’s only a few weeks left to go, after all.”

Keith looked disappointed that their walk had been interrupted.

Then Anne suddenly realized something.

“The Selection... That’s it!”

“Huh, what?”

“The workshop that is chosen in the Selection becomes very popular, right? And if they deliver the candy for the First Holy Festival, they get ten thousand cress!”

“That’s true, but—”

“Right! In which case, that could be my chance! Thank you, Keith!”

Anne clutched both of Keith’s hands, and after giving her a puzzled look, he smiled.

“I don’t know what you’re thanking me for, but you’re welcome.”

Anne felt like she had finally figured out what she was supposed to be doing. Once Marcus and Keith had left, she headed straight for Glen’s room. Elliott was still there.

“Glen, I have a request,” Anne said.

He looked confused by her announcement.

“What is it?”

“I’d like the Paige Workshop to participate in this year’s Selection for the First Holy Festival.”

“That we cannot do. The Paige Workshop will not participate.”

Glen rejected the idea immediately.

“Why not?! I’m sure it’s our opportunity to revive the workshop.”

“We will not participate. My predecessor decided that.”

“Why did he decide such a thing? Especially when the other two factions always participate?”

“Originally, ever since the Millsland royal family united the kingdom, the candies for the First Holy Festival were always made by the Paige Workshop.”

“Oh, really? Wait, but the Selection—”

“There was no such thing. But the previous monarch, King Edmond I, changed course and started choosing from among the three factions. That was a slight against the Paige Workshop, which the Millsland family had employed since before the unification. What’s more, after the Selection was instituted, the Paige Workshop was never chosen even once. Unable to endure the humiliation, our previous maestro, my father, stopped participating in the Selection altogether. It was my father’s way of standing up to the royal family and the state church, which had insulted the Paige Workshop. I cannot change it now.”

“You were never selected?”

As far as Anne could tell, the skills of the candy crafters currently affiliated with the Paige Workshop seemed to compare favorably to those of the other workshops. If anything, Orlando and King had considerable talent. Despite dwindling to only five candy crafters, the workshop employed one Silver Sugar Master, as well as two other artisans with incredible skill. The crafters at the Paige Workshop were still top-notch.

So why had the sugar candy from such a workshop never once been chosen at the Selection?

And why had the king introduced the new system in the first place?

Both the monarch and the church demanded the best. They were the ones who desired good fortune above all. Which meant that as a way of finding the best candy, they had introduced the Selection. Then they had stopped choosing the Paige Workshop.

“There’s got to be a reason; I’m sure of it,” Anne said. “There’s something that the Paige Workshop needs in order to be selected by the king, the church, and the masses. If I don’t know what that is, I can’t revive the workshop. That’s why I think it’s necessary for us to participate, so that I can figure it out.”

“I cannot change my father’s policy,” Glen repeated. “The same way that I can’t change three hundred years of tradition. I cannot change the things that I inherited from my predecessors. That’s a rule that I must uphold in order to continue protecting our traditions.”

“But what would you do if one of your predecessors made the wrong

decision? If the maestro a hundred years ago or two hundred years ago made a mistake, what would you do?”

“A mistake? Are you suggesting that the decisions of our previous maestros were wrong?” Glen responded with obvious displeasure. “That’s very rude, Anne.”

“But the previous maestros, from two hundred years ago or a hundred years ago or your immediate predecessor—they were all human, right? Mistakes happen, don’t they? Being wrong isn’t anything to be ashamed of. Because if you know you made a wrong call, you can fix it.”

“Are you in your right mind, Anne? What you’ve said is an insult to our workshop. You’re basically saying we’ve been making a string of mistakes. That our traditions are wrong.”

Our workshop? Insult?

His tone was gentle, but Glen was clearly angry.

Anne, however, felt herself getting angry at Glen’s words, too.

“But, Glen, you also just insulted me.”

“What?”

“Right now, I am the head candy crafter for the Paige Workshop. But you said, ‘our workshop.’ That makes it sound like I’m not a part of the Paige Workshop, even though I’m the head candy crafter. You insulted me.”

“But you don’t really belong to the Paige Workshop.”

“I am a candy crafter belonging to the Paige Workshop,” Anne insisted. “You decided to hire me, and you said you were expecting great things from me. Those were your words. You told me it was my duty as a Silver Sugar Master. I was given this assignment because I won the royal medal, so if I don’t fulfill my responsibilities, that would be shameful. That’s why I agreed to join the Paige Workshop! And I’m the head candy crafter, so I want to get the workshop back on its feet! Because it’s my job!”

Glen seemed taken aback by her words.

“That’s...”

Glen was about to say something, but he couldn't seem to find the right words. He did not continue.

Elliott, who had been silently listening to their exchange, burst out laughing. Glen frowned and looked uneasily over at Elliott as he cackled.

"Elliott..."

"S-sorry. No, no, I'm sorry," he said after laughing for a while, as he wiped away the tears that had welled up in his eyes from laughing too much. "For now, I'm going to take Anne out of here. If you talk anymore, Glen might have a seizure."

"But, Mr. Collins—"

"Now, now, let's go. Let's go, okay?"

Elliott pushed Anne firmly on the back, guiding her toward the door. They left the room together. Even as she was being pushed along, Anne stole a glance back at Glen.

Glen deeply furrowed his brow and was glaring at the wall in front of him.

Once Anne had been pushed along as far as the dining room, Elliott started laughing again. Holding his stomach, he collapsed into a chair from exhaustion, stretched his legs out, and kept chuckling.

Anne was annoyed as she looked at Elliott.

"I'm serious, you know."

"It's funny *because* you said something like that so seriously."

Elliott's laughter had finally died down, and he was able to properly give her a reply.

"What do you mean, 'something like that'? Did I say something funny?"

"When Glen said that you didn't belong to the Paige Workshop, and you insisted that you were. That was brilliant. Glen lost that round. The rest of us could never even imagine defying him like that."

"If something Glen is saying seems off, shouldn't you give your opinion?"

"Maybe, if we thought something was off. But it doesn't seem that way to us."

Because everything that Glen is saying and all the traditions he's been protecting seem right. That's why I didn't know how to react."

Elliott cocked his head and looked up at Anne.

"Everyone who's still here feels a deep sense of obligation to Glen. We all respect him from the bottom of our hearts. If we didn't, we would have already transferred to a different faction. He's not even paying us a proper wage, you know?"

"Huh?!"

She was surprised, of course.

"Many people moved to Mercury or Radcliffe because they felt anxious about the future of the Paige Workshop. Even so, there were some who stayed because they idolized Glen. But when they stopped receiving a proper wage, they couldn't survive. Those with families reluctantly transferred to other factions. Even some of the bachelors and those on an allowance left. In the end, the single people who didn't need to send their families any money, and who idolized Glen from the bottom of their hearts, remained. In my case, I had an invitation from Killeen, the proxy maestro at the Mercury Workshop, asking if I would join them. But I chose to be with Glen. Everyone else is in the same boat. We are here because Glen is here."

"Everyone?"

"Yes, everyone."

At that point, Elliott directed his gaze toward the kitchen, as if remembering something fondly.

"You know, my mother worked in this house as a cook. She raised me and my older sister by herself. But she got sick and couldn't work anymore. Normally, she wouldn't have had any choice but to sell my sister to a brothel. But Glen... I was about seven years old when he hired me as an apprentice, despite being a useless boy. People don't usually pay their apprentices a wage, but he paid me. We agreed that once I became a proper candy crafter, he could deduct all the wages from my days as an apprentice. Because of his kindness, my sister and I had a decent life. And I was able to get my mother the proper medical care she

needed until she died. And ever since I became a candy crafter, I really had him deduct the wage I received as an apprentice from my salary every month.”

Glen had extended a helping hand to Elliott’s family. But he had only provided help in a way that benefited him.

What a strict person.

Anne had sensed the same thing when she saw how Glen behaved toward Bridget. The feeling grew even stronger when she heard Elliott’s story.

If someone worked hard, Glen would help them. He didn’t simply hand over money because he felt bad for someone. Expecting a seven-year-old child to exert himself to support his family was cruel. But in doing what he did, he had preserved the pride of the family, which might have been lost if he had simply given them the money.

Elliott turned his gaze toward the workroom, which was visible out the window.

“Orlando’s father was a Paige Workshop candy crafter. His father was good friends with Glen. But he passed away early, and Orlando was taken in and raised here. According to his father’s dying wish and based on Glen’s judgment, he wasn’t taken in as an adopted son but simply as an apprentice. Glen has always interacted with Orlando as the maestro, but at the same time, I’m sure he views him affectionately, the same as any parent would. And Orlando has probably always sensed that. While he respects Glen as a maestro, he also looks up to him as a father. This place is like his home. That clean freak is even growing his hair out as part of a prayer that Glen’s illness will get better.”

When Anne heard that, she could almost see Orlando as a surly little kid, sullenly walking around the grounds surrounding the main house. She finally understood why he wouldn’t cut his hair, even though it always seemed to be in his way, no matter how much it bothered him.

“King has really mellowed out now, but he used to be a wild little punk. His name is weird, right? Well, he was the leader of a gang of hoodlums. That’s where he got the name *King*. And no one would want to hire a guy with that kind of nickname, and who was also the biggest delinquent in Millsfield, right? But Glen hired him.”

Sure enough, King's appearance and manners were both very brazen. Now that she knew he was once the boss of a group of hoodlums, she understood the scar on his forehead was probably a souvenir from those days.

"Valentine went to school in Lewiston. He took the exam and entered parochial school, and there were rumors around Millsfield that he might become a great mathematician. But both of his parents died, and when he could no longer pay tuition, he dropped out. He's a smart guy, and he got job offers from all sorts of merchants, but for some reason, he came here. He said it's because he would be able to do what he wanted to do at this workshop. And then when he started making sugar candy, he really would not make anything other than precise, regular shapes. In a way, it was like he was stubbornly refusing to deviate. Even so, Glen told him that was fine. '*It's your style,*' he said. Since then, only occasionally, Valentine has been known to make other shapes as well."

Valentine certainly seemed clever. But when his path in life was blocked, he became obstinate and only made geometric shapes. As gentle as he was, Anne imagined he must have been carrying some gloomy thoughts.

At a time like that, he had probably needed someone to tell him that was okay. Anne had a feeling that it must have been incredibly comforting to hear someone say those words, rather than *cheer up* or *move forward*.

"Nadir came here with his parents from a kingdom on the mainland. He loved sugar candy and wanted to become a candy crafter, so he was looking for somewhere he could work as an apprentice. But no studio would accept him because of a popular belief that proper sugar candy only exists in the Kingdom of Highland and that making it is a Highland trade, you see. All the studios balked at teaching a foreigner those skills. The only one who accepted Nadir was Glen."

The Kingdom of Highland is an island nation. Accordingly, it is very insular and harsh toward outsiders. Nadir had probably received similar treatment to Anne, who had not been acknowledged because of her gender. And Glen had been the only one to accept him without complaint.

There probably wasn't a crafter alive who wasn't shaken when they heard the

rumors that'd gone around after Keith's decision to leave. Thinking about one's own life, transferring to a different studio, and holding a position as a candy crafter in another faction would secure future employment.

That was the smart decision.

Even so, the people who remained here each had their own reasons for staying. They all adored the maestro Glen Paige, and it was exactly that admiration that led them to polish their skills.

And it was precisely because they admired him so much that they couldn't see his other traits.

Anne envied them for having someone they could look up to like that.

Her mother, whom she had similarly adored, was no longer with her.

"If everyone idolizes Glen so much, then shouldn't they do something to help the Paige Workshop, which he wants to save?"

"You're certainly right about that."

Elliott looked up at the ceiling. If there was something they could do, they probably would have done it a long time ago.

Glen was by no means an unreasonable or obstinate person.

But he seemed to be letting his history and his pride warp his judgment.

History and pride were both important things. But they had warped him. Anne wondered why the important things were so often at odds with each other.

She had these thoughts as she headed toward the workroom, when she suddenly had an intense desire to touch silver sugar.

She went to her own wagon, which was parked in the stable, and from the storage compartment, she carried out one barrel of her own silver sugar. She rolled the heavy barrel into the workroom.

The workday was already underway, and Orlando and King were making progress on their sugar candy sculptures. Mithril seemed to have decided that he was in charge of cleaning, and he was diligently sweeping with a tiny broom

in his hands.

But as usual, Nadir and Valentine did not have anything to do.

The five people in the workroom looked confused when Anne showed up rolling a barrel of silver sugar.

“Sorry I’m late. Orlando and King, please continue your work. Nadir and Valentine, you don’t have anything lined up today, right?”

“We don’t, but...this is your silver sugar, right, Anne? What are you doing with it?”

Nadir approached Anne, looking at her quizzically.

“I brought it because I also want to get my hands into some silver sugar. While I’m at it, I want you to try and make something with me. I want you to show me your skills.”

“But, Anne, this is your silver sugar, right? Is it okay for us to use it?”

“I am the head candy crafter for the Paige Workshop, so there’s no such thing as my silver sugar or the workshop’s silver sugar.”

Anne shrugged as she lifted the lid.

“I’m sure you’ve checked the silver sugar that we have in storage here. So you’ll notice that the quality of our silver sugar is higher than the one that I brought with me from the Radcliffe Workshop. I want to see what you can do for my own satisfaction. We’re just playing around, so we can use my low-quality silver sugar.”

When he heard that, King gave a lighthearted whistle.

“Just what I would expect. She’s not a Silver Sugar Master for nothing. She really gets it.”

“Huh?”

Anne looked up and saw Valentine smirking.

“We told you that we took part in the refining work at one of the Radcliffe branch studios nearby, right? It was a studio without those huge pots and pans, so the four of us conspired to split up within the studio. We did our best to

ensure the portions we were allotted had been made to our standards. Sometimes, their careless work got mixed up with ours, so the results weren't entirely perfect. But even so, we obtained much higher-quality stuff than what the other folk took back with them."

"Is that true?!"

That explained why Anne had been impressed by the high quality of their mass-produced sugar.

She remembered getting angry at the sloppy work that had taken place during the mass refining operation at the Radcliffe Workshop. So she was hopeful and happy to hear that there had been crafters who had gone their own way and only worked on their own portions.

"All right, let's make something. Let's make whatever we like."

Anne gave them a nod, and Nadir and Valentine carried the barrel of silver sugar over to an open workbench.

As he scooped up some silver sugar, Nadir stuck out his tongue.

"Bleh, this really isn't very good, huh?"

"You're being too blunt!"

Valentine slapped the back of Nadir's head hard.

"Ow! I could have bitten my tongue!"

"That is silver sugar that Anne went to the trouble of securing!"

Anne also scooped up some silver sugar and smiled.

"It's fine. It really is poor-quality stuff."

Certainly, the silver sugar was not great. The color was dull and a little gray, and it had a coarse texture. Long ago, when Anne still struggled at refining silver sugar, she had produced similar results, and her mother, Emma, would always look displeased whenever that happened.

Anne added cold water to the silver sugar and began kneading. Seeing that, Nadir and Valentine also did the same.

While she was chilling her hands and kneading the sugar dough, Anne thought

about what she would make.

The image that arose in her mind was something she had seen that morning: Bridget's green eyes damp with tears.

Challe had been snatched away from her. She might even still be crying over it. When Anne thought about that, she felt guilty. Bridget was probably feeling lost, having been separated from Challe like that.

Her green eyes, shedding tears of love for him, were quite striking and beautiful. Anne felt a little pained, thinking about them.

She couldn't forgive Bridget for taking Challe's wing and shutting him up in her chambers. But to do something like that, even if it had to be through force, Bridget must have been desperate to be by his side. Because she loved him.

She loved him, so she wanted to be by his side, even if she had to be forceful. Anne didn't approve of Bridget's methods or principles, but she could understand Bridget's heart and the love she felt. After all, Anne had also come all the way to Millsfield.

And if Bridget was crying, Anne wanted to do something about it.

But since Anne was the one who had hurt her, she couldn't approach her unprepared.

She felt like Bridget needed a little bit of good fortune.

The maestro's daughter was beautiful and had lovely golden hair. It was entirely possible that Challe, who could not forget about Liz, had been charmed by her blond tresses.

If only Bridget's heart was a little softer, she might have better luck.

As she was thinking that, Anne searched for the right colored powder to use. There were many vials of colored powders lined up on the shelves that were built into the wall of the workroom. Anne approached them and took down five vials of powder in different shades of green.

She mixed a little bit from each vial into the silver sugar as she kneaded, creating a translucent green hue. She continued kneading the palm-sized piece of colored sugar.

Good fortune. I'll give some to Bridget with this.

The candy sitting in Anne's palm was in the shape of a small jade-colored bird. She thought Bridget's eyes would look even prettier if they were focused on something graceful and charming. So she wanted to make something like that for her. Anne had a feeling that her wish for Bridget would come true if the color of Bridget's eyes were reflected in the candy they were looking at.

It was sugar candy to bring about good fortune.

"The color of jade, huh? A little bird?"

There was a voice over her head, which startled Anne.

Orlando was peeking over Anne's shoulder at her hands. And it wasn't just Orlando; King was there, too.

"That's great work," King mumbled.

"Thank you."

Anne was a little bit embarrassed. Flustered, she tried to change the subject. "Anyway, um, what about Nadir and Valentine?"

When she looked around the workroom, she saw that Valentine had several perfect cubes lined up in front of him. She was stunned by how precise they were.

Valentine's cubes were composed of six faces that were all different translucent colors.

What was incredible about them was that the edges and corners were perfectly aligned. Both were so sharp, they looked like they had been cut by a knife. The edges between the faces were so beautifully done and so clean that the seams were practically invisible, and only the change in color distinguished them. The simple cubes were identical, differing only in color, and he had made several of them. Anne was taken aback by how stunning they were.

And she was even more surprised when she looked at what was in Nadir's hands.

Nadir practically had his face down against the workbench, holding a needle with the tips of his fingers as he frantically worked at making something. Lined

up next to him were tiny flowers, each one about the size of a grain of barley. Nadir was currently crafting a house about the size of his palm. He hadn't made anything but the bricks yet, but the color and shape of the bricks that were piling up on his workbench were just like the real thing, down to the coarse texture. He was using the tip of his needle to create that texture, to achieve something so detailed that it wasn't visible to the eye.

The two were paying absolutely no attention to their surroundings as they fervently worked away.

King saw Anne's expression and laughed.

"Orlando and I are more or less normal candy crafters. But Valentine and Nadir are a little special. Those things Valentine is making are his favorite shape. According to him, it's 'math.' And Nadir likes to create small, detailed pieces. The smaller it is, the more he seems to like it. Some customers have even come specifically to request that sort of work."

"Indeed. It really is something."

Anne felt like she could probably work with this.

If she could cleverly combine the skills of these unique crafters, they might be able to make something that had never been seen before, something that would be impossible for her to make on her own.

Since the day that Challe's wing had been handed over to Glen, Bridget had not taken a single step out of her room.

She had the curtains drawn and had shut herself away. Danna brought her meals to her room, but apparently, she hardly touched them.

Anne didn't know how to pass the little jade-colored bird she had made to Bridget, so it was still sitting in her room by the window. Somehow, the undelivered piece of candy looked lonesome.

Now that she knew what Nadir and Valentine were capable of, Anne thought she could probably manage something, but it wouldn't mean anything if the workshop didn't participate in the Selection. Time was slipping by as she

thought about how she should persuade Glen.

It was the morning of the third day since Marcus and Keith had visited.

Anne figured she'd probably spend the whole day cleaning and looking after the tools again. With that expectation, she headed to the workroom as usual and was greeted with four crafters sitting with nothing to do.

Even Orlando and King were sitting on stools, looking bored.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"We don't have any jobs," Orlando answered sullenly.

King had his legs stretched out in front of him and added with a yawn, "The candy sculptures that Orlando and I made were both completed yesterday and delivered to the customers."

"I see. And you told me that you only had the two orders, so..."

The orders for sugar candy coming into the workshop had finally dried up.

"This ship's about to sink. Even the rats are running away."

Mithril muttered that ominous warning as he diligently swept the dust from the hearth with his tiny broom.

"But it's just a break in orders. Such things happen, surely?" Anne asked.

King shook his head. "Even when we've fallen on hard times, we were still the top studio in the kingdom. It's never been like this before. Right, Orlando?"

When the question was thrown over to him, Orlando nodded.

"So then why?!" Anne shouted.

"The rumors that Glen's life is in danger are having an effect. What really should have happened last year, when Glen's health deteriorated, was for Elliott to have married Bridget and taken the Paige name. Either that or Glen should have adopted Elliott, given him the Paige name, and made him his successor. But there have been no signs of that, and the preparations for the wedding aren't moving forward. If Glen passes away now with no one to become the new maestro, the workshop will have to close down. There's no way the maestro hasn't thought of that, so Glen Paige is probably preparing to

start shutting things down. That's what the rumors all say. Even at our own subsidiary studios, there seem to be plenty of people who are certain that's the case. No matter how storied the main studio of the faction may be, I suppose no one wants to commission a studio that's preparing to close. On top of that, there's the thing with Powell, too."

Orlando's calm analysis made Anne want to put her head in her hands. Dejected, she put both hands down on a workbench.

"Have you told Glen any of this?"

This time, Nadir answered her.

"We have, and for a long time now, Elliott has been going around to various influential aristocrats and wealthy merchants, relying on old connections to try to get us jobs. So I'm sure he's been reporting his progress to Glen. We all knew that if it didn't go well for him, the workshop wouldn't get any more orders."

Anne pondered this sullenly.

"If that's the situation, then Mr. Collins can't marry Bridget anyway. If Glen has been informed of the circumstances, then for now, how about we try and suggest that he adopt Mr. Collins? If there's someone who can become the next maestro, then maybe the weird rumors will stop?"

"Impossible, I think."

Valentine spoke up hesitantly.

"I doubt Glen is going to adopt anyone as his heir. He was really bothered by what happened at the Mercury Workshop. He said he would never let such a thing happen here."

In response to Valentine's words, Nadir clapped his hands sharply.

"Oh, that? There was a lot of gossip about the faction having been taken over and so on, wasn't there?"

"I'm sure Glen doesn't want his precious daughter to be left with nothing. That's parental love for you."

Hearing Valentine's words, Nadir chuckled cynically while fiddling with his earring.

“I guess my parents didn’t have any of that parental love, huh? It doesn’t make an ounce of sense to me. I think he should hurry up and adopt Elliott. I don’t care what happens to that little princess of his.”

“Nadir. Keep your mouth shut.”

“Um, guys?” Anne interrupted Valentine and Nadir’s conversation. “What happened at the Mercury Workshop? What takeover?” she asked.

“Five years ago,” Valentine answered, “the maestro of the Mercury Workshop changed. The current Silver Sugar Viscount, Hugh Mercury, became the maestro. And there was some trouble within the workshop at the time.”

King took over, continuing the story Valentine had started.

“Hugh Mercury’s original surname was Ackland. Even among the candy crafters of the Mercury Workshop, Hugh Ackland had a reputation for being amazingly skilled. And the previous maestro took Ackland in. On the other hand, the maestro’s own son was stupid, reckless with money, incompetent, and ill-behaved, so apparently, the maestro was fed up with him. Therefore, he adopted Ackland as his son, bestowed the Mercury name upon him, and designated him as his successor. When the old maestro passed away, Ackland, who was now using the Mercury surname, became the new maestro. And he expelled the son from the workshop.”

“Expelled?”

“Well, he was such a delinquent that it’s no wonder it happened, but the son didn’t stay quiet about it. He appealed to the Silver Sugar Viscount, but ultimately, the new maestro won out. No one knows the whereabouts of the previous maestro’s son.”

King explained everything while stretching and rolling his neck around and around.

As he gently pushed his glasses up his nose, Valentine opened his mouth to speak again.

“The measures that Hugh Mercury took in dealing with him were appropriate. But they were also dispassionate, yes? That said, if he wasn’t so levelheaded, he wouldn’t be able to manage a workshop. I think that’s why Glen is worried. If a

clever person inherits the Paige Workshop, anyone who hampers the workshop could be driven out, even members of the founding family. Of course, if Elliott promises Glen, I'm sure he would not treat Bridget horribly, but she could lose her standing. Especially if Elliott were to find another wife, it would become even more difficult for her to remain here. So as a father, I guess he wants some insurance by making her the new maestro's wife. Moreover, that would guarantee the line of the founding family of the Paige Workshop would continue."

"So then as things are, we're really... If we don't do something, the workshop is going to end up closing!"

"What are you saying we should do? Walk around town, begging people to please give us jobs?" Orlando coldly responded to Anne's anxiety.

"If push comes to shove, we might have to! I'll set up a booth in town!"

"Ah, that sounds fun!" Nadir's eyes sparkled.

"Don't get excited. I've never heard of a faction's main studio doing something like that."

Orlando frowned. Behind him, the workroom door opened.

"Well, I don't think we're going to have to set up a roadside booth—not yet, at least."

Elliott came in, suppressing an amused smile. Glen was with him, walking slowly and hanging on to Elliott's shoulder. The candy crafters all rose from their seats in surprise.

"Glen, you should be in bed!" Nadir shouted as he jumped to his feet.

The maestro looked slowly around at all of them, said that he was all right, then sat on a nearby stool, steadying himself on Elliott's arm. He took short breaths for a little while, as if trying to calm his pounding heart.

Elliott knelt beside Glen and asked sympathetically, "Are you in pain?"

Glen shook his head. He looked up and smiled slightly.

"No, I'm all right. It feels good to come to the workroom. The sweet fragrance of the silver sugar is nice. Orlando, King, Valentine, Nadir. And Anne. I've heard

about our situation from Elliott. And I've come to give everyone instructions. As your maestro."

The candy crafters' expressions all changed. Tension filled the air.

"To date, our workshop has refused to participate in the Selection for the First Holy Festival. But this year, I'm thinking we should take part."

All the crafters were surprised, but Anne was the most shocked of them all.

"It's okay for us to participate?!" she asked to confirm.

Glen turned toward Anne and nodded.

"The main studio of the Paige Workshop is in danger. Just this once, let's ignore the rules. But if we take part in the Selection and our work is not chosen, it will be piling shame on top of shame. We will never participate again. And, Anne, I will also ask you to stop calling yourself a Paige Workshop candy crafter. I will ask you to leave this place. And of course, that fairy will be mine to keep. I'm ignoring my own rules, because I recognize you as the head candy crafter. And because I'm recognizing you as such, you have commensurate responsibilities."

Glen's decision to ignore a rule that had been in place to protect three hundred years of tradition required Anne to also prepare herself for failure.

If their work wasn't chosen at the Selection, she wouldn't get Challe's wing back.

She seemed to be at a disadvantage. Anne felt like her chances of success had been higher when she'd agreed to rebuild the workshop without any particular time limit. If she failed once, she could try another tactic, and another.

But as an opening move, participating in the Selection was the best option. By doing so, the whole world would know that the Paige Workshop was not in any way preparing to close down. Everyone will be able to see that they weren't just a workshop clinging to tradition that had fallen on hard times, but that they also had the skills to make amazing works of sugar candy.

It's sink or swim, huh? If I shy away from this, I'll never get the workshop back on its feet. And I won't be able to help Challe regain his freedom.

She was unwilling to assume that her first tactic might fail.

“I will take responsibility. As head candy crafter of the main studio of the Paige Workshop.”

The other candy crafters were surprised by her response. After staring intensely at Anne for a moment, Glen shifted his gaze over to the other crafters and solemnly gave them an order.

“Let’s participate in the Selection for the First Holy Festival. Listen to the instructions of your head candy crafter.”



It was dusk, and on the other side of the hill, the clouds were barely moving. The edges of the clouds were illuminated by the setting sun, and they shone with a brilliant light that wasn’t quite orange and wasn’t quite gold. The soft clouds were bathed in a faint light, in an array of seven pale colors like a rainbow. The clouds were a strange color.

Challe had seen clouds that color before, a long time ago. The season had been late autumn, the same as it was now.

That year, winter had come surprisingly fast, and it was the last winter that he’d spent with Liz.

It had been a long time since he’d thought about her. While he had been separated from Anne, he had been so busy worrying about her and nothing else that he hadn’t had time to think of Liz.

The past three days, he had been strangely calm. Challe’s wing was still in Glen’s hands.

But he had left Bridget’s room and moved into Anne’s, and he was being permitted to move about freely.

No doubt, he felt uncomfortable that his life was in human hands. But just being with Anne mitigated it.

He couldn't believe how difficult it was to be apart from her now.

He could no longer avoid admitting it. He needed Anne.

This was clearly different to how he had needed Liz. In Liz's case, no matter where she went or what she did, as long as she was happy, Challe was glad.

But with Anne, he needed her by his side. Otherwise, he couldn't bear it.

It was the first time he had ever felt this way. And he was afraid of those feelings. If Anne was so important to him, that had the potential to become a tremendous vulnerability.

He had been born from obsidian glass and lived over a hundred years. He was confident that he could kill almost any opponent. But Anne was his weakness, a chip in his hard, unbreakable exterior.

At last, he could understand Liz's words: *"You being in love and me being in love are two different things."* If the feelings that she had held toward Challe were the same as those that he felt for Anne, then Challe must have treated Liz horribly.

I'm sorry, Liz.

He looked up at the unmoving clouds and internally apologized. But even though he realized what he had done back then, he still didn't hold the same feelings he felt for Anne toward Liz.

"Challe?"

As he was standing in the field of dry, withered grass, someone called his name from behind. He turned around and saw Anne, with Mithril riding on her shoulder. She had come out of the workroom and was walking toward him.

"Are you finished with your work?" he asked.

Anne nodded, but at the same time, she had on a slightly regretful expression.

"The Paige Workshop doesn't have any more orders. Even if I wanted to work, I can't. We are in a really tight spot. Glen just decided today that we are going to participate in the Selection for the First Holy Festival, so that we can revive the workshop. But..."

“What is it?”

“...if the Paige Workshop’s candy isn’t chosen at the Selection, I have to quit working here. And I won’t be able to get your wing back. But I said that was okay. Because I think we need to enter the Selection.”

“If you think it’s necessary, then that’s fine.”

Anne cocked her head at his answer.

“It is? If we’re not chosen, you will—”

“You told me to believe in you and wait. So I’m going to trust in everything you do, and wait.”

Anne nodded happily.

“Thank you. I’ll work hard so that our piece is selected. But even if we aren’t chosen and I get driven out of here, don’t worry. If that happens, I’ll return my royal medal to His Majesty, kneel in front of Hugh, and beg him to get your wing back. No matter what happens, I’m absolutely taking it back, Challe.”

“You’re ready to give up on being a candy crafter?”

“I don’t think that’s possible. I don’t know anything other than making sugar candy. Plus, I don’t know why, but I’m positive I will always want to make candy. I wouldn’t be able to call myself a Silver Sugar Master with a straight face, though. And if I’m not a Silver Sugar Master, it will be difficult to make it as a candy crafter, but I can depend on various people and probably scrape by.”

Anne couldn’t live any other way than as a candy crafter. She knew that about herself. If she failed, she would return her royal medal and choose a life where she lived by relying on other people. She was prepared to throw away her pride. There was no way she didn’t know how wretched a life that would be.

But because she believed in herself as a candy crafter, she was willing to gamble with that pride.

When he looked at her honest, vibrant smile, Challe felt a surge of love. He wanted to kiss her, on her lips, forehead, and cheeks. Over the past few days, he had noticed how often he had such feelings.

Challe turned his gaze away from Anne, suppressing the urge to reach out and

touch her.

“I’m not worried.”

“Th-this is...! Wowee, isn’t this mood great?” muttered Mithril, who had been looking back and forth between the two and listening to their conversation.

Then he abruptly stood up, put his hands on his hips, and burst into a forced laugh. “Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Sorry to leave so suddenly, but I just remembered I had some urgent business! I’ll go on ahead. You two stay and watch the sunset a little longer! It’s kind of romantic, isn’t it?! Right, it’s perfect weather for holding hands, embracing, and kissing, and so on! Which is to say, do your best, both of you! Especially Anne.”

As soon as he said that, he jumped down from Anne’s shoulders and went bouncing away across the field.

“M-Mithril Lid Pod?”

Anne called out after him in a panic, but Mithril didn’t turn around.

“Mithril Lid Pod, that little busybody...! I mean, I don’t really know what he was talking about, do you?! I didn’t understand a word!” Anne said as she turned back to look at Challe. Her face was twitching, and she sounded like she was trying to hide something.

Challe put his head in his hands. He was stunned by Mithril’s complete lack of subtlety.

Did I look like I wanted her that badly?

Even if Mithril had noticed, Challe didn’t want Anne to know, at the very least. In many ways, she was still naive. If she learned of his strange feelings, she might get flustered and run away. He resolved to do something about his emotions.

Chapter 5

SUGAR CANDY FOR SOMEONE

“I wonder what sorts of candies are usually made for the Selection for the First Holy Festival?”

“Usually, they are centered around the motifs of the twelve patron saints of the state church, as well as Ancestor King Cedric. The candies are meant to draw in good fortune for the new year, after all. As for their size, they usually make them about as tall as me,” Valentine responded.

King made a disagreeable face. “How boring, making statues of saints and kings,” he said. “If we sculpted plants, we could use more colors.”

“Plants, in the middle of winter?” Orlando coldly replied. “That would disregard all sense of seasonality. If Ancestor King Cedric is the standard, then he will do. That’s the perfect theme to represent strength.”

Nadir grimaced. “I don’t like sugar candy sculptures that are too big,” he said. “They’re so awkward-looking.”

“I doubt a straightforward representation of strength will be enough. I think something simple, like an abstract symbol of God, would be amazing. But when it comes to size, the bigger the better, absolutely,” Valentine added.

It was the day after they had decided to participate in the Selection. The four candy crafters, who had gathered in the workroom, responded one after another to Anne’s question, each with a different answer.

“Wait a minute!” Anne raised her hand. Her cheek was twitching. “Aren’t you all just describing the kinds of things that you like to make?!”

When she said that, King had on a surprised look. “Surely, you’re assigning the sculptures for the Selection to one of us, right?” he asked. “To the one who seems like he’ll make the best sugar candy. Am I wrong?”

“Oh, I get it. Excuse us. King, you’ve got it wrong. Anne’s making it. She’s merely asking for our opinions, no doubt,” Valentine said, as if the idea had just flashed through his mind.

“What? Is that true?”

“...It is not...”

Anne was perplexed by their fundamental misunderstanding. The other candy crafters were all wearing the same puzzled expression.

Okay, I’d better explain this point by point.

Anne, who had never worked on such a project with other people before, was fumbling her way through her new job as head candy crafter. She wasn’t happy that she had somehow confused all four of her colleagues, but she stood up in front of the workbench where everyone was seated.

Then she informed them once again.

“You’ve all explained to me that up until now, a single crafter takes responsibility for executing a single job. This time, I thought we could change our way of doing things. Fortunately... Well, I don’t really know if I can call it that, but at the moment, the workshop has no commissions. So the five of us here are going to put our heads together and decide on what kind of sugar candy sculpture to make. Then I want us all to make it together. If we do that, then half a month is plenty of time for us to create a masterpiece.”

The Paige Workshop’s methods emphasized the individual artist. Each commission accepted by the workshop was assigned to a single candy crafter. They then reached an agreement with the client over what they were going to make by having them choose what they liked from among the things the crafter wanted to create. They didn’t make things strictly according to the wishes of the client. The whole process was focused around the candy crafter.

It was probably beneficial for the candy crafters, who would leave and work independently sooner or later. It fostered a sense of responsibility in the

individual artisans. That explained why the Paige Workshop had been very protective of its traditions.

However, the method left them at a disadvantage with so few crafters.

“Decide together and make it together?” Orlando frowned. “I doubt five candy crafters will be able to agree on a single piece. If it’s not something that we each want to make, then we won’t feel like working on it. And anyway, why do all five of us need to agree in the first place?”

“I’ve thought about it. If we can get together and decide on something that we think is best, then that ought to turn out to be something that lots of people would choose. I mean, it’ll be shaped by five opinions instead of one. Don’t you think the chances of being chosen at the Selection will be higher if five people contribute rather than just one? If we can agree, everyone can make what they want and be enthusiastic about it.”

Orlando snorted. “If there’s anything that all five of us can agree upon, that is.”

“We’ll find something.”

The fact that they had several crafters collaborating should work out to their advantage. It would be good in the same way that two people would have more fun than being by themselves. The more heads they could put together, the stronger they would be.

Anne had been all alone after her mother, Emma, died. But Challe and Mithril had become her friends. Two were better than one, and three were better than two. Their combined strengths couldn’t possibly end up making them weaker. There was no way this wouldn’t be fun. That was what Anne hoped in any case.

She was currently fumbling her way through everything, and all she could do was let those vague hopes guide her.

King shrugged awkwardly. “But...how do we do that?” he asked. “No matter how long we stand here talking over one another like this, the five of us are never going to agree on anything. Our artistic preferences are just too different.”

As King had pointed out, therein lay the problem.

“You’re right,” Anne replied. “I don’t suppose there’s anyone around who can tell us what kinds of candy sculptures this workshop used to make for the First Holy Festival, back when they participated in the Selection? It would be nice if there was some hint in the past about what might appeal to everyone.”

At that, Valentine put a finger to his chin. “I believe I heard something from Glen,” he said thoughtfully, “about some sort of diary that the maestros have kept from generation to generation. There might be a clue written in there.”

“If such a thing exists, I’d like to get a good look at it.”

“I’ll go ask him,” Valentine said and stood up immediately.

Before long, he came rushing back to the workroom. He was nearly out of breath, but he managed to inform them that Glen still had the diary of the maestro three generations before him. But it was an important item, and he refused to let it be removed from the house. He had apparently told Valentine that if they wanted to read it, they could look at it in the dining room of the main house.

So Anne headed there, along with the other four candy crafters.

Elliott was sitting in the dining room wearing his traveling overcoat. He had piled about ten books on top of the table and was waiting for them with a grin.

“You’re interested in reading these? Well, I’ve never had any desire to, but good luck!”

“Are you going out?” Anne asked.

Elliott shrugged. “Yeah. I’m going to Lewiston for the repayment thing I told you about, at the guild. The guild there keeps very old records, and they might be useful, you see. I’ll be back this evening. I’ll help you out when I return.”

He then headed for the front door, waving good-bye.

He always seemed to be busy dealing with the workshop’s monetary issues. Anne had hardly ever seen him settled down at the main house. He never let anyone see him looking tired, but on occasion, he would wander around vacantly with a very bored expression.

“There’s no need to put all the burden of reading these on Mr. Collins. If we

split them up, I bet we'll be done in no time," Anne said exuberantly.

She picked up a book with a brown leather cover that was sitting on the very top of the pile. It was not so much a book as it was a collection of sheets of parchment bound together with thread, with a stiff cover attached to the front and back. It did have a spine, but it didn't fit all that well. Still, preserving an individual's diary, no matter how imperfect it may be, was exactly what she would expect of the main studio of a faction.

She opened the book, looked at the words written in ink, and involuntarily groaned.

"...What is this?"

The four candy crafters peered over Anne's shoulder to look at the book she had opened. Mithril, who had been sitting on Anne's shoulder, hopped down onto the table and read the text out loud.

"Autumn-fills-the-air-and-the-seasons-change-as-they-always-have-but-at-my-age-I-dream-not-of-change."

Following the lines with his finger, Mithril read the words out loud then looked up at Anne.

"A magic spell?" he asked.

"Might be."

"Don't be ridiculous." Orlando sounded exasperated by their exchange.

Anne was breaking out in a cold sweat, but next to her, Valentine was calm. "It's because it's an old diary," he said. "The language is ancient, and it's hard to read."

"No way! Absolutely no way. Not on my life!" Nadir went pale, as if he had seen a demon or something, and started backing away. "I'm sorry, Anne. I can't read this. I mean, don't make me read this. Please. I'll do anything else, I'll clean, do laundry, I'll even give you a massage. So don't make me read it. My head will explode if I do."

"Well, I'd be in trouble if you exploded...", Anne responded. "But...can anyone here read this?"

Valentine cracked a smile. "I can read it," he answered. "And I think Orlando might be able to as well? Right, Orlando?"

"I can."

At that moment, the two men looked incredibly dependable.

"I've got no chance," King said, scratching his head awkwardly. "I'm with Nadir, on cleaning, laundry, and shoulder rubs," he mumbled, looking down at the pages of the diary miserably.

"Well, I'm not confident I can read it, but I'll give it a shot," Anne said.

At least it was better than the initial feeling of hopelessness. Anne didn't know how things were going to turn out, but she had something she needed to do, something she needed to find. And she had something she needed to consider.

Orlando, Valentine, and Anne began reading the diaries right there at the dining table. King and Nadir headed out to clean the workroom and maintain their tools.

They started reading the diaries in order, beginning with the oldest one. As Orlando and Valentine silently flipped through the pages, they took notes on the entries related to the Selection.

Meanwhile, Anne delved into one of the books with Mithril, desperately trying to decipher the text. It brought her to the verge of tears.

"Oh-the-stars... Oh, what does that mean?"

She looked at Mithril with watery eyes, and Mithril folded his arms and tilted his head as he thought it over. "Couldn't it mean, like, *Oh, the stars are out?*" Mithril replied.

"So then this says, *How it sparkles after kneading and tempering. Oh, the stars are out!* Is that what it means? These are words of praise for himself, for kneading his silver sugar well? He's singing his own praises?"

Orlando was sitting across the table from Anne and groaned when he overheard them struggling.

"Idiots."

Valentine was sitting beside Anne with a wry smile. He had been writing on a piece of notepaper for a while, and when he finished covering it with dense lines of text, he held it out in front of Anne.

“Sorry for meddling, but this might be useful?”

He had made a vocabulary list. The old words were on the right, and to the left, he had written their meanings in the modern language.

“Since even *silver sugar* was written differently in the old orthography, you have to read it this way. I’ve noted the meanings of some other words that appear frequently.”

“Valentine, thank you.”

Anne almost cried with gratitude.

Mithril accepted the notepaper. “Thank you so much! You’re really a great guy, you are. Totally different from that man over there making fun of people!” Mithril exclaimed loudly.

“I’m perfectly happy not being a great guy,” Orlando grumbled miserably, without even lifting his head.

Elliott had said he would return in the evening, but he hadn’t come back yet. He had many miscellaneous duties and often did not return home as planned, so no one paid it any mind.

Elliott was unable to help them, but thanks to Orlando and Valentine, there were only three volumes left to read by dinnertime.

Two of the three belonged to the previous maestro, so they were written in the modern language. Even Anne could read them. The remaining diary was written in the same incomprehensible words as some of the others, but it was only a single volume, so Anne figured she could probably get through it that night. With that expectation, they wrapped up the job before dinner.

Orlando and Valentine, who had been reading the whole time, had dark circles under their eyes.

After dinner, Anne had Mithril and Challe rest in their chambers while she remained in the dining room alone.

She proceeded to read through the remaining diaries and drew the light of the candle close to her. It was night, and nearly winter. A chill rose from underfoot, but it would have been wasteful to light the large dining room fireplace just for herself, so Anne brought a blanket down from her room, wrapped it around herself, and sat in a chair.

She wasn't making much progress. She was tired and felt drowsy.

Even so, the steady work of reading the diary yielded something useful.

It was mentioned that back before the Selection system had started, when the Paige Workshop was still exclusively making the sugar candies for the First Holy Festival, the opinions of the workshop frequently clashed with those of the clergy.

If the candy crafters made what they wanted to make, there was a chance that it wouldn't suit the clergy's preferences. And if that disconnect had been the impetus for starting the Selection in the first place, then they would have to craft the sugar candy that the state church wanted for the First Holy Festival. That much was clear.

But the four crafters of the Paige Workshop would likely refuse to make anything other than what they themselves wanted to make.

Oh no. What can I do to get everyone interested in creating something the church will like?

For a while, Anne vacantly watched the dancing candle flame. Black soot rose steadily from the tip of the fire.

"Brr."

Anne squirmed around inside her blanket. Then from behind, a gently steaming cup was held out in front of her eyes. When she turned around, a fairy with orange hair was smiling down at her.

"Here. Have something warm. It's herbal tea, to warm the body."

"Thank you, Danna," Anne said.

The fairy smirked. "I'm Hal."

After he said that, Anne noticed the fairy was wearing pants and a shirt,

rather than a dress. His hair was also somewhat shorter than Danna's.

"I'm so sorry! Oh, but you do look just like her."

"It's fine. Danna and I were born from the same tree at the same time, so we look a lot alike. I think we are what humans call twins."

"I see. So fairies can have twins, too? I never knew. Thank you for the tea. It's a big help."

He must have been the other fairy working in the main house. It had been a little less than a week since Anne started living here, but this was her first time meeting him.

"If you want to thank someone, thank Danna. She wanted to bring you tea, but she was embarrassed, so she made me come do it."

"Why was she embarrassed?"

"Apparently, she felt awkward bringing you tea when she hadn't been ordered to do so. She said she would have been even more embarrassed if you turned it down."

"I would have never turned it down. Not when she went out of her way to do something so sweet. Danna seems very kind."

"You made her happy. So she wanted to do something in return, she said."

"Oh, did I do something?"

"That was the first time that anyone had ever asked her to eat a meal together."

"Oh, that? But I just invited her because I was feeling lonely."

Anne turned her gaze toward the kitchen, where she assumed Danna was hiding. She caught a glimpse of orange hair near the kitchen doorway. She could sense a charming, bashful presence just from seeing the vanishing strands of hair.

Anne spoke clearly, so that she could be heard from the kitchen. "I like eating together with other people. So if you can't eat meals at this dining table, let's go on a picnic in the forest and have lunch together or something, okay? ...Would

you tell Danna that?”

The orange hair that had been slipping in and out of view came to an abrupt halt. Then it anxiously withdrew deeper into the kitchen.

Hal seemed to notice as well, and he smiled wryly.

“Certainly.”

Then Hal happened to look down at the book in her hands, and he frowned.

“Looks like you’re reading something difficult.”

“Hal, can you read this?”

“No. When it comes to stuff like that, I think only old people, or those who studied very hard in school, can decipher it. In this house, the sole people who received a proper education are Orlando and the young mistress. It’s impossible for me.”

Hal sounded disappointed as he headed back into the kitchen.

“Right, so I guess Bridget can read it. She does seem smart.”

Anne looked toward the corridor that led out from the dining room. At the other end of that corridor was Bridget’s room.

A thought suddenly occurred to her.

Maybe I could ask for her help. I could give her that piece of candy and ask her to help read this.

Bridget might accept the candy if it was a gift of thanks.

Anne shed her blanket like a second skin and went back to her room. Mithril was snoring away, but Challe was awake. He looked at Anne quizzically when she picked up the sugar candy that’d been sitting by the window, but he didn’t ask her anything.

Anne took the candy with her back down to the first floor.

With the little jade-colored bird in her right hand and the old diary under her left arm, she walked down the dark hallway. When she reached the door to Bridget’s chambers, she took a deep breath. Bridget would probably be upset with her for showing up. But she wanted to hand her the candy directly.

Anne readied herself and knocked. There was no answer.

When she knocked once more, a probing voice replied from the other side of the door.

“Who’s there?”

Before Anne could give her name, the voice asked with a faint sense of hope, “Challe?”

Anne’s chest throbbed at the frail, questioning voice. She could tell that Bridget had been holding on to the slight possibility that the person she loved might come and see her.

Even though Bridget knew it was impossible, she still hoped for it. Anne heard it in Bridget’s voice.

“It’s Anne... I’m sorry.”

She could tell the presence on the other side of the door grew tense.

“Sorry,” she repeated. “Um, I want some help. From you, Bridget.”

The door slowly opened. Bridget’s expression was blank, and her complexion was terribly pale.

“‘Help’?”

“Right now, I’m reading through the diaries of the past maestros of the Paige Workshop, but it’s very difficult. When I asked Hal, he said that you might be able to read them, since you went to a proper school and studied hard. I never really went to school, you see. I hated studying and even skipped out on church school.”

“I didn’t necessarily like studying, either. It’s just that I’m the Paige daughter, so I couldn’t do anything unbecoming.” Then Bridget curled her lips ever so slightly into a small smile. “So then what’s the deal? If I help you, will Challe come to my room?”

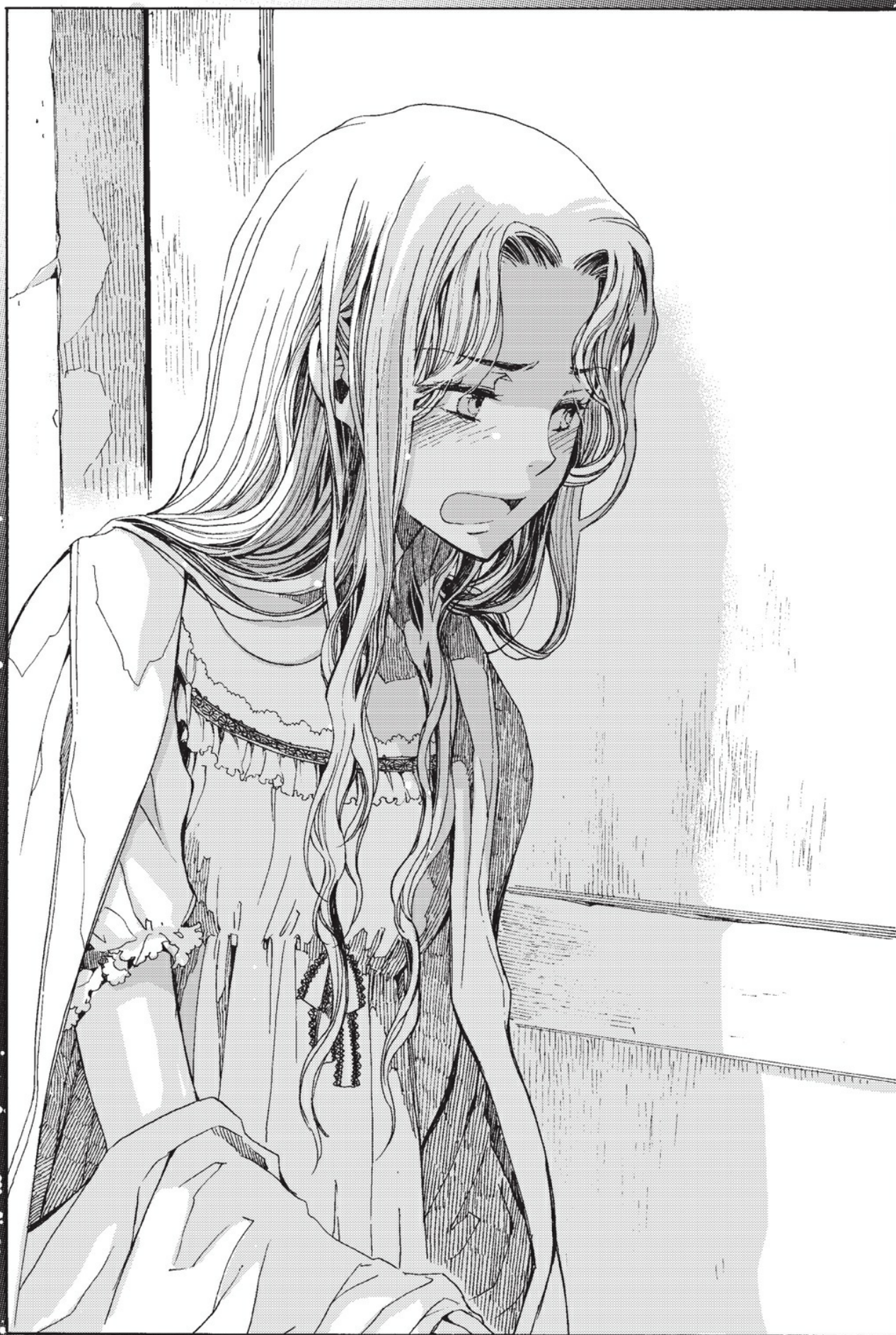
“That’s up to Challe. If he wants to come, I’m sure he will. I don’t know. But I’ll give you this as thanks.”

She held the little jade-colored bird candy in her hand out in front of Bridget.

Bridget gave it a surprised glance. But then she immediately averted her eyes.

“Unless you can guarantee that Challe is going to come, I won’t help you.”

“I see... But I’ll give you this candy anyway. Because I made it for you, Bridget.”



Bridget blinked in surprise when she heard that. But then she looked away again.

"I don't want it."

"I'm giving it to you. If you don't like it, you can break it and throw it away."

"There's no way I can break a piece of sugar candy, can I?! So I won't accept it. I absolutely won't."

Bridget slammed the door in Anne's face.

"Fair enough," Anne mumbled dejectedly.

But she pitied the poor little candy that had been waiting in her room for so long. She crouched by the side of the door, intending to leave it there. If Bridget didn't want it, she could ask someone to dispose of it.

"What are you doing?"

There was a stifled voice from behind her. Startled, she stood back up, still holding the sugar candy, and turned around.

Standing in the dark corridor was Orlando. His gaze was locked on Anne's hand. He was looking at the sugar candy sculpture of the little bird. But Anne's gaze was drawn to Orlando's hand as well. He was also holding a piece of candy, a sculpture of a cute little cat.

"That's...candy."

The moment the words came out of Anne's mouth, Orlando looked down at the sculpture in his own hand regretfully. Then he grabbed Anne's hand in a panic and quickly walked away, dragging her along. After passing through the dining room into the entryway, he shut the door behind them.

Only when they were out on the front porch did he finally let go of Anne's hand.

"Orlando, what were you doing there?" Anne asked. "And what's with that sugar candy?"

"I could ask the same of you; what were you doing?"

"I thought I would get Bridget to help me with reading the diary. I was going

to give her this piece of candy as thanks, but she turned me down. I wanted her to at least take the candy, so I was going to leave it there.”

“You really are naive, aren’t you? There’s no way she’ll help you, and there’s no way she’ll accept that.”

“But you also made something for Bridget, didn’t you, Orlando?”

None of the people at the workshop cared much for Bridget. That’s what Anne had thought, so she was a little happy that she’d been mistaken.

“This is just an apology,” Orlando replied sullenly after seeing the look on Anne’s face.

“An apology? Did you do something so awful?” Anne asked.

Orlando was silent. It was the kind of silence that seemed to be his specialty.

The light of the waning moon faintly illuminated the dark grounds, allowing them to look out over the meadow full of rustling grass from the porch. The air was cold. The stars shone brightly. Anne’s hands and feet were immediately chilled.

She stood there patiently waiting for an answer. Orlando seemed to relent and began to speak.

“I’m the one who stole Challe’s wing and left it on Glen’s pillow,” he confessed. “This is an apology for that.”

“That was you?! Why—? I mean, how did you know about that place?! Bridget said it was a spot no one else knew about.”

“She just forgot.”

Orlando sighed.

“When she was little, I often played with her. She had shown me that spot and told me it was for hiding secret treasure. She was going to become a candy crafter in the future, and that made us comrades. So she said she wanted us to share this secret. She was cheerful and a good girl. Different from how she is now. Now Bridget is awful. Everything she does is intolerable. I get annoyed just looking at her. The way she treated Challe was no exception. That’s why I stole his wing and gave it to Glen.”

“Bridget wanted to become a candy crafter, right? Is it possible she changed because she wasn’t allowed to do that?”

Anne recalled Glen’s words to Bridget upon their first meeting. He had said that even if it was all right for Anne, Bridget, who was born the daughter of a maestro, could never become a candy crafter.

“I don’t understand the reason why I am allowed to work here, while it’s forbidden for the daughter of the maestro. Surely, she could train at her own family’s workshop without having to go through all the same troubles like I have? Glen just needs to approve of it, right?”

“That would be no problem if she spends her whole life working as a candy crafter exclusively for the Paige Workshop. But if the maestro’s child becomes a candy crafter, then he can’t disregard his heir and leave the workshop to someone else. In which case, could a woman become the maestro? Her job wouldn’t end at the workshop gates if she became maestro. She would have to go out into the world. She would have to play her cards well, so that the other factions would not look down upon the Paige Workshop. You worked at the Radcliffe Workshop; you should know. Do you think it would be easy for us to compete against other factions with a woman as our maestro?”

Within the world of candy crafters, women were treated poorly. Anne had experienced that herself...

Becoming maestro, inheriting the workshop, and keeping it going... That path would be fraught with difficulty, especially for a woman. Just thinking about it was enough to make Anne uncomfortable.

“If we can’t keep the main studio going, the faction will go extinct. All the subsidiary studios in the Paige Workshop will be without a faction and fall into hardship. That’s why, in order to ensure the survival of the workshop, we must choose the safest path. Glen’s avoiding the dangers that come with having a female maestro. And I’m sure that as a parent, he doesn’t want to burden his daughter with undue hardships.”

Why is it?

In her heart, Anne suddenly felt miserable, as if she had gotten drenched in a sudden downpour.

Why is it that so many things aren't working out?

Glen loved his daughter, Bridget. For that very reason, he didn't want her to suffer. When he thought about the workshop's future, forcing Bridget to give up on the idea of becoming a candy crafter seemed like the best method.

That's what Glen thought, precisely because he loved and wanted to protect someone precious to him. But because of that, Bridget's dreams had been dashed. He didn't do it out of malice. His love for her had caused things to become complicated.

The same was true for Challe, who had sold his freedom for Anne's sake. But Anne had never wanted him to do such a thing. It was still extremely distressing, knowing that he had handed his wing over to someone else and put himself in a position of servitude.

In both cases, their intentions didn't mesh well with reality. No one seemed to have figured out a way to reconcile such complicated feelings with reality. Anne wondered why there were always so many misunderstandings in the world.

Suddenly, she became aware of the weight in her hand. She casually looked down at it.

It was her sugar candy.

"That's why we have sugar candy, isn't it?"

Just then, she thought she heard a voice. She had imagined the little jade-colored bird in her hand whispering that to her.

Its whisper landed with a *thud* in her heart. She had been struggling to understand the feelings that had taken root inside her, but now everything was clear.

"That's why, isn't it?"

Since the world was full of conflict, there was nothing to do but hope. To put all her feelings into her work and hope good fortune would come. And though it was to a small degree, sugar candy had the power to do that.

"That's why I've got to make it. That's why I want to make it."

Anne had been having doubts about her desire to make sugar candy ever since she had been awarded the royal medal.

Now the reason behind that desire showed itself.

Anne often felt powerless. That was exactly why she wanted to make candy. She felt like making candy was all she could do. So she wanted to continue doing it.

Silver Sugar Master was the title given to candy crafters who made the most beautiful sugar candy that would bring the greatest happiness. Amazing power dwelled in beautiful sugar candy. That was why Anne had wanted to become a Silver Sugar Master.

Precisely because she felt powerless on her own, she wanted to grasp the greatest power she could get her hands on.

Challe and Mithril were accompanying her now, in place of her deceased mother, Emma.

She also had people like Keith, Kat, and Hugh, who showed her generosity even though there was no reward in it for them.

She'd met the owner of the Weather Vane and the duke with sad eyes.

People she needed and loved, kind people, generous people, sad people. Every time she met someone, she'd unconsciously made a wish. A wish to protect them, be useful to them, and help them. That was why she wanted power.

She wanted to grasp the greatest power she could and use it for other people.

"You made that, right, Orlando?" Anne asked, looking over at the sugar candy in Orlando's hand.

"....."

"For Bridget, was it?"

Even though he had cursed Bridget for being awful and had stolen Challe's wing from her, Orlando had made this sugar candy. It might have been the product of simple guilt, but Anne felt somewhat relieved to know there was someone who was worried about Bridget at least.

Anne smirked at his silence.

Orlando was often silent. Perhaps because he didn't want to lie or deceive anyone. If there was something that he didn't want to openly admit, his only choice was to remain quiet.

"Orlando, you seem to like strong motifs with a lot of impact, don't you? The horse sculpture was like that, and you said a sculpture of the Ancestor King would express strength. But that little kitten is round and cute. I like it better than the horse. Even if it wasn't what you wanted to make, it's beautifully crafted. We can make even lovelier things when they're for others rather than ourselves."

Orlando's eyes widened at Anne's words.

"Crafting for others...?"

Anne was surprised when he answered with a question.

"Ah...I see."

In Anne's experience, when she wanted to make something for somebody else, she was more inventive, more focused, and more concerned about the end product than when she made something for herself.

It was the doctrine of the Paige Workshop that candy crafters should make the things that they wanted to make.

Make the things that they want to make.

But the truth wrapped up in that simple precept may have gotten lost over the course of the workshop's long history.

Taking the words at face value, they were likely to be interpreted to mean that candy crafters should only create the kinds of candies they desired. But Anne wondered if the real meaning behind the words was: *make the things that you want to make for others.*

She wondered if the idea had gotten twisted little by little over the years because of self-confidence, history, and arrogance.

As a result, the sugar candies of the Paige Workshop had ceased to win peoples' hearts.

Candy artisans crafted because they wanted to make things for others. Not just for their own self-satisfaction.

“Orlando. Let’s give these sugar candies of ours to Bridget. After all, we made them for her.”

“Bridget will never accept them. The best we can do is leave them outside her door.”

“Right. That will do. Let’s do that. And hey, Orlando? Let’s think about our sugar candy sculpture for the Selection one more time with everyone. Not about what we ourselves want to sculpt—but rather about what would make the people we love happy when they go to the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell to worship during the First Holy Festival and see our sugar candy. Let’s think about that. Won’t we feel driven to create, thinking about what would make those people happy?”

Orlando responded after a brief silence, “You might be right.”

The following morning, the early sun slowly peeked out from behind the hills and began to illuminate the sparkling fields, which were wet with dew. A thin mist rose into the air.

Anne headed to the workroom with Mithril. She was carrying a bundle of papers in her hand. They were notes that she had made the previous night with Orlando and Valentine about the accounts regarding the Selections that they had found in the diaries.

The other four candy crafters had already assembled in the workroom.

Somehow or other, Anne had managed to finish reading the two volumes from the previous maestro by herself over the course of the night. All that remained was the one written in the old language, but Challe had gone through that one and made notes for her. Anne struggled with the archaic language, but a little past midnight, Challe came to the dining room and finished reading it with ease. At first, Anne was surprised, but when she gave it some thought, she remembered Challe had been born more than a hundred years ago. Many of the words were familiar to him.

Anne was lacking sleep, and her head was a little fuzzy, but she felt refreshed.

She gathered the other four candy crafters around a single workbench and set their notes down on top of it.

“Yesterday, I had you read through the diaries and pick out any accounts pertaining to the Selection. I’m sure you know this since you were doing the reading, but the system was apparently created because the type of sugar candies that the Paige Workshop wanted to make frequently clashed with the opinions of the clergy in the state church. That caused trouble. Because the church wanted the right to choose which pieces it would accept, it sought approval from the monarch and developed this system.”

When he heard that, King looked unhappy. “So does that mean that we have to make a candy sculpture that will curry favor with the clergy at the state church?” he asked.

Anne grinned. “Not even a little. Let’s make something that we all want to make. If we don’t, we won’t be able to craft anything good, will we? Isn’t that the three-hundred-year-old conviction of the Paige Workshop?”

In response to her words, Valentine, King, and Nadir looked around at one another. They hadn’t expected Anne to understand their beliefs. Only Orlando nodded slightly.

“Our participation in this year’s Selection is something that Glen decided on,” Anne continued. “He broke his own rule because he wants to save the workshop. If we fail, we all know it will bring shame upon us. So we need to make our candy for Glen’s sake and for the continuation of this workshop.

“There is no need to curry favor with the church. Instead, we will work for Glen. We’ll craft something to make him happy,” she announced slowly, looking at everyone’s faces in turn.

Nadir smiled bitterly. “I wonder if Glen will be happy to see what we come up with, though? I’ve gotten praise for how well-made my candies are, but you know, I have never thought Glen was truly pleased with them.”

“So wouldn’t you be that much happier if we pleased him?”

“That would make me happy. If it’s something I can create, I’d like to.”

“Then let’s go ahead and do it. We’ll make it together. Think of something that Glen would pray for in the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell so that good fortune will visit the Paige Workshop. Something that Glen will say is beautiful. Something that he will like, and that he will feel proud to see decorating the altar of the church.”

A sugar candy sculpture to offer at the solemn ceremony for welcoming the new year, one that would invite happiness. Something that Glen would feel proud of when he saw it in the sanctuary of the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell.

Sugar candy that was made not for their own self-satisfaction but to invite joy for someone else.

If they could create something like that, Anne had no doubt the church would approve of their candy. And that was what the clergy would see at the ceremony. A work of sugar candy that enhanced the space, one that they could be proud of having made, and couldn’t possibly fail to win the hearts of the people. Even if it wasn’t a standard sugar candy sculpture, it wouldn’t matter.

There was no need to curry favor with the clergy and the state church. As long as Glen felt pride when he saw their piece, as long as he felt the genuineness of it and was pleased, that was enough.

Suddenly, King spoke. “The First Holy Festival, huh?” He had a distant look in his eyes, like he was remembering something. “Glen always said it’s a good sign if snow falls on the night of the First Holy Festival. The snow turns everything pure white and leads us into a new world. And if it happens on the night of the First Holy Festival, everything feels solemn. I heard him say it so many times in the past. *‘I hope it snows. A new world will come,’* he’ll say.”

Anne recalled the sight of the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell covered in pure-white snow.

The whiter it was, the more it seemed to add to the solemnity of the sanctuary. Even the people of Lewiston who were fed up with snow had no complaints about it on the night of the First Holy Festival.

“Glen often made sugar candy sculptures depicting groves of evergreen trees covered in snow. It’s one of his favorite motifs. I’ve heard him say as much,” Orlando muttered. “He really loves it.”

Their sculpture didn't have to be of saints or the Ancestor King. It didn't have to be flowers that colorfully decorated their surroundings. If Glen loved snow and wished for a snowy First Holy Festival, then regardless of weather, they should make something that invoked the image of snow.

The candy crafters knew what Glen loved, so the best idea then was to make it.

Anne raised her head and looked around at everyone's faces one more time for confirmation.

"In that case, let's create some of that snow that Glen loves."

Just then, they heard someone calling desperately for help in the distance.

They all turned in the direction of the voice, which gradually got closer, and they began to hear the words clearly.

"Help! Mr. Collins is in grave danger!!"

Startled by the shouting, the small birds in the eaves of the workroom abruptly ceased chirping.

Chapter 6

SNOW

Someone banged violently on the front door of the main house.

“Mr. Paige! There’s trouble!”

The voice belonged to the boy from Millsfield who delivered milk to the workshop every morning.

At the sound of his urgent shouting, Anne, Mithril, and the other four candy crafters dashed out of the workroom.

When they looked toward the main house, they saw the boy yelling and pounding at the front door with a desperate expression. And limply hanging over his shoulders was Elliott.

“Mr. Collins!” Anne shouted.

The four candy crafters ran over to him, and Anne followed close behind.

“Hey, what happened?! Elliott!” King called out.

The boy noticed them and turned around.

That was when the door to the main house opened, and Challe appeared. He took one look at the boy and at Elliott, who looked like he might slide to the ground at any moment, and moved to support Elliott under one arm. Challe carefully lifted his body from the petrified boy’s shoulders.

Anne and the others arrived out of breath.

They got a clear look at Elliott’s condition as he dangled from Challe’s arms.

A thin trail of blood trickled down his forehead. A shallow wound in his side was oozing blood. He was unconscious.

“Too sharp,” Challe muttered with a frown, looking at Elliott’s wound.

Orlando was stunned for a moment, but he quickly started and shook the boy by the shoulders. “What happened? What is this?! Hey!” he demanded.

“I—I don’t know! I was trying to deliver the milk, and when I got here, there was a wagon parked at the bottom of the hill. Mr. Collins was lying beside it! He’s injured. What should we do? Should I go back to town and call a doctor?”

“Sorry. Yes, please do that.”

The boy ran off, and Orlando moved to support Elliott’s other shoulder.

Just then, they heard a shriek from the direction of the parlor. When they looked, they saw Bridget standing in the doorway. She was covering her mouth with both hands, and her eyes were wide.

“For now, we’ll carry Elliott to his room. Anne, please ask Danna to boil some water. Then get some clean cloth—anything will do—and bring it to Elliott’s room.”

Once Orlando gave her instructions, Anne’s brain finally started running normally again. She nodded and ran over to Bridget.

“Bridget. I don’t know where to find cloth. Will you help me?”

Bridget was trembling slightly, but she managed to nod.

Before long, the doctor arrived and tended to Elliott’s wounds.

Thankfully, his injuries weren’t serious and would heal within ten days.

Bridget worked with Anne to carry in the cloth and water that Danna had boiled for them, but she didn’t leave the room even after that. She stood motionlessly in the corner, looking worried.

Orlando and Anne couldn’t pull themselves away, either.

It was near noon when Elliott regained consciousness. He suddenly opened his eyes, looked in turn at Orlando and Anne—who were peering down at him—then at Bridget in the corner of the room, and muttered, “Ah...so I’m alive,

then.”

“What happened, Elliott?” Orlando asked.

Elliott grimaced painfully. “I went out on a day trip to Lewiston yesterday,” he said, “but on the way home... It was evening, but the sun was still up. I was attacked.”

“Robbers?”

The road that led from Lewiston to Millsfield saw a lot of traffic and was known for being comparatively safe. Injuries from robbers or wild animals were largely unheard of.

“I don’t know what they were after. They attacked so suddenly. They came out onto the road, as if they had been waiting for a break between the farmhouses and for the foot traffic to thin out. They were wearing a hood, so I couldn’t see their face. They were a strange one. They said they could smell silver sugar on me and asked if I was a Silver Sugar Master. I told them no, but...”

Elliott laughed lightheartedly, then groaned in pain. Once the pain subsided, he took a deep breath and continued:

“Then they suddenly sliced me open. I drove the wagon onward in a daze, and I remember almost making it back to the workshop, but well, you know the rest. Anyway—”

Elliott stuck a hand out from under his blanket and waved at Bridget, who was still standing in the corner of the room.

“—come over here, Bridget. Were you worried about me? Want to nurse me back to health?”

Bridget had been watching over Elliott with apparent concern, but when he spoke to her, she turned away. Then she briskly left the room.



Challe had his arms crossed and was leaning against the wall in the hallway, glaring at the door to Elliott's room.

The doctor had left, and the only people still in the room were Anne, Orlando, and Bridget. The rest of the candy crafters had returned to the workroom.

Around noon, Bridget came out of Elliott's room. She then saw Challe in the hallway and jumped back, stopping in her tracks. He stared back at her blankly.

"Are you worried about Elliott?" Bridget asked, averting her gaze slightly.

"I saw his wounds. I could tell they were nothing serious. I just have something that I want to confirm with him."

"In that case, you should go in. Elliott's awake."

Challe moved away from the wall and started walking when Bridget grasped his hand to stop him.

"Wait. Challe, won't you come to my room again?"

"I have no obligation."

"Even if you're not obligated, if I ask you to, won't you come?"

She looked up at him imploringly, and Challe sighed. There was a pathos in the fact that, like a child, she didn't understand anything.

"Wise up," he quietly said as he slowly pulled his hand away.

Bridget stared at him with a blank expression, like she didn't understand what he meant.

Challe knocked on the door and stepped into Elliott's room.

Anne looked at Challe as he came in and smiled. "Challe, were you worried?" she asked. "Mr. Collins is all right. In fact, he's come around."

"I wasn't worried about him."

"How cruel, Challe. You can't say you were worried, even if it's just lip service?" Elliott said in a pitiful voice from the bed.

"Not for you. More importantly, there's something I want to ask."

Challe stood over Elliott's pillow.

“Those wounds. Did a fairy inflict them?”

“I don’t know whether it was a fairy or not. They were wearing a cloak with a hood, so I couldn’t see their face or even tell what clothes they had on.”

“Were you robbed?”

“I said this earlier, but I don’t know what they were after. But they told me that I smelled of silver sugar. Then they asked if I was a Silver Sugar Master, and when I lied and said I wasn’t, they attacked me.”

Anne anxiously tugged at the sleeve of Challe’s jacket.

“Hey, what’s going on? Do you know something?”

“His wounds weren’t inflicted by any blade made by humans.”

The wound on Elliott’s abdomen was shallow and perfectly horizontal. He had been carried into the main house by his shoulders. The cut in his skin was so precise, it couldn’t possibly have been inflicted by a human-made weapon. The only thing with that kind of edge was a blade conjured by a gemstone fairy.

Challe casually opened his right hand and focused his attention there. Then beads of light from his surroundings gathered in his palm. In the blink of an eye, they coalesced into a silvery sword.

Elliott’s and Orlando’s eyes went wide.

“He’s not a pet fairy?” Orlando asked, overcome with surprise.

“I thought there was something different about you—so you’re a warrior fairy, huh?” Elliott said with a strained smile. “Kind of scary to think I didn’t know.”

People were always getting the wrong idea about him, so Challe didn’t pay it any mind. He brought the blade in his hand closer to Elliott’s face.

“Were you slashed by a sword that sparkled like this one?”

Elliott stared at the blade thrust before him and nodded.

“The shine was similar,” he said. “But it wasn’t as silvery as this one. It was a reddish silver. Though actually, I couldn’t see it very well. I’m sure there was quite a bit of distance between me and my attacker, but I could hear something

like a sword cutting through the wind, and I saw out of the corner of my eye some reddish-silver light.”

Challe withdrew his blade and waved his hand to make it disappear. “The one who cut him was a fairy. No doubt about it,” he asserted.

“So someone made a fairy attack Mr. Collins?” Anne frowned hard.

“Probably.”

Challe had a bad feeling.

The smell of silver sugar, huh?

The fairy’s question seemed extremely ominous.

“Well, whoever did this, and whatever their purpose, it’s over now. And I lived through it.”

Elliott closed one of his eyes.

“Since Bridget rejected me, I’ll ask Danna to be my nurse. I’ll be fine, so hurry up and get out of here, Orlando, Anne. This is hardly an occasion to idle your time away in a place like this, wouldn’t you say? There are only ten days left until the Selection. Make sure you don’t present an ugly sculpture that will disappoint Glen. Get to work.”



“Elliott was—?”

When Anne went to report Elliott’s injuries, Glen tried to get up out of bed.

She rushed to stop him.

“He’s fine. His injuries aren’t that serious, and it sounds like his wounds will heal in about ten days.”

Glen lowered his head back onto his pillow. Then he placed his right palm on his forehead and gently closed his eyes. His thin wrist attested to his weakness.

"If only my body wasn't in such a state. Elliott is still young. I'm sure he'd like to have his hands in silver sugar. Yet I've been asking him to do nothing besides handle various duties in my place, so something like this—"

"The two things have nothing to do with each other. And anyway, if Mr. Collins is going to become maestro, then it's only right that he should be acting as your proxy. Besides, he is undeniably aware of what it means to be a proxy."

"Why do you think that?"

"I was just driven out of his room. Orlando and me. He told us to go because he'll ask Danna to nurse him. He told us not to submit anything ugly at the Selection and to get to work."

"That boy is growing into a fine man."

Glen let out a chuckle. But then his face clouded over.

"If I could just entrust Bridget to Elliott, I would have nothing more to worry about. But it doesn't seem to be going very well. Bridget is still a child. There's nothing that can be done about that."

Even as he said that, it was obvious that Glen loved Bridget the most. If he didn't care about what happened to her, surely he wouldn't be so worried. He would simply hurry up and adopt Elliott, like how the former maestro of the Mercury Workshop had adopted Hugh.

Glen's expression was like an exact duplicate of one of Emma's. It was the face of a parent.

"She'll make something of herself, bit by bit. As long as she tries," Anne said.

"What do you base that on?"

"Nothing."

Anne shrugged. "But even if she's capable, if she doesn't start working toward something, nothing will change," she continued.

Glen's eyes went wide, and he laughed.

"I see. Well, as Elliott also said, please get back to work. Don't embarrass me."

Anne left Glen's room and headed straight for the workroom. The crafters

and Mithril seemed to have heard about Elliott's condition from Orlando, and they appeared relieved.

"I assume you all heard about Mr. Collins's injuries?" Anne asked.

King screwed his face up and looked annoyed. "So much fuss over nothing," he said. "I should have expected that bastard Elliott would be as tough as he is headstrong. The doc said he'll be better in ten days. Though, we might get some peace and quiet if he'd stay down a little longer!"

King was jokingly complaining about Elliott, even though he had been the most panicked when he saw that Elliott was injured. His face had been pale just earlier. King was tall and fierce-looking, but Anne suspected that he was actually the most sensitive and kindest of the five candy crafters.

"He'll heal in time for the Selection. He can go to the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell as the proxy maestro. After all, both Mr. Collins and Glen told me not to submit something ugly and to not embarrass them."

Anne walked over to the barrels of silver sugar that were lined up against the wall of the workroom and placed her hand on one of them.

"Let's get crafting."

Then she raised her head.

She looked at King, sitting in front of his workbench. Then at Nadir, who had planted himself in front of a millstone. Next, Anne's eyes traveled to Valentine, who was standing quietly behind him. Finally, her gaze landed on Orlando, standing by the wall. She looked at Mithril, holding his broom on top of the stove.

Everything had been entrusted to Anne. It was time to issue instructions.

"Let's start our preparations. King, carry two barrels of silver sugar over to the workbenches. Valentine and Nadir, draw cold water from the well. Orlando, gather all the tools we need for crafting. Mithril, set out every single vial of colored powder on top of the workbench closest to the door. Please."

Everyone nodded.

"Once everything is in order, we'll get to work."

The moment she gave her instructions, the crafters started moving.

Clear, cold water was drawn up and carried in. A barrel of silver sugar was opened, and vials of colored powder were lined up in rows on a workbench.

Anne, the other four crafters, and Mithril gathered around one workbench.

“We’re going to make snow?” Orlando asked uneasily. “How do you plan to represent that? It’s so shapeless.”

Anne shook her head. “Snow has a shape.”

The image of snow that came to Anne’s mind was snow slowly drifting from the sky as she looked up at it.

Fluffy and weightless, it could cover the world in the blink of an eye, yet it simply melted away in her palm.

Just like sugar candy.

Though both seemed to lack power, the ability to invite even a little bit of good fortune could make a big difference over time.

During the previous winter, the winter that Anne had spent with Challe and Mithril at the Weather Vane, they had seen lots of snow. The large flakes that stuck to the windowpanes had formed magnificent crystals. They had perfect regular structures, with six sharp points branching off to form hexagons, while the centers were complex and lovely like lacework.

These crystals glistened in the sunshine and melted instantly in its warmth. Anne had thought how nice it would be if she could preserve the way the snowflakes sparkled in the light forever.

“Crystals.”

The other four crafters looked at one another.

Anne plunged a stone bowl into the barrel, scooped up some silver sugar, and spread it out on top of the workbench.

“Let’s determine what size and shape they’ll be. Everyone, try making what you envision as a snowflake. Then we’ll compare what we’ve all made and decide on the shape of our crystals.”

“And then what are we going to do?”

“We’ll figure that out after we give this a try,” Anne answered.

King heard that and burst out laughing.

“You’re pretty laid-back, huh, head crafter?!”

“I’m still learning!”

She was able to answer in a carefree manner with a smile. Orlando smiled a little, too. Without a word, he picked up a stone bowl and scooped some silver sugar out of the barrel.

Each of the crafters chilled their hands in the cold water. Then they added water to the silver sugar in front of them and began kneading the mixture. Their hands moved smoothly as they all huddled together. They put just the right amount of strength into kneading, and the silver sugar took shape and grew lustrous before their eyes.

Anne stretched her silver sugar dough out thin and cut it into pieces about the size of her palm. She took a spatula and formed each piece into an elegant shape with spokes extending out in six directions. Then she split the shapes again, using each spoke as a center point, forming a radiating geometric pattern.

Nadir was using a needle. As usual, his face was almost flat against the workbench as he made his tiny, delicate hexagons. The patterns inscribed into the center of his hexagons were so detailed, Anne had to strain her eyes just to barely make them out clearly. The patterns had a complex regularity to them.

Valentine’s snowflakes looked a lot like Anne’s—thin shapes with sharp spokes sticking out in six directions. The spokes coming off them were pointed, and the design was surprisingly well-balanced. There were geometric patterns carved uniformly into the shapes he’d created.

King’s shapes were composed of twelve thin decorative branches arranged in a radiating pattern and stuck together in the center. They were about the same size as Anne’s. But they were tinted ever so slightly pale blue and light pink. In the subtle, delicate hues, Anne sensed King’s superb intuition for color.

Orlando's were a lot like Anne's. They were similar in shape, but there wasn't the slightest bit of ornate design applied to their surface. They were simply smooth, almost perfectly so. They were also quite large, about the size of a person's face. At that size, considering how thin they were, they looked like they might break easily, but perhaps because of his clever method of kneading, Orlando's snowflakes were sturdy and didn't crack even when he held them up in his hands.

Their snowflakes were all different sizes, colors, and shapes, but they certainly were identifiable as snow crystals. There were probably some shapes that didn't actually exist among snowflakes, but they captured the image that humans had of snow.

There were all sorts of different snowflakes being made one after another, and they quickly spread over the top of the workbench.

Soon, there were enough crystals to bury the workbench completely. There was a beauty in their accumulation.

They were lovely individually but had more impact as they accumulated. Their brilliance also increased. That particularly seemed like a property of snow.

Anne gazed at the workbench and made up her mind.

"Let's make lots. We'll unify the shape and pattern and make crystals of all sizes and colors. When we put them together, they'll form some kind of structure."

Nadir raised his head.

"A tower of snow, maybe?"

His words brought a flash of inspiration.

"That's right. We'll combine our snowflakes and put them together. We'll make a tower of snow."

Anne wondered how she should describe the image that had suddenly appeared in her mind to everyone so she could ask their opinions on it. She puzzled over it for a moment, but before she could even find the right words, Valentine spoke.

“If we pile them up unevenly, the interior will be structured like cobwebs, and light will get caught inside. It’ll show through to the other side, too. The sculpture will be ethereal.”

King nodded. “If light can get in, the colors will look vibrant,” he said. “We should add color to it here and there.”

Orlando added his thoughts. “We’ll need to be clever about our kneading. Thinking about the light, we’ll have to knead the dough more than usual to enhance their luster.”

The vague image that had risen in Anne’s mind was transformed piece by piece into precise words as it came out of the other crafters’ mouths.

These people. They are unmistakably candy crafters.

Anne felt a slight shudder.

With them here, I’m sure we’ll be able to make a sugar candy sculpture that’ll bring great joy.

Anne carefully examined how their crystals looked.

If they were factoring light in, complicated snowflake shapes would be best to reflect the most light. Anne listened to the opinions of the other four crafters and chose a shape with a hexagon at the center and spokes branching off it in six directions. Then she decided to engrave them with a regular pattern that was fine and delicate like lacework. They could form a lattice with that pattern and let the light shine through.

To reflect the light, the colors used white as the base and ranged from pale blue to faint pink to light purple. The crystals ranged from the size of a human’s face to the size of a palm. The crafters made as many as they possibly could.

They kneaded their silver sugar dough with more than twice as much persistence as usual. In doing so, they increased the intensity of the sugar’s luster and brilliance.

It was an enormous amount of work. Even just the kneading simply took twice as much time than normal sugar candy.

However, they had four crafters.

Orlando, whose kneading technique was excellent, kneaded the silver sugar. King was also strong, so he helped, too. And at the same time, he added color to the silver sugar.

Once King and Orlando were done kneading the dough, Anne and Valentine took it and stretched it thin. Then Valentine cut the thin dough into complex branching hexagons with miraculous accuracy. Anne engraved a radiating lacework pattern onto those shapes. Nadir used a needle to carve a uniform fretwork pattern on the tips of the six spokes. Light diffused wonderfully across the faces and tips of the shapes that were cut out in this way, making them even more brilliant.

Mithril moved around restlessly. He polished tools, straightened vials of colored powder, and scooped up silver sugar from the barrel. It didn't seem like very important work, but his timing in bringing over tools and sugar was perfect, and thanks to his help, they were more efficient.

And so by midnight, they had managed to make just shy of one hundred snowflakes, large and small combined.

When it came to the works presented at the Selection, Anne had heard that some of them were even taller than her. If they intended to pile up the crystals, one or two hundred wouldn't be enough.

"Ten days until the Selection, huh?"

Under the light of the lamp, Anne groaned and gently bit down on her thumb.

"We'll need two days to stack up the snowflakes. We can get to Lewiston in one day. Which leaves seven days. Seven hundred snowflakes? I'd like to have twice that," she grumbled.

"We could make two hundred a day," Orlando said simply.

Anne's eyes widened in surprise.

"Can we?"

"Glen won't be happy with half measures. If we need twice as many, we will work twice as long."

At his words, the other crafters all nodded, as though this was not a big deal.

From the next day on, the crafters lit the workroom lamps and handled silver sugar until the middle of the night. Then they got up at dawn and gathered in the workroom.

From early morning until late at night, Anne, Mithril, and the four other crafters kneaded and worked their silver sugar.

They took lunch and dinner in a small break room in the back of the workroom. Inside, there were only four chairs and a table for four. They brought in one more small stool, and the five humans and one fairy ate their meals in a huddle.

“It’s cramped.”

At first, Orlando had complained. But Anne liked the tiny narrow room more than the spacious dining room. For some reason, it was fun eating meals packed in there like sardines.

“Sometimes, smaller is better,” Anne said.

After she did that, Orlando didn’t complain anymore. He started eating silently, but the expression on his face didn’t look displeased.

But King’s face would turn bright red whenever Anne sat beside him, and he wouldn’t be able to eat his meal. So Anne took care not to be his neighbor. Clearly, older men sometimes felt confused on how to act around younger women, in ways that were hard to talk about.

Then on the seventh day—

Elliott’s injuries had been healing day by day. But they still didn’t know the identity or the objectives of the fairy who had attacked him. Ever since the incident, attacks on candy crafters by an unknown number of assailants had been taking place on the road connecting Lewiston and Millsfield.

Bridget remained holed up in her room with no change. The sugar candies that Anne and Orlando had left in front of her door were still there.

When they returned to the room exhausted each day, Mithril and Anne both slept like logs. But unlike when they had been staying at the main studio of the Radcliffe Workshop, this sleep was pleasant.

Challe watched Anne silently from the sidelines, as he always did.

Over time, the snowflakes came to number over one thousand and four hundred. They varied in size. Eighty percent of them were silvery white; the remaining twenty percent were light blue, pink, or purple.

From the ninth day on, Anne worked at assembling it.

The skilled candy crafters were able to make crystals that were extremely thin. To the point that if she were to apply more than the necessary amount of force they could easily break, Anne handled the crystals slowly and gently, as if she was touching a newborn baby bird.

She arranged them into a three-dimensional structure, taking size, color, and direction into account, without breaking any of the ever so thin snowflakes with their complex and dainty designs.

The other four crafters observed from four directions, checking the balance and color distribution. They also decided where she should place the next crystal and what size it should be.

Once a crystal was stuck on, it was difficult to remove it again. There were no do-overs.

One by one, paying meticulous attention, they decided on the size and color of the crystal going in the next spot and adjusted its angle before attaching it on. It required enormous powers of concentration.

All five of them were constantly staring at the snowflakes, holding their breath.

“What do you think?”

On top of a stepladder, Anne stretched her arm as far as it would go and placed the final crystal. Then she got down from the ladder and turned her gaze on the other four crafters.

It was the night of the tenth day.

Lamps were lit in the four corners of the workroom, and a further five lamps surrounded the sugar candy sculpture.

The crafters looked up at the sculpture standing before their eyes, and each

of them nodded.

“No complaints.”

After Orlando’s comment, King spoke.

“It’s all right.”

Valentine smiled with a tired expression.

“We can’t do anything more than this.”

Nadir simply looked up at their candy sculpture, spellbound.

Just then, the door to the workroom opened.

“Anne! I brought him!”

Mithril bounded through the door, sounding excited. Anne and the others, sensing their sugar candy sculpture was nearing completion, had asked Mithril to go and summon Elliott from the main house.

Elliott followed Mithril in.

“Hey. I heard you finished your candy sculpture.”

The wound on Elliott’s head completely healed, and it seemed like the gash in his abdomen hardly hurt anymore.

He had restarted talks with the heads of the guild several days earlier. He had been boasting that he’d completely recovered from his injuries, but he was still being a little protective of his belly, perhaps because the wound ached with the cold at night.

As soon as Elliott saw their sculpture, he stopped in his tracks.

“Whoa. This is...”

He stared intently at the candy sculpture.

Then someone else appeared at the door of the workroom. It was Glen, being supported by Challe.

The four candy crafters were startled and rushed over to Glen in a panic.

“Glen! You mustn’t be out of your room on such a cold night!”

Valentine frowned, but Glen smiled.

“Do you think I can stay in bed when the sugar candy sculpture is finished? I —”

Orlando and King took over supporting Glen’s body from Challe. They helped Glen stand beside Elliott.

Glen looked at the sugar candy sculpture.

The piece was taller than Anne. It formed a tapering cone, like a fir tree.

Large and small crystals were stuck together in a complex pattern, layered over one another at all angles, standing tall and dignified like a tower.

Though it was unusually large for a sugar candy sculpture, it didn’t feel oppressive. That was because of the way the crystals were put together. They were arranged so that it was possible to see right through the interior of the tower to the other side.

Light shining on the outside of the tower penetrated through to the inside, and diffusion through the crystals made it even brighter.

The slightly tinted crystals placed here and there provided gentle accents. And the pointed tips of the crystals scattered the light in every direction. The patterns inscribed onto them made them break up the light more strongly than other parts, which made them twinkle.



“What do you think?”

Elliott slowly looked in Glen’s direction.

“It’s a winter wonderland.”

Glen’s eyes narrowed, as if he was yearning for something from his past.

“Actual snow isn’t as beautiful as this. But if we’re talking about the snow in my memories, it sparkles just like this.”

Glen looked at Orlando, King, Nadir, and Valentine in turn.

Then he smiled happily.

“I want to see this displayed at the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell.”

At those words, Elliott and the other four candy crafters smiled with relief.

Anne was watching them from a short distance away. They all adored Glen, and Glen believed in them. Sure enough, she could see the aura of confidence that surrounded them.

Anne was jealous. The image of Glen overlapped with her image of Emma.

I’m a guest here after all.

Watching them warmed her heart. But she also felt a little lonely.

Suddenly, Anne sensed a presence beside her. It was Challe.

He was staring at the sugar candy sculpture.

“It’s beautiful.”

“I wonder if it will be chosen? And if it’s enough to get your freedom back?” Anne said.

Challe answered her with his eyes still on the candy. “I don’t know. But it’s very clear that you put all your effort into this. That’s enough.”

Anne felt the light sensation of someone hopping up onto her shoulder. It was Mithril, who had his hand on his hip, looking cocky.

“Now, look what we can make when the great Mithril Lid Pod helps Anne with her work!”

“Thank you, Mithril Lid Pod. We only had a few crafters, so you really were a big help.”

When she thanked him again, Mithril scratched his head bashfully and turned bright red.

I may be a guest, but that's okay.

She knew she could trust Challe and Mithril. They were her new family, ever since Emma had passed away.

“Anne?”

Suddenly, Glen called out to her.

“Why are you standing over there? You're *our* head crafter.”

Anne looked at him blankly. Glen saw her expression and forced a smile. He must have remembered that Anne had gotten angry at his words.

Our head crafter? So I'm not a guest?

Elliott, Orlando, King, Valentine, Nadir. One by one, they looked toward Anne as if they were waiting for her.

She looked up at Challe, as if to ask what she ought to do. When she did, he gave her a silent push on the back.

When she hesitantly moved to stand beside Glen, he said quietly, “Our head crafter did a great job, huh?”

His words had an affectionate ring to them.

“Anne. Take this sugar candy sculpture and go to Lewiston,” Glen continued. “Go with my proxy, Elliott. You, the head candy crafter at the main studio of the Paige Workshop, will be the one to present it. This sculpture will be difficult to transport. It's probably going to require all hands on deck to carry it. Absolutely do not break it.”

“Yes, sir.”

Anne nodded, and Glen turned his gaze on Challe, who was standing a little ways off.

“And you, Challe. Go with them, too. I've heard candy crafters have been

attacked on the highway recently. So I want you to guard them. Do your job as a warrior fairy. Protect the crafters of the Paige Workshop. Can you do that?"

Challe smiled slightly.

"I will follow your orders."

Chapter 7

GLOW OF CELEBRATION

It took half a day to travel to Lewiston by wagon. The Selection was to be held in the afternoon, two days from now. Normally, if they left Millsfield the morning of the same day, they could have joined the Selection with time to spare.

But Anne's party set out the afternoon of the day after the sculpture was completed.

"You guys really are foolish. Of course I'm going. What would you do without me there?"

Sitting in the driver's seat, Elliott tediously and proudly repeated himself.

Orlando was holding the reins. He looked to be gritting his teeth as he glared at Elliott.

"We get it, so shut up, Elliott. And don't sit so absurdly close to me. You're crushing me."

After Orlando said that, Elliott further harassed him by moving even closer to him, to the point where their shoulders were touching.

"Oh, you get it? Great, that makes me so happy. It's nice that Orlando is so cooperative, right, King?" Elliott said.

"Be quiet, or I'll kick you in the gut," spat King, who was riding in the cargo hold.

Orlando was driving a huge, two-horse wagon. It was owned by a blacksmith,

and Elliott had obtained it through the guild system. In the back were King, Valentine, and Nadir. Anne, Challe, and Mithril were also riding along.

They had departed the day before the Selection, just in case, for the sake of the candy.

Their completed piece was incredibly delicate and would easily break if handled roughly. Any intense rocking of the wagon would be more than enough to do it. There was no other way but to drive the horses slowly and move the wagon at a snail's pace.

They were going at a preposterously slow speed. A distance that normally took half a day would take twice that.

Moreover, placing a protective cloth directly on the candy sculpture was out of the question. So at Elliott's suggestion, they had quickly assembled a frame out of thin tree branches. They'd placed it around the candy and covered everything with a protective cloth.

Elliott had been taking digs at them all day, making fun of them for not having taken into consideration how to transport the sculpture.

Even now, King, Valentine, Nadir, and Anne were all making sure that the protective cloth didn't blow in the breeze—which would damage the sugar candy—by firmly holding down the edges of the fabric.

"I really hate that we can't talk back to him," Valentine said.

"Oh? Why not?" Nadir responded nonchalantly. "All Elliott did was say we should make a frame out of branches, right? We're definitely more amazing. We created something the likes of someone like Elliott could never make."

"I can hear youuu, Nadir."

Elliott glanced back, and Nadir grinned.

"That's because I said it loud enough for you to hear!"

"...Um. For now, everyone, let's pay attention to what we're doing. The wagon's swaying..."

As she held down the cloth, Anne spoke to the excited candy crafters, who seemed like they were about to start an argument.

Mithril was also trying to help by holding down an edge of the fabric. But Challe was just sitting on the side of the cargo hold with one knee up, staring intently out at the world around them.

“Hey, Challe Fenn Challe. You help, too!” Mithril said in a huff.

But Challe didn’t even look his way; he kept his eyes trained on their surroundings.

“I have no intention of helping,” he answered bluntly. “I was ordered to be a guard.”

“I get that it’s not any fun having your wing in the hands of a human, but that doesn’t mean you can sulk all day.”

“That job doesn’t require more than four people.”

“It’s a matter of camaraderie, camaraderie!”

“In that case, it’s even less necessary.”

“You’ve got zero spirit of cooperation!”

Mithril was fuming, but Anne noticed that Challe’s tone was different from usual. He wasn’t sulking and refusing to help with Anne’s work.

Rather, he didn’t want to be tied down by something so that he could concentrate on protecting them.

Challe kept his keen gaze directed at their surroundings. He was staying alert so he could move immediately if anything happened.

He was probably on guard against the robber who had attacked Elliott and then gone after the other candy crafters who frequented this highway.

A fairy who had appeared saying they could smell silver sugar. Their motives weren’t clear, which made it even eerier.

The road was level, with fields and farmhouses visible here and there. It was an extremely peaceful landscape.

They passed a constant stream of wagons and people. But that number decreased dramatically just after midday.

Though it was a comparatively safe road, no one wanted to travel down it at

night. Moreover, candy crafters were still being attacked. Everyone was trying to get off the road before the sun went down.

Across the expansive wheat fields was a distant mountain range. The tops of the mountains were tinted slightly pink. The sun was sinking, and its orange light was shining straight into their eyes.

“The sun will set very soon.”

“Well then, I wonder what’s our best plan of action? What’s the warrior fairy’s opinion?” Elliott casually asked as he scowled at the sinking evening sun.

“We should keep the wagon moving just like this and continue onward to Lewiston. There’s a full moon tonight. Good visibility.”

Orlando tilted his head, puzzled by Challe’s answer. “Staying up all night driving down the road?” he asked. “But we’re perfectly prepared to make use of a way station.”

“If the fairy who appeared on the highway said they could smell silver sugar, then we can count on them to show up because of it. They’ll definitely come. We’d be better off getting as much distance behind us as we can before then.”

The candy crafters were obviously startled by his answer.

Challe stared blankly out over the already-harvested fields of wheat, which were tinted crimson.

Catching the setting sun, his wing shone gold. It had a stiff brilliance to it, which seemed to speak to his nervousness.

It made Anne anxious to see Challe so uneasy.

Mithril seemed to feel the same way as Anne as they exchanged looks.

Challe was strong. The two knew that quite well. So seeing him on edge told them the enormity of the danger.

The horse-drawn wagon proceeded slowly down the highway. The sun set, and twilight fell, blotting out the heavens with darkness in the blink of an eye.

Nothing changed until midnight. The moon was bright, and just as Challe had said, there was no issue driving. The white stones in the road stood out in the

moonlight.

It was nearly midwinter. The moonlight was shining down, and there were no sounds of insects. And thanks to the cold, the air felt extra crisp.

Whenever the wind blew, distant groves of trees made rustling sounds.

Suddenly, Challe looked ahead.

Orlando pulled on the reins and brought the wagon carefully to a stop.

There was a figure on the road straight ahead of them.

They were wearing an olive-brown hooded cloak that went down to their ankles. They were as tall as Challe. Their hood was pulled down low, obscuring their face. But the tip of a pale chin was visible as well as some loose red hair that sparkled almost transparently.

Anne shuddered when she laid eyes on the figure. She wasn't sure why, but she felt frightened.

The other candy crafters had also tensed up.

"It's them," Elliott said almost reflexively.

"They're...bad news," King groaned.

King seemed like he was used to fights and could easily judge his opponent's abilities.

Challe stood up silently. He jumped down softly from the wagon.

"Challe...?"

In response to Anne's trembling voice, Challe maintained his blank expression and kept his gaze fixed ahead. "The wagon cannot outrun them. I will lead them far away. While I do that, you go on ahead. Do not stop," he said.

"But, Challe, you—"

"I will come after you. Go."

Challe ended their conversation and slowly set out from the front of the wagon. He casually opened his right hand. Beads of light sparkled in the dark, and a silvery blade appeared. When it did, the figure in front of them seemed to

smile a little.

“I thought I smelled the strong scent of silver sugar. So you brought a bodyguard with you?”

The person in the cloak extended both arms in front of their chest. On top of their hands, beads of light began to gather.

The moment he saw that, Challe dropped low with his sword in one hand and ran. In the blink of an eye, he had closed the distance between himself and his opponent and was sweeping sideways at the cloaked figure. But they leaped to the side of the road and avoided his attack.

With another swing, Challe sent his blade flashing through the air, slashing at his opponent’s torso, and shouted, “Go!”

The cloaked figure jumped out of the way of Challe’s blade again and were now farther away from the road.

Seizing the opportunity, Orlando whipped the horses.

He couldn’t allow them to break into a full gallop. But Orlando drove the horses forward with as much speed as he dared. Cold sweat covered his forehead.

“Challe!” Anne shouted from atop the cargo hold when the wagon began to move.

Mithril jumped up on her shoulder. “Don’t worry, Anne,” he said. “Challe Fenn Challe is obsidian. More important than his fight is transporting this candy to Lewiston. For the sake of Challe Fenn Challe’s freedom, too. Believe in him—he’s strong!”

Anne was startled by the earnest look in Mithril’s eyes.

“Believe?”

She turned around to look behind her once again. The wagon passed by the spot where Challe and the robber were facing off. Challe’s figure was already behind them. She could see his back. His wing, giving off the same vivid crispness as his blade in the moonlight, was stretched taut from apprehension.

Beads of light were gathering ever so finely in the robber’s palms. They

formed a bundle of what looked like needles, glistening with a reddish-silver color.

Anne had a bad feeling about it. Challe was strong. But his opponent was also strong. Something about the robber was not normal. That was the feeling she got. There was no way that Challe hadn't been able to sense their strength when even Anne had recognized it.

But he had said to go. He was surely going to fight. She didn't want him to fight against a dangerous opponent. But if they didn't let him, what would become of them?

Ultimately, in her powerlessness, Anne had no choice but to rely on Challe. She gripped the cloth in frustration and shame, protecting the sugar candy.

But as powerless as she was, there was still something she could do. She could enter the Selection with their sugar candy sculpture and get Challe's wing back. At the moment, the best thing she could do was simply pray.

"I believe in you, so...Challe, come back. Don't fail."

If Challe wasn't around, none of this would mean anything.

She wanted to protect the sugar candy sculpture for the sake of Challe's freedom.



Strange.

Dry, withered grass rustled around Challe's ankles as he faced off against the cloaked figure across an open field. He was suspicious of how still his opponent was.

Though Challe had his sword at the ready, they showed no signs of attacking with the silvery-red threads in their hands.

He figured those threads must be weapons. The other fairy could manipulate them at will to cut their opponent. Of course, Elliott hadn't been able to see the

threads. They only appeared to human eyes as streaks of light. Considering the special properties of those weapons, the other fairy had the advantage when fighting from a distance. Challe would have expected them to attack before he closed in on them.

The other fairy watched the wagon go. It rolled away much too slowly to really be called an escape.

“So the humans have gone.”

It was a soft voice. With elegant, calm movements, the fairy gripped the bundle of silvery-red threads and lowered their hand. It was not a fighting stance.

“Obsidian, huh? It’s been a long time since I’ve seen another gemstone,” they continued. “I have no intention of fighting. I’m here to help you.”

Challe frowned at the unexpected words.

“Did you hear me? I said I’m here to help you,” the fairy murmured gently, as if they pitied Challe.

Though he remained cautious, Challe relaxed his stance and held his sword down by his side.

The other fairy was smiling. Challe could only see their mouth under the edge of the hood. They approached him slowly.

“Which of those humans is holding your wing? Once I know that, I’ll go and recover it for you.”

“What gives you the right to ask about others’ wings? Who exactly is your master?”

At that, the other fairy chuckled.

“My wing is in my own hands.”

“Meaning you are a free fairy?”

Fairies who are bought and sold as warrior fairies have great combat abilities. If their masters are negligent, they can take back their wings. Sometimes, they will from a careless master, then kill them and escape. Challe reasoned this fairy

was likely one of those.

“I am free. But living alone is inconvenient in many ways. I’ve been thinking it might not be bad to have another companion or two. Obsidian would be good. Strong. So I will help you. I’ll chase down that group and take your wing back. Then I’ll kill every one of them and steal their sugar candy. That candy seems large. I want to see what kind of candy it is. If it’s good, I want it for myself.”

“You want sugar candy?”

“That and a Silver Sugar Master. Is there a Silver Sugar Master among that group?”

Challe laughed.

“I see. So that’s it!”

As he said that, he raised his sword again.

His opponent looked unprepared, but even so, they leaped out of the way instantly. But a straight, vertical cut suddenly appeared in the right arm of their cloak. Beads of sparkling silver-red light fountained from the wound. It was the shining energy that leaked out from fairies’ wounds. To compare it to humans, it was like blood.

“Unfortunately, no one is going to give you what you want.”

Challe smiled coldly, holding his blade at his side.

The other fairy groaned and clutched at their right arm.

“You don’t have to follow human orders. Do you not understand that I’m here to save you?”

“I already know who’s going to save me. I promised I would wait. I have no need for the likes of you.”

“Were you...deliberately closing the distance between us?” the fairy grumbled bitterly.

Challe had pretended to listen to what they’d been saying so that he could get close to his opponent, who seemed to specialize in long-distance attacks. He had put them at a disadvantage by getting close.

Under the moonlight, Challe's wing shone the same silver as his blade.

His opponent smiled widely.

"Fascinating."

The other fairy jumped away, still clutching their injured arm. Seemingly without regard for their injury, they kept their grip on the cluster of silvery-red threads in their right hand. Then they drew out one of the threads with their left hand and held it at the ready in front of their face.

Challe readied his sword as well.

At the same moment that Challe leaped forward, his opponent swiftly lashed out with the thread in their left hand. A thin, high-pitched sound echoed in the chilly air.



The crafters were anxious to move, but they couldn't make the wagon go any faster.

"Orlando! Speed up!" Nadir shouted angrily, frustrated by their incredibly slow pace.

"He can't!" Elliott answered immediately. "The candy sculpture will break!"

Orlando, who was sitting beside him driving the wagon, also appeared to be desperately suppressing his panic. He was gritting his teeth. It required quite a bit of effort to control himself and not set the horses running under their current circumstances.

"But what will we do if that robber catches up to us?" Valentine asked.

"If this candy breaks, we'll lose everything! Quit makin' a fuss!" King yelled in response. But even as he shouted, he couldn't hide the fear in his eyes.

"It's all right, everyone," Anne said in a firm voice. "We have Challe on our side. Challe won't let that fairy take a single step closer to us."

With those words, everyone's eyes turned to Anne.

Mithril, who was sitting on her shoulder, also nodded. "Challe Fenn Challe is made from obsidian. He's exceptionally strong, even among fairies."

That didn't mean they had total confidence in him, but that they chose to believe in him.

No one pursued the slowly advancing wagon. The sky was beginning to lighten by the time they made it off the road.

They all felt relieved once they made it to the end of the highway and could see Lewiston in the distance.

If they had gotten that far, the robber was unlikely to come after them.

The sky was covered in thick clouds. They looked heavy, like snow clouds, and were sweeping low across the horizon. The sun was up, but thanks to those clouds, their surroundings were illuminated in a faint gray light.

Even so, it was undoubtedly daybreak. The scenery around them gradually became clear.

Anne turned around and looked back at the road.

The fact that the fairy didn't come after us must mean that Challe stopped them. But...why hasn't Challe returned?

Anne shook her head to dispel her worries. She had decided to believe in Challe. She admonished herself once more to trust in him.

Early in the morning, their wagon entered the city of Lewiston.

The Selection was that afternoon. It was to be held in the sanctuary of the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell.

A cold wind blew through the streets of Lewiston, which were dim where sunlight had yet to reach.

The scenery was drab and gray.

That day, regular services had been canceled for the morning at the church. That time was meant for crafters from each faction to carry in their sugar candies and prepare for the Selection.

There were already two large horse-drawn wagons parked in front of the sanctuary. They were stationed some distance away from each other, so they probably belonged to the Radcliffe Workshop and the Mercury Workshop. Each wagon had about ten crafters around it busily running about. It was taking time to unload the sugar candy sculptures stowed in the cargo holds of each wagon.

When their wagon pulled up in front of the sanctuary, the crafters from each of the other workshops looked at them in surprise. Their whispering was audible.

“That’s the Paige Workshop.”

“Don’t tell me they’re participating in the Selection?”

When Orlando parked the wagon in front of the sanctuary, a clergyman who had been standing in the doorway came over.

Elliott alighted from the wagon and went to greet the clergyman.

“And whom do I have the pleasure of welcoming?”

“I am the proxy for Glen Paige, the maestro of the Paige Workshop. My name is Elliott Collins. We are from the main studio of the Paige Workshop. We have brought a sugar candy sculpture to enter in the Selection,” Elliott said with a cheerful, lively smile.

The clergyman looked surprised.

“The Paige Workshop? Will be participating?”

“Yes.”

“How very...unusual...”

The clergyman gaped at Elliott for a moment, but he soon seemed to remember his duties. He briskly issued instructions.

“Very well then, take your candy sculpture inside the sanctuary. Please set it in front of the altar. We’ve instructed the Radcliffe Workshop and the Mercury Workshop to line theirs up starting from the right-hand side, so yours will be on the far left. Then only the proxy maestro and the head crafter may take a seat in the first row. After you have set up your candy sculpture, the other candy crafters are permitted to sit and watch from the back pews if they wish.

Provided that they remain silent.”

Once the clergyman had left, Elliott exchanged looks with all the other crafters.

Anne stood first, then the other four candy crafters simultaneously stood up.

As they were preparing to move their sugar sculpture, Marcus Radcliffe ran over in what looked like a panic from near one of the wagons that had arrived before them.

“Collins!”

As soon as Marcus located Elliott, he shouted out his name.

“What’s the meaning of this, Collins?! I thought you said Paige wasn’t interested in participating in the Selection!”

“Hey, Master Radcliffe. When I said that, we really weren’t interested in participating, but well...our feelings changed. Oh, but don’t worry about us, please. Surely, a tiny little faction like the Paige Workshop is beneath the worry of the grand Radcliffe Workshop.”

When he heard that, Marcus let out a sort of growl. He snorted and turned on his heel.

Watching the whole scene from the Mercury Workshop’s wagon was a nervous-looking man wearing a monocle.

“Oh, it’s Killean.”

When Elliott noticed him, he waved casually. The other man shrugged.

Killean was the name of the proxy maestro at the Mercury Workshop. The man with the monocle was probably John Killean. It was the first time Anne had seen the Mercury Workshop’s proxy maestro.

Anne had heard that the maestros and their proxies from each faction rarely gathered in one place, except for when they were summoned by the Silver Sugar Viscount. The fact that they were all here like this made it clear how important the Selection was to each of the factions.

The sugar candy sculptures from each of the workshops were carried into the

sanctuary.

There were three large sugar candy sculptures covered in cloth. The crafters lined them up in front of the altar, which had the symbol of God, a cross in a circle, inscribed on it.

Twelve candlesticks were placed at regular intervals on top of the white altar. The silver candlesticks held ornamental candles, each about an arm's span in length. They were made from pale-green wax, with an ivy pattern carved into them twining around each candle. Gold coloring had been applied to the inscribed patterns.

The ornamental candles were also arranged systematically throughout the whole sanctuary, flanking the altar and the feet of the statues of the saints.

The maestros of each faction and their proxies, as well as the head crafters, seated themselves in the first row. Behind them, the other candy crafters sat with nervous expressions, watching over their own sugar candy sculptures.

The church's bell rang, signaling noon. Taking that as their cue, twelve clergymen walked out along an aisle next to the altar. They all wore the same black vestments. But just one of them had a thin band of gold around his neck. He was the head priest, the clergy member with the highest standing, and responsible for the sanctuary.

Anne was suddenly nervous.

The chilly air of the sanctuary became even more tense with the presence of the clergy.

It was dim inside as gray clouds still covered the skies of Lewiston.

The clergymen entered and formed a line in front of the altar.

"We will now carry out the Selection," announced the clergyman standing to the side of the altar, facilitating the proceedings.

"The participants are the main studios of the Radcliffe Workshop, Mercury Workshop, and Paige Workshop."

When the name of the Paige Workshop was called, the twelve clergymen glanced curiously over in Anne and Elliott's direction. And when they spotted

her sitting there, they all looked surprised.

“First, we will view the sugar candy sculpture from the main studio of the Radcliffe Workshop.”

At the clergyman’s instruction, Marcus and the head candy crafter from the Radcliffe Workshop stood up. They slowly removed the cloth covering the candy sculpture before them.

They revealed a statue of the Ancestor King, standing about the same height as Marcus. Anne was startled. The Ancestor King’s face and the beauty of his strong, elegant figure seemed familiar. It looked like Challe.

Did Keith...?

Hints of Keith’s characteristic style were all over the sugar candy. In response to the handsome, strong figure, the twelve clergy members murmured words of admiration in spite of themselves.

“We have conceptualized and crafted the figure of the Ancestor King during one of his accomplishments. We plan to line the sanctuary with statues representing each achievement,” the head crafter explained.

Marcus, who was standing beside him, nodded with a satisfied expression and sat back down.

John Killean furrowed his brow.

Elliott wore a blank look.

“Next, the main studio of the Mercury Workshop.”

When their studio was called, Killean stood up with his head candy crafter. With no hesitation at all, they quickly removed the cloth covering their sugar candy.

They revealed a collection of spheres. Inside one of them, one of the patron saints of the state church was kneeling in prayer. His anguished expression and the depiction of his thin, sinewy arms was incredibly realistic, in contrast to the Radcliffe Workshop’s fanciful statue of the Ancestor King. And for that very reason, it was eye-catching.

“We will make twelve spheres and arrange the twelve saints inside them in

this manner. We plan to line them up around the sanctuary.”

This time, it wasn’t the head crafter but the proxy maestro, Killean, who gave a smooth explanation.

The clergymen nodded. They looked like they were deeply moved. As people who had studied the teachings of the state church in depth, they must have felt incredibly touched by the vivid depiction of the saint.

“Lastly, the main studio of the Paige Workshop.”

They were called forward just as Killean was returning to his seat.

When Anne stood up with Elliott, the eyes of the clergy focused on her.

Her back stiffened, but then Elliott lightly clapped a hand down on her shoulder. He gave her a little wink in such a way that the clergy couldn’t see it. Then he signaled with his eyes to look at the pews behind them.

Anne glanced behind her. Mithril, Orlando, King, Valentine, and Nadir were looking at her hopefully. She nodded to them, then removed the cloth covering their sugar candy sculpture.

When she pulled off the cloth, the clergymen knit their brows in obvious disapproval.

The frame of thin sticks was still in place around the sculpture.

“Wait just a moment, please,” Anne said.

The other crafters from the Paige Workshop stood up. They quickly untied the strings holding the parts of the frame together and dismantled the whole thing in the blink of an eye. Afterward, they stood off to the side of the pews, holding pieces of the frame.

“It’s snow.”

The tower, formed by putting together snow crystals, stood there dimly in the dark, lightless house of worship.

The candy crafters wore cloudy expressions. Anne also furrowed her brow.

The sculpture, which had looked incredibly beautiful in the workroom at the Paige Workshop, now seemed like nothing more than a vague little curio with a

hazy silhouette.

How strange. Why?

Anne was nearly overcome with surprise.

“Main studio of the Paige Workshop. Continue.”

Prompted by a member of the clergy, Anne returned to her senses. In any case, she had to explain their piece.

“This is... It’s snow. A snowy First Holy Festival is a solemn occasion, one that will cleanse our heart. This snow...”

The longer she stood there talking to the row of clergymen, the more doubt and dismay welled up inside her. Her palms were sweaty.

Just then, the sound of footsteps echoed through the hall.

Anne reflexively turned to look toward the sound of someone walking into the sanctuary, which had fallen completely silent.

The huge sanctuary doors were only halfway open. A cutout of the gray sky beyond was visible. The aisle leading straight from the entrance up to the altar was gloomy. Walking down the aisle was a slender figure. The person had sparkling beads of silver light on their right arm, lower back, and ankle. In the gloom, they glistened with astonishing beauty.

Challe slowly approached the front of the sanctuary. He had a sharp glint in his dark eyes, and his wing shone a brilliant crisp blue and silver color—traces of his battle, perhaps.

The beads of light dancing around Challe, following his movements, made him look even more gorgeous.

Challe!

In her joy, Anne’s withered emotions of a moment earlier disappeared instantly. Then she suddenly realized something.

Light!

The swirling lights beautifully highlighted Challe’s image. When she saw that, Anne remembered something important.

“Holy Fathers!”

Anne turned back to the clergymen standing next to the altar.

“During the First Holy Festival, will lights be lit in this sanctuary?!”

Challe quietly sat in the farthest back row of pews.

The clergymen, who had been looking at Challe suspiciously, wondering who he was, came back to themselves with Anne’s inquiry. One of them answered with another question.

“Huh? What did you ask?”

“During the First Holy Festival, will the lights be lit in this sanctuary?”

“Of course. All the candles decorating the sanctuary will be lit. Twice as many candles will also be prepared. What of it?”

“In that case, please listen to my request. This is the Selection, where you choose the sugar candy for the First Holy Festival. I ask for the same conditions we will have on the day of the ceremony. Please see what you think when the lights are lit up. Even if it’s just the ornamental candles that are in here right now. I ask for light!”

“Well, that’s... There’s no precedent for such a thing...,” one of the clergymen said, perplexed.

However—

“I see. That’s quite reasonable. Very well.”

The one who had quietly spoken up was the head priest.

“Father Brooke. Summon the fairies to light the candles.”

So ordered, the clergyman who was in charge of the proceedings quickly withdrew from beside the altar into the back.

Anne curtsied to the head priest.

“Thank you.”

“We hold the First Holy Festival every year, but sometimes, when I look at the sugar candy sculptures on the day of the festival, I feel that the impression they

give is different than what we selected. It makes sense to have the conditions be the same as they will be on the day in question.”

The clergyman who had disappeared into the back a moment ago came out leading several little fairies about Mithril’s size. The fairies held slender candles in their hands. They scattered in all directions and moved around the room lighting the ornamental candles one after another in what seemed to be an assigned order.

Here and there, the candles began to burn.

The light-green color of the ornamental candles was faintly visible in the gloom, while the gold patterns reflected the flames and gleamed lustrously.

The stained glass embedded in the dim walls seemed to come to life. It shone with bright colors.

Shadows appeared, throwing the engravings on the pillars holding up the sanctuary into bold relief and giving them a presence that made them seem twice as large.

The sugar candy sculpture from the Radcliffe Workshop stood there, looking simply beautiful, just as it had in the dim illumination. It reflected the light and didn’t look as if anything in particular had changed.

The shadows on the sculpture from the Mercury Workshop stood out even more, which increased its realism. But making it seem more vivid just enhanced its melancholy nature.

Only the piece from the Paige Workshop flickered and sparkled, as if it were breathing in the light that filled the sanctuary.

The clergymen were wide-eyed in wonder. The head priest smiled admiringly.

“It’s snow,” Anne informed them again. “We’ve formed crystals representing the snow that covers the world in a blanket of white and renews it every year, then arranged them together to create a snowy scene, in a prayer that good fortune will visit our kingdom in the new year. We will line these up around the sanctuary. Lots of them.”

Marcus had his arms crossed and was staring sullenly at the candy sculpture

that he had brought.

Killean was making an unpleasant face, as if he had a thorn or something lodged in the sole of his foot.

Once she had finished her explanation, Anne and Elliott took their seats.

“Which of these sugar candy sculptures is worthy of the First Holy Festival? I ask for the judgment of the twelve,” the clergyman in charge of the proceedings said solemnly.

The clergyman standing to his right quickly pointed to the Paige Workshop’s sculpture with his right hand.

In spite of herself, Anne smiled.

Next, the clergyman beside him pointed to the Mercury Workshop’s sculpture.

Killean nodded as if he had expected as much.

The third clergyman pointed to the Radcliffe Workshop’s candy.

A look of relief came over Marcus’s face.

The fourth clergyman indicated the Mercury Workshop. The fifth did as well.

The sixth chose the Radcliffe Workshop.

Anne’s hands balled into fists on her lap.

At that point, three clergymen had chosen the Mercury Workshop. Two had chosen Radcliffe. And only one had chosen Paige.

The seventh clergyman picked the Paige Workshop’s sculpture. The eighth pointed to Mercury’s.

The ninth chose the Radcliffe Workshop. The tenth, the Paige Workshop.

At that point, four clergymen had voted for the Mercury Workshop. And three each for the Radcliffe Workshop and Paige Workshop.

Marcus glanced over at Anne. She bit her lip.

Then the eleventh clergyman chose. He was pointing at the Paige Workshop’s candy.

Marcus gazed up at the ceiling as if in prayer.

Anne looked at the head priest. Killeen was looking at him, too, with a bitter expression.

Four clergymen each had selected the Paige and Mercury Workshops. Three had selected the Radcliffe Workshop. Would the head priest's final decision make the three workshops tie even, or would it decide the matter?

"Of the three workshops, which do you think has made sugar candy most fitting for the First Holy Festival?" the head priest asked the other eleven clergymen after a moment of thought.

"I think the Radcliffe Workshop's is good. It's beautiful and sublime, even on its own," one of them answered.

"The Mercury Workshop. The saints who protect the state church are an especially fitting motif for the First Holy Festival," another responded.

"The Mercury Workshop's candy sculpture is a little too melancholy. It's not suitable for the sanctuary when we're celebrating the new year."

"The Paige Workshop's sculpture is too abstract."

"Surely, being abstract is not a bad thing. I can feel the light of the new year in their sculpture."

The clergymen all contributed their various opinions.

"The Paige Workshop has not taken part in the Selection for over ten years. I wonder if we should choose them when they have no past record of success."

"If you're going to say that, then shouldn't we question the purpose of the Selection? Because we introduced it with the aim of making our choice not just based on a workshop's track record, but on whether they can produce something magnificent."

After listening to the opinions of the other clergy, the head priest raised his hand gently and took control of the crowd.

"Very well. I understand. Now then, allow me to decide."

The sanctuary fell silent at the sound of his voice.

Anne could hear her own heart throbbing quickly in her ears. She squeezed her fists even tighter.

The head priest slowly pointed his finger.

He pointed at the Paige Workshop's sugar candy sculpture.

For a moment, Anne could hardly breathe. Then joy welled up inside her.

We made that, all together.

A feeling of pride spread throughout her chest.

We created something wonderful.

It was a different sort of joy from the one she felt toward sugar candies that she had made by herself. There was none of the slight anxiety and embarrassment that came with being recognized on her own. She was able to feel pure happiness and pride. It was the exhilaration of having created something joyful for someone else.

Elliott's expression relaxed in apparent relief. The other candy crafters and Mithril were all staring at one another. Anne turned around once more and looked at the farthest back row of pews. Challe was there.

"That which must be chosen, has been chosen," the head priest announced quietly.

Then he made eye contact with Elliott and Anne, who were sitting side by side. Prompted by his gaze, the two of them stood up again.

"We request the sugar candy sculptures for the First Holy Festival from the main studio of the Paige Workshop. On the last day of the year, please decorate this sanctuary with your candy."

"We accept," Elliott answered in a dignified voice that Anne could never have imagined coming from someone like him.

Anne also curtsied and bowed deeply.

The head priest walked away. The other eleven clergymen followed him.

Once the twelve of them had disappeared into the back, everybody from the Radcliffe Workshop and Mercury Workshop stood up. The candy crafters from each group started moving to carry their sugar candy sculptures back outside.

Marcus and Killeen both glanced over at Elliott.

But Elliott was staring up at his own group's candy sculpture with a somewhat vacant expression.

Anne had never seen such a blank look on Elliott's face before. He was always chattering on, jumbling lies and truth together as he smooth-talked his way through life. It wasn't like him to be speechless. Anne was amused by the sight and laughed without really meaning to.

When she laughed at him, Elliott looked at Anne.

"Huh, what is it?"

Then Mithril came bounding up to them from his pew and hopped on top of Anne's shoulder. "That dumb look on your face was really funny!" Mithril shouted.

Elliott frowned. Then the usual frivolous yet charming glint returned to his eye.

"Big talk for a little man, Mister One-Tenth."

"Whyyy you! Again with the one-tenth thing!"

"Well, anyone would be slack-jawed looking at this candy sculpture... I wish I could have worked on it with you," Elliott mumbled. He sounded deeply envious. He had the unmistakable look of a Silver Sugar Master.

Then the clergyman who had been facilitating the proceedings approached them.

"Mr. Collins. Let us confer about the arrangements leading up to the First Holy Festival. Please come through to the priests' quarters behind the sanctuary. And move that candy sculpture into the room in the back. I'll show you the way."

"Certainly."

Elliott stiffened up to address the clergyman, but once the Holy Father had left, he reverted to his flippant expression.

“So that’s that, then. We were chosen, Anne.”

“Mm. Though, it seems like rebuilding the workshop is still going to be a tough job. But for now, I made it through without getting myself expelled.”

“Ah, about that. Well, for now, put out both of your hands.”

“Huh?”

“Just do it.”

Unsure of what was going on, she extended her hands. When she did, Elliott dug through his breast pocket and pulled out a small leather pouch from inside it. He casually let it drop into Anne’s waiting hands.

“Here. All yours.”

Without a doubt, it was the pouch that contained Challe’s wing.

On top of her shoulder, Mithril was also staring in wonder.

“Mr. Collins?! You’re giving it back?!”

“You really are careless, you know? When Glen said he was going to expel you if we didn’t get chosen in the Selection, you didn’t give him any conditions of your own, did you? Normally, you’d say something like *Then if we get chosen in the Selection, please give me back Challe’s wing*, right? If only you were a little smarter.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! You know Anne’s not that clever!!”

Anne’s shoulders slumped at Mithril’s words.

“...He’s right...”

“And so feeling sorry for Anne in all her carelessness, Glen and I decided to give Challe his wing back if we were chosen in the Selection.”

Then Elliott smiled.

“You showed us how to take the first step down a new path. So we’re not going to make you work so hard anymore.”

“But what about the commission for the First Holy Festival? We’ve got a lot of work waiting for us.”

“Truth is, we are going to be extremely busy, so I do regret having to let you go. Well, I guess this is where I have to be a man. I’m not going to ask such a big favor of a girl. So it’s fine, it’s all right. We’ll manage somehow, we’ll manage.”

Elliott waved his hand, then turned around to face the four candy crafters.

“Hey. You guys, we’re moving the candy. Give me a hand.”

The four crafters gathered around their sugar candy sculpture.

King thumped Anne in the back vigorously. “Well then, head candy crafter!”

Even though he was the one patting her on the back, King’s cheeks flushed red. He quickly left Anne’s side.

“That’s right, it’s over now, I guess. Mm...well, take care,” Nadir said, hanging his head and fiddling with his earring.

Rubbing Nadir’s back, Valentine smiled. “We heard everything from Glen and Elliott the night before last. Good for you, Anne. And thank you. It’s been fun.”

Lastly, Orlando glanced at Anne.

“Much obliged,” he said simply.

Elliott and the four candy crafters quickly assembled the wooden frame and covered their sugar candy with cloth. Then working together, they lifted the candy sculpture and loudly but carefully heaved it away toward the back of the sanctuary.

Once they were gone, the sanctuary fell silent. The Radcliffe Workshop and the Mercury Workshop had both already carried out their candy sculptures.

In a daze, Anne looked down at the pouch in her hand.

“Challe’s wing.”

“But those guys... Are they really not going to have any trouble once you’re gone?” Mithril asked, sounding concerned.

He looked toward the back of the sanctuary, where the five candy crafters had disappeared.

“Good point.”

Anne also couldn't help but worry. Just making one of those sugar candy sculptures had demanded a lot of time and effort. And who knew how many they needed to make by year's end? She felt overwhelmed simply thinking about it. They ought to be in serious need of additional crafters, even just one.

“Well. Where's that Challe Fenn Challe? Is he still sitting?” Mithril asked.

Anne looked toward the pew where Challe had been sitting.

He was still there. His eyes were closed, and he was leaning against the backrest, his face tilted slightly up toward the ceiling. He appeared to be unconscious.

“Challe?!” Anne shouted in surprise.

She ran over and crouched in front of him. Looking at him now, she saw cuts on his arms, waist, and ankles. There were slashes through his clothes and boots. And there were faint scarlet cuts running across his skin that she could see through the tears in his clothes. Beads of glistening silver light seemed to be dancing around his wounds.

“Challe Fenn Challe is injured, you see. That light is coming out of his wounds. It's the flow of fairy life force, sort of like blood in a human being.”

When Anne heard Mithril's explanation, she went pale.

That meant the light that had been coiling about Challe in the gloom earlier was actually flowing out of his body. If he had been shining that brightly, it must have meant that he had sustained quite a few injuries.

“He's probably fine, Anne. His wounds have already closed. He is Challe Fenn Challe, after all.”

“But he's unconscious.”

She peered at his face. When she did, as if he was reacting to Anne's presence, Challe's eyes slowly opened.

His dark eyes, glossy like pieces of obsidian, reflected her image.

“Challe?”

She felt relieved. Challe's eyes, which had been vacantly staring at nothing, focused on Anne's face. Then—

“...What of the Selection?” Challe asked suddenly.

“We were chosen. And I—I got your wing back, Challe. I have it here.”

When he heard that, Challe slowly raised his upper body from the backrest.

“They returned it?” he asked quizzically. “Why?”

“They said I had done enough. That they weren't going to force me to work anymore.”

Anne looked toward the back of the sanctuary again.

The people of the Paige Workshop, the folk who had called her head crafter, were about to undertake a difficult job. She wondered whether she could really wave a pleasant good-bye and leave them, knowing that.

In order to secure her standing as a Silver Sugar Master, Anne was supposed to work for one year.

But in that case, surely there would be no issue with her working at the Paige Workshop?

She could make the sugar candies that had been chosen at the Selection. If she did that, her reputation as a Silver Sugar Master would rise along with the name of the workshop. More than anything, she felt great joy at having made the candy that had been chosen for the First Holy Festival. But the true work of decorating the sanctuary with those sculptures started now.

She had started the job for Challe's sake, but Anne was certain it was something she ought to see through to the very end. However, the people from the Paige Workshop had told her she could abandon that responsibility.

They'd said that since she'd started it against her will, she didn't have to continue with it.

But she didn't want to abandon a job halfway once she'd taken it on. She had been told that she'd done enough, but she couldn't take advantage of their kindness. Surely, that was what responsibility meant.

“Hey, Challe? Mithril Lid Pod? Since I got Challe’s wing back, there’s no reason I have to work at the Paige Workshop anymore, but...but if I were to say I wanted to work there until the First Holy Festival is over, would you be opposed?” she asked.

Mithril smiled pleasantly. “The beds there are nice to sleep on, so I’m all in favor!”

“Do whatever you feel like doing. I can go anywhere. As long as you’re there, wherever it is, I’ll be with you,” said Challe, who still had on a blank expression.

“All right, then it’s decided!”

Mithril stood up on Anne’s shoulder. He looked excited. “I’ll go let the other guys know! I’ll tell them Anne is going to continue working at the Paige Workshop a little bit longer!”

No sooner had he said that than Mithril jumped down from the top of Anne’s shoulder, then seemed to kick off the back of the pew and, without stopping, rushed off to the back of the sanctuary. He looked delighted.

Mithril had also taken part in making the sculpture for that year’s Selection, and having helped them, he must have been curious to see where that work would lead. Anne thought it was promising that he had the enthusiasm of a full-fledged crafter.

“I’m sorry, Challe. I’m always making you follow me.”

“There’s nothing in this world more interesting than watching you, so I don’t particularly mind.”

“But you even got injured like this. What about that fairy? What happened?”

“They ran away. If I meet them again, I’ll kill them.”

There was a startling sharp glint in Challe’s eyes. Anne caught a glimpse of the true nature of a warrior fairy.

“I’m really glad that you made it back okay. Thank you, Challe, for always protecting me.”

With little strength of her own, as long as Anne was with Challe, she had to rely on him to protect her. She was well aware of that, and she knew she

mustn't depend on him too much. But as long as Challe didn't object to it, she couldn't pull herself away from him. If they were ever to be separated, she would miss him so badly that she wasn't sure what would become of her.

She knew she was selfish for wanting to take advantage of Challe's kindness and to stay by his side forever. So all she could do was try her best not to be too much of a burden to him. She could only pray that Challe would be grateful and that he would always want to stay by her side.

Anne didn't have it in her to try to stop Challe from leaving by holding on to his wing.

"Thank you for waiting. I can finally give your wing back now. Challe, this is yours."

Anne extended her arms and hung the pouch with his wing in it around his neck. Challe smiled. He leaned in a little bit and held Anne's cheeks in both hands. Then he slowly brought his face closer to hers.

"You saved me after all."

Challe's breath caressed Anne's lips. His long hair brushed her cheeks. The luster in Challe's eyes was enough to send a shock down her spine. Suddenly, she was pinned to the spot, unable to move.

"With this, you can say that you became a Silver Sugar Master under your own power. Throw out your chest and wear the title with pride. You truly are a Silver Sugar Master."

Challe didn't move for a moment, like he was wavering over something. Then as if he had changed his mind, he adjusted the position of his lips slightly and kissed Anne on the forehead.



“A blessing for you, who has become a Silver Sugar Master,” he whispered.

His words were kind and sweet.

Anne had really become a Silver Sugar Master.

The flames of the ornamental candles flickered, and the sanctuary was filled with gentle light. It was quiet enough to give the illusion that they were the only two people in the world.

“Ah! I can see the main house!” Nadir shouted, standing on top of the cargo hold. Just then, the wheels of the wagon ran over a stone, and the whole vehicle bounced dramatically. Nadir collided with King’s back and fell on his behind.

Orlando was driving the wagon, with Elliott sitting beside him. In the cargo hold were Nadir, King, and Valentine, as well as Anne, Challe, and Mithril.

“Nadir! Settle down!”

King shouted at him and thumped him on the head, but Nadir was not discouraged.

“Come on, I just want to tell Glen soon, okay? I want to tell him that we were chosen and that Anne is going to keep working at the Paige Workshop for a while. I want to run from here!”

“We won’t stop you. Do whatever you like,” Valentine answered in an exasperated voice.

Nadir grinned and turned to Mithril.

“Let’s go, little guy!”

“Why are you asking me to come along?! Also, ‘little guy’ is not my name! I’ve got a very handsome name, which is Mithril Lid Pod!”

“All right then, Mithril Lid Pod, let’s go. It won’t be any fun by myself!”

No sooner had he said that than Nadir hopped out of the cargo hold.

“You didn’t answer—why me?!”

Though he seemed to be in a better mood now that he had been called by his proper name, Mithril still looked puzzled as he jumped down off the wagon.

Nadir and Mithril cut through a field and ran toward the main house of the Paige Workshop. As he watched them go, Elliott folded his arms behind his head and yawned. "I wonder why children like to waste all their energy like that? It's strange, don't you think, Orlando?" Elliott asked.

"He's probably just impatient, unlike us. That's why...he's also useful at times."

Orlando squinted at Nadir's retreating figure, then turned back to look at Anne.

"Huh? What is it?" Anne asked, feeling his gaze on her.

"You're a child, too, I guess," Orlando mumbled.

Challe snickered.

Anne was disappointed when he earnestly called her a child.

"Well, maybe I am a child compared with you, Orlando. But I'm sixteen, and I've been an adult as of last year."

She begrudgingly lectured him, but Orlando wasn't looking her way anymore. He had turned his back to her, and she got the sense that he found her discontent and grumbling amusing, but she decided it must be her imagination.

A dry wind blew down the hill, rustling the grass. The wind was cold, but the sunshine was warm.

Nadir and Mithril ran toward the house.

The wagon sluggishly climbed the gentle slope.

After a short while, Hal came out onto the porch of the main house. He set out a chair and went inside through one of the sliding glass doors. Then Nadir came out with Hal, supporting Glen. The two of them set him down in the chair. Glen looked toward the wagon and smiled. Observing carefully, Anne could also see Danna there, peeking out bashfully from behind the curtain of the door. Mithril also came bounding out onto the porch.

Glen waved his hand. She could almost hear him saying, *Welcome home*.

For some reason, Anne had a very nostalgic feeling. She felt like she wanted to hurry up and return to that place.

Ever since she was born, Anne had lived her whole life on the road. She had never known a place she could call home, but she had yearned for one. Perhaps the house she had longed for as a young girl had resembled the large estate before her now.

Challe must have noticed her vacant expression as she stared at the house. “What’s the matter?” he asked curiously.

“Nothing. Somehow, I— This feels like...coming home.”



Bridget heard Nadir burst into the house and talk to Glen excitedly. She’d heard that they had been chosen at the Selection. And that Anne intended to work at the Paige Workshop until the First Holy Festival was over.

She was able to tell when Danna, Hal, and Glen had gone out on the porch to greet the crafters.

Shut up in her own room, Bridget had heard all those noises.

She felt proud that the Paige Workshop had been chosen. Bridget liked the sugar candy sculptures that the Paige Workshop crafters made, and she respected them. She had found the fact that the Paige Workshop was in decline despite her feelings implausible and vexing.

But at last, the world had properly acknowledged the workshop.

Thinking she should probably also go out and greet them, Bridget stood up from the chair where she’d been sitting and walked over to the door.

But she stopped. The crafters probably wouldn’t be happy to see her.

Both Glen and the candy crafters seemed to want Bridget to have nothing to

do with the workshop, as they never told her anything. No one, she reasoned, would be happy if she were to go out and meet them.

She just wanted to see Challe. But when she thought about how coldly he would treat her, she couldn't muster up the courage to see his face.

I alone am an outsider. That's always been true my whole life.

That thought made her sad, and then angry. She couldn't help but be mad. But it wasn't toward anyone in particular. She was just furious at everything.

Bridget turned her back to the door and leaned against it. She closed her eyes. She felt like she was suffocating.

The sugar candy sculptures of the little bird and cat were still sitting outside her door. Anne had left the bird there, but she didn't know who had left the cat. They were both incredibly cute, though, and she wanted to take them in her hands. She felt like the candies were whispering to her from the other side of the door she was leaning on, telling her they wanted her to bring them inside.

But still, she just couldn't reach out to take them.

Just then, someone tapped one of the glass sliding doors lightly.

When she opened her eyes in surprise, she saw a tall man standing on the other side of the glass. She could see a single wing hanging down his back. He was a fairy, and he took her breath away.

The fairy wore a fine coat. It was brilliant white and decorated with beads and lace.

His soft-looking hair was a marvelous, gentle hue, like green and blue dyes that had been dissolved in creamy milk. His eyes were a similar ambiguous color. With his slender chin, long eyelashes, and pale skin, he was nothing if not handsome.

He was just as beautiful as Challe, but without the sharpness that made the obsidian fairy unapproachable.

She sensed softness within the fairy on the other side of the window.

When Bridget had met Challe, she'd thought there was no other living creature in the world who could be so beautiful. Now she knew that she had

been wrong. There was a lovely fairy who was just as perfect as Challe but wrapped in a soft, gentle aura.

Who are you?

She wanted to ask, but overcome with surprise, her voice wouldn't come out. The fairy was smiling.



AFTERWORD

Hello, everyone. I am Miri Mikawa.

This is the fourth volume of *Sugar Apple Fairy Tale*.

There are suddenly more characters since the last volume, and I have had many readers tell me that among the new characters, they particularly like Kat, which makes me happy. I find the Kat-and-Benjamin duo easy to write. They're the easiest after Mithril, so they're good characters.

I also occasionally hear from folk who like Keith. But maybe because of Jonas's evil deeds, it seems like readers have remained deeply suspicious of Keith, thinking, *Surely, this guy must be like that, too!* (Ha-ha!) Poor fellow.

Kat and Keith didn't have much to do in this volume, but I've been thinking about having them catch up with Anne and the gang at a later date.

Oh, this is sudden, but I have an announcement.

The *Sugar Apple Fairy Tale* website is up and running on the Beans Bunko home page.

There are videos and such introducing the series. Apparently, there will be some special projects now and then as well, and you may be able to find useful information by looking there. Try searching for Sugar Apple Official, won't you?

And one more thing. Believe it or not, there is also a Twitter account now.

My helpers, silver sugar fairies Cornet and Dragée, have been tweeting all sorts of things for me. They've even posted some love letters to the characters sent in by readers. As well as promptly tweeting new announcements and more.

By the way, my manager and I burst out laughing when the fairies presented the love letter for Jonas.

So anyway, if you have some free time, please take a look at the website and Twitter account.

Well, then—

—I say this all the time, but I'm deeply grateful to my manager. I'm quite aware that I put you through a lot of trouble trying to keep my thoughts on track when I have a tendency to wander, and I apologize for that. I rely on you as the lighthouse that guides my workflow. I look forward to continuing to work with you.

Aki, you always draw beautiful and detailed illustrations for my books. I find myself sighing when you show me just the sketches for the covers. Thank you always and forever.

I always feel like these *Sugar Apple Fairy Tale* books are a team effort, like a four-legged race. (Is that the right number of legs?)

And most importantly, I know these books are only able to exist because there are people reading them.

It brings me great joy knowing that there are folk who appreciate them.

It's been exactly a year since the series's debut. The fact that I'm still able to write about Anne and Challe's world is because of you all. Thank you so much. I'm very grateful. All right then, until next time.

Miri Mikawa

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