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Miri Mikawa
Illustration by Aki
Sugar Apple Fairy Tale
The Silver Sugar Master and the Purple Promise

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Miri Mikawa

TRANSLATION BY NICOLE WILDER
COVER ART BY AKI

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The Silver Sugar Master and the Purple Promise

Sugar Apple Fairy Tale

Story & Characters



Silver Sugar Master
Anne



Warrior Fairy
Challe



Fairy
Mithril



Silver Sugar Master
Kat



Candy Crafter
Jonas

The Story So Far

Anne realized her dearest wish of becoming a Silver Sugar Master at her second Royal Candy Fair. Chasing after Challe, who sacrificed his freedom so that Anne's dream could come true, Anne has become one of the candy crafters at the Paige Workshop. To save Challe, she must restore the prestigious workshop, which has fallen on hard times. In order to do so, Anne convinces the whole Paige Workshop to try their luck in the Selection. The Selection is an event where one workshop is chosen to make the sugar candy sculptures that will decorate the annual First Holy Festival, which is sponsored by the state church. After much effort, Anne and the others are chosen, but now…?



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.

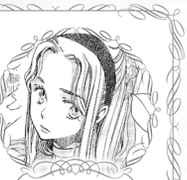
Paige Workshop Maestro
Glen Paige

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.

A young Silver Sugar Master is on her way.
Perhaps with her arrival, my wish can finally be granted.

Chapter 1
A CASTLE WITH NO CREST

Anne looked up at the building towering before her and grimaced.

"This is Hollyleaf Castle?"

After struggling up the hilly road and finally arriving at its summit, Anne brought her boxy horse-drawn wagon to a halt.

The rest of the wagons belonging to the Paige Workshop, which were being driven by the other candy crafters, followed up one after another.

Elliott hopped out of the driver's seat of his wagon without delay and took up a position next to Anne, gazing up at the castle. His winsome, drooping eyes narrowed as he awkwardly grinned. "Father Brooke did tell me the place was *atmospheric*."

The building sat atop a low hill not far from the royal capital of Lewiston. It was surrounded by a wild forest untouched by human hands. A tangle of vine-wrapped trees and thorny underbrush spread out in all directions, partially blocking the road that led from the bottom of the slope to the top. It had been difficult for them to make it even this far.

The whole hillside was covered in skinny trees with nothing but withered branches. They had been cut back in one area of the summit, however, where it looked like there had once been a spacious garden. And at the center of the hill stood a tall castle built of stone.

"'Atmospheric,' huh?" said Anne. "I mean…I suppose it does have a kind of indescribable…*ambience*."

The castle was three stories tall and faced south. It was composed of three wings, which formed a U shape, comfortably enclosing a central courtyard. The outer wall was made of cut stone, and the front entrance was shaded by triple-arched eaves with a grass pattern carved into them in relief.

The east wing spread out to the castle's left side, with the west wing to the right. A tower stood at the end of each wing, so that the two towers faced each other, east and west. The low towers, capped with gently sloping cone-shaped roofs, looked comfortable and inviting rather than intimidating.

The building had no rampart or gatehouse and no real fortifications. It might be a castle in name, but it more closely resembled a large mansion. It was probably more like an estate merely serving as a castle due to its strategic location.

It must have been an elegant structure once. But now the outer walls were covered with ivy, and the whole place was crumbling underfoot. Brown smudges like tearstains dripped down from the corners of each window. The center of the triple-arched eaves had fallen to ruin, exposing gnarled, uneven stones. The windows visible from the front had all their glass broken, and most of them revealed only a gaping darkness beyond.

"This castle looks haunted."

From his place beside Anne, Challe Fenn Challe shared this unpleasant impression without a hint of hesitation.

He tied his dapple-gray horse to a nearby tree and stroked its muzzle to show his appreciation for its efforts. The horse snorted happily.

"H-haunted? You shouldn't say such things, Challe," Anne chided.

"Is there anything else you would liken it to?" the obsidian fairy asked her, a chilly look in his eyes.

"……I guess not…"

It was just past midday. The late autumn breeze was cold, but the sun was out. The sun's rays also lit up the garden, which was overgrown with weeds.

And yet somehow, the place retained its creepy atmosphere.

Mithril Lid Pod, sitting on Anne's shoulder and gazing at the structure with blue eyes like drops of lake water, asked timidly, "Hey, Anne? Are you really planning to rent this castle?"

“It’s not a question of planning. I’ve already paid for it.”

That day, the Paige Workshop would take a new step forward. For the next two months, Anne and the workshop’s other candy crafters would be constructing their sugar candy sculptures for the First Holy Festival here at Hollyleaf Castle.

The sculptures would be very delicate, and it would take quite a bit of time to make just one of them. If they were constructed in Millsfield, there was a high risk that they would break during transit to Lewiston.

Because of that, they had decided to move their operation directly to Lewiston, and so they were temporarily relocating to this site.

The other four candy crafters—Orlando, King, Nadir, and Valentine—parked their wagons wherever they found room, then assembled behind Anne, joining her in gazing up at the castle.

“Ah… I had a bad feeling about this…and sure enough…,” Valentine muttered. His words had an exceptionally hopeless ring to them.

Anne whirled around and asked, “What do you mean, ‘sure enough’?”

The clever candy crafter looked pale as he pushed his round glasses up his nose with the tip of his finger.

“There’s a famous ghost story told among students in Lewiston,” he began. “Among the Seven Wonders of the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell, one of them is known as the ‘cursed castle.’ During the Chamber Rebellion, the whole Chamber family was eradicated, and afterward, the royalty of Millsland laid claim to the castle they left behind, which was located close to Lewiston. Or so the story goes. But the deep-seated grudges of the Chamber family filled the castle, and it was plagued by a series of strange incidents. Bad fortune seemed to hang over the place, and the Millsland royals wanted nothing to do with it, so they forcibly donated it to the state church. But the church wasn’t sure how to handle it themselves, and ultimately, the place was left to sit, abandoned. I think this might be that very castle…”

All the blood drained from Anne’s face as she listened.

“A cursed castle so unlucky that it was forcibly donated?!”

“According to the rumors, it was a U-shaped structure and had two towers with conical roofs at the east and west ends. There

can be no doubt."

"Then what are we doing?!" King's face was red with rage. "Are you telling me we're gonna work in a cursed castle?! For two months?! That's not even funny! What in the world were those priests thinking?!"

Orlando said nothing, but he looked a little unwell.

In order to find a place to make their sugar candy in Lewiston, Anne and Elliott had initially approached the priests of the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell for advice. The priests suggested that the workshop rent a castle owned by the church.

The two of them had jumped at the opportunity.

The rental fee was one thousand cress per year. It was quite expensive. But it was an amount they were prepared to pay in order to secure a facility with enough space for the workshop's needs in a city as populous as Lewiston.

In fact, they had been quite surprised that a thousand cress was enough to rent an actual castle. And so they paid their thousand cress and drew up a contract.

Then everyone in the workshop hurried to prepare to relocate. Though it would be temporary, they still had to move the workshop in its entirety. They finished those difficult preparations in only three days.

And on the day of the move, expectations swelling in their breasts, every member of the Paige Workshop had made the trip to Hollyleaf Castle.

…But the castle looming before them now seemed to cast a dark shadow over their bright future.

"It's much too late to be asking this, but… Elliott, why did you sign the contract before checking the state of the property?" Orlando, who still looked pale, said critically.

Elliott scratched the back of his head. "Well," he answered, "it was referred to us by Father Brooke, who manages the Selection, so I felt confident it would be fine."

"Even so!" King snapped at him. "Who rents a place without even seeing it?! It goes against basic common sense!"

"It would have taken half a day to come check it out, and I was trying to save us some time, okay? Considering the number of sculptures we have to make, we can't afford to take things slow.

Besides, except for the place's creepy aura, the arrangement still works out in our favor, doesn't it?"

"But that creepy aura is nothing to sniff at," Valentine grumbled, looking dejected.

"Fair point," Elliott said with a laugh. He did not seem embarrassed at all.

"Don't make a fuss! There's nothing we can do about it now, is there?!" Mithril, who had been sitting atop Anne's shoulder deep in thought, suddenly stood up as if he had just made up his mind. "What's done is done, and this is the place we've rented!" he declared. "We've got no choice but to do our work here!"

Mithril hopped down from Anne's shoulder and paced around in the center of the group. Then he put his hands on his hips and addressed the others arrogantly. "If you guys are proper candy crafters, you won't be scared off by one or two little ghosts or three or four evil spirits! Besides, I'll protect you from them all! Leave it to me!" He beat his chest and spoke valiantly.

"You're so cool, Mithril Lid Pod! It's okay, I'm not scared at all." Nadir was completely calm. But the other three candy crafters kept silent.

Elliott shrugged. "I'd like to trust the boasting of one tenth of a man, but I'm afraid I'm not convinced."

"What did you just say?! Just try and call me a tenth of a man one more time!" Mithril fumed, but Elliott ignored him.

"Let's get back to serious matters," Elliott continued, "since we really don't have time to argue about the place's condition. Think about it. If this castle was genuinely cursed, then surely they wouldn't rent it out as a place to make precious sugar candy sculptures intended for the First Holy Festival, right? Ultimately, it's all just rumors. The church is probably in a bind because of the stories scaring everyone away. In reality, there's nothing here."

This line of reasoning had merit. Moreover, they had no other choice. No matter how creepy or scary it might be, they had to use the castle.

Anne accepted Elliott's explanation. Resolving herself, she spoke up with bravado. "Right, it's fine! It's not like any of us will be living here alone!"

“It could be fun,” Nadir added. “I say let’s go for it!” He sounded full of energy.

Encouraged by his enthusiasm, the other candy crafters returned to their wagons and began carrying in their luggage.

Anne went to retrieve her own belongings, and Elliott started pulling down bags from the wagon parked next to hers.

“Mr. Collins, what happened to Bridget?”

As she was lowering luggage to the ground, Anne asked a question that had been bothering her for some time. When the Selection ended, they had all gone back to the main workshop in Millsfield. But when they arrived, Bridget was gone from the house.

According to Danna, right before Anne and the others arrived, Bridget had said, *“I’m going into Millsfield,”* and left the house. Everyone at the workshop figured she’d gone to stay at a friend’s house and didn’t seem particularly worried.

But then they had suddenly decided to move the workshop, and they needed Bridget and Glen to come with them to Hollyleaf Castle. Accordingly, the day before, Elliott had set off for Millsfield and searched all the places that Bridget was likely to stay at. But that was as much as Anne knew.

“Did you figure out where she was?”

“She was at an inn run by an acquaintance of hers. The acquaintance heard I was looking for Bridget and let me know she was staying there. I tried to see her, but she wouldn’t let me into her room. She just told me to go on ahead to the castle and that she would follow after us later, and then she sent me away.”

“Will she be okay coming here on her own?”

“I gave her some money and told her to hire a carriage, so I’m sure she’ll be fine.”

“You’re not worried?”

“Not really. Bridget’s not a child, you know. And I can’t afford to be worrying over her all the time.”

The candy crafters of the Paige Workshop were artists to the core. They seemed to find everything other than sugar candy bothersome. Even Elliott, who ought to have been at least a little bit worried about Bridget as her fiancé, seemed fundamentally to have filed her away as one of many “other miscellaneous matters.”

I wonder what she's up to?

Ever since relinquishing Challe's wing, Bridget had locked herself away all alone in her room. She had become very stubborn and seemed to be turning her back on everyone at the workshop, including her father.

Once a person's mood has soured, it isn't easily mended. Though it may be obvious that one's behavior isn't healthy, the ill feelings only grow. It's a hard cycle to break out of.

A long time ago, Anne had quarreled with her mother, Emma. For days afterward, Anne refused to speak to her. While she was acting that way, she wasn't interested in looking at pretty flowers or cute little birds.

That flower is pretty, isn't it?

There's a cute little bird over there!

She had to force herself to stifle such pleasant feelings. It had been suffocating.

Anne was certain that Bridget must also feel suffocated. That was probably why she wouldn't come home.

Pondering such thoughts, Anne headed toward the castle, luggage in hand.

It was difficult to walk across the courtyard, which was overgrown with dry grass and piled thickly with fallen leaves. Charcoal remains from something burned were buried here and there in the grass, and there were large stones lying about in strange places, so it was easy to trip.

When the group stepped through the large doors under the triple arch, they found themselves in a grand entrance hall with a very high ceiling.

The voices of the candy crafters echoed as they ran around sorting out all the luggage.

There was a wide staircase sloping upward from the first floor to the third. It started from the center of the hall and seemed to pierce the castle vertically. In bygone days, the master of the castle must have descended those stairs, gathering the attention of those assembled in the hall.

Most of the windows at the front of the castle were broken, allowing the wind to blow through. In those areas, the interior was in a terrible state.

But the windows in the east and west wings still had their glass. Once the candy crafters cleaned things up and carried in the most basic of furniture, the rooms there would be usable right away.

They designated the first floor of the east wing as the sugar candy production workshop and decided to use the west wing as their living quarters.

Glen, who was in poor health, would live on the third floor of the west tower in the room that got the most sunlight.

Anne's room would be on the second floor of the west wing, and Mithril and Challe would each have their own room to the right and left of Anne's.

"My own room…," muttered Anne, as she entered her quarters. She pushed her bags under the bed and looked around.

The plaster had come off the wall in one spot, and she could see the stone behind it. There was a large, arch-shaped window, its dirty glass visible in the sunlight, with a frayed curtain hanging over it. Once she dusted and swept out all the litter, however, the interior of her room was in fairly good order. She and the others had brought in a simple wooden bed and a wooden side table.

Dust danced lightly through the air across the sunbeams streaming in from the window.

Maybe it was because she had heard that the estate belonged to the ruined Chamber family, but its deserted atmosphere felt like the stillness of something unseen holding its breath.

Unconsciously, Anne hugged herself and rubbed her arms. Everything was still fine in the daylight. But when night came, she wondered whether she would be able to sleep alone.

"I'm a little worried…"

Just imagining it brought on a shiver, and Anne resolved to ask someone to sleep next to her that night.

The best candidate would probably be Danna, who was also a girl. But Danna wouldn't even eat meals together with Anne. If she invited Danna to come sleep with her, the other girl was sure to decline.

If she asked Challe, he would probably agree, if only to tease her. But Anne would be too excited and wouldn't get a wink of sleep.

That's it!

"Mithril Lid Pod!"

Having hit upon the perfect candidate, Anne dashed over to the adjacent room. She knocked and hurriedly opened the door, then poked her face inside.

But the interior was empty. There was no one there.

"Huh?"

At the moment, King and the others were in the middle of carrying in furniture and fixtures to transform the east wing's first floor into the sugar candy workshop. Mithril must have gone to lend them a hand.

That's when it happened.

"Young Silver Sugar Master."

A man's voice whispered in her ear, startling her. She turned around, but no one was there. There was no sign of anyone in the corridor.

Anne was wondering what was going on when the voice spoke again.

"I'm glad you've come."

"It's heeeeeeere!!"

She let out a shriek, clapped both hands over her ears, and crouched on the spot.

Challe heard her and dashed out of his room. He knelt in front of Anne, who had planted herself on the floor.

"What happened?!" he asked.

"Challe!"

Anne flung herself at him and clung to his neck. She was so frightened that she couldn't speak clearly.

"It…it's here…," she said.

"What is?"

There was only one thing that would make an appearance in a haunted castle. Yet Challe had answered her with a question. There was doubt in his eyes—it seemed he didn't have the slightest belief in such things.

"A voice—I heard a voice. It was a man, and he said into my ear, 'I'm glad you've come'!"

Recalling it gave Anne another chill, and she squeezed Challe tightly.

“You’re hearing things, dummy.” He was making fun of her, as usual. Nevertheless, his arms wrapped around her back to reassure her. “You just heard the creaking of a door or the echo of someone’s voice.”

“No! I heard it twice! What do we do?! There really are ghosts here!!”

“There are no ghosts. Calm down.”

“I’m telling you, there are!” She shook her head emphatically, insisting.

Challe breathed an exasperated sigh. Then he suddenly brought his lips to Anne’s ear and whispered sweetly, “Should I kiss you?”

“Huh?!” Anne abruptly pulled away. She could tell that her face had turned bright red. “What? What did you just say just now?!”

“I asked if I should kiss you. Have you settled down?”

At his calm question, she relaxed.

“Oh, I see. Shock therapy…or something like that…?”



Apparently, Challe had once again resorted to drastic measures. But sure enough, Anne had entirely forgotten her fear.

She felt embarrassed for taking him seriously and for blushing bright red. Not only that, but she also realized that a moment earlier, she had thrown her arms around him, clinging to him like a little monkey, crying and making a fuss. It must have been incredibly unbecoming.

"I'm sorry, Challe… I really lost my cool… It's just this castle. It's got a terribly bleak atmosphere, and it's doing something to me."

Mumbling an apology, Anne slid back on her knees over the smooth stone floor. Her dress was collecting dust, but she was so agitated that she didn't even notice.

"You were simply frightened because you expected to be frightened," said Challe. "There are sections of this castle that were intentionally destroyed by human hands. Because of that, the structure looks more ruined than it otherwise would."

With a glance, Challe indicated one of the large arched windows that lined the corridor. When he stood up, he took Anne by the hand and helped pull her to her feet. Then he led her over to the window. His gallant, efficient movements entranced her. All it had taken was a casual tug at her hand.

There's such a gap between us. Challe would never make a big fuss like me.

"You can see it from here—the relief on the arches," Challe said, "the front windows, the ornaments on the outer wall. Some things aren't visible from here, but we saw them on our way from the entry hall to our rooms, like the facade in the hall, parts of the walls and ceiling, the portraits. All these were deliberately destroyed."

The window before them was impressive, taking up a huge section of the corridor and reaching almost to the ceiling. When Anne looked through its glass, filthy with dust and streaked with traces of wind and rain, she saw the garden and the arches over the entrance.

The things that Challe had pointed out were indeed broken. Now that he mentioned it, the fact that only those sections were damaged, and the areas around them remained intact, made it clear that they had been targeted intentionally.

"You're right. But why?" she asked.

“I would bet that they were destroyed when the Millsland royal family seized this castle.”

“For what purpose?”

“The crest of a castle’s owner is usually carved into the center of its arches. And I’ve often seen windows with crests set in stained glass. The front wall of the entrance hall normally displays a crest as well. And the other places that were wrecked must have had some ornamentation on them that used the crest as a motif. The crest of the Chamber family, that is—the former owners of this castle. The Millslands erased every trace of it and stripped the castle of its crest.”

The reason the castle gave Anne such an eerie impression, above and beyond the fact that it had been left to decay, seemed perfectly obvious once it was explained to her.

It had been destroyed on purpose. The scars of that devastation tied into the creepy atmosphere, and that was all there was to it.

But she could hardly believe the cruelty of the Millsland royal family. They had gone so far as to exterminate even the crest of a family they had eradicated. It was a dreadful thought. They had wiped them out thoroughly and mercilessly. Powerful people probably became powerful precisely because they had it in them to do terrible things like that.

“How awful… It’s almost like they were trying to erase the very fact of those people’s existence from the world.”

“That’s probably what they intended,” said Challe. “To banish the crest of the Chamber family.”

Suddenly, Anne became aware that she had taken Challe’s hand again. Flustered, she let go.

“I was looking for Mithril Lid Pod. Let’s go check the east wing. We’ve got to hurry and get the workshop up and running, too.”

If she stayed there together with Challe, she feared the heat would never leave her cheeks. She quickly headed away down the corridor. Walking with brisk steps, she used her left hand to tightly squeeze her right, which had been holding Challe’s only a moment earlier.

She had touched a fairy’s cold hand, and yet her own was so warm that it tingled.

She proceeded down the corridor and emerged into a hall on the second floor, smaller than the one downstairs.

This lesser hall contained decaying couches and a low table that must have been part of the castle's original decor. Candlesticks, flower vases, and other valuables had either been confiscated or looted after the fact. Nothing of the sort remained. The only thing left on the low table was a square slab of stone with a black and white grid on it, covered in dust.

It was the board for a game called fyffe, which used many pieces. There should have been kings and queens, bishops and knights, castles and fairies, all elaborately carved out of some hard material. The pieces were to be arranged on the board, across which two players would face each other. It was a game beloved by nobles; common people usually played cards instead.

But the pieces—essential to the game—were nowhere to be seen. They were usually made from stone or crystal and sometimes decorated with gems, so they must have been carried off long ago.

There were a number of life-sized portraits hanging on the walls of the room. Every one of them had the face torn out, and any images of necklaces or garments that must have been adorned with the family crest were shredded.

Anne came to a stop and looked up at the portraits.

The paintings made her uncomfortable, but now that she had heard Challe's explanation, she found them more pitiful than unpleasant.

All of them were covered in dust, except for one portrait that was bizarrely clean. It depicted a man with black hair. He looked like a knight attending a ceremony. He was slender and dressed in a splendid, close-fitting costume. His face, too, had been torn out.

Why is this the only painting not covered in dust, I wonder?

Though she found it quite mysterious, Anne moved away from the portrait. When she did so, she felt a cold breeze on the back of her neck, but she convinced herself it was merely her imagination and didn't turn around.

And since she didn't turn around, she didn't see the shadow of a person quietly stalking through the small, deserted hall.



Challe couldn’t help but find it amusing when Anne made such a fuss over seeing a ghost. But she seemed genuinely frightened, so he went ahead and embraced her. And yet she continued making a racket, so he asked if he should kiss her. Whenever he teased her like that, she always overreacted. He figured it would put any thoughts of ghosts out of her mind.

Sure enough, Anne was completely startled, and her fears appeared to vanish.

The question about the kiss was only a joke, of course. But as he watched Anne head off to meet up with the other candy crafters, he wondered absentmindedly: Supposing Anne had answered Challe’s question with a yes, what would he have done?

Anne was a human. Humans were happiest living among other humans, so he couldn’t take her for his own. But he knew such rationalizations would not have kept him from kissing her.

He couldn’t control himself. That was one big difference between the feelings he’d had for Liz and those he had for Anne.

Challe stared at Anne’s back.

He wondered whether she had noticed the changes herself. A year ago, she had been small and thin, and her only striking features had been her lanky arms and legs. Since then, she had matured somewhat.

She had grown just a bit taller, her chest and hips were filling out, and her proportions had become more balanced. She was still petite, but her figure was slender and elegant. The color of her hair had also lightened a bit, and illuminated by the sunlight streaming in through the corridor windows, it looked more lustrous than before.

In a single year, Anne had transformed from a little girl into a young woman. But she didn’t seem to have changed as much inside as she had on the outside. It might still be some time before she was able to formulate a response to his sweet teasing.

Once Anne had disappeared down the corridor, Challe chuckled.

From a fairy's perspective, it was a curious thing to have a body that naturally changed over time. It was one of the many mysterious things about the creatures known as humans. But Challe found it charming. He'd felt the same way as he watched Liz transform from a child into an adult.

But he didn't simply think Anne was cute. There was a peculiar, sweet sense of urgency mixed in with his other emotions.

Just then, Challe sensed someone's eyes on him. The feeling was coming from the end of the corridor behind him. When he spun around, he saw a figure turn the corner there. It was soft and purple.

As if he had been fired from a bow, Challe was off. There was a thin layer of dust covering the smooth stone floor. His feet slipped as he ran, but he dropped lower and regained his balance. Clearing the corridor in an instant, he rounded the corner.

But after the turn, he hit a dead end. The hallway came to an abrupt stop.

Challe slowed to a standstill. Frowning, he walked up to the dead-end wall and touched the plaster.

I know I felt someone's eyes on me.

Down on the first floor, there was a door in that same spot—an entrance for going up into the west tower. But here on the second floor, there was no way into the tower, just a plaster wall. Its rough texture seemed perfectly natural—nothing out of the ordinary.

Challe turned to look back at the corridor he had just dashed through. In the light shining through the window, the dust that had built up on the floor glowed white. Challe's footprints stood out distinctly.

And there was another set of tracks beside his. They were much smaller and lighter than Challe's, and they were all mixed up, as if the person who had left them had walked around the corridor many times, ultimately coming right back to the spot where Challe was standing. And their trail broke off right in front of the wall.

"A ghost that leaves behind footprints, huh?" Challe muttered to himself, then looked up at the plaster wall once more.



Doors to either side of the great entry hall led to the first floor corridors of the east and west wings of the castle.

The eastern doors opened into a straight corridor lined with large, arch-shaped windows. Four doors were set at regular intervals into the opposite wall. The second and third floors were constructed in the same way, with four rooms on each. Furthermore, the east and west wings of the castle were identical, as if they were mirror images of each other.

The candy crafters of the Paige Workshop set up the four rooms on the first floor of the east wing as their workspace.

The final finishing touch was the purification ceremony. For this, they used the powder of a special nut that had been named after Saint Ellis, one of the twelve patron saints of the state religion.

The hard, brown Saint Ellis Nut was dried and ground into a powder. The head of the workshop or their proxy scattered the powder, which had a spicy, invigorating aroma, at all four corners of the workshop while chanting passages from scripture.

By doing so, it was believed that that place was purified and became a sacred space. Similar purification rituals were performed in the workshops of blacksmiths and artisans and in the churches and sanctuaries of the state religion.

The sun had set completely by the time they were finished with the purification ceremony.

If they'd wanted to, they could have lit the room and started their work at night. But they had begun preparations for the move the moment the Selection concluded and completed it without rest, and as might be expected, all of them looked exhausted.

Elliott had realized as much, and at his suggestion, they decided to take a break for the evening.

Their work would begin early the next morning and would continue day in and day out. The crafters all knew this, and after eating dinner, they immediately withdrew to their own rooms.

Anne had no choice but to return to hers as well, so she clung to Mithril Lid Pod and pleaded with him to sleep by her side. He took pity on her and followed her back to her room.

“Anne, it’s not that I mind sharing your bed. Actually, I’m happy you asked. But…”

He sat on the bed and folded his arms, looking troubled.

It was just as Anne had anticipated. At night, her room was extremely unsettling. Because it was so big, the light from the candle atop her side table was not enough. The four corners of the room were pitch-black, with darkness lurking in every nook and cranny.

She had closed the curtain hanging over the window, but even the curtain itself was eerie.

Anne finished changing into her nightclothes behind that weird, dusty curtain. She breathed in the dust and sneezed two or three times. With a hand over her itching nose, she approached the bed.

“But what?” she asked.

“For this sort of thing,” Mithril replied, “I think you ought to ask Challe Fenn Challe.”

“You know how Challe is. If I asked him, he would be amused and probably agree, but sleeping together… It’s a step too far. I would be too embarrassed.”

“Anne, you dummy! With that attitude, your love will never bloom. Even that big idiot will come around with the proper mood and atmosphere. I said it once before, didn’t I? Sometimes, you have to get the ball rolling with a little action first! And what better way to do that than to invite Challe Fenn Challe to join you tonight? All right, it’s settled.”

Mithril jumped to his feet on top of the bed. “I’ll go ask him now!” he said.

He tried to leap down, but in a panic, Anne grabbed him with both hands. “Wh-wha—? Mithril Lid Pod! Wait! Please!”

Mithril wriggled and put up a mighty struggle. “Let me go, Anne! Are you trying to keep me from repaying your favor?!”

“This is your idea of repayment?! It feels more like harassment!!”

“What are you calling ‘harassment’?! Why, this is the very first step to returning the fa…”

Mithril wormed his way out of Anne's grip and was about to hop away, when he suddenly froze.

"Anne…?" he said.

"What?"

"Did you open the window?"

"I didn't."

"But there's…a breeze, isn't there?"

Mithril's eyes were fixed on the flame of the candle. Sure enough, it was leaning to one side, as if being fanned by a breeze. But Anne didn't feel any wind.

It was as if someone was blowing out a long breath over the candle. But no sooner did that thought cross Anne's mind than the flame suddenly stood up straight again, before flickering back to its previous position. Then it went back up. It kept repeating the same cycle.

"What is this?"

Anne widened her eyes at the bizarre phenomenon. Then the slanting flame abruptly went out.

Suddenly, they were plunged into darkness.

"It's pitch-black!" Mithril exclaimed. "I can't move!"

"Hold on, I'll get some light."

Anne fumbled around, trying to find the side table. While she was crawling across the bed on her hands and knees, she felt someone blowing puffs of air over her shoulder. She sensed no presence, and yet she heard the sound of someone's breath near her shoulder.

Anne let out a shriek and squeezed her eyes tightly shut. She curled up on the bed with her head in her hands.

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

For some reason, Mithril's voice seemed far away. The noise of the breathing by her ears was much louder.

"Mithril Lid Pod!!"

She called out for his help. At that very same moment, like a burst of sparks, she saw a scene play out behind her closed eyelids.

A man with black hair and a black beard was riding on a horse. The sun was at his back as he raised a whip overhead.

"Laggard!"

She heard a scream. It was the voice of a young boy. She couldn't see the boy's figure, but something purple flickered at the edge of her field of vision.

"I'm sorry, Your Lordship! Please forgive me!"

The boy's pleas, mixed with his screams, pierced her ears.

"Anne?!"

Then she heard Mithril's voice loudly calling her. She raised her head in surprise and saw that the room was no longer dark. Mithril had just relit the candle. He immediately hopped nimbly over to Anne.

"What's the matter, Anne?"

"Ah… Mithril Lid Pod…"

With a sigh of relief, she sat up. Her hands were still trembling slightly. But she felt significantly more secure now that it wasn't pitch-black, even if the only light was the weak flame of a single candle.

"Just now, something… I don't know. But it was scary…"

She was a little dizzy. She recalled the breathing noises that had sounded so close by and shuddered. But even more than that, the scene that had appeared behind her eyelids like a flash had been terribly frightening.

The brutality and ruthlessness of the man wielding the whip had been unbearably awful.

"What happened?"

Mithril hopped up onto her lap and patted Anne's hand. Instinctively, she embraced him. She felt relief flood her as she hugged the small but energetic Mithril.

"I have no idea," she said.

There had to be a reason for the flickering candle, the breathing she had heard close to her ear, and the draft and difference in air temperature. Even the scene that had flashed before her eyes might have been something like a daydream, brought on by her feelings of fear.

She knew this. Still, it had been terrifying.

"I don't know, but…please, Mithril Lid Pod, just for tonight, will you sleep here with me?"

She felt like it might lessen her fear somewhat if she could hold on to Mithril as she slept.

The fairy flushed. "S-sure. I don't mind."

While they were having that exchange, there was a knock at the door. Before either of them could answer, it swung open.

“What’s going on?”

Challe Fenn Challe was looking in at them. Apparently, he had heard Anne’s screams and had come to check on her.

Finally, the trembling in Anne’s body subsided. She felt secure when she saw Challe. It was almost like a reflex—like it had been imprinted into her mind that everything would be all right as long as he was with her.

“Did something happen?” he asked.

Anne wasn’t sure what to say. In reality, the only thing that had happened was that the flame of her candle had wavered and gone out. She didn’t think she could say for certain that hearing breathing in her ear or seeing a scene behind her eyelids had actually “happened.”

“What perfect timing! Challe Fenn Challe! Come here and sleep with—”

Just as Mithril was about to say something outrageous, Anne panicked and covered his mouth.

“Everything’s fine,” she insisted. “Really, it was nothing. Good night.”

Challe didn’t look like he believed her, but he closed the door.

After taking some time to settle down, Anne blew out the candle and slipped under the blankets, holding Mithril tightly.

In Anne’s arms, Mithril grumbled, “What the heck? Wouldn’t you be better off sleeping with Challe Fenn Challe like this?”

“Sorry, but I get embarrassed just thinking about it…”

“That said, Anne…,” Mithril began suddenly, his voice anxious. “I wonder if there really is something here?”

As long as the two of them were under the warm blankets, they felt safe, and it helped them stay a little calmer.

“I really don’t know,” Anne said, squeezing Mithril even tighter.



I wonder what Father and the others will say about him?

Seated before a brightly burning hearth, Bridget was packing her bags.

There was no one in the main house of the Paige Workshop. Not her father—Glen Paige—or Elliott or Orlando, not Anne or Challe or Mithril. Not even Hal or Danna.

She was the one who had told Elliott to go on ahead when he came to pick her up, and yet she was filled with a hopeless sense of loneliness.

Just then, someone embraced her shoulders gently from behind.

"What's the matter, Bridget? Are you cold?"

Bridget blushed at the man's kind words and gesture, and she turned around to look at him bashfully.

"I'm all right," she answered. "Thank you."

Joy sprouted inside her for a moment, but then just as suddenly, she felt empty again.

I would probably be fine with anyone at all…

She was well aware that what she was doing was foolish. But she was in a hopeless, reckless mood.

The fire was burning vigorously in the hearth. It wasn't even that cold, but for some reason, her body felt frigid.

"Should I bring you a coat?"

"No need," she said, touching his hand. "I'm fine."

"You're so cute," he whispered, then snuggled up to her. His words were sweet like the scent of flowers.

He was beautiful. Whenever she took him out walking around the town of Millsfield, people passing them on the street stopped and turned back to look at him in spite of themselves. She had him all to herself. She ought to have been prouder than she'd ever been. So why couldn't she even manage a smile?

"I've arranged a carriage for us to go to Hollyleaf Castle tomorrow," said Bridget. "But…why do I have to go at all? I wouldn't mind waiting here alone with you."

He answered her gently, like someone speaking to a child throwing a tantrum.

"Because it would be careless for the two of us to stay here together. Besides, you are the daughter of the Paige Workshop, aren't you? It's not good for you to be away from your family."

Bridget already knew this, and she nodded with a sigh.

“Of course…you’re right.”

Chapter 2
THE PET FAIRY

With everything that happened the night before, Anne didn't get much sleep. She couldn't shake her fear and had jumped at every little sound.

On top of that, she had heard noises coming from the first floor all night long. That was where Orlando, King, Valentine, and Nadir were staying, but the sound of doors opening and closing had continued until dawn. She had been just about to nod off when the sun rose, so she was very tired.

Up the castle's main staircase, right as one disembarked onto the second floor, was a small hall. A dining table had been set up there as a meeting place for the candy crafters, and once the sun had risen, they came one or two at a time and gathered around the table.

By the time Danna and Hal carried in food from the kitchen, everyone was present and accounted for. Only Glen, who was in poor health, was absent from the hall, since he would be taking his meals in his room.

There was a large fireplace set in the wall on the west side of the room, while the wall to the east was lined with damaged portraits. There was no wall on the south side; it opened directly into the grand entrance hall. If one leaned over the ivy-patterned brass banister, it was possible to see down into the first floor. Looking up in the opposite direction, one could spot three chandeliers constructed from many pieces of teardrop-shaped glass suspended from the ceiling. They were all covered in dust,

but it was easy to imagine what splendid, sparkling light the chandeliers must once have given off.

Anne was unsteady on her feet as she staggered to the dining table and let out a big yawn. As if catching it from her, Orlando also yawned.

Keen-eyed Elliott spotted this and commented:

"Uh-oh, it seems neither Anne nor Orlando got enough sleep. That's going to be a problem, since we start work today. What were the two of you doing all night? Anything good? Let me in on it next time."

"We weren't doing anything!" Anne insisted. "Something weird happened, and I couldn't get to sleep."

Orlando made a sour face. "There's something wrong with the lock on the door to my room," he said as if lodging a complaint with his landlord. "So many times, I thought I locked it up tight, but whenever I dozed off, the door would come open."

At that, King, Nadir, and Valentine all looked up in surprise.

"The draft kept waking me up," Orlando continued. "But no matter how many times I got up to close the door, it just kept opening again. It happened over and over throughout the night."

At this point, King spoke up, a severe look on his face. "My room was the same," he said.

And then—

"Mine was, too."

"Me too."

—Nadir and Valentine joined in, sounding shocked.

Elliott made a noise of interest and cocked his head. "I wonder if the foundation of the castle is crooked?" he said. "It seems the fittings on the first-floor doors are all deformed. Should I get Hal to take a look at it today?"

"No, the foundation's level," Valentine said bluntly. "There is no tilt. You can trust me on this one. Same for the locks. As far as I can see, the one on my door fastens securely."

"Well then, I wonder why they all came open?"

In response to Elliott's perfectly natural question, silence fell over the hall. They all busied themselves moving their forks, as if no one wanted to think about what the answer might be.

Challe, who was supporting his cup with the palm of his hand and slowly drinking his tea, raised his head.

“Your doors were locked from the inside, I assume? All four of you?”

He asked the question like he was confirming something, and the four candy crafters nodded simultaneously. Then Challe asked another question.

“Have any of the four of you seen a purple figure?”

“Oh,” said Nadir. “I think I saw something purple drift past the front of my door, but I’m not really sure. It was only there for a second.”

Challe replied, “I see,” and returned his gaze to his cup.

“What is it, Challe? Is there something here?” King questioned him.

Gazing at the gently wavering surface of his dwindling drink, Challe answered dispassionately, “There is. No doubt about it.”

The candy crafters looked startled by his words.

After spending a single night in the castle, Challe, who had declared so definitively the previous afternoon that there was no such thing as ghosts, had just admitted that something was there with them. Anne, for one, was surprised.

She guessed that Challe must have seen or heard something. In that case, the things she had experienced the night before might not have been hallucinations, either.

“So there *is* something here!” Mithril exclaimed. “I knew it! Let’s see… In a situation like this, it’s up to me to protect all of you. Time for the great Mithril Lid Pod to show off his wisdom and bravery. I must be strong…”

Mithril balled both hands into fists and looked down as he grumbled. Then full of resolve, he lifted his head. “I’ll exterminate the evil spirits,” he declared. “That’s a promise—I’ll protect all of you!”

Mithril stood up on the dining table and threw a fist into the air. Everyone’s anxious gazes converged on him. Nadir clapped, though no one else did.

Elliott looked pleased.

“I might just take you up on that. I don’t really care if we’ve got ghosts or badgers or anything else trying to live here, but if my exhausted candy crafters aren’t able to rest peacefully, it’s going to adversely affect our work.”

“Sure! Leave everything to me!”

Now that Mithril had been given a job by the workshop's proxy maestro, the fairy's cheeks flushed red with apparent delight. His wing stretched out taut, and he sprang up onto Challe's shoulder.

"Did you hear that, Challe Fenn Challe?! Elliott has entrusted the extermination of the evil spirits to the great Mithril Lid Pod."

"He sure has."

"How can you be so calm, Challe Fenn Challe?! You're going to be my right-hand man as we work hard to get the job done! My duties are your duties, too, understand?!"

Challe's expression chilled at Mithril's willful assertion. "Since when has that been true?"

"Since now!" Standing on Challe's shoulder, Mithril beat his chest. "The great Mithril Lid Pod will surely exterminate all evil spirits! Everyone, relax."

"We're counting on you. Do your best, buddy," Elliott said, though it was hard to tell how serious he was. "I'm going to join in the work this time. I want to wear myself out so I can get some good sleep." He stretched casually.

Hearing this, Anne and the other candy crafters simultaneously turned their attention to Elliott.

"You're going to participate?" Orlando asked, sounding surprised.

Elliott smiled. "What's with the long face? It's only right, isn't it? If we don't all work together over the next two months, we won't finish in time. For two months only, I'm putting my duties as proxy maestro on hold. I've been operating under that assumption for a while now, and everything is already in place. So I'm going to take part, whether you like it or not. Aren't you happy, Orlando?"

"Well, strictly speaking, it'll be a big help," Orlando replied. "But it's going to be just as big an annoyance."

"It's definitely gonna get loud in here again," King grumbled.

Nadir stuck his lip out in a pout. "Don't talk too much while I'm working, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah." Elliott shrugged.

Valentine looked at him and smiled. "But honestly, talk of Elliott lending a hand is reassuring."

Mr. Collins is quick to think and quick to act.

The candy crafters seemed to have various reservations about his decision, but Anne was frankly impressed by how swiftly Elliott had handled the matter. From this point forward, they would have to complete an incredible amount of work. Even one additional candy crafter would be of enormous help.

"Well, I will be taking part in the process, but ultimately, I'm still the proxy maestro, and I could get dragged away if there's any kind of trouble. That's why I'm leaving the leadership on this job to our head candy crafter. Anne, I'm sure you were thinking along the same lines. I'd like to hear what kind of procedures you have in mind for the project from today on."

At Elliott's casual request, the other four candy crafters' expressions immediately tightened.

Finally, it's time to get to work.

Anne could feel the anticipation, joy, and tension of the crafters before they set themselves to a job. She laid down her fork and sat up straight in her chair.

"I'll have Orlando and King take charge of kneading the sugar dough. King will also be responsible for mixing the colors. The other three of us will form the shapes and put them all together."

"How many pieces are we making?" asked Elliott.

"At least seven or eight sculptures of the same size as the one we presented at the Selection. Also, about ten that are half that size, and another ten or so about a third that size. I think that will be enough to decorate the sanctuary."

"Well, that sounds about right. And for the work schedule—…"

Elliott was about to ask something else, when the huge double doors leading into the great hall creaked loudly. At the sound, everybody peered over the banister and down into the hall below.

The big doors were opening.

Most of the windows on the first floor of the hall were broken, so they had boarded them up. Because of that, the space was dim.

Now a single bright spear of light shone into the gloomy hall. Slowly but steadily, the light spread across the cracked stone floor.

"Well, well, what have we here?" came a cheerful voice. "This is quite the setup! What a curious place for the state church to send you."

The voice surprised Elliott and Anne, and the two of them stood up out of their chairs. It was a voice they knew well.

Challe frowned, and Mithril blinked.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen of the Paige Workshop! Sorry for not announcing myself ahead of time, but I have arrived."

Entering the hall was a young man with roughly combed, unruly brown hair and sharp features with a kind of wildness to them. He was wearing a simple jacket, but it was excellently tailored. Another young man with hair and skin that resembled Nadir's followed him in quietly.

"The Silver Sugar Viscount," Anne and Elliott mumbled at the same time.

The pair of newcomers were Hugh Mercury and his bodyguard, Salim.

When they heard the words *Silver Sugar Viscount*, King, Orlando, and Valentine exchanged glances.

Meanwhile, the moment he saw Salim, Nadir shouted in a delighted voice, "Hey, that guy's Izaran!"

Salim turned his expressionless face up toward the lesser hall on the second floor. Nadir waved at him, but Salim only averted his gaze.

Nadir puffed out his cheeks. "What the heck? How unfriendly. I wonder if he's shy."

Anne and Elliott quickly ran down the stairs.

"Silver Sugar Viscount…" Elliott looked bewildered. "What's going on?"

Hugh smirked. "You seem well, Collins."

"Yes, thank you. But I don't imagine you came here to check up on my health."

"Just thought I'd ask. I actually came to check up on that brand-new Silver Sugar Master over there. Seems like you've got a lot going on, Anne. I've been hearing rumors. Oh, and it looks like you got *him* back, too, eh?"

Anne smiled and nodded. She was unabashedly pleased and proud that she had returned Challe's freedom to him. "Yep. I sure did."

Hugh spoke to her like an old friend, and Elliott looked down at Anne in surprise.

“Anne? Are you acquainted with the Viscount?”

“Our paths sort of crossed, and he’s helped me out in all kinds of ways. But, Hugh, why are you here? I can’t imagine you came just to check on my health, either.”

Elliott’s mouth hung open in shock. “You’re on a first-name basis? With the Viscount?”

“If you’d like, you can call me by my first name, too, Collins,” Hugh said.

Elliott snapped his mouth closed and grimaced. “I believe I’ll refrain. I have a feeling Salim would skewer me if I tried it.”

As Elliott joked, Salim remained silent and expressionless.

“Well, then,” Elliott continued. “To what do we owe the pleasure, Silver Sugar Viscount?”

“Work. Do you think I would come here for any other reason? I’ve stopped by at the request of the state church. Every year, the Silver Sugar Viscount monitors the workshop chosen during the Selection. From time to time, I’ll need to check up on the Paige Workshop’s progress. I heard that you had moved your operation here, so I came to review the state of the place.”

Anne stared at him in puzzlement. “Monitor us? But why?”

Elliott’s brow wrinkled as he quietly mumbled an answer. “It would be terrible if the sculptures weren’t finished in time for the First Holy Festival. A whole year of good fortune for the Kingdom of Highland would never manifest. So the Viscount has to see whether or not the workshop chosen in the Selection will be able to get all their pieces finished in time. That’s what you’re here to check on, isn’t it?”

Hugh nodded, confirming Elliott’s explanation.

“Not having any sugar candy sculptures ready for the First Holy Festival or, alternatively, having a bunch of unsightly sculptures lining the sanctuary cannot be allowed to happen,” said Hugh. “And so I monitor the chosen workshop, to see whether they will get it all finished properly.”

Hugh paused for a moment, then turned to Elliott with a sharp look in his eye. “As insurance, the state church has requested that the Mercury Workshop, which was the runner-up in the Selection, prepare to produce backup sugar candy sculptures. This is a measure taken every year. In the event that you cannot complete the expected sculptures, I will report my findings to the

church. If that happens, the candy sculptures from the Mercury Workshop will be used for the First Holy Festival instead. The Paige Workshop's sculptures will not be used, and the reward will not be given. Moreover, as a penalty, the workshop will be required to pay a fine equivalent to the promised ten-thousand-cress reward."

"A ten-thousand-cress fine?!" Anne raised her voice in spite of herself at the mention of such an outrageous sum. She looked up at Elliott. "Did you know this, Mr. Collins?"

"I did. It's an important duty, after all. I wasn't aware we would be monitored by the Silver Sugar Viscount, however. As you know, the Paige Workshop has never participated in the Selection before."

The First Holy Festival was a ritual to summon good fortune for the Kingdom of Highland in the coming year. If they didn't have sugar candy to invite it, or if the candy was poorly made, good fortune would not bless the kingdom.

Splendid sugar candy sculptures were a necessary part of the festival. That was the very reason the Selection had been started in the first place. Even if the chosen workshop was, for some reason, unable to complete their task, the church could not simply announce that there would be no candy sculptures that year. So it made sense for them to ask the Silver Sugar Viscount to monitor the process. It was also no surprise that they had readied a backup plan.

There were preparations in place in case Anne and the other candy crafters failed. That knowledge put a lot of pressure on Anne, and anxiety reared its ugly head.

"Elliott Collins, proxy maestro of the Paige Workshop," Hugh said quietly. "Do you understand the duties and responsibilities with which you and your people are tasked?"

For a moment, Elliott's expression was uncharacteristically stiff. But it soon melted into his usual playful grin. "Understood, Viscount. We'll make everything properly. No need for threats. Plus, we've got an impressive head crafter on our side. Right, Anne?"

"Right," she answered, despite her nerves.

When she did, Hugh's eyes twinkled, and he broke into a smile. "Show me everything you've got, Paige Workshop."

“Hey now, go easy on us,” said Elliott. “By the way, did you want to see Glen? He’s in decent condition this morning, so you can if you’d like.”

“I’d rather not, but if I can, then I will. If I slink off without showing my face, I expect Glen will complain about my manners and dignity compared with those of, say, Keith Powell.”

“Then allow me to show you the way.” Elliott led Hugh up the stairs.

Anne watched them go, then returned to the dining table. The candy crafters’ eyes were following Elliott and Hugh with keen interest.

“Anne, you didn’t tell us you were acquainted with the Silver Sugar Viscount!” Nadir’s eyes were sparkling. “What a surprise! This is the first time I’ve ever seen him. Oh, and it’s the first time I’ve met another Izaran since I came to Highland. Who is that guy?”

“I crossed paths with the Silver Sugar Viscount, and he looked after me,” replied Anne. “As for ‘that guy,’ do you mean Salim? He’s Hugh’s…no, the Viscount’s bodyguard. What’s an…Izaran?”

“An Izaran is, mm— Well, it’s us.”

Valentine graciously embellished Nadir’s vague explanation: “The people from the former kingdom of Izaral in the east of the continent are called Izaran. Izaral was invaded by a neighboring country and was wiped off the map about twenty years ago. After that, the Izaran people scattered across the continent. Most of them formed into a few groups, and now they wander from place to place.”

“Izaral was destroyed before I was born, so I never knew it. Even when I hear such stories, I don’t really feel like it’s my country. On the contrary, before coming to Highland, I had never even considered the idea of living forever in one place.”

Nadir seemed awfully nonchalant about it, but Anne thought it must be terribly painful for someone to lose their country like that.

Anne, who had lived her whole life on the road, had no hometown. It was usually no big deal, but when she saw people wave and say with a smile that they were going back home, she always felt a little jealous.

Nadir must have lived a similar lifestyle.

“So we’re going to be under the surveillance of the Silver Sugar Viscount?” he asked.

Behind his round glasses, Valentine’s eyes showed a shade of concern. “Looks that way.”

“It’s only natural.” Orlando nodded.

“No slacking off for us!” King said, shrugging.

“I wonder if you all really understand the incredible amount of work we have ahead of us.” At the sound of Elliott’s voice, everyone looked up and saw him descending the staircase from the third floor. He appeared to be returning after showing Hugh to Glen’s quarters. “If we don’t finish our sugar candy sculptures in time for the First Holy Festival, sculptures from the Mercury Workshop will be used instead. I thought we might find some way through this by decreasing the number of sculptures or something, but the Silver Sugar Viscount will be watching. He’d never let us get away with cutting corners. Not only that, but if we fail, we’ll face a fine equal to the reward we’re supposed to receive: ten thousand cress. The Paige Workshop couldn’t come up with a sum like that, even if we turned the place upside down. If that happens, I’ll be ruined as well. The Paige Workshop will be no more.”

Elliott stood in front of the dining table and told them all this in an uncharacteristically matter-of-fact tone.

They needed to make a lot of sculptures in a short amount of time, without letting the quality slip.

It had taken them about one month to make the first sugar candy sculpture through trial and error. This time, they already knew what to do and would be repeating the same tasks, so they had experience. Given the crafters’ current skills, four days should be plenty of time to finish a similar sculpture.

Simple calculations told Anne that it would take thirty-two days to make eight copies of the sculpture that they had presented at the Selection. And making ten more sculptures at half that size would take about twelve days, if she assumed each one would take half as much work. Making the ten remaining one-third-sized sculptures would take about ten more days.

They had less than two months before the First Holy Festival. Just looking at the numbers, they were short several days of working time. But if they got more comfortable as they went

along, they would also get faster. Anne had been banking on that when she decided on the total number of sculptures they would make.

It was going to be close.

If we don't succeed here, not only will I fail to restore the workshop, but I'll also destroy it in one fell swoop. No matter what, we have to complete the sculptures.

As she psyched herself up, Anne looked at the faces of the other crafters. But to her surprise, King and Nadir were, for some reason, smirking at Elliott, as if to provoke him. Valentine was smiling, and Orlando looked composed.

"Who do you think you're talking to, Elliott?" King grinned broadly. "If there's something we need to make, we'll make it."

"All we have to do is get it done, right?" Nadir said casually.

Valentine nodded. "It'll be fine. We'll finish everything."

Orlando added curtly, "Of course we will. We'll make sure they're done on time."

Elliott looked satisfied with their answers.

"You all seem pretty pleased with yourselves," he grumbled. "I'm the one who's supposed to be Glen's proxy here."

But despite his complaint, Elliott sounded happy. The men were artisans—of course they didn't want to admit defeat. The same feelings inside Anne dwelled in them as well.

And it might have been a bluff, but they had spoken clearly and confidently. They'd said they could do it.

Anne was always coping with anxiety and impatience. She didn't have the extra energy to boast. But with such a difficult job ahead of her, she needed to put on a bold front, even if only to herself. That appeared to be an important part of the process.

I should learn from them.

Anne flashed a smile at Elliott, too. Somehow, just the act of smiling seemed to make her jitters disappear. All of a sudden, she was at ease.

"We'll get it done," she said.

Mithril, who seemed to be impatiently waiting to speak, raised his hand energetically and jumped up onto the dining table.

"I, too, shall lend you my support! Don't forget to thank me!"

Challe lightly poked the back of the little braggart's head with his finger. "You're the biggest show-off of them all."

Hugh finished his visit with Glen, then checked over the workspace and left.

The moment he was gone, the candy crafters of the Paige Workshop started making their sugar candies for the First Holy Festival.

They brought down just two of the barrels of silver sugar, which they had stored on the second floor of the east wing. Anne, Mithril, and the other four candy crafters all gathered in the room where they would knead the sugar. Elliott joined them as well.

There were almost no sources of heat in the workspace. Because silver sugar despised warm temperatures, they kept the area as cool as possible. All they had were warm coals placed in small iron buckets, with which they could warm their hands when their fingers got too cold to work.

They opened a barrel of silver sugar, and Elliott ran his hand through it. The sugar poured smoothly through the gaps between his fingers. He narrowed his eyes in pleasure.

“Silver sugar. How wonderful.”

For a moment, Elliott looked delighted—spellbound, even. It was the first time Anne had seen him make such an expression.

No matter what anyone says, Elliott is a true Silver Sugar Master.

As the crafters went to their posts, Mithril, who had been diligently gathering all their tools, glanced out the window and shouted, “Hey, everyone, look there! A carriage is coming.”

Mithril was pointing to the edge of the courtyard. A one-horse carriage was parked at the top of the road leading down the hill. It was a type of vehicle for hire that was common in town.

“Oh, so there is,” said Anne as she peered out the window. “I wonder who it could be?”

Elliott and the other candy crafters lined up beside her to see outside.

As they were looking, the door to the carriage opened, and a single person—a tall youth—stepped gracefully out. A sleek wing fell down his back, reaching his knees. He was a fairy.

“Who’s that? He’s really…pretty…” Anne spoke without thinking.

The fairy was tall. Probably about the same height as Challe. He was wearing an ostentatious costume of lace and beads over

white fabric. With his every movement, the beaded decorations caught the light and twinkled.

Ribbons of hair curled gently down past his shoulders, their strands a blend of colors, like someone had dissolved green and blue dyes into milk. His eyes were a similar color to his hair, not quite green or blue. His pale face had a striking luster to it that was almost eerie.

Everyone, Anne included, was entranced by the fairy's appearance.

As they stood there captivated, someone they knew quite well got out of the carriage.

"Bridget?!" Elliott shouted hysterically.

It was indeed Bridget who had emerged from the vehicle. The fairy politely lent her his hand and helped her down.

Bridget gave the driver some money, then appeared to instruct him to take down the baggage tied to the vehicle's roof. Once that was done, she snuggled up close to the fairy, and they started walking toward the castle.

"What the heck?! What's going on here?! It doesn't make any sense!" King shouted, his eyes darting about the scene.

Orlando screwed his face up like he had seen something disgusting and groaned. Valentine's eyes bulged, and Nadir stared at the pair with a look of amazement.

Elliott put his head in his hands and said miserably, "Oh, give me a break…"

Hopping up on Anne's shoulder, Mithril tugged at her hair. Her mouth was still hanging open.

"Hey, they're coming this way. They're coming inside!" he exclaimed.

Startled, Anne yanked Elliott's sleeve. "Mr. Collins! Who is that guy?!"

"Ugh… I have no idea…," he said weakly, then turned back to the other crafters. "For now, I, as the proxy maestro, and Anne, as the head crafter, will go inquire as to who it is Bridget has brought with her. The rest of you, continue with your work. Things will get out of hand if everyone goes. Oh, Mithril Lid Pod, you come with us. As a fellow fairy, you might be of some use."

Anne, Mithril, and Elliott quickly left the workspace and dashed to the entry hall. But the moment they arrived—

“What’s with all the excitement? See another ghost?”

—a voice came from the second floor. They looked up and saw Challe in the upstairs hall, leaning over the banister.

“Perfect timing. Challe, would you mind coming down here?” Elliott motioned for Challe to join them. The fairy looked puzzled, but he made his way down the stairs.

“What’s this about?” he asked.

Elliott shrugged. “Trouble.”

Just then, the knob on one of the front doors moved. Elliott grimaced. “Well, here they are. The trouble has arrived.”

A cool breeze blew in through the entrance and swirled softly around their feet. Everyone’s gaze naturally converged on the big door. Stepping in slowly, as if unsure of herself, was Bridget. When she saw Anne, Elliott, and Challe waiting for her there, she froze in surprise.

“Wh-what’s this? Why is everyone gathered here?”

The fairy quickly followed her in. Challe scowled.

Challe was bewitching and radiant, with a hard, sharp quality to him. His beauty made people want to touch him, but it also made them hesitate. He gave off the impression that he would not easily allow others to lay a hand on him.

In contrast, the new fairy, with his hazy, ambiguous color and demeanor, seemed like he was standing on the other side of a heat shimmer, like some kind of apparition. Anne found herself wanting to approach and touch him to see what that apparition felt like. And unlike Challe, this fairy seemed like he might just let her do it.

The fairy, who had come to a stop next to Bridget, looked a little surprised that there were people waiting there for them. But he immediately offered them a charming smile.

“Nice to meet you, people of the Paige Workshop. My name is Gladys.”

His voice was mellow and gentle. He gave a single, elegant bow, then with practiced movements, he softly put his arm around Bridget’s shoulders.

“You told me to come, so I came, Elliott,” said Bridget, her face stiff. “Are you happy now? Let me introduce you. This is my pet fairy. I bought him.”

“I appreciate your making the journey,” said Elliott. “But why did you suddenly get another fairy? And what do you mean, you ‘bought him’? With what money? You can’t buy a beautiful pet fairy like this with pocket change.” His usual joking manner had vanished.

“I wanted to buy him, so I did. What’s wrong with that? And as for the money, I used what I saved up from tutoring a child in the neighborhood. You’ve got no right to criticize me for it, Elliott.”

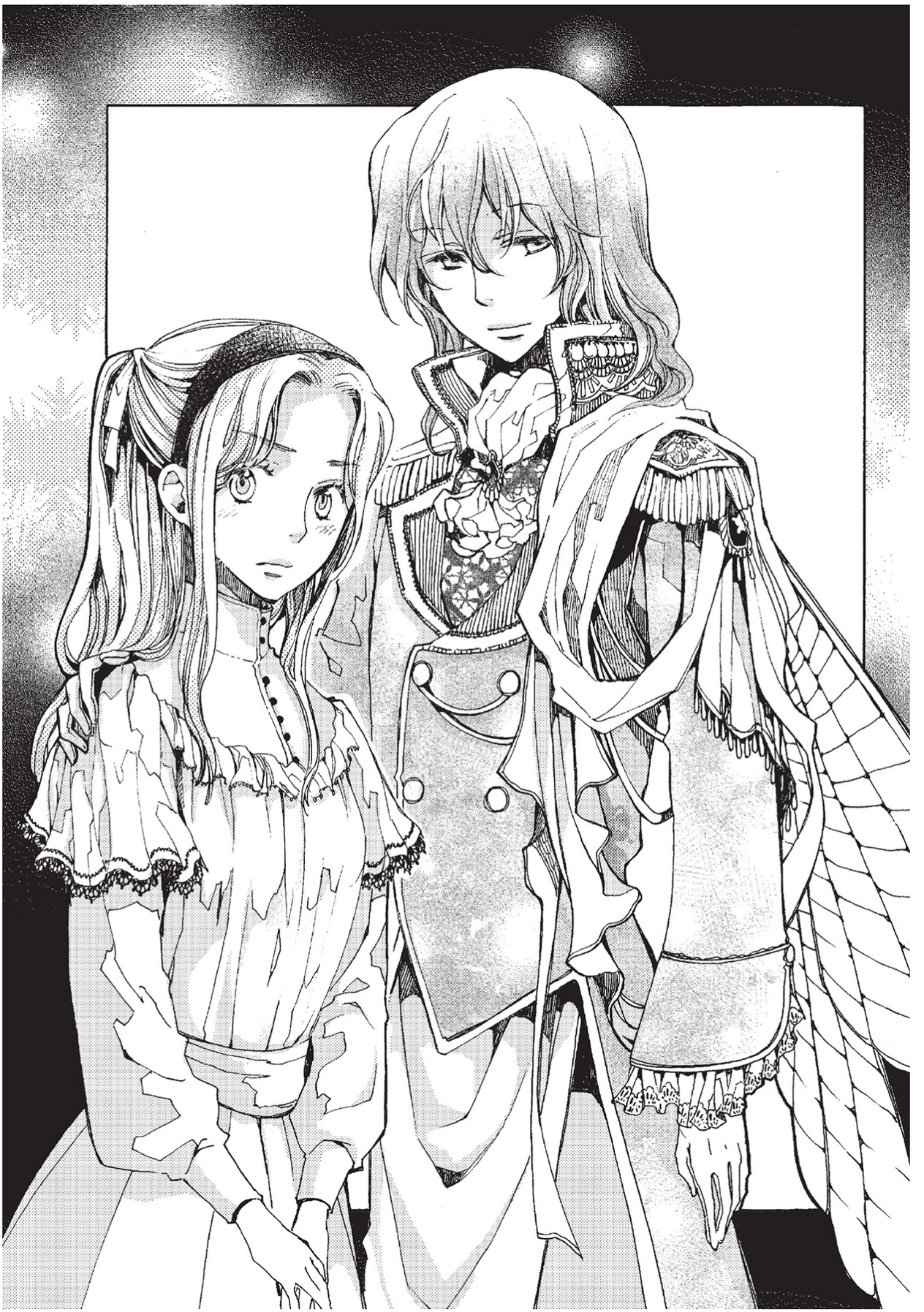
“He looks a little more expensive than that, if you ask me.”

“I’m not lying. I told the fairy dealer that I only had so much money and asked for a discount, and I was able to purchase him.”

Bridget looked straight at Elliott, unwilling to back down.

Challe was leaning against the wall, watching the couple with cold eyes. Mithril was staring at Gladys and cocking his head back and forth for some reason. Anne was so surprised, she was speechless.

“What do you think Glen will say?” Elliott asked quietly, and Bridget glared at him.



“It’s always my father this, my father that. My father told me I could do as I pleased until I got married, didn’t he? He let me have Challe, too. His reason for taking away Challe’s wing was that I locked him up and spent all my time with him. I won’t do that again. Gladys can walk around freely, and I won’t be with him constantly. Even you approved of Challe, Elliott. If Challe was fine, then surely Gladys is, too. I bought him because I wanted to buy him. I wanted him, so I bought him! That’s all there is to it! You’ve never paid any attention to me, so don’t you dare start criticizing me now!”

She wanted him? But it doesn’t look that way.

Bridget didn’t seem the least bit happy. It was like she had only bought the fairy in order to rebel against her father and Elliott.

Bridget probably couldn’t do anything about her feelings. Anne got the sense that she was reaching out recklessly with both arms, desperately struggling forward, searching for something.

“Bridget…” Anne wanted her to settle down a little and take a moment. That’s what she was going to say.

But Bridget shook her head fiercely, flatly interrupting her. “I particularly don’t want to hear any criticism from you, Anne.”

“Bridget, is there a problem with me being here?” Gladys sounded perplexed from his place behind her.

“No problem at all.” Bridget glared at Elliott and Anne in turn as if to silence them. However, she avoided looking in Challe’s direction. “I’ll tell my father about Gladys myself.”

“Wait.” Elliott raised his hand slightly. “Glen’s heart can’t take sudden news like that. I’ll go in first and inform him. Then, Bridget, you can tell him in your own words. Okay?”

“…Fine.”

“All right, let’s go, then. He’s on the third floor.”

Elliott turned on his heel and started to ascend the staircase. Bridget signaled Gladys with her eyes, then marched up the stairs after Elliott.

Watching Gladys’s wing rippling down his back, Mithril said, “That guy’s also a gemstone fairy like you, isn’t he, Challe Fenn Challe?”

The moment Mithril said Challe’s name, Gladys stopped in his tracks and turned around, startled.

“Challe Fenn Challe…?” Gladys repeated the name as if he’d discovered something unexpected. He stared at Challe. “Obsidian? …No, it couldn’t be…”

“You need something?” Challe smirked, still leaning against the wall. There was a glint in his eye, like he was daring Gladys to continue.

That seemed to bring Gladys back to himself.

“No… No, nothing at all.” His answer was halting, as if he was holding something back. Then he started walking again, following Bridget.

Anne looked over at Challe. “Someone you know?”

Challe’s eyes followed Gladys as he ascended the stairs. “Never met him before.”

Mithril put his chin in his hand and cocked his head. “I can tell that he’s a gemstone, but I’m not sure which type. Unlike Challe Fenn Challe, he’s hard to place. I’m usually good at guessing other fairies’ types, too.”

“He’s probably an opal,” said Challe. “Every one of them has a different coloration depending on the specific stone they were born from. Moreover, the way he reflects the light—he’s got so many colors. Opals tend to be ambiguous like that.”

Following Elliott, Bridget and Gladys reached the third floor and disappeared.

Once they were gone, a feeling like impatience suddenly welled up inside Anne. She got the impression that if someone didn’t confront Bridget here and now, she would only grow harder to reach.



Bridget was assigned a room on the third floor of the west wing. The fairy, whom she called Gladys, had been given a room on the third floor as well.

Good job, Elliott.

The sun was setting. The sky was dyed a light pink, and the clouds were disappearing behind a distant mountain range, as if

it were swallowing them up. Challe was on the top floor of the western tower. The wind blew through his hair. It felt nice.

A spiral staircase ran up the center of the tower, and there were windows set at regular intervals.

At the top, the structure opened into a single small room. The space was completely empty, but when Challe opened the window and gazed out at the landscape below, he could see the king's castle and the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell, as well as the whole city of Lewiston.

Naturally, Glen had not been happy about Bridget buying a pet fairy. Apparently, as soon as he saw Bridget's face, he had ordered her to return the fairy to the dealer immediately. But she had been stubborn. *"I don't want to do what you say anymore, Father,"* she had said and refused to budge. In the end, it was decided that Gladys would be staying at Hollyleaf Castle, much to Elliott's displeasure.

Just then, Challe heard footsteps coming up the spiral staircase. He turned around to see Gladys. After spotting Challe, Gladys said the other fairy's name as if checking to make sure he had it right.

"Challe Fenn Challe…was it?"

Gladys slowly approached him. The beads decorating his coat made a clear sound every time he took a step. The lace attached at his wrists, collar, and hem fluttered. It was all very beguiling, coupled with his delicately colored hair. The clothes seemed to have been made deliberately to complement his fine features.

Challe turned his gaze back to the landscape, but Gladys didn't seem to care and moved to stand beside him.

"I was walking around, looking at the interior of the castle. This tower is nice. It's so pleasant." He smiled at Challe. "Have you not been given a human name? That's rare. Who's your owner?"

Gladys was a gemstone fairy like Challe. Unlike fairies of other types, something about Gladys's presence was sharp and cold. Perhaps it was the aura of a kindred spirit. Challe found it somehow nostalgic. But that didn't mean he felt any affection toward Gladys.

"I have no master," he said. "My wing is in my own hands. I live with the humans, and if I am asked, I may even do some work. But that's for me to decide."

Gladys opened his eyes wide. “Is that why you’re not called by a human name? But if you have control of your own wing, why are you with the humans? Do you have some purpose for staying?”

“Never mind my situation. Your background seems no less mysterious.”

“It does?”

Gladys’s hair was constantly shifting in color. No sooner did it appear green than it changed to a pale blue. And wherever it was struck by the rays of the setting sun, it became yellowish gold. Like perfumed oil floating on the surface of water, it had a gleaming shimmer to it that changed at a dizzying pace.

Challe shot him a sidelong glance, carefully observing Gladys’s expression. “You don’t look like the kind of fairy a girl could afford with pocket money.”

Challe, who had been constantly bought and sold by fairy dealers, had a good grasp on the prices that fairies fetched at a market. There was no way that such a handsome, attractive fairy could have been purchased with whatever Bridget had.

But Bridget hadn’t appeared to be lying. If she had truly bought Gladys with her own money, Challe was at a loss as to how.

“Well, I suppose we can chalk it up to her enthusiasm,” said Gladys. “She was very keen to have me and really bargained for me, you know. The fairy dealer was swayed by her ardor, that’s all.”

“Fairy dealers aren’t the type of people who are swayed by ardor. They only bend to money.” Challe stared fixedly at the other fairy, and Gladys smiled evasively.

“I don’t have any exceptional powers, and I’ve always played a fool. In fact, the reason I met Bridget was that I pretended to mistake the place I was being sent to on an errand, and I just happened to go to her house. But it was a stroke of good fortune—she saw me and took a liking to me. She seemed like the sort of person I wouldn’t mind having as an owner. She seemed decent. It appears the fairy dealer didn’t know what to do with me, either, having been unable to find a buyer for so long. Plus, Bridget is the daughter of a famous man. Since she was so enthusiastic, I suppose the dealer was simply inclined to sell.”

“You are a gemstone fairy. You ought to have the power to create sharp objects. You don’t have any combat ability?”

“Unfortunately, I cannot fight. Would you like to see?”

Gladys turned his right palm upward and spread his hand out in front of his chest.

Glittering specks of light gathered there, a mixture of faint blues and greens. The light coalesced into a thin line across Gladys’s palm, forming a feeble, bluish-green needle about the length of his middle finger.

“See? This is all I can do.”

It didn’t seem like he was suppressing his power. Evidently, that was the limit of what he could make.

Gladys casually waved his right hand, and the bluish-green needle disappeared. “Can’t fight with that, can I?”

“Humans are ruthless. Even if you’re a fool, even if you can’t fight, as long as you look pretty, they’ll make you into a pet fairy. In fact, some actually prefer you to have looks rather than fighting prowess. There are plenty of people who want to buy a pretty fairy for large sums of money.”

For a warrior fairy, Challe had been sold for an extraordinarily low price. That was mostly due to his foul mouth, which potential buyers had found unpleasant.

Another factor was that an owner couldn’t let their guard down when dealing with a warrior fairy. If a human tries to use such a fairy for any purpose other than fighting and isn’t careful, they are sure to meet a painful end. Fairies of this kind are valuable and functional, but on the other hand, they are considered very dangerous.

Since Challe couldn’t be sold as anything else, his foul mouth had lowered his value. There weren’t many owners who wanted to be subject to constant abuse from a fairy they had bought for protection.

But if he’d had no fighting skill, his value would have shot up, even with his foul mouth. If he had been easy to control, his range of uses would have expanded. His beauty would have made him prized as a pet fairy. He’d been told this often by fairy dealers. All of them had said that, with his appearance, he’d surely have sold quickly and for a high price if only he’d been powerless.

“You’re saying they still couldn’t find a buyer for you?” asked Challe. “I find that hard to believe.”

“What kind of people bought and sold you, Challe? Were you hurt very badly? No one wanted to buy me. That’s the truth.”

“What kind of idiots were you bought and sold by? Humans aren’t that naive.”

Gladys looked down and snickered. “For someone who stays with humans of his own free will, you don’t trust them very much. As I thought, you must have been hurt. I’m sure whatever you went through was terrible.”

Gladys lifted his head again and narrowed his eyes. Those eyes, a swirl of soft, shifting colors, seemed to be concealing something, like a landscape wrapped in fog.

“You are straightforward and forceful,” Gladys continued. “And you stare too much. You look at the humans with such beautiful black eyes, and yet they can have no control over you. That’s why they get angry. You ought to keep your stare more vacant, as if you’re not looking anywhere in particular, like I do. But why is someone like you staying with humans? Which one do you want to be with? I’m curious.”

“I don’t feel like satisfying your curiosity.”

At Challe’s refusal, Gladys lowered his eyebrows teasingly and said, “We’re both gemstone fairies. I rarely meet another of my kind, so I thought this was my chance to make a friend. But it seems you’re unwilling.”

“If you’re not hiding or lying about anything, then we can be friends. We can even be drinking companions.”

“I’m hiding nothing. I’m not lying. I swear.”

“Oaths sworn by lips alone are easy to make.”

“You’re very wary, Challe Fenn Challe. That’s a good thing. If you weren’t, you wouldn’t live long.” With one last smile, Gladys turned his back on Challe.

A gust blew in, and Challe’s hair and the hem of his jacket flapped wildly. The wind whistled in his ears. With his hand, he pinned a lock of hair against his cheek.

Ambiguous in all respects. That’s their nature.

He wasn’t sure whether he needed to be so wary. But he was certain that the other fairy was more than he appeared.

Opal, eh?

Chapter 3
GHOSTS ARE NOTHING TO FEAR

Bridget's arrival had taken up a little bit of time, but that afternoon, Anne and Elliott joined in the work of making sugar candy.

Their first task was to knead the silver sugar. The candy crafters did this together, producing the sugar dough. Once that was done, Elliott and Anne, as well as Valentine and Nadir, began forming the shapes of the snow crystals.

Elliott worked unbelievably quickly. The movement of his hands was smooth and capable as he reached with agility for portions of silver sugar and spread them out thinly. No sooner had he spread out a lump of dough than he took a cutting knife in hand and scored the shape of the snowflake into it. Then without hesitation, he cut the snowflake out.

At first, it took him the same amount of time as Anne to make a single crystal. But by that evening, he was making two in the time it took Anne to make one.

With Elliott's help, their efficiency increased dramatically. Anne was frankly astonished.

So this is the true power of Elliott, the Silver Sugar Master.

However, Elliott was very talkative. It was great to have him happily working away, but he kept poking fun at Valentine and Nadir, as well as Anne. Finally, Nadir yelled at him to keep quiet.

Except for the time they spent eating lunch, their job continued without breaks. Even after dinner, Anne and the candy crafters returned to their workshop. In order to ensure they had enough time, they couldn't rest, even at night.

Only Mithril did not return. Apparently, he was off on his mission to exterminate evil spirits.

As Anne followed the other candy crafters back to the workshop, she casually glanced outside through one of the windows in the corridor. A slender crescent moon shone forlornly in the sky. It looked like it was caught in the withered branches of a thicket of trees. The neglected courtyard was illuminated just enough by the moon's meager light to be full of shadows.

Right in the center of that dark courtyard, Anne could see a faint, white, human figure. She gasped.

A ghost?!

She froze. The white figure was a blond woman. But she was much too clear to be a ghost, so Anne looked more carefully.

On closer inspection, she could tell that it was Bridget wearing a white nightgown. However, at that point, Anne began to worry again. It was nighttime in late autumn, and Bridget was out in the cold air with only a thin gown on. She didn't even have a shawl. Anne shivered just looking at her.

Had no one stopped her and warned her that she would catch a cold, dressed like that?

We're not paying any attention to her. No one is… No one is looking at Bridget.

Her bleak figure perfectly represented her position. If no one confronted Bridget, she was sure to keep her back turned to them forever. It would probably be best if Elliott or Orlando, or even Glen, was the one to do it. But with the First Holy Festival right around the corner, it was unlikely any of them would have the patience to deal with her.

Besides, it would be cowardly to saddle someone else with such a responsibility.

Anne was the one who had noticed, and so she was the one who should do what needed to be done. It might well be negligence to foist the task off onto someone else simply because she wasn't sure what to do, or because she thought others were more suited to the task, or because Bridget might reject her.

"Sorry, everyone," Anne said to the other candy crafters. "Get started without me. I'll be there soon." Then she turned on her heel and dashed off toward her own room.

She dug a shawl out of her clothing trunk and carried it out into the garden.

"Bridget?" Anne approached quickly, calling Bridget's name.

Bridget turned around with a scowl on her face. She must have been cold, because she was rubbing her arms with her hands.

"What?" she said.

Anne was discouraged by the annoyance in Bridget's voice, but nothing would change if she went back now.

"What are you doing out here?" she asked.

"Looking at the moon. Is that a problem? Did someone say that I'm not even allowed to look at the moon?"

"No one said that, and there's no problem—none at all. But… where's Gladys? He's not with you?"

When Anne asked that, Bridget jerked her chin dismissively and looked back up at the moon.

"I'm letting him roam free so that my father doesn't complain. He went off somewhere after dinner, but he promised to have tea with me before bed. Do you have some business with Gladys? If you need him for something, find him yourself."

"I don't need him for anything. I just realized that he wasn't looking at the moon with you and asked about it, that's all."

"I never wanted him to look at the moon with me."

Bridget answered immediately, and it didn't sound like she was putting on a brave front.

"I wanted to look at the moon alone," she said. "So would you mind getting out of here, too?"

"I'll go soon. I just came to give you this."

Anne held out the shawl that she had brought, and Bridget turned back toward her. She saw the shawl and frowned quizzically. "What's this?"

"You'll catch a cold dressed like that."

"I don't need it. I'm not cold."

Bridget turned away. She was clearly lying—her exposed ankles looked incredibly chilled, and the lace at her hem was trembling with the quivering movement of her knees.

"But it'll be a pain for me to take it all the way back to my room. So here!" Anne forced the shawl into Bridget's hands.

"Wait!" Bridget called after her, but Anne ran away as quickly as she could. "I said I don't need it! Didn't you hear me?!"

Though she caught Bridget's voice behind her, Anne rushed into the castle and headed for the east wing.

When she looked out from the corridor, she could see that Bridget was still standing in the middle of the courtyard. She was holding the shawl that Anne had pushed into her hands, but she didn't show any sign of putting it around her shoulders. Even so, Anne was glad.

Anne had clearly been meddling. Bridget would have been within her rights to discard the shawl in the garden or even trample it underfoot.

While Anne was looking out the window, Orlando stepped out into the corridor from the workshop, holding a lump of kneaded silver sugar.

"Are you bugging Bridget again?"

He glanced between Bridget, who was outside the window, and Anne, who was in the corridor, and seemed to realize that Anne had been meddling. He sounded exasperated.

"Yeah, sort of," she admitted.

"You're an odd one. You don't need to pay her any mind. If anyone ought to be concerning themselves with Bridget, it's Elliott. He's her fiancé, after all."

"You're not worried about her, Orlando?"

"I don't need to be."

"That's not the point, and whether you need to has nothing to do with whether you are. Do you care that Bridget looks cold? Do you care that she bought a fairy and brought him here? Do you care about what drove her to do that?"

Orlando fell silent. It seemed he didn't want to answer.

He does care a little bit. Probably.

She was sure that if Orlando didn't, he would have simply said so. Even though Bridget wasn't his fiancé and he wasn't obligated to be worried about her, he probably still was.

Orlando cares about her. He still does.

That made Anne happy.

Slowly, Orlando shook his head. "Right now, the sculptures for the First Holy Festival are our top priority. I don't want to think about anything else. You should also put unnecessary things out of your mind and get to work."

That was all he said before returning to the workshop.

Anne let out a long sigh.

She felt like something would change if only people could just communicate what they were feeling—like *I care* or *I'm lonely*. And yet everyone was too worried about their own position, or putting on a brave front, and couldn't say what they meant.



Mithril had told Challe to stay in the hall after dinner.

Challe knew that Mithril was up to something weird. But Mithril would get annoying if Challe refused him, so he went along with the other fairy's request. Mithril had finished his meal quickly and then scurried off somewhere, leaving Challe alone in the lesser hall.

He sat at the dining table, resting his chin in his hands and staring at the fire in the hearth on the west wall. The flames danced energetically, and the shadows around them flickered and swayed.

He had been sitting there for a while, when Gladys came down the stairs and walked over to the dining table.

"Hey there, Challe."

Challe couldn't even be bothered to look in his direction. The other fairy sat next to him with a smirk.

"Do you need something?" Challe asked.

"I just saw you sitting here, so I thought we could have a chat. Am I not allowed to talk to you unless I need something? Even though we're two of a kind?"

"Mithril Lid Pod, Danna, and Hal are also fairies. If you want idle chitchat, have at it with them."

"They're a little different. They're not as similar as you and me."

"I don't think I'm similar to you at all."

"You just don't know it yet."

Sensing something behind those words, Challe turned his gaze toward Gladys. The other fairy's ambiguously colored eyes were staring back at him.

“What don’t I know?” Challe demanded.

“You want me to tell you? I wonder if I should? I suppose. But… maybe not yet.”

“Are you telling me or not? Be clear.”

Gladys was an irritating conversation partner. He was smiling, as if he enjoyed Challe’s annoyance. Just as Challe was considering whether it would be better to thrust his blade at Gladys’s neck and try threatening him, Hal and Danna came up from downstairs.

The pair seemed bewildered by Gladys and his sudden appearance that day. When they saw him in the hall, they stopped for a moment, unsure what to do.

Then Gladys called out to them cordially, “Hal and Danna, was it? Did you need something?”

“Yes, sort of,” said Hal, seeming to relax a little. He approached the dining table along with Danna. “Um, where is Mr. Mithril Lid Pod?” He looked around the room restlessly, searching for Mithril.

Danna seemed to be hiding behind Hal’s back, making herself smaller. She appeared to want to escape Gladys’s gaze as much as possible.

“He went somewhere after dinner,” Challe answered. “That’s all I know.”

Hal made a troubled face. “We were told by Mr. Mithril Lid Pod to come up here after dinner.”

He even summoned Hal and Danna? What is that little fool planning?

Challe was getting a bad feeling about the situation, when all of a sudden—

“Danna and Hal! So glad you came!”

—they heard an energetic voice, and then a small figure came striding in briskly from the hallway leading to the west wing’s second floor. Mithril jumped up on the table in a single bound with a shout of “A-yup!”

Looking at the little fairy standing on the dining table, Challe sighed.

Mithril must have gone rummaging through Anne’s things. On his head, he was wearing a thimble she used for sewing; he also had a ribbon wound around him from chest to belly and had her

pincushion affixed to his back. Another ribbon was tied around his hips, with a marking pin thrust through it as if it were a sword.

"The reason I had the two of you join us is this," he began in a serious voice. "At present, there are heinous, evil spirits inhabiting the grounds of Hollyleaf Castle, threatening to put a deadly curse on the candy crafters."

"Whaaa—?!" Hal shouted in surprise.

Danna gripped her brother's hand. "Are there, really?" She seemed frightened.

Gladys nodded with a mysterious expression that could have been either admiration or exasperation.

Challe had no doubt that something was living in the castle, and the candy crafters had been met with some mysterious phenomena. But he wasn't sure when that had transformed into "threatening to put a deadly curse on the candy crafters."

"Accordingly," Mithril continued, "we fairies must band together to exterminate these heinous, evil spirits and bring peace to this castle. Tonight, we shall organize a vigilante corps, with me as your glorious leader. We shall set out to rid this place of evil!"

Hal and Danna, who had been looking down at Mithril as he made his pronouncement, exchanged glances.

"'Heinous, evil spirits,' he says, Danna. We can't ignore those, can we?"

"You're right, Hal. But I wonder if we'll be of any use?"

"Never fear! I'm right here with you. I'm sure the two of you will be most helpful." Mithril offered an entirely unwarranted pledge and threw out his chest with pride. Challe felt a headache coming on.

"I understand." Hal nodded earnestly. "We can't possibly let evil spirits roam free. We're in."

Gladys didn't look like he was taking any of this seriously, but he raised his hand slightly in an elegant gesture. "This little vigilante corps is a wonderful idea. Very interesting. I certainly hope I'll be allowed to take part."

Mithril's eyes sparkled. "Your name was Gladys, wasn't it?"

"Yes. Very pleased to make your acquaintance, Captain Mithril Lid Pod."

Mithril beamed, obviously delighted to be called captain. “Very good. I authorize your participation.”

“And will we head out on patrol immediately, Captain Mithril Lid Pod?” Gladys asked.

“That’s right,” Mithril answered pompously. “Now, let’s get going. Come on, everyone. That means you, too, Challe Fenn Challe!”

“You all can do as you please.” Challe stood up.

“Huh? What did you say?”

“I’m going back to my room.”

“W-w-wait! Challe Fenn Challe! If you leave, who’s going to fight the evil spirits?!”

But Challe had already turned his back. Mithril grasped desperately at the hem of his jacket, trying to detain him, but Challe snatched the material back out of Mithril’s hands.

“*You’re* going to fight them. Good luck, Captain,” he said, then turned to leave.

Cold sweat started to bead on Mithril’s forehead as Hal and Danna gazed at him anxiously.

“Will we be all right, Captain?” Gladys asked.

“L-leave everything to me! I am the great Mithril Lid Pod, after all! Everyone, let’s move out! Follow me!” Mithril burst into loud, restless laughter.

Leaving the commotion behind, Challe returned to the second floor of the west wing. He had no inclination to take part in such a ridiculous operation, but he did intend to do something about Mithril’s so-called evil spirits.

Challe passed right by his own quarters. Then he opened the door to Anne’s room, which was empty at the moment, and stepped inside.



The candy crafters continued working past midnight.

By the time they decided to wrap things up, they were all completely exhausted. In a half day of work, they had made a

little more than one hundred and fifty snowflakes. It was a fairly respectable pace.

Anne returned to her room pleasantly tired. But as she was about to put her hand on the doorknob, she hesitated.

Mithril would not be there that night. She had asked him to sleep next to her again, but he had turned her down, apparently keen to form a fairy vigilante corps and eliminate evil spirits. He had declared, *"I'll get rid of the evil spirits, so you can sleep easy,"* but that didn't leave Anne with much confidence.

She was afraid to sleep alone, but she was also absolutely worn out. She wanted to crawl into bed immediately, so she steeled herself and opened the door to her room.

Holding her small candle aloft, she made her way to the bed. As she reached it, she could see that someone was already in it. Startled, she stopped in her tracks.

She raised the candle up high and took another look. There, lying on his side in the bed, was Challe.

"Uh…Challe? What's going on?"

She approached, but Challe did not stir. Both of his hands were entwined behind his head, and he had one leg bent up at the knee. His eyes were closed. He appeared to be sleeping, with no blanket to cover him. If he'd been human, he might have gotten sick, but since fairies didn't feel the cold, he was probably all right.

"Challe?" Anne called his name softly, but he didn't respond.

No matter how deeply Challe slept, he always woke up at the slightest hint of someone's presence. But apparently, he had grown accustomed to Anne and Mithril. No matter how much noise the two of them made or how close they got to him, he remained relaxed.

Why is Challe sleeping in my bed?

Of all the people in the castle, he was the last person whom she thought would mistake her room for his.

Anne set her candle down on the side table and looked curiously at Challe's sleeping figure. His eyelashes cast shadows on his cheeks, which looked pale in the dim candlelight. He had long lashes. His wing flowed over the blankets, shimmering a peaceful, light-blue color.

Without thinking, Anne crouched beside the bed and stared at Challe's wing. She recalled how it had felt the one time she had touched it before. She wanted to touch it again.

The sense of happiness Anne had felt when she kissed his warm, silky wing was indescribable.

As she looked at his beautiful sleeping face, a suffocating feeling gradually welled up from deep within her chest. She wanted to touch his wing. She almost reached out for it in spite of herself. But she stopped her hand before it made contact. Wings were like a fairy's life force. She couldn't touch something so important without permission.

She moved to pull her hand away, when—

"You want to touch it?"

—she suddenly heard Challe's voice and nearly leaped into the air in surprise.

"Challe! You were awake?"

"I just woke up."

As he spoke, Challe slowly raised himself. Lightly combing his messy hair with his fingers, he looked at Anne.

"Touch it," he said.

"Huh?"

"You, and no one else, may touch it any time you like."

Challe stared fixedly at Anne. His black eyes shone enticingly while reflecting the flame of the candle. As he gazed at her, Anne felt her chest begin to pound as if her heart had taken off running. She was overjoyed. He was saying that she was allowed to touch something akin to his very life force any time she wanted. Challe trusted her from the bottom of his heart.

"Can I?" she asked.

"I don't mind."

Anne extended her hand. She gently stroked the tip of the wing, which was spread out over the bed.

It was smooth like silk, and a shiver ran down Anne's spine at the slightly warm feel of it.

Challe cast his eyes downward and let out a long breath, as if he was under some strain. When he did, a soft gold color spread quickly from the spot that Anne had touched, as if it were blooming to the surface of the wing.

Startled, Anne pulled her hand back. When she removed it, the wing returned to a calm, light-blue color.

“Challe, your wing is incredibly beautiful…”

I love it, hopelessly.

She swallowed those last few words. Before, the one time she had been allowed to touch his wing, she had simply been mesmerized by its allure. But now, on top of her heart trembling at its unchanging beauty, she felt a swell of tenderness.

Challe slowly opened his eyes. Then he got down off the bed and pulled Anne to her feet.

“Hey, Challe? Why were you sleeping in my bed?” she asked.

“I was waiting for you.”

“Why?”

Without answering, Challe turned back the quilt and the blanket on the bed, then gestured toward it.

“For now, let’s get some sleep.”

“Huh? I mean, of course I am going to bed, but I haven’t even changed clothes yet.”

“Don’t make excuses.”

Challe was still gripping Anne’s hand, and he gave it a slight twist. When he did, Anne fell easily onto the bed. While she was lying there surprised, he brought his beautiful face close to hers, covering her.

“Don’t move. Don’t make a sound.”

“Uh, ah, umm…”

Challe snickered at how flustered she was getting. “Don’t worry. There’s nothing to be afraid of. Do exactly as I say.”

Challe straightened and stood up, then covered Anne with the quilt and blanket.

What? What is this?

With her face half-buried under the blankets, Anne blinked rapidly in astonishment.

This was a completely different development than the various scenes that had flashed through her mind a moment prior. Challe blew out the candle, and she felt him move toward the window. Apparently, he had hidden himself behind the curtain.

Anne wasn’t sure what was going on, and she stared into the darkness for a little while. But she was exhausted, and soon, her

sleepiness took over, and her eyelids drooped of their own accord.

As she was nodding off, she heard the rustling of clothes. It was coming from right near the bed. She thought it was probably Challe, but she couldn't be sure. Her eyes wouldn't open—it was like she was being dragged down by the sandman himself.

From there, it all happened suddenly.

A high-pitched shriek, like the sound of someone shredding fabric, came from right beside the bed.

Naturally, Anne's sleepiness was gone in an instant, and she leaped up.

"Wh-what?!" she exclaimed.

"Turn on a light!" Challe barked, and Anne fumbled around on the side table until, panicked, she finally managed to light a candle.

She shone the light of the candle in the direction of Challe's voice and the area where she had heard the scream.

Challe had a small person pinned face down on the floor. The person's arms were behind their back, and Challe was holding them with both hands. Furthermore, he had a knee pressed into the stranger's back, completely preventing them from moving.

There was a single, rather short wing next to Challe's knee. The person was a fairy.

"Who's this?!" asked Anne.

"An evil spirit."

"Evil spirit?!"

The fairy squirmed around, trying to escape, but Challe pinned them down even harder. When he did, the fairy suddenly went limp and stopped moving.

"Challe! Oh no! I think they might have died from you pressing too hard!!"

"Not dead. Maybe unconscious." Challe let go of the other fairy and stood up.

Anne set the candle back down on the side table and ran over in a panic. She peered down at the face of the fairy lying on the floor. Their hair was a light-purple color.

"What should we do? Are you sure they aren't dead?"

She extended a hand and was about to gently touch the fairy's hair, when—

“Gotcha!!”

—the fairy, who hadn’t so much as twitched, suddenly sprang to their feet.

“Dummy, you dummy! You got careless and let me go! Stupid!”

The fairy pulled down the skin under one eyelid and stuck out their tongue. Despite the mean gesture, they looked adorable.

The fairy’s appearance was that of an eleven- or twelve-year-old boy. His pastel-purple hair was cut evenly at the shoulders, and his bangs drew a straight line across his forehead. His big eyes, burning with anger, were purple, too. In height, he came up to only about Anne’s chest. His wing was a bit shorter than Challe’s or Mithril’s, and it ended above his hips. The fact that he was dressed in an old-fashioned blue and white page’s uniform made him even more adorable.



“Who are you?” Anne asked.

“As if I would ever tell my name to thieves!”

“Th-thieves? Wait, do you mean us?”

“That’s right, you thieves! Just you wait and see—I’ll get you!”

No sooner had he finished shouting than the fairy tried to break into a run. But he suddenly tripped on nothing and tumbled over.

“Are you all right?!”

Anne rushed over and helped him sit up. His body was limp, with absolutely no strength in it.

“A-am I…to die at the hands of thieves…?” he muttered under his breath. “I’m sorry, Master… They were too much for me.”

“Um…so first things first, we aren’t going to kill you…”

The fairy had closed his eyes and slumped over in Anne’s arms. He wasn’t dead, but he seemed to have passed out.

Challe gazed off into the distance, looking annoyed. Bewildered, Anne glanced over her shoulder at him.

“This boy… Seriously, who is he?”

“This is the true form of your evil spirit. As for who he is, I’m sure it will be quickest to ask the boy himself.”

As they were having this exchange, they heard a flurry of footsteps and voices from afar. Apparently, the others had heard the disturbance and had come running. Before long, the candy crafters and Elliott from the first floor, as well as the members of the fairy vigilante corps, all gathered in Anne’s room.

“There were footprints in the corridor. If it had been some sort of ghost, it surely wouldn’t have left behind footprints. That’s why I was certain it was something living.” Challe crossed his arms and looked down at the unconscious fairy.

Elliott clapped his hands together. “Ah, so that’s it! When you said something was here, that’s what you meant.”

Challe nodded. “Yesterday afternoon, someone appeared in the corridor, and their footprints stopped right in front of the wall that connects to the western tower. It was as if they had passed right through it. And last night, someone went around entering locked rooms and opening doors. They couldn’t have gotten in

normally, which meant we had to be dealing with a creature with the power to pass through solid objects—probably a fairy. Since he played pranks on the first floor's occupants last night, I reasoned that he would come to the second floor this evening, and I waited in ambush."

Fairies each had their own special powers. Cathy, the fairy owned by Jonas, had the power to make herself invisible. Challe could conjure a sword out of light. Mithril could create droplets of water. Fairies' powers were extremely varied and wide-ranging, so it wasn't strange for there to be a fairy with the power to pass through walls and doors.

"And this boy…rushed right into your trap…" Anne sat on the edge of the bed and stared down at the fairy.

He was lying on Anne's bed. They hadn't been sure what to do with him after he passed out and had laid him there for the time being.

Ultimately, just as Elliott and Challe had said from the start, there were no ghosts—just this fairy, who lived in Hollyleaf Castle and had been causing the mysterious phenomena.

In that case, the man's voice and the sound of breathing that Anne had heard, the flame of her candle going out, and the strange sights she had seen—all those happenings must have been figments created by Anne's anxious mind, making up things that weren't there because she was so frightened.

Am I really that much of a scaredy-cat? I'm a little disappointed in myself.

The other four candy crafters withdrew to their rooms, thinking about all the work they had to do the next day. They seemed glad to know the true form of the evil spirit and reassured enough to get some sleep.

Danna, Hal, and Gladys, the other members of the fairy vigilante corps, had also murmured their approval before returning to their quarters.

Only Mithril Lid Pod, their captain, remained. Or rather, he seemed unable to move. He had his arms clasped around his knees in the corner of the room, with his back to the others. There was a dark shadow hanging over him. The fairy vigilante corps had dissolved in no time, and it hadn't been Mithril but

Challe who had caught the evil spirit. His self-esteem seemed to have suffered a serious blow.

The captured fairy had been carrying only one thing: a little embroidered bag that had been tucked very carefully into the belt around his waist. It was now placed on the side table.

"Who could he be, this boy?" Anne tilted her head to the side thoughtfully, and the fairy lying in her bed groaned.

He opened his eyes slowly, and when he saw the faces of Anne, Elliott, and Challe peering down at him, he drew back in alarm. "Th-thieves!"

"Don't be afraid. Listen, what's your name?" Anne tried to calm him down, but the fairy glared at her sharply.

"No name that I would give to thieves!" he shouted.

"Now listen," Elliott said, "it's not nice to suddenly call people thieves, is it? We paid money to rent this place. We should be asking you what *you're* doing, going around the place as you please."

At Elliott's words, the fairy thrust the blankets aside angrily and sat up. "You can't just decide to borrow and lend this place at will! This is the castle of Master Herbert—the younger brother of Master Stewart, the head of the Chamber family! This is Hollyleaf Castle!"

"But it's not your castle, is it?"

"Of course it's not my *personal* castle. But I am Master Herbert's page, Noah! I was instructed directly by Master Herbert to protect this place!"

"So your name is Noah, is it?"

"That's right!"

The fairy was apparently so angry that he didn't even notice he had inadvertently given his name. His purple eyes seethed with rage.

"Hey! It's disrespectful to Anne for you to call us thieves." Mithril jumped up on Anne's lap. Apparently, Noah's awakening had attracted Mithril's attention and pulled him out of his slump. He thrust his index finger at Noah with his usual pompous attitude. "Besides, what are you even talking about?! The Chamber family was stamped out fifteen years ago. That Herbert guy is totally dead, along with the rest of them."

“Don’t you dare say he’s dead!” Noah’s right hand whizzed through the air and landed a direct hit on Mithril’s side.

“Aaah!!”

“Mithril Lid Pod!” Anne screamed his name.

Challe caught Mithril before he could go flying off to the side of the room, but the little fairy’s vision was still spinning from the impact.

“Master Herbert is coming back!” Noah yelled. “No matter how many years it takes, he’s definitely coming back! So I have a duty to stay here and protect the castle until he does!”

Anne was baffled. It sounded like Noah was a page for a man named Herbert Chamber, who had been the master of Hollyleaf Castle fifteen years earlier. But Noah didn’t seem aware that his master had died. He also didn’t seem to know that after the castle was seized by the Millsland royal family, it had been donated to the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell. Or that after that, the Paige Workshop had rented it.

With how fired up he was, Anne wasn’t sure he would believe her even if she explained the situation.

“A little while after the castle’s master left, didn’t the soldiers of the Millsland royal family come raid this place, Noah?” Challe asked, gently placing the dizzy Mithril Lid Pod on Anne’s lap.

“What? Do you work for these thieves?”

Challe didn’t get angry at Noah’s sullen tone. With a blank expression, he produced a small pouch from his breast pocket. It was the pouch that contained his own wing. He pulled the wing from it, then without hesitation, spread it out in front of Noah and showed it to him.

Noah widened his eyes. “Is that…your own wing?”

“Take a good look at that groggy fellow over there. He carries his own wing as well. The young lady before you gave both of us our wings back.”

Noah shifted his focus to Anne’s lap and stared at the wing wrapped around Mithril’s neck. Then he looked up at Anne. His aggressive posture vanished, and his eyes wavered, as if he was recalling a fond memory.

Challe returned his wing to its pouch and stashed it back in his breast pocket.

“Neither of us is owned by anyone. We’re with these people of our own free will. He’s Mithril Lid Pod. I’m Challe Fenn Challe. Now, I’ll ask you again, Noah. Did the soldiers of the Millsland royal family come to this castle?”

“…They came.” Noah made a face like he was in great pain. “A whole bunch of knights in filthy armor came in without asking and stomped around. And they wrecked the castle. They stripped down the Chamber family crests and slashed all the portraits. They burned any furniture with the crest carved into it out in the garden.”

“And when that happened, what did you think the outcome of the war between the Chamber family and the Millsland royal family had been?”

Noah looked at the ground. “That the Chamber family had… lost…”

“That’s right. The Chamber family lost. And after this castle was seized by the Millsland royal family, it was donated to the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell. These humans are renting this castle from that same church. They are not thieves.”

As Challe explained everything in a detached tone of voice, Noah bit his lip several times and looked like he was going to make objections. But ultimately, he kept silent.

Meanwhile, on Anne’s lap, Mithril slowly came around. Holding his head, he blinked his eyes dramatically, then suddenly sat up and shouted at Noah.

“You! How could you do such a thing?! I thought I was gonna die!”

“Yes, the Chamber family may have lost. Hollyleaf Castle may have been taken by the Millsland royal family and rented out to you. But this is Master Herbert’s castle. And I have to protect this place until Master Herbert returns.” Noah grasped the covers tightly, wringing them in his hands as he spoke.

Mithril stood up, apparently having lost his patience.

“I told you. That Herbert guy isn’t coming back! He’s absolutely, positively dead!”

“Don’t you dare say he’s dead!” Noah grabbed a pillow and swung it around.

“Gaaah!!”

The direct blow from the pillow sent Mithril flying off Anne's lap again. He rolled three times across the floor and passed out face up.

"Mithril Lid Pod!" Anne put both hands on her cheeks and shouted his name again.

Challe looked annoyed, like he couldn't believe this had happened twice, and picked Mithril up once more.

"I can't trust anyone who goes on and on about Master Herbert being dead without any proof! That's it—I'm driving you all out!" Noah threw back the covers and leaped out of the bed. But he immediately tripped over his own feet and fell flat on the floor.

"Hey! Are you all right?!" Anne ran to Noah's side and peered down into his face. "What's wrong, Noah?"

Noah had closed his eyes and gone limp.

"Considering how excitable he is, this evil spirit doesn't seem to have much stamina." Elliott looked exasperated.

Challe laid Mithril on the edge of the bed and walked over. He crouched beside Anne and close to Noah's face and gently touched one of the boy's soft-looking cheeks.

"He's weak," said Challe. "I bet he's hardly eaten anything."

Anne turned to Challe. "Huh?"

"This is a castle, so I'm sure they had stores of food somewhere. Fairies don't need to eat as much as humans, and he was alone, so it should have lasted him quite a while. But fifteen years is too long. His provisions must have run out. Judging by how weak he is, he probably hasn't eaten properly in several weeks or more. He's lost of a lot of strength. If this keeps up, he won't last."

"By 'won't last,' you mean he'll die?! Then we've got to feed him something fast!" Anne jumped to her feet.

Elliott laid Noah back on the bed as Anne quickly left the room and headed for the kitchen at the back of the castle. There, she made a sweet soup with milk, a little bit of sugar, and some dried fruit.

When she returned to her room with the soup, Mithril was no longer there. He seemed to have regained consciousness and gone back to his own quarters. After getting smacked across the room twice, it was understandable that he'd grown sick of being there.

Elliott and Challe were staring down at the bed where Noah was lying face up. His eyes were open.

"Hey, Noah," Anne said. "Why don't you leave talk of the castle aside for now and eat something?"

When Anne set the soup down on the side table, Noah turned his head on the pillow and looked away from it.

"I won't eat it."

He closed his eyes tightly and crawled under the quilt and blanket. That seemed to be the closest thing to running away that he could manage, weak as he was.

The night before, in an attempt to drive out the intruders, he must have mustered all his strength to go around patiently opening all the doors to the candy crafters' rooms. And in doing so, he had used up whatever energy he had and fallen into this sorry state.

Elliott shrugged. "Well, there's nothing more we can do. Let's get some sleep already, Anne. This is going to impact our work tomorrow."

"Please go to bed, Mr. Collins. I'll sleep here."

Anne didn't want to leave the side of a fairy who was so weak, he could hardly move.

"But what will you do if he eats the soup and regains his energy, only to run riot?" Elliott asked. He sounded a little concerned.

"I'll stand watch," Challe said. He was leaning against the wall beside the bed. "I'm the one who caught him in the first place, so I have a responsibility."

"Well then, I'll leave it up to you. You take it easy, Anne, and try to get at least a little sleep."

Once Elliott left, Anne sat beside the bed and stroked Noah's head through the blanket. Challe continued leaning against the wall, watching stoically.

Won't he eat just a little bit?

Anne had initially felt relieved when they caught the evil spirit, but now she had a different problem to worry about. If she couldn't get Noah to understand that they weren't a threat to him, he would probably never eat. In order to convince him, Anne patiently stroked his head through the blanket.

After doing that for a little while, she was struck by drowsiness. Even Challe had quietly closed his eyes. Anne started to nod off in

her chair.

Behind her ear, she heard the sound of someone breathing.

Again? But there are no ghosts. It was all Noah. I must be imagining things again…

Then there was a sudden burst of sparks behind her eyelids.

"I'm sorry, Your Lordship! Please forgive me!"

The pleas of the boy, mixed with the sound of screaming, stuck in her ear. It was exactly the same scene as the night before. And she could clearly make out the face of the boy who was screaming. It was Noah. His purple hair stuck to his tearstained cheeks.

Noah was looking up at a very large man with black hair and a black beard. The man was scary. Anne felt Noah's fear as if it were her own. The man raised a whip over his head.

"Master!"

At Noah's scream, Anne awakened with a start. Her back was bathed in a cold sweat. Noah was under the blankets, sleeping peacefully.

That was Noah.

She couldn't understand why she had witnessed such a scene.

Anne borrowed the blanket from Challe's room, wrapped herself up in it, and napped beside the bed. Then the following morning, she asked Danna to put breakfast for three people on one tray and carried it back to her room.

Challe was sitting on the windowsill, gazing out at the thicket of trees now dusted white by settling frost.

"I brought us some hot breakfast, Noah," said Anne. "I figured it would be boring for you to eat alone, so I brought mine and Challe's up, too. Let's eat together."

She moved the cold soup over and set the tray on the side table.

Noah had pulled the blanket up over his head. He didn't move.

"Hey, Noah?"

Anne put her hand on the blanket to pull it back, but Noah's hand resisted her slightly. He was surprisingly weak, however, and he quickly let go. When she turned back the blanket, his face was pale, and his eyes were stubbornly squeezed shut.

Fairies usually had pale skin to begin with, but Noah's face was strikingly white.

Anne had heard that when fairies died, they turned into beads of light that dispersed and disappeared. As she looked at Noah's face, she got the feeling that the outline and coloration of his too-pale features had thinned and might vanish at any moment.

"Noah, please. Eat."

But Noah squeezed his eyes shut even more tightly. "I only eat things that Master Herbert gives me."

"Well then, do you have anything left of what Master Herbert gave you somewhere? If you have it, we'll go get it for you. Where is it?"

"I ate all the provisions in storage. There's no food left. There's nothing for me to do but wait until Master Herbert returns."

"If that's your answer, then you'll die."

"I'll wait."

"Why must you only eat food that Master Herbert gave you?"

"If I want to stay here, I can't eat anything else! Those are Master Herbert's orders!"

So his master commanded him to eat only the food he gave him? Anne frowned. *What a cruel order.*

She recalled the scene that had flashed into her mind twice in the past two nights. She didn't understand why she was seeing it or whether it reflected reality. But what if it was a scene from Noah's past?

That man with the black hair and black beard might have been Herbert. If that was true, he was a brutal master. Anne felt sorry for Noah, who was faithfully following the harsh orders of such a man.

She thought he might feel like eating if people around him started their own meals, so she invited Challe over, and they ate their breakfast right by Noah's pillow. But Noah didn't show any sign of movement.

"Guess there's no need to stand watch, is there?" said Anne. "I think I'd prefer that he eat something and make trouble instead."

After Anne and Challe finished, Anne stacked up their plates and put them on the tray, sighing in spite of herself. She left the cold, sweet soup and one portion of breakfast on the side table.

"I'll leave these here. He might feel like eating once no one is watching."

Noah moved his head on the pillow and glared at Anne. “I don’t do vulgar things like sneaking food when no one’s looking! Anyway, I said I won’t eat, and I won’t.”

“But if you feel like it, please do.”

“I will not! Never mind that, you thieves should get out of this castle!”

Noah’s determination appeared solid. Moreover, he seemed to really hate Anne and the others.

Anne didn’t want to leave him alone in such a weakened state with no one to watch him, but she also felt bad about relying on Challe to stick with him all day. After considering her options, she decided to ask Challe to rest in his own room. In his place, Anne would personally check on Noah and bring him food during her breaks from work. With that plan in mind, she left the room.

As expected, Challe looked exhausted. He went straight back to his own quarters.

Anne was worried and anxious. What if Noah refused to eat anything? Her chest pounded when she thought that Noah might be gone the next time she peeked into her room. Whether someone was fairy or human, friend or stranger, the thought of them dying while within her reach frightened her. She couldn’t help but remember the occasion of her mother Emma’s death.

When Anne returned to the lesser hall with the tray in hand, she found that the other candy crafters had already gone to the workspace. She had just missed them. Knowing that she also had to get to work right away, Anne carried the tray into the kitchen at the back of the castle. She handed it off to Danna and Hal, who were washing up, and quickly retraced her steps.

“Anne, good morning.”

As Anne was cutting across the first floor hall, headed for the east wing, someone called her name from above. When she looked up, she saw Gladys. He was waving elegantly, so she stopped. It was the first time Gladys had ever directly spoken to her.

The fairy made his way down the stairs.

His hair color appeared to be a blend of white and warm yellow. It was usually a mix of blue and green melted into white, but its color seemed to change from time to time with the lighting conditions and his own mood.

“Good morning,” Anne said.

“How is the fairy you caught yesterday? Have you decided what to do with him?”

“No, not yet. We can’t decide anything with him in that condition.”

Gladys cocked his head slightly. “What’s the matter, Anne? You look down. If there’s something worrying you, you can talk to me.”

Gladys’s right hand gently brushed Anne’s right cheek.

“Huh?!” Startled, Anne jumped back.

She wondered when they had gotten close enough for him to touch her. Gladys’s movements were smooth and natural enough that she hadn’t been aware of him closing in.

“You don’t have to run away like that.” Gladys smiled, looking amused.

“S-sorry. I was a little surprised.”

“This time, don’t run away. I won’t do anything. I won’t touch you.”

Gladys opened both arms wide and stood before Anne again. Then he slowly brought his face close to the top of Anne’s head.

“What a wonderful aroma. I can smell silver sugar, the scent of a Silver Sugar Master. You’re adorable, Anne.”

Anne blushed at his flattery. It made her nervous.

“I think Orlando, King, Valentine, Nadir, and Mr. Collins probably all smell the same way…,” she muttered.

“You’re right; they probably do. But I suspect you have the best aroma of all.”

Startled, Anne looked up and saw that Gladys’s ambiguously colored eyes, not quite blue or green, were very close. Anne was flustered by his closeness, and she dodged out of the way.

“I’m off to work now, okay?!”

She could feel his gaze on her back as she ran off. She was confused about why Gladys would make such comments. But most of all, she wanted to get away from his peculiar gaze. Quickly, Anne made her way to the workshop.



On mornings when frost settled over the land, the whole world looked like it sparkled in the light of the sun.

Challe knew that, so he wanted to go out into the garden before he lay down for a nap. He liked to breathe in the invigorating morning air that seemed to permeate the depths of his body.

He did go back to his own room briefly, but he immediately left and headed for the lesser hall. There, he casually gazed past the banister, down at the lower floor, and caught sight of Gladys and Anne. Unconsciously, he halted in his tracks.

Gladys touched Anne's cheek. She backed away, seeming startled, then Gladys took several more steps forward and made a gesture like he was smelling her hair.

Seeing this sent Challe into a rage.

Anne dodged Gladys again, looking even more flustered, and then hurried off. As he watched her go, the corners of Gladys's lips curled into a smile.

Once Anne was out of sight, Gladys looked up at Challe.

"Challe. She's wonderful. She smells great. And she's cute." He spoke shamelessly. He must have known Challe was there the whole time.

"Cute? That scarecrow? You've got some strange tastes," Challe said coolly, so as not to expose his true feelings.

Gladys came up the stairs and peered into Challe's face inquisitively. "You don't find her cute?"

"Not especially."

"Oh, really? You're here for her sake, aren't you? Aren't you with her because she's lovely and cute and you just can't leave her alone?"

Challe felt like some formless tentacle was coiling around his body, trying to probe inside his mind. This Gladys person was someone to be wary of; he was sure of it.

Challe had hardened his heart so that nothing could touch the things he needed to protect. With a surly expression, he stared back at the other fairy.

"She's cute, so I can't leave her alone? What a naive way of thinking, Gladys."

Gladys frowned and was silent for a moment, as if he wasn't sure what to say. Then he grumbled, "I see you keep your true feelings hidden. Or are *those* your true feelings? You are made of

the same stuff as I am. Does that mean I can assume your thoughts are similar to mine? And that your behavior, too, stems from thoughts like mine?"

"I have no interest in your thoughts."

"Whether you're interested or not, the two of us are very closely related, and that's a fact. You and I ought to be together, Challe Fenn Challe."

"What kind of nonsense is that? I'm tired of listening to it." Challe slipped past Gladys and started down the stairs.

And then—

"The dark chapel," Gladys said suddenly.

"It was a chapel in the back of a tunnel carved into a cliff," he continued, "where an altar had been set up. There were no windows. The entrance was decorated with stones in the way you would expect of a holy place. But inside, the ceiling and walls still bore the scars of excavation."

Challe was taken aback by Gladys's words. He froze.

Impossible.

Slowly, he turned around.

"Do you know about it, Challe? Do you know of such a place?"

The dark, stagnant air of the chapel. The sound of the wind whipping past the tunnel entrance was fierce, like a shrill flute, but no breeze made it to the altar deep inside. The air was always cold and still. The silent darkness made the chapel seem as if some great, sleeping thing were buried behind it.

A strong wind always blew outside. Challe felt like he had always, always been able to hear the sound of the wind.

At some point, a single candle was lit in that darkness. Day after day, clumsy little hands had lit the candle.

"How do you know about that?" he asked.

"So you *are* familiar with it. Just as I thought. If you let me see a little of your true feelings, I could tell you how I know."

What Gladys had just tossed before Challe was bait. Challe wasn't sure how Gladys knew about that place, but he was sure that if he took the bait, the other fairy would seize the initiative. Challe had a hunch that it would cause trouble in the future.

Keep your guard up and don't show him any openings, whispered his instincts as a warrior fairy.

“That place no longer exists,” Challe said quietly. “So I don’t care how you know about it.”

That was all he said before he turned his back on Gladys and descended the stairs. Gladys met Challe’s cool demeanor with a look of slight bewilderment.

How does he know? Challe wondered. *How does he know about that place? What is he?*

Chapter 4
RAIN AND A FAVOR

“So that’s what happened, and the evil spirit…by which I mean, that fairy—he won’t eat anything.”

Anne had left the workshop before lunch, taking on the duty of carrying Glen’s meal to his room. She did it because she had realized that ever since they arrived at Hollyleaf Castle, she had been so busy that she hadn’t even seen him.

As she arranged his lunch tray on the side table so that it would be easy for him to eat, Anne spoke to Glen, her words intermixed with sighs.

“Earlier, Hugh…I mean, the Silver Sugar Viscount dropped by,” she said.

“Did he?”

“Yes. He came for an inspection. Apparently, he heard from someone that we caught the evil spirit, and he thought it was hilarious. He kept asking to see him. I asked Hugh for advice about the boy’s refusal to eat, but he just made a joke about him being on a diet and left.”

Hugh had shown up again, just like the day before. It seemed he was going to Westol for two or three days and stopped by on his way. While at the castle, he spent more time asking about the evil spirit they’d captured than actually checking on their work, and then he went away again.

Noah had been annoyed by Hugh, who must have seemed to him like a rude man who’d appeared suddenly, stared at him like a curiosity, and then left.

“I’m not sure why he stayed in a place like this for fifteen whole years,” said Anne. “He should have ignored his master’s orders and run away.”

“Perhaps his master took his wing with him when he left the castle?”

Glen, who had been slowly eating his soup with a spoon, sounded sad as he suggested this possibility.

“Oh…right…”

Anne had always tried to treat Challe and Mithril as her equals, and she tended to think of Danna, Hal, and even Gladys in the same way. But in fact, Glen held Danna’s and Hal’s wings, and Bridget held Gladys’s. They were all slaves. She had nearly forgotten.

“So that boy, Noah,” said Anne. “He’s also…”

“Whether he likes it or not, I’m sure that fairy can’t leave until his wing comes back unharmed. What a cruel thing to do. If I were his owner and I knew it was likely I wouldn’t return, I would either take him with me, give his wing back, or transfer it to someone else. The fact that he was left here in bondage is just too pitiful.”

Fifteen years spent waiting for his wing. Noah had to have been anxious, passing all that time, not knowing whether it was safe. Not knowing when his life might be suddenly snuffed out.

“Noah said that according to his master’s orders, if he wants to stay here, he can’t eat anything other than the food his master gives him,” Anne explained. “He’s probably convinced that if he intends to keep waiting for his wing, he has to follow those orders and can’t consume anything that didn’t come from his master.”

Leaving his fairy behind alone in a state of insecurity and forbidding him to eat any food he hadn’t personally given him. If Herbert Chamber was the one who did all that, he was an extraordinarily cruel man.

“You may be right. He might eat if we can rid him of that impression. Fairies love sugar candy, so how about making him a piece of candy, Anne?”

“Oh yeah, that’s right!” Anne smiled at Glen’s suggestion. “He might eat if I give him sugar candy. I’ll craft him a piece tonight, after our work is done.”

“Give it a try. By the way, speaking of fairies…,” Glen said casually, “how is the fairy Bridget brought with her?”

“No particular issues. Bridget is keeping a proper distance and going about her life, as promised.”

“I see.”

Glen kept moving his spoon around, pretending not to care, but Anne could see the relief in his face. Suddenly, Glen’s hand stopped. He lay his bony wrist down on top of the blanket, as if he was tired.

“I have no idea what Bridget is thinking these days. In the past, I could easily tell what was on her mind and had a good idea of what she liked. I knew all about her interests.”

“What sort of things did Bridget like?”

“Sugar candy—of course she liked that. We had a senior candy crafter who everyone called Grandpa Jim. He only handled the silver sugar refinement, though. Normally, he was quiet and brusque, but Bridget loved Grandpa Jim. She also loved cats. She begged me countless times to let her keep one, but I thought it would cause trouble to have an animal prowling around the workshop, getting hair mixed in with the silver sugar, so I wouldn’t allow it. She also really loved the story *Four Gold Coins and One Flower*. She often badgered me to tell it to her before bed.” Glen smiled bitterly. “But I couldn’t name a single thing that girl likes now.”

Maybe all parents’ faces looked alike. Anne had often seen Emma put on a bitter smile like Glen’s. It was a complicated expression, with hints of both shame and resignation.

Whenever Anne had quarreled with Emma, she had always blamed her mother and had never, ever apologized. In times like those, Emma had extended sympathy to Anne—the sympathy of a parent. But Glen didn’t have the finesse for that. Not all parents did. This had never dawned on Anne before, though it seemed obvious now.

“Listen to me complaining,” said Glen. “I’m sorry, Anne. Here I am going on and on, when I’m causing you all sorts of trouble.”

“Trouble?”

“I heard everything from Elliott. The thousand-cress rent for this castle—you paid it for us, didn’t you?”

Hollyleaf Castle had to be rented by the year. The rent for that time was one thousand cress, to be paid in full in advance. That was not an amount that the Paige Workshop could muster. It couldn't even pay its crafters' wages.

But in a stroke of good luck, the thousand cress that Anne had received from the former Duke of Philax was largely untouched and still in her possession. When she heard what the rent would be, she immediately recalled her own thousand cress and decided to put it to use.

At the moment, she was the head candy crafter for the Paige Workshop. To the head crafter, nothing was more important than successfully completing the sugar candy sculptures for the First Holy Festival by the deadline. If the thousand cress could help, she had to pay it.

Elliott had bowed his head and apologized. He promised to pay back every bit of it as soon as they had the reward for the First Holy Festival in hand. He even drew up a promissory note.

"It's all right," said Anne. "I only loaned it to you. Even if I kept it, I have no use for it right now anyway. Leaving that aside, it's dark in here, isn't it? Should I open the curtains…?"

As she spoke, Anne turned toward the window and saw that the curtains were already open. Outside, it was as dark as dusk. Even though it was still around noon, it looked like night had descended over the area.

"What's this?" she said. "Snow maybe? But the sky looks strange for snow."

Anne approached the window and looked up through the glass. Black clouds hung low, covering the sky.

"It's a little warm for snow." Glen opened his collar.

There was no flame in the hearth. During the late autumn season, the chill in the morning and evening was intense, so fires were necessary. But in the afternoon, as long as everyone wore warm clothes, they didn't need to light one. It was chilly, but not so chilly that they couldn't bear it.

But it certainly never felt hot. And yet Glen had a thin sheen of sweat on his forehead. Now that he'd mentioned it, Anne felt warm, too.

Far off in the sky, there was a rumble like a beast growling in displeasure. Then the next moment, drops of rain began falling

one by one onto the windowpane. The intensity increased in a flash, and soon, they were in the middle of a violent downpour.

“Rain? In this season?” Anne widened her eyes.

Rain was scarce in the Kingdom of Highland. Any rain that fell between spring and autumn was usually quiet and reserved, like monks reciting scripture. And it never continued for longer than half a day.

In winter, on the other hand, it usually snowed so much that everyone got fed up with it. The cold of winter turned all the moisture in the atmosphere into snow and ice, so the air was even drier than it was during the summer. The snow that fell on this dry land was smooth and powdery.

The large quantities of snow would melt, and thanks to that snowmelt, the underground aquifers were kept saturated, and the wells and lakes remained full.

The Kingdom of Highland survived through the dry season from spring until autumn on the water from the snowmelt.

It was rare for rain to fall during the current season, so close to winter. On top of that, the temperature was high. The air was warm, almost as if it were early summer.

As they worked that afternoon, all the candy crafters were surprised by the unseasonable heat and humidity. Moreover, the rain fell in a downpour like they had never experienced.

As he was cutting out the shapes of snow crystals from silver sugar, Valentine suddenly raised his head.

“What’s going on with this rain?” he asked.

Elliott, who had been cutting out crystals with him, shrugged. “Who knows? Things like this aren’t for humans to understand.”

“It’s incredible. It’s raining so hard, the outer walls look like waterfalls. And the garden has turned into a river!”

Nadir, who had been peering out the window, came back to his workstation and made this excited report. As he did so, he sat and picked up a needle. Then pulling over one of the snowflakes that Valentine had cut, he bent down so close that it looked like his face was touching it. He then started inscribing detailed patterns onto its surface.

This room was for making the snowflakes. There were four workstations, a candy crafter stationed at each.

The adjacent room was for kneading. There, Orlando and King kneaded the silver sugar, then brought the finished batches of dough to the snowflake room.

The finished snowflakes were laid out on shelves in the corner of the room. They were many different sizes and were basically all white, with some having a slight tint to them. The candy crafters had made nearly three hundred so far. They would probably finish another hundred and fifty that evening.

“If we keep up this speed, we should be able to start assembling them in two or three days,” Anne informed the others after she finished counting the snowflakes.

Elliott frowned a little. “We’ll be cutting it close at this pace,” he said.

“But our work will get faster bit by bit as we go,” countered Anne. “We’ve finished more snowflakes today than we did yesterday, after all. I figure it’ll take four days from the beginning of the project until we can put together the first statue. At this pace, we should be able to start the second one after three days.”

“Oh, really?” When he heard that, Elliott grinned. “That’s great. I’m glad the head crafter is keeping track.”

Anne felt a chill when she saw his smile. Elliott was leaving command of the work up to Anne, but at the same time, he was likely keeping a watchful eye on her. He was checking to see whether she had thought the project through thoroughly and was making sure everything was on track. His comment a moment earlier had probably been a test.

The day after next or maybe the day after that, they would begin putting together all the snowflakes. Then finally, they would have one tower of snow complete.

Elliott had not been exaggerating when he’d called it a tremendous workload.

But we’ve got to do it. If we can proceed with the work at this rate, we’ll definitely get it done in time.

Anne returned to her workbench. As she picked up an engraving tool and began to carve patterns into a sugar crystal, she glanced out the window.

She expected they would finish in time for the First Holy Festival. It was an enormous amount of work, but she should have felt confident in their abilities. Yet Anne had a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach, and even she wasn't sure why.

She reasoned she was probably just feeling out of sorts due to the unusual, heavy rain and the darkness.

The curious rain and heat continued into the evening.

The candy crafters finished their work before midnight and returned to their rooms. Anne, however, remained behind in the workshop alone.

Listening to the sound of the rain battering the windows, she kneaded some silver sugar.

She intended to make a piece of sugar candy for Noah.

She didn't know whether he would eat the candy, but she had to make some. Anne could only make sugar candy. It was the one thing she could do herself.

She had work again the following day, starting early in the morning, so she had to get to sleep soon. Considering the time, she couldn't make anything elaborate.

I wonder what would be good? I wish I'd had more time to talk with Noah.

He was sure to eat it if it was something that he liked.

"Though, I suppose he wasn't in much of a mood to talk. Especially since he called us thieves."

In the end, she played it safe and crafted a single sweet flower blossom, light purple like the color of his hair.

Carrying the candy in her right hand and a candlestick in her left, she made her way out of the workshop.

The rain striking the windows was as noisy as ever. She shone the light of the candle up overhead and looked at the window glass. It was like someone were sprinkling water over the windows with a giant watering can. Puddles had formed here and there in the entry hall, signaling leaks in the roof.

There had been a terrible harvest of sugar apples that year, too. The gears of nature must have been warped somewhere.

With that thought, Anne climbed the stairs up to the second-story hall. Once there, she saw someone sitting quietly on the floor near the eastern wall. She held her candle up high and approached.

"Noah?"

The person sat facing the wall with his arms around his knees—he was a fairy with light-purple hair. He looked like he was asleep. He was resting his cheek atop his knees, and his eyes were closed.

"What are you doing in a place like this?" Anne asked. "And why are you facing the wall of all things?"

Bewildered, she looked up and saw a portrait hanging there. It seemed to portray one of the former lords of the castle, but the portion that contained the face had been cut out.

The man in the portrait's black hair and build resembled the man in the scenes that Anne had witnessed over the past two days. It was the same portrait that she had noted on the day they arrived—the only one without dust on it.

It seemed to be the newest in a line of portraits depicting the castle's previous owners. It was likely that it showed the last lord of the castle, Herbert Chamber.

This is the person who gave Noah those cruel orders.

After glaring a little at the portrait, Anne set her candle and the sugar candy down on the floor and gently shook Noah by the shoulder.

"Noah, Noah, get up. Let's go back to bed."

Noah drowsily opened his eyes and lifted his head. It took him a moment to focus, but when he saw Anne's face, he scowled.

"Well, if it isn't the thief."

"First of all, I have a name, and it's Anne… Well, whatever. For now, let's go back to bed."

"I don't take orders from thieves! This castle is under my protection."

Anne sighed at the fairy's stubborn attitude. Noah ignored her and gazed at the portrait in front of him. He stared at it fixedly, without moving. Anne looked up at it, too.

She wondered why Noah was gazing at such a thing. It was in a pitiful state. The longer she stared at it, the more it pained her. All

the more so because the portrait depicted the master who had given Noah his coldhearted orders.

"That man is Master Herbert, isn't he?" Anne said, but Noah didn't answer. Undaunted, she asked a further question. "Hey, Noah? About your wing—did Master Herbert take it with him when he went?"

At that, Noah glared sternly at Anne. "Master Herbert is not such a cruel man! He gave me my wing back!"

"Huh…? He gave it back?"

"That's right. He gave it back to me."

At this unexpected revelation, she stared at him blankly for a moment.

"So why have you been here for fifteen years? If you got your wing back from him, there's no need for you to be here."

"I've told you why many times! I am Master Herbert's page, so I'm protecting the castle and waiting for his return."

"But were you ordered to do that? By Master Herbert?"

"Well, I…!"

Noah was at a loss for words. He hung his head.

"Did Master Herbert tell you to protect the castle, to never leave, and not to eat anything other than what he gave you? Truly? Is that truly what he said to you?"

Anne couldn't imagine that a master who had given a fairy their wing back would go on to deliver such brutal orders. If he had been the sort of person to do that, he would never have returned the wing.

"Master Herbert…did say that." When Noah spoke again, his voice sounded frail. "He said he wasn't taking me with him to war, that he was leaving me at the castle. And he asked me to protect it carefully after he left. He said it was my duty. But he also said if I ate the three pieces of sugar candy that he left behind, I should leave the castle. And that if I ate anything other than the food that he gave me, I wasn't allowed to stay… That's what he told me."

"Not allowed to stay?"

After Noah's admission, Anne looked up once more at the damaged portrait with no face.

This man… Did he want Noah to run away?

When he departed the castle, Herbert Chamber must have known he would likely never return.

If he had taken Noah into battle, the fairy would also have died. So he left him behind in the castle. But he knew the intensely loyal fairy might insist on going along. Because of that, he had given the fairy a job. A duty to “protect the castle.”

What’s more, he tried to get Noah to leave before the castle was eventually seized by the Millsland royal family. Herbert had ordered him not to eat anything in the castle except what he gave him, so that once he had eaten the three pieces of sugar candy, he would have to leave, even if he didn’t want to. If Noah wanted to eat, he would have to abandon the castle. In short, he was sure to go eventually.

Anne had been certain that the man with the black hair and beard in her visions over the past two days was Herbert, the man whom Noah called his master. But he was not Herbert. Anne was now convinced. The man in the portrait and the man in her visions were two different people. They had the same hair and similar builds, but they were not the same.

“Did you eat the sugar candies?” asked Anne.

Noah shook his head anxiously. “N-no, I didn’t eat them! There’s still one left! So it should be all right for me to stay in the castle! I’m abiding by Master Herbert’s orders. Like I said, there’s still one sugar candy left!”

“But didn’t Master Herbert tell you not to eat anything other than the food that he gave you? You ate up all the stockpiled provisions, right? Wasn’t that ignoring his orders?”

“All the food in the castle’s stockpile belonged to Master Herbert. He left it behind for me, which is the same as giving it to me. I’m obeying his orders!”

Noah must have kept on waiting for Herbert’s return, desperately searching for a way to remain loyal to his master’s orders.

Now he had run out of both excuses and available food. But he didn’t want to leave the castle, and so he could no longer eat.

“I see,” said Anne. “You really have remained loyal.”

Even though she knew that Noah was making excuses, she agreed with him. When she did, Noah gazed down at his knees, looking relieved. His eyes, like purple quartz, were a little bleary.

As if trying to convince himself, he said once again, “That’s right. I’m abiding by Master Herbert’s orders.”

“Do you like Master Herbert?”

Noah nodded deeply. That was all it took to make Anne understand. To convince her that his master had been a very good master indeed.

“Come on, Noah, eat something. Master Herbert will be happier when he comes back if you’ve been waiting in good health.”

She held the piece of sugar candy that she had made in both palms, then extended it to Noah. The fairy opened his eyes wide.

“This…”

“It’s sweet and tasty!”

Noah’s right hand let go of his knee and slowly reached out toward Anne. But then he suddenly withdrew and turned away, as if he had changed his mind.

“No! If I defy Master Herbert’s orders, I’ll have to leave the castle.”

“But, Noah, what Master Herbert really wanted was…”

“I’m obeying his orders!” Noah said, cutting Anne off. “I’m obeying them. Because I am Master Herbert’s page…I’m going to be useful.”

Then as if he was worn out, Noah put his face down on his knees again.

“So…I won’t eat…”

Noah’s body lurched forward violently. In a panic, Anne propped up the falling boy.

“Noah?!”

There was almost no weight to his body, which had started to tip over when he lost consciousness. It was like he was hollow on the inside. His lightness frightened Anne. It seemed like he might really vanish.



What is he?

Challe was sitting on the windowsill, staring at the rain as it streamed down the other side of the glass.

Gladys had known about a place that should have belonged only to Challe and Liz. And Challe had heard that the place had collapsed decades earlier and was now buried under earth and stone. But somehow, not only had Gladys known about it, but he had also known that it was a special place for Challe.

When he considered that, one possibility came to mind.

But that can't be.

If that was the case, there was one way to be sure. Even if Challe learned what Gladys was, however, he wouldn't necessarily know what he had in mind.

Gladys had put his hand on Anne's cheek.

It made Challe sick to recall it. No matter what the other fairy was thinking, laying his hands on Anne was unforgivable. That was true if it was done in malice, of course, but even if he had done it out of affection, Challe couldn't bear it.

As he was thinking that, he heard the pitter-patter of someone running in the hall. The light footsteps could only belong to Anne. They passed Challe's room, then went to Anne's and turned back again.

Next, he heard heavy breathing.

He knew it was about time for Anne to finish her work and go back to her room, but her behavior was strange. He stood, opened the door, and looked out into the corridor.

There was a candlestick sitting in front of the door to Anne's room. Its unsteady light flickered as it lit up the corridor.

Just then, Anne was about to pass in front of the door to Challe's room. She was carrying Noah on her back, wobbling unsteadily as she walked.

"Ah…Challe…"

The moment she gasped out his name, she stumbled.

"What are you doing, idiot?!" Challe caught Anne in his arms as she tipped over.

"S…sorry. Thank you, Challe."

"Come on, keep it together."

Challe planted Anne's feet back firmly on the ground and propped her up. He took Noah's body, which was about to slip off

Anne's back, and lifted him, cradling the boy in his arms. He was light. Challe frowned at how light he was.

He hasn't got much longer.

Challe carried Noah into Anne's room and laid him on the bed.

Anne followed him, gasping for breath. As she pulled the quilt and blanket up over Noah, she said, "Thank you, Challe. Noah sneaked out of bed and went into the portrait hall. But he lost consciousness. He's light, so I thought I could carry him, but…" Her words trailed off there, and she hung her head. "He won't even eat sugar candy… This boy—he told me he got his wing back."

In the candlelight, shadows flickered over Anne's face as she bit her lip.

"He got it back?" asked Challe.

"Yeah. It sounds like his master, Herbert, returned it to him. Noah stayed in this castle to wait for him, but his master said that if he ate anything other than what he'd given him, he would have to leave. Noah says he can't break his promise, so he won't eat. I think Herbert probably told him that because he wanted Noah to go. But Noah insists he's going to keep waiting."

Challe could not sense in Noah the energy needed to maintain a fairy's form. When that energy dried up, a fairy's body would disperse and vanish. And Noah himself had to realize what state he was in.

But he must have wanted to keep his promise and wait, despite all that.

Challe looked down at Noah's face again.

Maybe it's only natural.

Noah had said he got his wing back from his master. There could be no doubt that his bond with the man was something special.

If Noah wanted to wait, even for someone who was never coming back, Challe was inclined to let him do so until he was satisfied. Challe knew that if he was in a similar situation with Anne, he would surely wait. For ten years or a hundred.

"You're a Silver Sugar Master, right?" Challe asked Anne, who looked like she might start crying at any moment.

Anne raised her head.

“So craft him something that will satisfy him and make him want to eat. If you’re really a Silver Sugar Master, that is.”

Anne looked startled. “A Silver Sugar Master, you say?”

“Are you not?”

“No…I am, but…” Then she smiled. “Mm… I see.”

When Challe saw Anne’s smiling face, a strong impulse overtook him. This girl before him, this helpless, good-natured, scrawny girl—he would never hand her over to anyone. She was a companion whom he would wait a hundred or even two hundred years for.

Challe put both hands on Anne’s shoulders and pulled her toward him. She opened her eyes wide in surprise.

“Challe?”

“Did Gladys say anything to you?” he asked.

“Huh? What’s this about all of a sudden?”

“It doesn’t matter—answer me.”

“Um. Not really. He said I smelled like silver sugar, and some other stuff.”

“You’re careless. Don’t let your guard down around anyone.”

“Is Gladys dangerous?” Anne sounded a little frightened.

Certainly, Gladys was mysterious, but Challe wasn’t ready to declare that he was dangerous. He just knew they ought to be careful.

“I don’t know. So don’t let your guard down.”

“Okay.”

Anne nodded, which was a relief. Her childlike obedience was sweet. She needed him, he thought.

“Good girl,” he whispered, then kissed her right cheek.

Anne’s shoulders, which he was holding with both hands, twitched, and she stiffened.

He casually slid his lips down her cheek to where Gladys had touched her. Anne turned bright red, but he didn’t care. He couldn’t forgive the fact that Gladys had touched her there. So he reasoned that it was appropriate for him to kiss the spot, to erase any traces of the other fairy’s touch.

“You didn’t sleep well yesterday, either. If you don’t sleep, then before long, it will start affecting your work. Use my room tonight. I’ll watch over Noah. You can rest assured. So go.”

Anne was standing in a daze. Challe pushed her back and sent her off to his room.

Normally, she would have whined and told Challe to get some sleep, too, or suggested taking shifts. But this time, she left quietly, her gait unsteady.

Was that unwise?

He smirked. Unwise or not, he knew he hadn't done anything wrong.



Anne lay in the bed in a daze, her hand on her right cheek, where Challe's lips had touched her.

Emma had often kissed Anne's cheek like that to say, *Good girl* or *Good night*. Challe had said the same sort of thing when he kissed her, so the gesture must have held the same meaning.

But her heart was still beating so quickly that her fingers trembled. She knew Challe was treating her like someone might treat a child, but even so, she was flustered.

At least Challe didn't hate her. He was concerned about her.

I'm so glad.

The rain continued pounding furiously outside.

When Anne closed her eyes, she was overcome by sudden drowsiness. Then yet again, she heard someone breathing very close beside her. For the third time, she saw the vision.

"Master!"

Noah was screaming. Anne gasped. And then—

"Please wait, Big Brother."

—she heard a calm male voice.

A slender, black-haired man stood in the way, as if to protect the frightened Noah. This second man was of a similar build to the one with the black hair and beard holding his whip overhead, and he had the same hair arranged in the same way.

"If you reprimand him so harshly, he won't be able to do anything."

Something clicked in Anne's mind. She had heard this man's voice before.

The black-bearded man on the horse snorted. *"We have no need for such a fragile page. I'll have him sold off."*

"Well then, please transfer him to me."

"If you want such a useless thing, Herbert, he's yours."

Herbert? So this is Noah's master.

Noah looked up at him timidly, and Herbert put on an awkward smile.

"Don't be so afraid," he said.

Herbert took Noah's hand and started walking. Noah still looked frightened. His eyes were unbearably anxious.

That scene dimmed and disappeared, and a new one took its place.

This was somewhere familiar to Anne—the lesser hall of Hollyleaf Castle, the one that Anne and the candy crafters had been using as a dining room.

The plaster walls were a vivid blue color, and the portraits of the successive masters of the castle were full of dignity. Herbert's portrait was among them. It was the same portrait that Noah had been staring at. In the vision, it had not yet been damaged.

A warm fire burned in the hearth. There were couches with elegant cabriole legs set up in front of the fire, and Herbert was sitting on one of them. Across the low table from him, seated on the facing couch, was Noah.

Both of them wore serious expressions. A fyffe board lay between them atop the table.

On the vibrant white and black checkerboard stood milky-white and aqua-blue game pieces, sixteen of each. All of them were made of stone and highly polished. Each piece was carved like a little individual statuette, made to look like it were alive.

The kings' crowns were decorated with a floral pattern and had beads made of red gemstone shining at their centers. The folds of fabric around the kings' collars and the staves in their hands had been rendered in three dimensions.

The queen pieces were distinctly conical in shape, thanks to their broad-hemmed dresses.

The horses each raised their forelegs up high and had green gems for eyes. And there were small blue jewels at the tips of the

lances held aloft by the knights.

The most beautiful of all were the fairy pieces. They each had two transparent wings and fluttering red hair. The tips of their wings and hair were inlaid with various small gemstones.

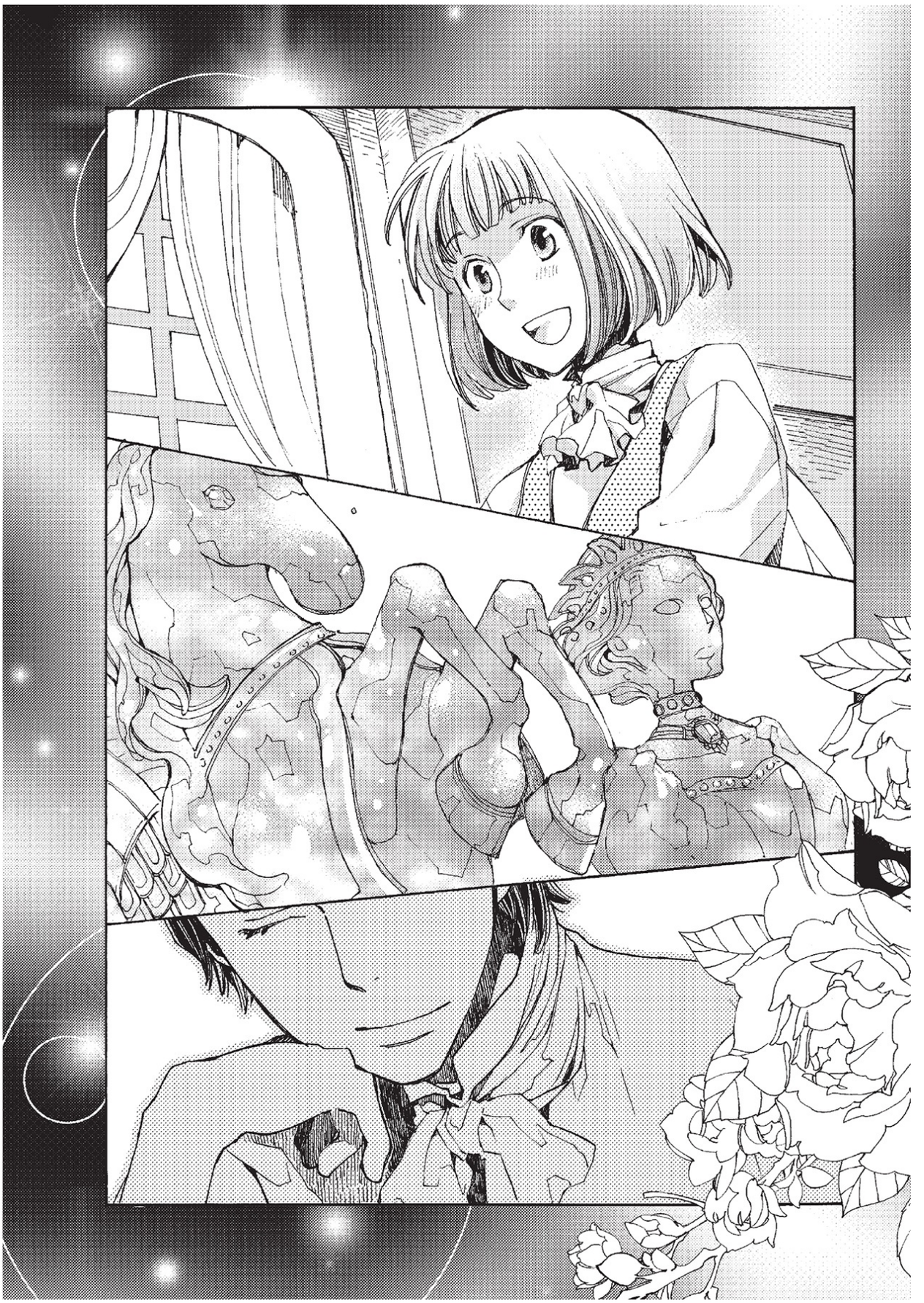
The rules of fyffe stipulated that a player could not use pieces taken from their opponent. However, the fairy pieces alone could be used as one's own once claimed from the other player. As the game progressed and the number of pieces on the board dwindled, players often made sure to keep a fairy piece beside their king to the very end.

"This is a tough one."

Herbert's brow furrowed, and Noah smiled. The fairy was perfectly calm. He looked completely different to the boy whom Anne had just seen, who had been like a small, frightened animal.

There was a sweets dish sitting on the low table, filled with pieces of sugar candy. The bite-sized candies were in the shape of the crest of the Chamber family. They were the sort of simple candies that aristocrats often ate, made by pressing silver sugar in wooden molds.

Herbert picked up a piece of candy and tossed it into his mouth, then went back to thinking. And then—



“You have one, too, Noah,” he urged.

Noah picked up a small piece, held it in his palm, and stared intently at it.

“This crest is wonderful, isn’t it?” he said.

“It’s meant to convey the pride of our house, after all,” replied Herbert. *“The swords, the shield, and the lion symbolize strength, while the blue banner stands for mercy. The crest is meant to say,* Follow us, for we shall use our strength to serve the common people with mercy. *Although personally, I’m rather useless at handling a sword.”*

“But, Master Herbert, you are strong of heart and deeply merciful.”

“Oh, don’t praise me so, Noah. Now, do you think I could get you to pretend like your previous move never happened?”

“That’s a different matter entirely. Thank you for the suggestion, but no.”

As he spoke, Noah reached out for the teapot on the edge of the low table, then moved to pour tea into the empty cup sitting in front of Herbert. But as soon as he tipped it, the lid of the pot came loose and fell off. It hit the teacup and broke it, and tea splashed all over the low table and the floor.

“S-sorry!”

Noah hastily tried to wipe up the tea with a napkin. But the liquid only spread further and made a miserable mess.

Herbert, his eyes wide, waved casually. *“It’s fine, leave it. I’ll get someone to clean it up later. Now, let’s move to the other table.”*

Despondent, Noah seemed to wilt. *“I’m sorry.”*

“It’s okay; it happens all the time,” Herbert said with a smile.

Noah hung his head deeply. *“Master Herbert, why do you employ a useless fairy like me?”*

“Useless? Don’t be silly. You’re plenty useful!”

“You’re lying. I can’t do anything.”

“You can, too. Listen, you’re the only one who will face me at this game on an equal footing, Noah. Most people get bored with how bad I am and quickly refuse to play with me. You and I are both equally terrible, and that makes the game fun!”

Noah glanced at his master with a resentful look in his eyes. *“Master Herbert, those are not words of praise.”*

“They most certainly are!” Herbert said, smiling.

The scene began to warp again.

Anne saw the same lesser hall. Herbert was sitting on the couch, just as he had been before, but he was clearly dressed for battle. The clothes didn't suit him very well. He didn't seem at all like a person who could draw his sword and kill a man.

Noah's purple eyes were full of tears, and he was angry.

"Why are you leaving me behind?! Master Herbert!"

Noah was standing in front of Herbert across the low table. With a gentle expression, Herbert pushed the candy dish on top of the table toward the fairy.

"Here, Noah. Eat."

"Master Herbert! Answer me, please. Why won't you take me with you?"

"I told you, didn't I? I need someone to look after the castle for me while I'm gone."

"Anyone can do something like that. Are you leaving me behind because I'm not useful?" Noah's voice trembled pitifully, but Herbert soothed him with a smile.

"Of course not. I want you to look after the castle. Here, eat. I want you to eat, too."

There were four pieces of sugar candy left in the dish.

Herbert was extremely insistent as he offered Noah the candy, and the fairy eventually gave in. He picked up a piece and held it in his palm. Herbert watched happily as the candy crumbled and vanished.

"If they find this candy, they'll probably smash it, too. Before that can happen, I want you to eat it." Herbert calmly stood up. *"Noah, protect the castle for me. But listen here, you mustn't eat anything in this castle except what I have given you."*

"Huh?"

Noah widened his eyes, and Herbert gently put a hand on his head.

"Once the food is gone, leave this place, okay? You must not eat anything other than what I have given you here. If you want to eat, leave this place."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean just what I said. I want you to protect the castle, so I'm leaving you behind. This is an important job, and only you can do it. But I have one more order. Don't eat anything other than what I

have given you while you are here. If you want to eat, leave the castle. Understand?"

With his sword in hand, Herbert descended the stairs.

"Master Herbert?!"

He did not turn around.

Noah stared down at the three pieces of candy that were left in the candy dish. He picked up one of them and quickly tucked it away into the small pouch at his waist.

"I won't eat this one," he mumbled, biting his lip.

He gently squeezed the small pouch in which he'd placed the candy.

Somehow, Anne understood that Noah's wing was in the same pouch—the wing that Herbert had returned to him. Anne's chest ached. Noah's pain was constricting her heart.

The scene of the warm hearth with the sofas and portraits suddenly became distant, and Anne's vision grew dark.

Why are you showing me these things?

Her instincts told her that these visions were true. Someone was showing her what had happened in the past.

Then she heard the voice again, right by her ear.

"Young Silver Sugar Master, you who loves fairies. I want you to help him. Help that boy."

Startled by the voice, Anne opened her eyes and jumped to her feet.

It appeared to be dawn, and the world behind the closed curtains was starting to grow lighter. But darkness still lurked in the corners of the room. Suddenly, a human figure moved, seeming to melt into those shadows.

But Anne didn't find the figure frightening. Somehow, she knew exactly who it was and what his intentions were.

"Wait!"

Without meaning to, Anne cried out to the figure. But it quickly dissolved and disappeared.

The voice that had whispered, *"I'm glad you've come,"* on the day they arrived at Hollyleaf Castle; the sound of breathing she'd heard from time to time; the voice in her dreams; and the figure that had just dissolved into the shadows right before her eyes—they were all the same person.

"Master Herbert." She mumbled his name in confirmation.

He's asking for my help.

She was convinced of it.

He needs my skills as a Silver Sugar Master.

Silver Sugar Master was a title given to artisans who could make beautiful sugar candies. Such candies gave fairies strength and extended their life span.

Anne was being asked, as a Silver Sugar Master, to help save Noah.

The rain continued to fall, never weakening, and the sky was dark all throughout the afternoon as thunder kept rumbling.

The withered garden in front of the castle flooded. The force of the water cut deep grooves through the garden here and there and ran through them like gutters.

The night after she saw Herbert's shade, Anne made another piece of sugar candy once her work was done for the day. She made another one the following night.

She showed them to Noah each morning, but on both days, he turned away. Naturally, he wouldn't take any other food, either.

Whenever Anne was at Noah's bedside, she held his hand as much as possible. She feared that he would disappear if she didn't. She worried about leaving him alone overnight, but she had to sleep, too. She couldn't do anything that would disrupt her work.

When he saw her struggling, Challe unexpectedly offered to spend the night by Noah's side. Though he was silent on the matter, for some reason, he was very kind toward the boy. His behavior was clearly different to the rough way he always treated Mithril Lid Pod.

The following morning, Anne offered Noah another piece of sugar candy. It was the fourth piece that she had made for him.

That day's candy was shaped like a blue butterfly. But as expected, Noah turned away. Anne cast her eyes downward, disappointed again. Challe touched her shoulder lightly. She looked up and saw his beautiful black eyes staring down at her. It was as if he was silently reminding her to be patient.

Anne set the candy down on the side table and spoke with deliberate cheer.

“Well, I’ll bring breakfast up, okay? Let’s eat together, the three of us.”

Then she left the room.

Orlando and Valentine, the early risers, were already at the dining table in the lesser hall. Elliott, King, and Nadir were sure to get up before too long.

Starting that day, their work would enter a new phase. They had all the snowflakes they needed, and they planned to start assembling them into towers. The other candy crafters seemed excited about it and had agreed to start their work earlier than usual.

But unfortunately, Anne was up too early. Breakfast wasn’t ready yet.

She headed to the kitchen to let Danna and Hal know that she would take portions for herself, Challe, and Noah up to her room again that morning.

The door leading into the kitchen stood halfway open, and warm steam and the smell of the charcoal in the stove came wafting out from within.

“Ah, oh no!” came Danna’s voice. “The sugar has clumped up, and I just put in a huge amount! What do I do now? It’s going to be ridiculously sweet. I’m not sure it’ll even be edible. Hal, what do you think?”

“We won’t be able to tell, so you’ll have to get someone else to try it.”

Anne peeked into the kitchen. “Good morning, Danna, Hal. If you want my help, I could taste it for you.”

“Anne!” Danna’s face lit up with delight for a moment, then she suddenly blushed. Bashfully, she fiddled with her frilly apron. “Oh, no, the thought of you tasting something I’ve ruined… It’s too embarrassing…”

“I’ve made plenty of mistakes myself while cooking, you know.”

Anne stood in front of the pot on the stove. Simmering inside it were walnuts and dried fruits. It sounded like Danna had added quite a lot of sugar. Anne ladled up some of the sauce, put it in a small dish, and tasted it. But it wasn’t unpleasantly sweet.

“This is fine. It tastes good. Everyone’s exhausted, so something sweet will be perfect.”

She reassured Danna with a smile, and Danna fidgeted even more.

“…I’m so glad…,” she said.

“Oh, no, don’t worry about it… I’m just happy it turned out all right.”

Danna was acting much too embarrassed, which made Anne blush as well. Hal smirked.

“Thank you very much, Anne,” he said. “By the way, did you need something?”

“Oh, yes. I’ll be taking three meals up to my room. I thought I would tell you.”

“For the boy, yes? Has he still not eaten?” Hal sighed. He sounded disappointed. Then he set a small jar on top of the counter and plunged a pestle into it, vigorously breaking up the contents.

“Hal? What are you doing with that?” Anne asked curiously.

Hal frowned. “This is sugar, the cause of Danna’s mistake. I don’t know why, but it’s all clumped up. She tipped the jar to add some sugar without paying enough attention, and a chunk splashed into the pot. It’s my first time seeing sugar harden like this. I didn’t spot it until yesterday. It probably hardened little by little from the bottom, and I didn’t notice until it got to the top.”

“Hardened?”

Anne peered into the jar.

Sure enough, the yellowish sugar, refined from sugarcane, had formed lumps all throughout the jar.

“You’re right,” she said. “I’ve never seen this before. Why is the sugar—…?” She suddenly stopped. “Don’t tell me—?!”

“Anne?”

Anne rushed out of the kitchen. She ran quickly up the stairs to where Elliott and the other candy crafters were gathered in the lesser hall.

“Everyone, come with me!”

Too impatient to even explain, Anne said only that before running off toward the second floor of the east wing. The others saw the expression on her face and must have judged that this

was no trivial matter. The candy crafters followed her immediately.

The second floor of the east wing was where they were storing their silver sugar.

Anne pulled the door open and burst into the room. Quickly, she opened the lid of the nearest barrel of silver sugar.

The surface appeared to sparkle more than usual. She touched the sugar and attempted to scoop some out. When she did, her fingers slid right across the surface. It had solidified.

Anne went pale. She was speechless. She reached out once more with trembling fingers, but sure enough, the sugar was hard.

The other candy crafters peered into the barrel as well and gasped. Immediately, Elliott started shouting.

“Check them!” he hollered. “Check the other barrels, all of them!”

At the sound of his voice, the candy crafters scattered around the room. They opened lid after lid.

“No good. It’s all solid,” Orlando said in a daze.

King let out a low groan.

Nadir’s eyes were as wide as saucers.

Valentine muttered, “I see. The humidity and…the heat… But I never imagined something like this…”

Silver sugar hates humidity and heat. When the temperature rises higher than that of the human body, it gets sticky and hard. Add in moisture on top of that, and it solidifies. In order to keep silver sugar free-flowing, it has to be kept in a cool environment where the air is always dry.

The weather in the Kingdom of Highland is usually perfect for that. The air is dry through all four seasons, and the summers aren’t typically that hot.

This climate was the reason why the refining of silver sugar had flourished in the country and why they could make sugar candies. That wasn’t possible in other countries on the continent, and Anne had heard that refined silver sugar went bad quickly in such places.

But for the past four days, a strange rain had fallen nonstop. That must have raised the humidity sharply. And the high

temperatures probably hadn't been good for the silver sugar, either.

The damp barrels had hardened gradually from the bottom up, until finally, even the surfaces were solid.

"Why didn't I notice until it got this bad?!" Anne bit her lip in frustration. She was upset with herself.

In a place like Highland, it would normally be unthinkable for silver sugar to go bad. Even if a barrel of it got wet in the rain or absorbed a bit of moisture, thanks to the climate, the sugar would soon dry out and flow freely again.

But it was a different story when the humidity in the air itself went up so dramatically.

No one could have predicted this. But if they had been checking the barrels from the bottom to the top during the four days when it had been raining, they might have been able to take preventative measures before the sugar hardened too much.

Mithril perched on the rim of the barrel that Anne and Elliott were peering into, wearing a solemn expression.

"Anne. The silver sugar is—"

"At this rate…we won't be able to use it," she said.

They had barely started making their sugar candy sculptures. That very day, they were finally going to start assembling the snowflakes they had created. But they were still only on the first sculpture. Anne wasn't sure how they were going to keep working, especially since they had so many sculptures left. With the silver sugar in this state, they simply couldn't make any candy.

All sorts of thoughts filled her mind at once, confusing her. She felt hopeless.

They wouldn't finish in time for the First Holy Festival. The thought made her want to cry. Tears gradually welled up in her eyes.

Just then, Elliott spoke.

"Don't cry, head crafter," he whispered in a quiet voice so that only Anne could hear him.

She looked at him with a start. Though he was staring at the silver sugar with a stiff expression, his tone was the same easygoing one he always used.

“Well, we’ve got to do *something* about this. I wonder what would be best?”

He raised his head and looked around at the candy crafters. He had on his usual playful expression.

He’s right.

The person in charge couldn’t give in and start crying. The people following her would get anxious and apprehensive. Before she could cry, she needed to pretend everything was fine and think about what they should do next. That was the job of the workshop’s proxy maestro and its head crafter.

What do we do? What can *we do?*

Anne touched the solid silver sugar once more. She scratched at it with her fingers and extracted a round clump, which she set in her palm. When she squeezed it tightly, it broke apart. It wasn’t impossibly hard. They could work with this.

Anne raised her head.

“Everyone, let’s bring all the firewood we can find up here, to the second floor of the east wing, and try to rapidly heat up and dry out this room! We’ll get rid of the moisture in the silver sugar. Then we’ll bring the hand mills from Millsfield and grind the dried-out product one more time!”

Elliott nodded. “That’s probably all we can do. Well then, everyone. Hurry!”

At that, the crafters took off running.

Chapter 5
ALL HANDS ON DECK

King, Orlando, Valentine, and Nadir had all gone back to Millsfield to retrieve the stone hand mills.

Challe had volunteered to escort them, so Anne felt confident leaving the task to them. However, the round trip would take one full day.

While they were gone, Elliott, Anne, and Mithril Lid Pod carried all the available firewood to the second floor of the east wing. Danna and Hal also lent a hand in their spare moments between chores.

They piled as much firewood as they could in the hearth of the room where the silver sugar was stored, and they lit a fire. Then they gathered up some iron buckets, placed hot coals in each of them, and set them here and there around the space.

The room grew stiflingly hot, and the air dried out. In the midst of the furious rain, a dense plume of smoke rose from the chimney in the roof of the castle's east wing.

Hugh came around again that afternoon. He had returned to Lewiston and had been receiving breathless reports one after another since that morning.

He'd heard from Harrington Province, which included Lewiston, and from neighboring Charmae Province, from Sant Province, and from the north of Rockwell Province. At all the workshops in those regions, their silver sugar had hardened in the same way.

After hearing about the Paige Workshop's response to the situation and seeing their work in person, Hugh asked just one

question.

“Will you make it?”

“We will,” Elliott promised him.

Late that night, the wagon returned, stacked with stone hand mills.

They set up the mills—five in total—in one of the rooms on the second floor. Naturally, after making the round trip between Lewiston and Millsfield and then carrying five mills up to the second floor, the candy crafters were totally exhausted. Elliott saw this and let the four of them go to bed early.

Elliott and Anne stayed up, throwing wood on the fire, topping up the charcoal, and keeping an eye on the transformation of the silver sugar.

They had placed thick fabric across the entire floor of the stiflingly hot room, and on top of the fabric, they spread out the solidified silver sugar. The silver sugar, which had formed clumps as large as a person’s head, made craggy little hills where they piled it. Due to the number of barrels, it was enough to fill the whole room.

After being in the heat for more than half a day, Anne and Elliott were getting dizzy.

At just past midnight, Anne sighed deeply and plopped herself down at the end of the hallway. Somehow or other, the silver sugar was drying out as planned.

From atop Anne’s shoulder, Mithril asked with concern, “Anne, do you need water? Should I go get some?”

“Yes, please. Thanks.”

She had been running around all day carrying wood, moving the silver sugar, and making sure the fire didn’t go out. She hadn’t had time for meals, and she was so worn out that she didn’t feel like eating anyway.

But the room was incredibly hot, and she was desperately thirsty.

Mithril immediately went to the kitchen to get water. Just as he left, Elliott came out of the room where they were drying the silver sugar.

He took a seat next to Anne, wiping the sweat from his brow and letting out a long breath. He leaned back against the wall.

Then suddenly, he spoke.

“Ah…the rain. It stopped.”

Now that he mentioned it, Anne didn’t hear it anymore. She halfway rose to her feet and glanced through the window at the sky. From time to time, a thin sliver of the moon peeked out through the gaps between the dark, drifting clouds.

“So it did.” Anne sat again, somewhat relieved.

“But the silver sugar is already hard, so we’ve got to get it back to normal…”

“Even so, if it had continued raining, then the stuff we dried and remilled would just go bad again. The humidity will decrease in two or three days, so it shouldn’t spoil a second time. If we can keep it drying overnight, we’ll have enough to mill a portion of it in the morning.”

“You’re right. For now, that’s good news.”

The stone floor of the hallway where they were sitting was quite chilly, but at the moment, it felt good to Anne.

“We can’t let the fire go out, so I’ll keep watch,” Elliott said. “You go get some sleep, Anne. There’s not much time before morning.”

“I can’t let you do that.”

“Running a girl ragged feels wrong, though.”

“But I am the head candy crafter.”

Elliott laughed jovially at her answer. “You’re a stubborn one, all right! Fine, then we’ll take shifts, okay?”

“Okay.”

Anne felt like it was the right time to ask about something that had been bothering her the whole day, brewing in the depths of her heart. Right now, the two of them were alone. Elliott might tell her the truth.

“Mr. Collins?” she began.

“What is it? You’re making a frightfully serious face. Is this a love confession or something?”

“No way! Nothing like that. It’s about the First Holy Festival… Will we finish in time?”

Elliott looked up at the ceiling and sighed.

“We can expect drying the silver sugar and remilling it to take a week. That’s what the Silver Sugar Viscount said. But frankly, I’m not so confident. At any rate, we don’t have enough candy crafters. We’re working with a tight deadline and a skeleton crew. A loss of seven days is huge. And since we aren’t going to get any

more time, I really wish we had two or three more able crafters. We might make it, but…”

“Couldn’t we call in anyone from some of the Paige Workshop’s smaller branches?”

“Our subsidiaries are scattered throughout the whole kingdom, so they’re not exactly at hand. Just getting them here would take over two months. There are a couple of workshops nearby, for what it’s worth, but they’re not on good terms with one another. And what’s more, each of them has quarreled with the main workshop before. We can’t rely on them. But just think about it—think about the work that we’re doing here. Even if we called in help, if they weren’t skilled candy crafters, we’d be lucky if they could help with kneading the sugar dough. I doubt they would add much to our capabilities.”

If the Paige Workshop had been the head of a larger faction, they probably wouldn’t have been in such a bind. They could have had their branch workshops in regions unaffected by the humidity send them extra silver sugar. But their branches were few in number and scattered far and wide, so just getting together their silver sugar would easily take two months.

The Mercury Workshop, which was preparing the reserve statues for the festival, commanded a much larger faction. Apparently, they were indeed gathering up silver sugar from their branch workshops at that very moment.

Hugh had said that, with the authority of the Silver Sugar Viscount, it was possible for him to issue orders to either the Radcliffe or the Mercury Workshop and make them lend silver sugar to the Paige Workshop. But if they accepted his help, they were sure to be at a disadvantage in the following year’s Selection.

The ability to obtain silver sugar was one measure of a workshop’s strength. The state church wouldn’t knowingly select a workshop that couldn’t secure enough of it. Supposing it was a close choice between several excellent sculptures, the workshop that had a history of trouble obtaining silver sugar, even if it had only happened once, would be rejected first.

“What about Keith?” asked Anne. “He would probably come. And he’s quite skilled.”

“That won’t work. Even if he wanted to, Master Radcliffe wouldn’t allow it. That’s just how the factions are.”

“So then we need someone skilled who’s not in a faction…”

Suddenly, Elliott’s eyes lit up. “That’s it! Him!” He leaned forward, put both hands on Anne’s shoulders, and shook her. “We can get *him* to work with us. He has no connection to any faction, and his shop never gets any business, so we don’t have to feel bad about pulling him away. Plus, he’s undeniably skilled! Kat’s the one, Anne!”

“Kat?”

Certainly, Kat would be the most reliable help they could ask for.

“Right now, I believe he’s set up shop in Southcent. You can get there in half a day from Lewiston. Anne, I want you to go fetch him. If you make the request, he may well agree to hear you out.”

The look in Elliott’s eyes was uncharacteristically earnest. He knew that as things stood, there was absolutely no way they would finish on time. But with Kat’s help, they would have a chance.

Anne nodded. “Got it. I’ll go get Kat!”

The following morning, before the sun had even risen in the sky, a dapple-gray horse belonging to the Paige Workshop was led out into the courtyard. This horse was their youngest and fastest, and he was accustomed to Challe.

The candy crafters needed to continue their work, so Challe was going to take Anne with him and ride to Southcent.

Elliott and the other four candy crafters, plus Mithril Lid Pod and even Danna and Hal, had come out into the courtyard to see them off.

The dead grass, inundated with rainwater, was frozen and crunchy. When the rain stopped, the temperature suddenly dropped; beads of moisture remained frozen, dangling from the tips of blades of grass and tree branches.

But the sunlight was back.

Perhaps because it had been washed clean by the rain, the forest—with its tangled ivy and thorny shrubs—looked somehow

refreshed. The frozen raindrops reflected the sunlight, and the cold castle garden was incredibly bright.

"Go with confidence. We will do the work properly," Orlando said coolly.

The other three nodded vigorously.

Mithril, who was standing on Elliott's shoulder, threw out his chest. "The great Mithril Lid Pod is here, so don't you worry!"

"We're counting on you, Anne," Elliott said.

"I'll bring him back with me," she promised. "I won't fail."

Then after looking at each of the four candy crafters' faces, Anne walked toward the dapple-gray horse. Challe was already straddling the saddle. He took Anne's hand, pulled her up, and set her in front of him. She sat protected between Challe's arms, but the horse was taller than she'd expected, and it was a little scary.

"Please look after Noah, okay? Danna, Hal." She made the request from atop the horse.

Danna and Hal both said they would.

Noah was still in Anne's bed, refusing to even look at the food they brought him. The day before, as busy as she had been, Anne had nevertheless gone to visit Noah's bedside numerous times during her breaks. But it had been of no use. Now Anne was anxious about leaving his side. As head candy crafter, however, this was a time when Anne had to fulfill her own duties.

"Let's go," Challe said brusquely, then kicked the horse's sides.

The horse started walking, and Anne looked back toward the west wing of the castle. She could see Glen's figure in the window of the third-floor hallway. He was staring down at her. She was sure that Elliott had told him of the situation.

She bowed silently to Glen, who appeared like he had something to say.

Then when she turned her gaze back ahead, she spotted Bridget standing at the top of the hill. The other girl panicked and rushed to hide behind a tree. She seemed to think that she hadn't been noticed, so for her sake, Anne pretended not to know she was there. But she glanced at her out of the corner of her eye.

Bridget was watching Anne and Challe leave, and she seemed anxious about it.

I wonder if she's worried about Challe? Or maybe she's concerned about whether we'll finish in time for the First Holy Festival? Or

could it be both?

They descended the hill, dodging briars and fallen trees. Then from behind her, Challe informed Anne, “We’re going to speed up now. Are you ready?”

He closed his arms around Anne’s body, as if to protect her, and leaned forward slightly. Her heart started pounding at the sensation of Challe embracing her from behind. She was glad that she had her back to him, so he wouldn’t notice that her face was red.

“Yeah. Ready,” she answered, and Challe kicked the horse’s sides hard.

It was unusually cool for late autumn. Anne was wearing a winter dress with a high collar and had several coats layered on top. Under her skirt, she wore woolen pants, and topping it all off, she had the cape Kat had given her draped over her shoulders.

Even so, she was still cold. The wind blew up her skirt and chilled her. The air was frosty enough to cut into her cheeks.

The horse’s hooves kicked the beads of ice that had formed at the tip of each blade of grass up into the air.



Bridget watched Anne and Challe mount their horse and descend the hill.

I hope Kat comes back with them.

She couldn’t help wishing for their success.

The candy crafters’ movements had been hectic since the previous morning. Bridget was naturally curious about what was going on, but the candy crafters wouldn’t tell her. And so she had eavesdropped when Elliott went to Glen’s room to make his report. That was how she found out about the silver sugar.

Glen and the candy crafters had been ignoring her, but she wasn’t hoping for them to fail. The Paige Workshop was a source of pride for Bridget. If it became a laughingstock, she wouldn’t be able to bear it.

Just as the horse that Challe and Anne were riding disappeared from her field of vision—

"Bridget."

—someone gently embraced her shoulders from behind. It was Gladys. Startled, Bridget looked back over her shoulder.

"Gladys. How did you know I was here?"

"I couldn't find you, so I searched for you from the windows on the third floor."

Gladys's words were tender and pleasant. But strangely, when he wasn't in sight, that pleasantness didn't linger in her mind at all.

And yet Challe's words, when he had gently told her to wise up, were stuck in her mind like a thorn forever. She would be happy, she thought, if only Gladys's pleasant words would remain with her, leaving her always feeling satisfied. The fact that they didn't frustrated her.

"You're worried about the Paige Workshop, aren't you?" Gladys whispered into Bridget's ear. "But the candy crafters are cold to you. They don't understand you at all. Even though you're so kind."

"It's always been that way. I'm used to it."

"You're so cute, Bridget. I love you."

Gladys smiled. He put his arms gently around Bridget's waist and hugged her tight.

"I'm so glad that you are my mistress."

Bridget was happy about Gladys's attitude—relieved, even. She touched one of his hands, which had wrapped itself around her waist, and found that it was cold.

Challe's hands were cold, too.

The memory struck her suddenly, and she became irritated with herself for recalling it. She wondered why she couldn't just fill her mind up with thoughts of Gladys holding her like this. Gladys was so beautiful and kind. And yet his kindness stemmed from the fact that she was in possession of his wing. She was well aware of that.

Even so, this is much better than Challe, who was cold and harsh even when I had his wing.

As she thought this, something whispered in the depths of her heart, asking, *Are you sure?*



The royal capital of Lewiston was located in Harrington Province, and at the province's southernmost tip was a port town called Southcent. The town sat at the end of a small peninsula with a warm current flowing offshore. Thanks to that, even in the depths of winter, hardly any snow ever accumulated there.

It didn't look like any rain had fallen in Southcent. There were no traces of rainwater carving grooves into the soil, and the air was moderately dry.

The town was centered on the port, built on terrain shaped like one-half of a bowl. Stone houses with low eaves covered the slopes, which spread gently upward from the bowl's bottom.

"Do you know where I can find the shop of the Silver Sugar Master Alph Hingley?"

A little past midday, Anne and Challe arrived at what seemed to be the center of Southcent—a marketplace that stretched along the port. Just as they'd heard from their resident walking encyclopedia, Valentine, the town was quite warm. Warm enough that Anne felt perfectly comfortable removing her cape and one coat.

Beside the marketplace was a wharf. The waves splashed gently against it, and the smell of salt water was strong.

The goods lined up along the wharf beneath oilcloth tents included freshly caught fish, shellfish, and seaweed. It was exciting just to look at the unusual foodstuffs. But they didn't have time for leisurely sightseeing.

Because she was with Challe, Anne stood out quite a bit.

The frank people of the port town were openly surprised by Challe's appearance, and the pair attracted a lot of interest. Anne stopped anyone who looked their way and asked about Kat, but every one of them seemed puzzled by the question.

Eventually, Anne found a housewife with a good-natured look about her, and yet again, she posed the question she had already repeated countless times.

"Do you know where I can find the shop of the Silver Sugar Master Alph Hingley?"

“A Silver Sugar Master named Hingley? We don’t have anyone as impressive as that here. I’ve never heard of him.”

The housewife gave Anne the same answer as all the others. And just as they had, she kept glancing at Challe, who was standing silently behind Anne.

“I see… Thank you very much,” said Anne.

“I’m sorry that I couldn’t help.”

“Oh, no, it’s all right.”

The housewife turned to walk away, and Anne’s shoulders drooped.

“I wonder if Kat is really living here. Is it possible he moved again?”

At this, the housewife stopped abruptly. She turned around, looking surprised. “Kat? The sugar candy maker?”

“You know him?!” Anne ran over to her.

“If you’re talking about Kat the candy maker, I know him. If you go straight up that hill, there’s a house. Was there a sign…? Now I can’t remember. The house has a red roof. It’s in between a clothing shop and a liquor store.”

“Thank you so much! That’s a huge help. Let’s go, Challe.”

Anne was about to take off running when the housewife called out to stop her.

“Wait, young lady! Do you mean to tell me that this ‘Silver Sugar Master Alph Hingley’ of yours is our Kat?!”

“That’s right.”

“You mean that man is as splendid a crafter as all that?! He’s a Silver Sugar Master?!”

Anne left behind the shocked, flustered housewife, and together with Challe, she ascended the hill the woman had pointed out to them.

The road leading up the hill was roughly paved with stones, and it was uneven and bumpy. Slender houses stood densely packed on both sides, their eaves all in a row. It might have been Southcent’s main shopping district, but the road was still narrow. Anne and Challe had to leave their horse with someone at the bottom.

After walking up the road for a while, they found a house with a red roof sandwiched between a clothier and a liquor store. There was no sign out. The window glass was filthy, and they

couldn’t see inside the shop. The door seemed to be a poor fit for its frame and was standing slightly open because it wouldn’t close all the way. The place looked like it had already gone under. In a word, it was shabby.

“Oh, Kat…,” Anne mumbled. “As always, you can’t tell if he wants to do business or not…”

Beside her, Challe was looking over the exterior of the house. “It’s a little bit better than the last one.”

“Yeah, I suppose…”

The name *Alph Hingley* was widely known among candy crafters. He was said to possess skills on par with the Silver Sugar Viscount, and he was famous enough that Anne had known his name for a long time.

Despite that, very few people had ever gotten Kat to make any sugar candy for them. That was because, sometimes, he wouldn’t make anything even when someone asked. He was determined to do work for only those he wanted to do work for.

What’s more, he took the financial standing of his customers into account and sold his pieces for very little, no matter how complex the creations were.

As a result, despite being a magnificently skilled Silver Sugar Master, Kat lived in poverty.

He had previously set up shop in Lewiston, but his dwelling at the time had been terribly dilapidated. He had hung his sign out in front of the ramshackle candy shop, but the appearance of the place had likely discouraged many potential customers.

Challe was right—compared with before, Kat’s current residence was an improvement. But he had no sign outside.

“Kat?”

Anne opened the door and peeked in. The gloomy interior of the shop was deserted. There was a counter in the back, but that was all. Aside from the counter, there was nothing there. It looked more like an empty storehouse than a shop.

There was a little fairy sitting on top of the counter. It was Benjamin, with his soft green ringlets, nodding off drowsily. He seemed to be minding the shop, but he wasn’t doing a very good job. Not that the shop really needed minding anyway.

“Benjamin, hello.”

Once they were inside, Anne spoke quietly to the fairy on the counter.

Benjamin blearily opened his eyes. “What’s this? You kind of look like Anne…”

“I am Anne, Benjamin. It’s nice to see you.”

“You are? Oh, so you are. And Challe is here, too. What a surprise. What are you doing in a place like this?”

Benjamin giggled and stood up. He didn’t look surprised at all. His pink cheeks were adorable, like a little girl’s.

“We came because we have a request for Kat,” said Anne. “Is he in?”

“Yep, he’s here. Oh, Kaaat! We have a lovely customer!”

Benjamin had turned to a door behind the counter leading to the back of the shop and called out. Then they heard a clattering noise, and the door opened.

“A customer?”

Kat emerged wearing a sullen expression. As always, his slim body was clad in clean and stylish clothes decorated with embroidery at the collar and wrists. His features were aristocratic and a little cold. His glossy, silvery-gray hair reminded Anne of a graceful cat with a long, elegant tail.

His eyes, the color of a clear blue sky, reflected the figures of Anne and Challe.

“Oh… It’s you guys.” Kat looked back and forth between Anne and Challe, and his slanted, catlike eyes turned uncharacteristically affectionate. “So you got ’im back, huh? Challe, I mean.”

“Yes. Sorry for causing you so much worry. I’m really grateful to you, Kat.” Anne bobbed her head in a bow.

“That’s great news, shrimp. No need for thanks, though. I didn’t do a thing. So what’s up? You come to report his recapture to me or somethin’?”

“No, I have a favor to ask.”

Kat raised his thin eyebrows slightly. “A favor?”

“All sorts of things have happened, and now I’m working as the head candy crafter at the Paige Workshop.”

“Wow, head candy crafter?” said Benjamin with a buoyant smile. “That’s amazing, Anne. Congratulations!”

Anne offered only a bitter smile in return.

“Well, I’m not sure how much I’m actually helping them. But at the recent Selection, the Paige Workshop was chosen to create the sugar candy sculptures for the First Holy Festival. We’re currently renting a castle near Lewiston and are in the middle of making our sculptures there. But we’ve run into trouble because our silver sugar solidified, and we’ve fallen behind schedule. With the number of candy crafters we have now, it seems like we might not finish in time. We need help. So, Kat, I’m asking for your assistance. Will you come with us to Lewiston and lend us a hand?”

Kat crossed his arms. He looked annoyed.

“Sorry, but I don’t do those kinds of favors. I only make candy for people I want to make it for. And I’m not makin’ any for His Majesty the King or the clergy of the state church. I’ve got an order from the old lady who works at the mill. Her birthday’s comin’ up just after the New Year. She’s more of a priority for me than the king or the church.”

Kat didn’t make candy for just anyone. Now that Anne thought about it, he didn’t seem likely to agree to work for the king or the church. And if she asked him to do it for the sake of the Paige Workshop, he’d probably say, *Why should I care?*

Kat had his own convictions, and she was basically asking him to leave those behind.

What should I do…? I can’t just give up.

Anne recalled the faces of Elliott and the other candy crafters. She knew they were working frantically, trying to get the silver sugar into a usable state as quickly as possible.

“You won’t do it, no matter what?” asked Anne.

“I won’t.”

“But we need you, Kat.”

“I said I won’t do it, and that’s final.”

Anne thought for a minute, but the only words she could manage were hopelessly simple.

“Umm, are you really saying no?”

“Answer’s no. I won’t do it.”

For a while, Challe silently listened to the two of them endlessly repeating the same question and answer. Then all of a sudden, he called Kat’s name.

“Hey, *Mr.* Kat.”

Anne almost screamed.

Did he just call him Mr. *Kat?! At a time like this—?!*

"You trying to pick a fight now?" Kat glared sharply at Challe. "I know I taught you not to stick 'Mister' in front of my nickname, so don't try an' tell me you forgot!"

"Oh, I remember," the fairy replied.

"So you meant to do that?!"

"I meant it."

Kat brushed Anne aside and pressed in on Challe. He stuck his finger out and pointed it right at the tip of Challe's nose.

"Why you…! So that other young lady couldn't bully the attitude outta ya after all, eh?!"

Challe weathered Kat's shouting with an unruffled expression.

"There's no need to change my attitude," Challe countered.

"Shameless!"

"By the way, I heard about this from Anne, but it sounds like you're in the Silver Sugar Viscount's debt."

At Challe's words, Kat looked alarmed.

"Debt?! What the heck're you talkin' about? That's no debt! In the end, that dim-witted bastard never did anything about it anyway. That was just a little…mistake! A slipup!"

"And as a result of that mistake, did the Silver Sugar Viscount demand anything of you?"

A cold sweat started to bead on Kat's forehead. "Uh, w-well……"

"And did you finish what was demanded of you?"

"Why should I tell you somethin' like that?!"

"Was it something that would be awkward to speak of?"

"Of course not! I didn't get it done yet, but I'm gonna! What's this about anyway? You workin' as the dim-witted bastard's minion now?!"

"No. I'm merely asking questions."

"Dammit, quit messin' around! If I thought I could get away without doin' it, I'd dance naked in the streets. But I promised, so there's nothin' I can do! I just gotta get it over with!!"

Kat cursed the absent Hugh as he ruffled his own bangs.

Anne was flabbergasted by Kat's extreme agitation.

What exactly is being demanded of him…?

Apparently, Hugh asked Kat to do something that he hated even more than the idea of dancing around naked. Hugh had stated

once that tormenting Kat had been his hobby for the past fifteen years. Anne didn't know whether to be surprised by how well it was working or not.

But why was Challe suddenly asking about such a thing? He couldn't simply be amusing himself. Not at a time like this.

"…Ah…!"



Suddenly, she realized what Challe was up to. Anne looked up at him, and he glanced back at her and nodded slightly.

That's it!

"Kat!" Anne exclaimed. "Do you really hate Hugh's request that much?"

"Does this look like the face of a happy man?!"

"Supposing I was able to get Hugh to cancel his request, in return, could I ask you to assist the Paige Workshop?"

"Cancel the request?"

"Yes. If Hugh has the right to ask you to do anything he wants, then I will take over that right from him. So in place of what he asked for, Kat, I want you to help the Paige Workshop."

Kat put on a complicated expression and stroked his chin several times. His fingers were long and slim—he had the hands of an incredibly skilled candy crafter, and the Paige Workshop needed them.

"If the sugar candy order that you've already accepted is for after the New Year, then you should have the time to finish it even after helping us. Please, Kat. The sugar candy sculptures for the First Holy Festival aren't just for His Majesty the King or the state church. They're made to bring a year of happiness to all the people living in the Kingdom of Highland. If we make good candy sculptures and bring fortune to Highland, then maybe next year, we won't have a poor harvest of sugar apples like we did this year."

"…That does sound better than doing that dim-witted bastard's bidding," Kat grumbled. "Next year, I really need to get my hands on some quality silver sugar. If we have a bad harvest again, I'll be in trouble, too."

"So then, Kat. Will you help us?!"

"I'm in."

At his words, Anne's eyes lit up.

"But I don't think that dim-witted bastard is just gonna hand over his prize because you asked."

"I'm well aware of that. I'll negotiate. And without fail, I'll get you to come with me."

Kat crossed his arms and nodded. "Fine. Once you do that, send me a letter or somethin'. If you get the right to tell me what to do from Hugh, I'll come work for you instead."

“Thank you so much, Kat! I’ll make sure I’m able to send you that letter!”

Anne gave a spirited bow and turned to leave. Just as she started to walk off, Kat called out to stop her, as if he had suddenly remembered something.

“Oh yeah. Hey, shrimp?”

“Yes?”

When Anne turned around, she saw that Kat was frowning a little.

“You said you guys are near Lewiston, right? You seen that guy Jonas at all?”

“Huh? No. What’s going on with Jonas? Did you find out where he is?”

“No, but someone told me he saw a guy who looked like Jonas hangin’ around the busy streets near the castle walls of Lewiston. So you know, I thought you guys might’ve seen ’im.”

“Oh, really…?”

Jonas’s whereabouts were one of Anne’s many concerns. If he was in Lewiston, she needed to find him and let him know that the false accusations against him had been cleared up.

“Hey, don’t think about doin’ anythin’ stupid.” Kat’s sharp, catlike eyes glared pointedly at Anne. “You’re the head candy crafter of the Paige Workshop, aren’cha? Don’t waste time you don’t have worryin’ about a jerk like Jonas.”

Anne felt embarrassed that even her briefest thoughts were so transparent.

“It did cross my mind, but I won’t do that. I’m the head candy crafter, after all.”

Anne bowed again and headed out.

After they left Kat’s shop, Anne and Challe immediately set their horse galloping toward Lewiston.

As they bounced violently up and down, Anne turned in the saddle and looked back at Challe. Challe, who was gazing straight ahead as he drove the horse, noticed her staring and glanced down at her.

“Thank you,” Anne said. Because of the noise of the horse’s hooves and heavy breathing and the wind whistling in her ears, she had to speak loudly. “Thank you for reminding me about Hugh’s demand!”

“I did it because you two fools weren’t getting anywhere by yourselves.”

Challe was rude as always, but Anne was happy that he seemed to be trying to help her and the Paige Workshop with their job.

By the time they arrived at Hollyleaf Castle, it was already quite dark.

After climbing the hilly road and approaching the courtyard, they could see the building come into view. On the first and second floors of the east wing, the flames of lamps still flickered. And there was a trail of smoke rising from the chimney in the roof of the east wing. The candy crafters were still hard at work.

After tying up their horse in the stable, Anne and Challe passed under the triple-arched eaves and entered the castle.

The air in the hall was a little warmer than outside. Anne breathed a sigh of relief.

“Kat’s not with you, is he?”

The voice came from the lesser hall on the second floor. When Anne looked up, she saw Hugh leaning over the brass handrail, looking down at them. Beside him, naturally, was Salim.

“Hugh? What’s the matter?”

Anne dashed up the stairs. Challe climbed up after her at a more leisurely pace.

“I was sent by the state church to observe you, and this is what I find! I come to check on the progress of your work, but the head candy crafter is absent. And when I ask Collins about it, he says that you went to see Kat. I told him I would wait. There’s something I need to get Kat to hurry up and do for me.”

Anne stood in front of Hugh, catching her breath.

“Would that ‘something’ be the wager you made with him?” she said, panting. “The one about Kat doing whatever you say?”

“Yes, so?”

“In that case, this is perfect. Hugh, I have a favor to ask. Your right to have Kat do whatever you say—I want you to transfer it to me.”

A mysterious look came over Hugh, but he seemed to understand immediately. The corners of his lips curled upward.

“I see. So Kat rejected your request for help. That seems like something he would do. I assume he said he would help you only if you managed to seize that right from me?”

“Exactly. Hugh, please. Transfer it to me.”

“You of all people ought to understand. Kat won’t make the smallest sliver of sugar candy unless he’s happy with the job. Even if I, the Silver Sugar Viscount, threaten or cajole him, he won’t make anything that he doesn’t find appealing. The right to control a guy like that to my complete satisfaction is extremely attractive. I’m not inclined to give it away.”

Hugh recognized Kat’s skills. He probably had something in mind that he wanted Kat’s talents for. But Anne and the rest of the Paige Workshop were in the same boat. She couldn’t back down.

“You won’t do it, no matter what?”

“No way. I can’t indulge you this time. If you want it, you’ll have to wrench it away from me.”

Hugh was smiling provocatively. Anne balled her hands into tight fists and looked him directly in the eye.

“All right, I will.”

“Oh?” Hugh’s eyes took on a fierce glint. “Do you intend to challenge me?” he asked her directly.

The question sent a chill up Anne’s spine.

Hugh was a kind person, someone she could rely on. But he was also the Silver Sugar Viscount. He had power, and his skills as a Silver Sugar Master were unrivaled. It was reckless to challenge such a man. That recklessness felt almost like fear, chilling Anne’s fists.

“The novice Silver Sugar Master wants to compete against me? And the stakes are the right to control Kat. Fine, I accept. It would be a disgrace for me to turn my back on a formal challenge. The Silver Sugar Viscount is prohibited from making sugar candy for anyone other than His Majesty the King, but things are different if someone challenges me. If it’s for the sake of a competition or for the purpose of honing my skills, I am allowed.”

Anne recalled a piece of sugar candy that she had seen in Silver Westol Castle, one that Hugh had made. It was a candy statue of a

mythical beast leaping ferociously through breaking waves. She remembered that when she'd seen it, she had felt like the candies she made were trinkets for children, sculpted using cheap tricks.

There's no way I can win in a competition against Hugh!

Anne's palms were sweaty.

Just then, they heard something. It was the rumbling noise of someone grinding material in a mill. All four mills were going. From time to time, there was a high-pitched crunching sound as solid chunks of silver sugar were broken into more manageable pieces.

The candy crafters were continuing their work without a moment's rest.

If they didn't finish their sugar candy sculptures in time for the First Holy Festival, the Paige Workshop would cease to exist. All of them understood that.

They also knew that they probably wouldn't make it. But they were convincing themselves that it could be done and were continuing the work. While suppressing their feelings of anxiety and impatience, they were still doing their jobs.

Challe stood behind Anne, and his hand gently patted her stiff shoulder. He was telling her not to be afraid.

Not a single one of them is running away. So I can't, either.

She took a breath. She inhaled and exhaled deeply, then she spoke.

"A contest, then."

At these words, Salim, who had been standing at the ready behind Hugh, mumbled, "Of all the foolhardy…," with a rather surprised expression.

Hugh grinned. "I accept, Anne Halford."

"What will we compete at?"

"It's a match between two candy crafters. It can only be a sugar candy competition."

Hugh put his hand on his chin for a minute like he was thinking things over. But soon, his gaze turned toward the corridor leading into the west wing of the castle.

"That fairy. There was a fairy living in Hollyleaf Castle, right? You said you caught him, but he wouldn't eat anything, and that he was very weak."

"You mean Noah?"

“Let’s get him to judge. It won’t matter to him who wins or loses, and fairies have a better eye than humans when it comes to sugar candies. They’re instinctively drawn to beautiful pieces of candy. We’ll make candy sculptures for him. Whichever one he wants to eat will determine the winner. How about it? If neither of us can get him to eat, it’s a draw. But in the event of a draw, I won’t give you my rights to Kat.”

“Understood.”

There was no point in getting hung up over the details of the competition. It didn’t change the fact that Anne’s skills were no match for Hugh’s. But she wouldn’t be able to show her face in front of her hardworking colleagues if she raised the white flag before the contest even started. So there was nothing to do but take on the challenge.

“Time is precious, I’m sure,” Hugh said. “We can’t be slow about this. We’ll have all of tomorrow—that’s it. The following morning, both of us will show our finished works to the fairy. Agreed?”

“Fine by me,” Anne replied.

“This’ll be fun, Anne,” Hugh said with a smile. He looked delighted.

Chapter 6
WHAT THE FAIRY SAW

“A contest against the Silver Sugar Viscount?! That’s absurd!”

Elliott’s mouth hung open. He had just heard about Anne’s plan.

They were on the second floor of the east wing. The hot air made the room where they were drying the silver sugar feel like a sauna. Elliott, who had been working there, had rolled up his shirt sleeves, and his whole body was dripping with sweat.

“But if I don’t do it,” said Anne, “Kat won’t come.”

“I expected as much. He’s a strange one. But he seems to have a soft spot for you, Anne, so I thought he might agree. I guess he’s still the same old Kat in the end.” Elliott’s shoulders drooped, and he sighed. “So what’s the Silver Sugar Viscount up to?”

“He told me to summon you. It sounds like he plans to stay here until the day after tomorrow to make his sculpture. That’s why he wants to speak with you.”

“It’s not like I have any say in it. I can’t exactly defy the Silver Sugar Viscount. Well, here I go. The lesser hall, was it? Anne, you go tell the others about Kat. Tell them he’s not coming right away. They were hoping he’d be with you, too. Oh, and set these down somewhere over there. I’ll be back soon.”

Elliott handed Anne a fire poker and his insulated leather gloves. “I won’t ask what you think your chances of victory are,” he said. He looked down at Anne like someone might look at a mischievous child. “Just do the very best you can.”

He clapped his hand down on her shoulder and left the room. It seemed he, too, understood that Anne was taking on a ridiculous challenge.

The grinding of the millstones continued unabated. Anne set the fire poker and gloves down near the door and peeked into the next room, where the stone mills had been set up.

Orlando, King, Nadir, and Valentine were each operating one of the mills. The machines were knee-high and big enough that Anne's arms could just wrap around one of them. They had long handles that reached about waist height, and they were operated by turning the handle from a standing position.

Each one was about twice as big as a typical mill intended for home use. Of course, that meant they required twice as much power to work, too.

"Ouch!" Nadir let one of his firmly planted feet slip, and he pitched forward. He must have hit his nose, because he was holding the middle of his face uncomfortably.

"Are you all right?" Valentine offered a frail attempt at sympathy, but the moment he did, he also staggered to a halt.

Both of them were so fatigued that their legs were shaking.

Orlando and King were steadier on their feet. But King's whole body was dripping with sweat. He had been gritting his teeth and working his mill hard.

Orlando grimaced painfully and stopped. He looked down at his hands, opening and closing his fists repeatedly.

"Here, put this on," said Mithril. "Your blisters burst, didn't they?"

Mithril noticed the way Orlando was acting and came bouncing out from the corner of the room to hand him some anesthetic ointment made from medicinal herbs.

The four candy crafters had been operating the mills continuously since morning. They must have been at the limit of their endurance. It was obvious how strained they were, because none of them even noticed Anne. They were all working desperately, trying to get even a little bit ahead.

The ground silver sugar had formed little mountains around each of the mills. As the millstones rumbled around and around, waves of dry white powder tumbled out from where the two stones joined in the center.

I've made a reckless wager. I know that. There's no way I can win against Hugh with my skills. Anne focused her strength into her

hand where it held the door. *But I don't want to lose*, she thought firmly. For the sake of the other crafters, she wanted to win.

"Everyone?"

When she spoke, the candy crafters finally turned to face her. "Anne!"

Mithril looked overjoyed and promptly ran over to hop up on her shoulder.

Then Nadir's voice came alive with hope. "So what about Kat?!"

Answering him was painful. "Not here yet," she said. "But I think he might join us."

Orlando frowned. "What do you mean?"

"It seems Kat won't be persuaded so easily. But the Silver Sugar Viscount has the right to make him do anything he asks. I'm going to enter a contest with the Viscount to receive that right. When I win, Kat will come to us."

"A contest with the Silver Sugar Viscount?" Valentine asked uneasily.

His reaction was only natural. No matter what kind of contest Anne entered against the Viscount, a young lady like her surely had no chance of beating him.

"Yes. I'm going to try. Because we need Kat."

For a moment, the candy crafters went still and silent. Their disappointment, anxiety, confusion, and other feelings jumbled together.

Not long after, Orlando raised his head. "We'll leave it to you, then, head crafter," he said. "We will do our jobs. You do yours."

King grinned. "That's right," he agreed. Then he turned to the others, "Okay, let's get through another batch! Nadir, Valentine, don't just stand there!"

The two of them nodded and went back to their mills.

Anne could clearly feel their confidence in her. She could tell that she had their trust. They believed in her and wanted her to do her best to not let them down, no matter the outcome. That was what they were trying to tell her, and she understood.

"Anne, the great Mithril Lid Pod will assist you!" Mithril flexed his biceps for her to see.

"Thank you. I'll be sure to do my job."

In terms of real ability, she fell far short of the mark. If she wanted a chance at victory, it was up to her to find it or to make

it.

Anne had to fulfill her responsibilities to the candy crafters who called her their head crafter and who believed in her. Their faith gave her courage.

Following Elliott's instructions, Danna and Hal hastily cleaned one of the rooms on the third floor of the west wing. Soon, Hugh settled in. The following day, he would spend all his time working there.

Despite it being the middle of the night, Salim had run off to Lewiston. Apparently, he was rushing to bring Hugh a barrel of silver sugar, his various tools, and his workbench.

Anne would make her sculpture in the east wing's first-floor workspace. She hadn't procured any silver sugar specifically for the contest, so it was decided that she would use some of Hugh's.

Anne finished setting up everything she would need, and then before she collapsed from exhaustion, she went to briefly check on Noah.

Challe was in the room, and Noah seemed to be asleep. Danna and Hal had told her the boy had yet to eat a single bite, even while she was making her round trip to Southcent.

Although his true age was much higher, Noah appeared to be a child of eleven or twelve, and he looked rather sweet when asleep. As she gazed at his peaceful face, Anne felt from the bottom of her heart that she wanted to help him.

"It might not all be a waste," she muttered. "Not if Hugh makes an incredible sugar candy sculpture that Noah can bring himself to eat. Even if I lose the match, it won't be a waste. Noah's life will be saved."

I can't fulfill Master Herbert's request, but his wish will still be granted.

Sitting in the room, though faded, was one of the sofas with the elegant cabriole legs. Anne guessed that Danna and Hal had moved it in that afternoon, probably because they needed it while looking after Noah.

Challe was sitting on the sofa with his legs crossed comfortably. He was propping his chin up in his hand on the armrest, looking

listless.

“There’s a possibility that he won’t choose either of your candies,” he said.

“You’re right. But don’t you think Hugh proposed this contest because he’s confident he can get Noah to eat? Are sugar candies really that attractive to fairies, Challe?”

Challe thought about this for a moment.

“If it’s in a form that has particular meaning for the individual, yes, they are,” he answered. “And the more beautiful and sweet-smelling the candy is, the more attractive. It’s like the feeling of wanting to touch and kiss someone you love. Though, even I can’t tell you whether Noah will be able to suppress it.”

Challe was an obsidian fairy—he was levelheaded and strong. Mithril had once said that obsidian fairies were exceptionally tough. If it was difficult for someone like Challe to restrain himself, Anne reasoned that Noah would likely give in and eat the candy.

But in order to entice him to eat, she had to make something beautiful that held meaning for him.

Something that was meaningful to Noah…

There could be nothing more meaningful than Herbert, the master for whom he had been waiting for fifteen years. But what about Herbert could she craft into a candy that would hold the most meaning for Noah?

Challe jerked his chin toward the door. “Get some sleep already. Use my bed. You have candy to make tomorrow, don’t you?”

“But what about you, Challe?”

“I’ll be here watching over him.”

“You’ll feel awful if you don’t sleep,” Anne said, standing in front of the sofa. “We can take turns sitting here. Go ahead,” she urged. “I’ll take the first watch.”

Suddenly, Challe squeezed her hand. It startled her.

“You have a tough match coming up, don’t you?” he said. “Go sleep.”

“But—”

“Do you need another good-night kiss? If so, I’ll give you as many as it takes.”

At that, Anne recalled the feeling of his lips against her cheek. In a flash, her ears were on fire.

Challe snickered and let go of her hand. “Go sleep.”

“G-good night!”

Anne ran away to Challe’s room, extremely embarrassed.

The following morning, Anne carried breakfast up to Hugh. When she reached the third floor of the west wing, she saw that Salim was standing in front of Hugh’s door.

“Salim. Have you been there all night?”

He answered the surprised Anne with a blank expression. “A lookout is absolutely essential whenever the Viscount stays outside Silver Westol Castle under his own identity.”

“I didn’t realize that being the Silver Sugar Viscount was such a dangerous job.”

“Normally, it isn’t. But this Viscount had all sorts of problems back when he became maestro of his faction and even before. He still does, to this day. From time to time, there are those who try to cause him harm.”

Sure enough, Anne had heard that back when Hugh became maestro of the Mercury Workshop, vicious rumors circulated that he had hijacked the position. Perhaps some were still carrying those old grudges.

“I see,” said Anne. “Well, there’s breakfast here for you, too, Salim. How about going inside and eating with Hugh? Surely, he wouldn’t object?”

Salim flashed her a strained smile. “Indeed. Even at times when he must consider his station, he tells me to eat with him, putting me in an awkward position.”

With that, he knocked on the door. “Viscount. Anne has brought breakfast.”

Hugh told them to enter, and Salim opened the door.

Hugh’s workbench, a cask of cold water, and a barrel of silver sugar had been brought into the room. There was also a small table and chair, as well as a large sofa, probably for resting. Hugh’s boots were propped up on the armrest of the sofa. Apparently, he’d lain down without any regard for manners.

Several leather-bound books were lying on the ground around the sofa.

As Anne set the tray on the table, Salim gathered up the scattered books. On their open pages, Anne saw lines of small text and depictions of people wearing old-fashioned garments. They appeared to be historical figures.

“Viscount,” said Salim. “Please treat the books with more care. When you borrowed these, you were strictly warned by the priest to take good care of them. Consider my position, as the person who is going to have to return them.”

“When they said to take good care of them, that’s not what they meant.” Hugh slowly sat up and smoothed down his wild hair. “They meant not to show them to anyone or carelessly expose them to the public eye. These are books that I wouldn’t even be permitted to read if I didn’t have a noble rank. They’re banned, so to speak. They were only barely allowed to remain with the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell for research purposes. Oh, hello, Anne.”

“Good morning. What are those books?”

Hugh walked briskly over to the table, reached out for a piece of crispy, toasted bread, and bit into it without taking a seat.

“Yesterday, I had Salim go wake up the priests at the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell in the middle of the night and borrow these,” he said.

“What’s written in them?”

“Now, now, I’m not about to help out the opposition. Anyway, after we eat, I want to see that fairy again, the one named Noah.”

“Fine.”

“Did you already decide what you’re going to make?”

Anne found his question difficult to answer. She had made up her mind to choose something to do with Herbert but hadn’t yet decided specifically what it would be.

“Not yet…”

“Decide quickly. We only have until tomorrow morning.”

“I know.”

Hugh seemed confident. When she saw how relaxed he was, Anne started to panic.

As Hugh had requested, after breakfast, Anne showed him to the room where Noah was staying.

“Noah, sorry to wake you,” she said. “There’s a guest here who wants to see you.”

She entered the room, accompanied by Hugh. Challe, who was sitting on the sofa, glanced over at them but didn't say anything.

Noah didn't seem able to get up, but he moved his head a little on top of his pillow. When he saw Hugh's face, he frowned. Several days earlier, on one of Hugh's visits, the man had gawked at Noah like a curious spectator, so the boy's unfriendly expression was probably well deserved.

But Hugh strode boldly over to Noah's bedside and announced himself.

"I am the Silver Sugar Viscount, Hugh Mercury. I forgot to introduce myself last time. My apologies."

Anne was surprised by Hugh's formal tone, but Noah seemed even more shocked, and his eyes widened.

"What? The Silver Sugar Viscount? Oh, p-please excuse me," Noah said, struggling with all his might to prop himself up with his arms.

"No, no, you're fine where you are." Hugh stopped him, and Noah shrank back. Sure enough, he didn't seem able to rise, and with an apologetic look, he put his head back on the pillow.

"Um… Please forgive my rudeness the other day," he said.

Noah had been Herbert's page, and it seemed he respected the ranks and hierarchy of noble society, just like his master.

Hugh had heard about the boy's former position from Anne, and he had almost certainly divulged his standing on purpose.

"Never mind that," said Hugh. "More importantly, I have two or three questions for you. Is that all right?"

"Yes. Please ask me anything you wish."

"Lord Herbert was a fine man who lived up to the Chamber family crest, correct?"

"Yes." Noah nodded.

"Did you sometimes play games of fyffe with Lord Herbert?"

"Yes," Noah said again, then smiled a little. "Master Herbert was — Well, it's rude of me to say, but he wasn't very good at fyffe. I was his only opponent in the whole castle. I never saw him play fyffe with anyone here other than me."

"He wasn't very good at it?" Hugh asked. He seemed surprised.

"No, he wasn't."

"…I see." Hugh was quiet for a moment, as if he was thinking something over, but soon, he smiled. "Great. That's enough. Please

forgive the intrusion, Noah. To thank you, I'll bring you something good tomorrow."

Hugh turned around, a confident smile on his lips.

It seemed his questions had been meant to confirm whether the direction he was thinking of taking was correct. Apparently, it was.

Once Anne left the room with Hugh, he announced, "I'm going to start working now. And you?"

Anne concealed her panic and nodded. "Me too. I'll make my candy."

Anne went directly to the workspace on the first floor of the east wing, accompanied by Mithril Lid Pod.

The sound of grinding millstones echoed from the second floor.

Anne opened the barrel that she had received from Hugh and scooped up some silver sugar. She spread it out on top of her chilled workbench, which was topped with a stone slab. Then she touched the silver sugar with her fingers, checking the feel of it.

I wonder what aspect of Lord Herbert I can craft that will make Noah happy?

She turned the question over in her mind.

Mithril was waiting quietly in the corner of the room, trying to stay out of Anne's way.

Noah was always looking at his portrait.

She called to mind an image of Noah sitting there in the dark, looking up at the portrait. She had no doubt that he would be delighted if she re-created the damaged picture for him. If she could reproduce that image of the master whose return he had been so eagerly awaiting, Noah would certainly be overjoyed.

But she couldn't win the match unless Noah ate her sugar candy.

Even if she managed to re-create the figure of his cherished patron in sugar, he wasn't likely to eat it. If a sugar candy sculpture in Emma's likeness appeared before her eyes, Anne would probably be happy to see it. But there was no way she would want to eat it. Precisely because it was an image of someone she'd lost, she'd want to preserve it.

In that case, what should I make instead?

Even when she touched the silver sugar, the shape of what she would create wouldn't come to her. Anne grew impatient. She

rubbed her face hard with both hands.

“Mithril, I’m going to the portrait hall. I’ll be back.”

With those words, she headed for the lesser hall.

Let me take a look at the thing Noah was looking at.

Anne made her decision and was soon standing before the portrait in the lesser hall. As before, Herbert’s picture was there in its pitiful state. The likeness of the kind master who had tried to let his fairy go had been shredded.

Anne’s chest ached as she looked up at it.

“I heard you’re having a competition with the Silver Sugar Viscount.”

Suddenly, a voice came from behind her.

Startled, she turned around to find Gladys standing there. She wasn’t sure when he’d arrived. His hair, a color like green and blue dyes dissolved in milk, was captivating in the afternoon light.

Challe had told her not to let her guard down around Gladys. Deciding to be a little more cautious, Anne discreetly put some distance between them. Gladys seemed to notice and smirked.

“What is it, Anne? Did Challe warn you not to get too close to me?”

“No, but…”

She tried to smooth things over, but Gladys took a step toward her. She backed away with a start.

“See, I knew it,” he said. “But, Anne, there’s no need to worry. I haven’t talked to Challe about this yet since he’s being so cautious, but he and I share a very close bond. I simply haven’t been able to confide in him for now because I can’t read his true intentions—that’s all.”

Gladys gazed at Anne earnestly.

“Close?” she repeated.

“Yes. I would never bear any ill will toward him or things that are important to him. I have no intention of harming him. He and I…”

Just as he was about to explain—

“Gladys. What are you doing?”

—a voice cut him short. Bridget came down the stairs. Gladys smiled at her as she slowly descended.

“Nothing at all,” he replied. “I decided to go out for a walk, and Anne was here. I was just asking her about her competition with the Silver Sugar Viscount. Are you out for a walk, too, Bridget? Shall we go together?”

Bridget came closer and casually linked arms with Gladys. She looked at Anne.

“A competition with the Silver Sugar Viscount? Are you serious?” Her face was harsh.

“We’re having a contest. That’s all.”

“…You can’t possibly win…”

Bridget looked a little crestfallen, then she lowered her eyes and walked off. Anyone who thought about it could tell that Anne had basically no chance of winning. But Bridget had seemed disappointed.

Does she want me to win for the sake of the workshop?

Bridget was proud of being the daughter of the Paige Workshop’s maestro. She’d said it was why she had worked so hard at her studies, even though she didn’t enjoy them.

Anne watched Bridget and Gladys walk away, then looked up at the portrait again. Suddenly, she felt uneasy. Gladys had been about to say something.

“He and I…” Where was he going with that?

“Oh, Anne! This is just perfect!” Hal cried happily as he came up the stairs.

In his hands, he was holding a tray with a set of tea utensils on it.

“I was just about to bring some tea to the Silver Sugar Viscount’s room, but, um, I’m kind of…frightened of that bodyguard of his. Could I ask you to take it up instead?”

“Sure. No problem. That’s easy enough.”

It sounded like Hal and Danna were afraid of Hugh and Salim simply because Hugh was the Silver Sugar Viscount.

Anne took the tray, but when she arrived at the room on the third floor, Salim was not standing in front of the door. Finding that strange, she looked around. Then she heard Salim’s voice coming through the door.

“Now, Viscount?”

She could hear the surprise in his voice. That was unusual for Salim, whose emotions were normally difficult to read.

“Yes,” Hugh answered coolly.

“Why?”

“Why? Let me see, because I am the Silver Sugar Viscount.”

She heard Salim sigh. “So you are.”

“I have another errand for you. Go to the place specified here and ask them about the item mentioned there. All I need you to do is listen to their description. If they have a sketch or an example, even better. Make sure you come back before the sun goes down at the very latest.”

“Understood.”

Suddenly, the door opened, and Salim came out.

“Anne,” he said.

“I brought up some tea.”

“Thank you.”

Salim accepted the tray and glanced back into the room. Over Salim’s shoulder, Hugh waved with a smile.

“You seem calm, Anne,” Hugh said. “Everything going well?”

“…Not too bad.”

In fact, she hadn’t made any progress at all. Hugh had a clear basis for his sculpture and was already moving ahead with his work. Compared with him, she was in quite a pitiful situation.

Hugh grinned suggestively. He seemed to see right through her bluff and down to the shame beneath.

“Keep it together, Anne. Don’t let me down now that you’ve challenged me to a match.”

“I know.”

For the sake of everyone in the workshop, she would have to come up with something.

I’m just not as clever as Hugh.

Anne went down the stairs and stood in the lesser hall again, in front of the portrait of Herbert.

That’s why I can’t keep my thoughts from wandering off in all directions. If I’m making something for Noah, I have to try to understand how he feels. I have to see what he saw.

The tragic portrait was the only thread that Anne had to cling to. Noah, who could barely move, had planted himself in front of it. She had to imagine what he had been feeling as he gazed up at it.

Just as Noah had done, Anne sat with her arms around her knees, facing the portrait.

She could hear the millstones. Apparently, the candy crafters were wolfing down their meals whenever they had a moment. Around noon, Danna and Hal made sandwiches and took them into the workshop. When they found Anne sitting on the floor facing the portrait, they seemed startled, but they stepped around her quietly without saying a word.

Anne tried imagining that it was a portrait of her beloved mother—Emma—or Challe, or even Mithril, hanging there in front of her.

The more she imagined it, the sadder she became. Why was the portrait so damaged? Gazing at something like this would only make a person even more miserable.

But this portrait alone was free of dust. It was likely that Noah had been keeping it clean. How had he been able to look at something so pitiful with such love?

Before she knew it, the room had grown dim. The sound of the millstones continued.

Suddenly, she sensed someone behind her.

“Still not tired of staring at it, huh?”

The cold, prickly voice belonged to Challe. The sound of it was refreshing, like the burble of a clear stream. It brought a cool, pleasant feeling to her when she was at an impasse.

He knelt next to her and looked up at the portrait as well.

“Did you think of anything?” he asked.

Anne shook her head. “I just don’t know. Noah was always looking at this picture. But I don’t know what he was thinking about when he looked at it. What was he seeing, exactly? I’ve been staring at it forever, but I can’t make anything out.”

“Maybe it’s something you can’t see. Something only visible to him.”

“Something I can’t see?”

His words gave her pause.

“I wonder why I can’t see it,” said Anne. “There must be something, or he wouldn’t have stared at it like this.”

If the picture had been painful to look at, it would have been agony for him to stare at it.

And if he was just using his imagination to remember something, he could have done that while still in bed. There would have been no need to go all the way to the hall and gaze at such a thing.

Something was there, for sure, in that portrait. Something that brought Noah comfort. It had to be there, but she couldn't see it. She wondered why that was.

"If I can't see it…maybe that's because it's hidden…"

Anne looked up at the portrait once more and realized something with a start. She stood up and put her hand on its unassuming frame.

"Challe! I want to take this portrait down off the wall. Please help me!"

Though he shot her a curious look, Challe stood up without comment and put his hands on the frame. The two of them together managed to get the portrait off the wall and lower it to the floor.

"Let's turn this over," said Anne.

Without stopping, they lifted it slightly from each side and, by switching positions, flipped the portrait over.

The dim light revealed the back of the large canvas. Torn fabric jutted out here and there. But the center area was undamaged. And there, on that undamaged stretch of fabric, in delicate brush strokes, was a painted crest about the size of a fist.

Two swords crossed over a white shield. On top of the swords was a purple lion with its front legs raised. A fluttering dark-blue banner adorned the edge of the shield. The colors were quite dark, but they were regal and powerful.

"A crest… Could it be the Chamber family's?"

Anne mumbled the question, and standing beside her, Challe nodded.

"Looks like this one escaped the eyes of the Millsland royal family."

Every Chamber family crest had been stripped away, destroyed, and burned in an attempt to erase their existence. The only example that still remained was right here. Noah must have known about it. He must have known that the last crest was hidden there.

A crest is the pride of any noble family. For Noah, who had been Herbert's page, the Chamber crest must have seemed like the embodiment of Herbert's spirit. That's why he had been staring at it.

This was the thing that Noah had been looking at.

"I'm going to make this."

"This is a banned crest," Challe said quietly. "This is the crest that the Millsland royal family tried to erase from this world. You would revive it?"

Anne felt a shock run through her. It might incur the displeasure of His Majesty and the royal court. She might be regarded as someone who defied the royal family. She probably wouldn't be executed, but her title as a Silver Sugar Master had been bestowed on her by the king. She wasn't sure whether she would be forgiven for making a piece of sugar candy that His Majesty found disagreeable.

Yet at the same time, something close to rage welled up inside her.

"Every member of the Chamber family is gone now. It's not like anything is going to happen just because some people see this crest. Why, then, was it violently ripped from this castle? Because it displeased the royal family? Is that all? But I'm not making candy to present to the royal family. I'm making it for someone who really needs it. It's wrong to ban something that people want to create, that people want to look at."

She gazed again at the crest.

"I can't accept such selfishness. If I can't make candy to help people, then the title of Silver Sugar Master has no meaning. To make what's required, and the very best version of it—that's what being a candy crafter is about. If there's a possibility that someone might desire something, we make it. That's why I'm going through with this."

Challe broke into a smile. "You really are fearless. To go behind the Millsland royal family's back."

"It's not that I want to quarrel with the royal family. I simply think this is what Noah wants, so I want to make it for him—that's all. My explanation may not be understood or accepted, but I can't stop just because of that," she declared, gazing into Challe's eyes.

“Make it,” Challe said. “Make what you want to make. And whatever happens after that, I’ll protect you.”

His words had a quality to them that sank deep into her heart. But why would Challe go so far as to say that? It was unbearably strange.

Suddenly, Anne felt anxious. What if Challe felt tied to her in some way, just like Noah had been tied down by Herbert’s words? She didn’t feel the least bit pleased by what he had said.

“Why would you protect me? There’d be nothing in it for you, Challe. Because I gave you your wing back, and you feel obligated to me? If that’s the case, you don’t have to worry about it. I gave it back because I wanted to, so there’s no need for you to feel obliged. It was my own decision. I just wanted you to be free, so…”

“I’m not crazy enough to risk my life for an obligation.”

“So then why?” Anne asked.

Challe fell into a perplexed silence, but his right hand slowly moved to touch Anne’s hair. His fingers shifted from her hair to lightly graze her cheek, then to stroke the nape of her neck and her shoulder.

“Obligation, advantage, desire… Do I need a reason?”

His fingers ghosted over her skin, tickling her and giving her chills. They brushed her hair again and toyed with the ends.

“Don’t ask me for reasons. Even I don’t know why I feel this way. The reason doesn’t matter. I want to protect you, so I will. Whether you’re being chased by the Millsland royal family or the gods themselves, I will protect you. I’ll be by your side. Forever.”

Anne’s feelings became unsettled. Ripples of joy and confusion were spreading through her heart.

“Forever? But why?”

“I told you not to ask.”

“Oh right. You did, sorry.”

She apologized in a panic, and Challe chuckled. Then with the fingers that had been playing with her hair, he gently stroked Anne’s chin and brought his lips close to her ear.

“Your scarecrow brain forgets everything so quickly.”

His voice was sweet, like teasing pillow talk. He grazed her earlobe lightly and planted a kiss there.

“Remember this, if nothing else. I’ll be by your side always. I will protect you. I swear.”

His whispers sounded like honeyed declarations of love. But Anne decided they probably meant something completely different. She couldn’t be sure. Challe himself had said he didn’t understand his feelings, so how could Anne?

Chapter 7
A CONTEST AGAINST THE SILVER SUGAR VISCOUNT

Challe will protect me.

The earlobe that his lips had touched still tingled. It filled Anne with determination, as if he'd cast a protection charm on her with his kiss.

In his behavior and words, she felt like she detected an emotion akin to love, but she was afraid to believe. If she got her hopes up and was wrong, it would be very painful.

Moreover, Challe's love was probably closer to a hen's feelings for its helpless chick. She figured he was just protecting her out of simple kindness, unaware of what kind of feelings she held for him. He would likely find her foolish affection amusing.

Challe's kindness was reassuring and made Anne incredibly happy. Happy enough that she knew she shouldn't wish for anything more.

The sun had already gone down, and the workshop had grown dark. She only had until the following morning.

She quickly lit a lamp.

When she did, Mithril, who had been sitting cross-legged on top of her workbench dozing off, opened his eyes.

"Huh, Anne? Gah! It's dark already?!" Panicking, Mithril stood up and ran over to Anne in confusion. "What have you been doing, Anne? I don't see your candy sculpture anywhere!"

"That's right. I'm starting it now."

Anne rolled up her sleeves and soaked both hands in a cask of cold water. As she did, Mithril scooped up some water from the same cask and set it on the workbench for her. He remembered the process of making candy very well and adeptly lent her a hand. He was a reliable assistant.

Anne pulled her hands out of the cask and added cold water to the silver sugar spread out across the top of her workbench.

She mixed it quickly, and once the water and sugar were combined, she used both hands to start kneading the mixture.

“Mithril Lid Pod. Purple, red, and blue. And also black. And green. Would you please take out all the vials of colored powder that are in those five color families?”

“Roger.”

Mithril quickly set out all the vials of colored powder close to the five shades Anne had listed on top of her workbench. He lined each group up in order for her, from lightest to darkest.

“What are you making, Anne?”

“A crest.”

“A crest? Wow, which one?”

“The Chamber family’s.”

“Oh, really, the Chamber family… Wait, whaaat?! Is that even allowed?! That’s the crest of a family His Majesty the King stamped out completely, right?!

“It’s fine.”

Mithril stared directly into Anne’s eyes, as if to confirm something. But after a moment, he nodded.

“Mm. If that’s what you’ve decided, I guess it’s fine.”

Then he looked at Anne’s hands and ran off in a panic to scoop up more cold water. Mithril came back carrying the water just as she reached out to add more.

Again and again, she kneaded the dough. She was kneading it more meticulously than usual in order to increase the luster of the sugar. The form of what she was creating was already decided, but she wanted to make it look more dignified and divine than it ever had before.

If Noah saw the spirit of his master, Herbert, when he looked at the crest, Anne would try to make it seem like his soul truly resided within her sugar candy.

First, she made the foundation, the shield, about the size of her palm. Next, she kneaded a deep-blue banner to adorn the glossy white shield.

I want to make this blue a very calm color. And the swords should look sharp, so that the metal shines.

She thought about what shade would be good for the purple lion. As she pondered, she mixed her color powders into various hues. She searched for the purple that would go best with the shield, banner, and swords. She made all sorts of purples, from light to dark, and from dull to vivid.

Suddenly, a particular dark-purple color caught her eye. It was lustrous like quartz crystals and had a certain depth to it.

The color of Noah's eyes?

She compared it to the colors of the swords and the banner and found they set it off nicely. Anne had no doubt that the owner of the crest had been very partial to the fairy with eyes the same color as the crest's lion. That was probably one of the reasons why he wanted Noah to live on in place of his vanquished crest.

Anne painstakingly constructed the candy's form with clarity and accuracy.

As soon as she was done with one crest, she started making another. She intended to keep producing them for as long as time allowed. Just one would not be enough. She would make as many as she could to show to Noah.

She hoped then that Noah might understand. That he might see that this crest was not gone. That as long as there were people who remembered it, it would never truly vanish. So Noah needed to live.

When the inside of the room began to grow lighter, Anne finally stopped working.

She had completed fifteen palm-sized crests. It had taken her an awful lot of time.

Creating multiples of the same thing without the slightest mistake had required considerable attentiveness and patience.

She felt like her brain had gone numb. She placed the fifteen crests she had made onto a stone slab and covered them with a piece of cloth. Then letting out a long sigh, she sat on a stool in the corner of the workshop, leaned her head back against the wall, and closed her eyes.

Mithril was also nodding off on top of the workbench.

Before long, the room was completely bright, and the warm aroma of soup drifted in from the kitchen, signaling that preparations for breakfast were underway.

“Are you finished, Anne?”

It seemed Anne had dozed off. Hugh’s voice woke her up.

Hugh was standing with one arm propped against the workshop’s doorframe. He had taken off his jacket and rolled up his shirt sleeves. It looked like he, too, had been working right up until the last minute. There was a sugar candy sculpture sitting at his feet, covered by a cloth. It was sitting atop a stone slab, but it wasn’t all that big. It was only about as tall as an adult’s fist.

Anne and Mithril both quickly stood up.

“Ah, Hugh,” said Anne. “Good morning. Yes, I’m finished.”

Hugh glanced over at her workbench and nodded.

“If we tell Noah that this is a competition,” said Hugh, “he might get strangely stubborn and refuse to eat. I’ve heard that you have been taking pieces of candy to him each morning, yes? Let’s pretend this is a continuation of that, and today, both you and I are simply taking candy to Noah. The two of us will go in together. It sounds like Challe is already in the room as usual, so he will be our witness. Agreed?”

Hugh’s demeanor was unusually severe. This must have been a trivial contest for him. But it was a contest, nonetheless.

“Got it.”

“Then let’s go. Bring your sugar candy.”

Hugh took the candy at his feet and turned his back to Anne. She also picked up her candy in both hands. Mithril looked at her with concern.

“Anne.”

“Here I go.” She smiled to reassure him, then followed Hugh.

Salim, who was always by Hugh’s side, was waiting in the hall. He climbed the stairs after Hugh and Anne, but when they got close to Anne’s room on the second floor of the west wing, he stopped. He must have been instructed to stay there by Hugh.

Once they were standing in front of the door, Hugh knocked confidently. Then without waiting for an answer, he opened the door.

Morning light shone into the interior of the room. In the chilly air, their breaths came out white and translucent in the rays of the sun.

Challe, who had been lying sprawled out on the sofa, sat up.

“Noah. Are you awake?” Hugh asked.

The bulge on the bed squirmed. Noah sat up, using his arms to prop up his body. His cheeks were so pale that he seemed about to dissolve into light, and he had no vitality to him.

“Silver Sugar Viscount?” he asked.

Hugh smiled and approached the bed.

“Good morning, Noah. As we promised yesterday, Anne and I have brought you presents for being so loyal. On the off chance that you feel like eating, you’re welcome to take either of the gifts we’ve brought you.”

At that, Noah looked away apologetically.

“I’m sorry, Silver Sugar Viscount. I can tell from the way they smell; these are sugar candies, aren’t they? But I’m under orders from my master and can’t eat anything other than what he has given me…”

Ignoring Noah’s weak apology, Hugh set his sugar candy on the side table. Then he removed the cloth.

Noah glanced over at it and gasped. He crawled across the bed toward the side table.

“Ah…” He let out a small noise of surprise.

Set before him was a fyffe board and game pieces.

I’ve seen this before.

Anne was sure that she had seen these fyffe pieces in one of the visions that Herbert had shown her. Herbert and Noah had played the game using these pieces. The ones Hugh had made looked exactly the same.

The thirty-two pieces arranged around the board were transfixing in their craftsmanship and number.

There was a dainty floral pattern carved into the crowns and staves of the king pieces, and intricate folds adorned their collars and cloaks. The queen pieces’ skirts fell elegantly like real cloth, and the knights’ lances looked sharp enough to cut. The horses had a tension in their muscles and a luster in their eyes, like they could come alive any moment. But the fairy pieces were the most beautiful. Everywhere along their translucent wings, their glossy

red hair, and their delicate fingertips was covered with shining bits like tiny gemstones.

Sixteen of the game pieces, although quite colorful, were all basically white, unifying them as a set. The sixteen pieces on the other side were just as colorful, but they were tied together by a shade of turquoise instead.

The game pieces were full of life, and each one appeared to have a thin halo of light coiled around it.

They were both charming and dazzling. Though they were toys meant to while away delightful hours of play, each piece's expression was somewhat cruel—the look of someone living in a tiny world of war.

Incredible.

They were only fyffe pieces, and yet they were so alluring. Their luster and light must have been impeccably calculated.

And these were the very pieces from Noah's memories of Herbert. Hugh had reproduced them splendidly. Anne, who had seen those mysterious visions, was sure of it. But Hugh couldn't have seen them. So how was he able to do this?

"There was a fyffe board in the lesser hall. I took it upon myself to use it."

At that, Anne noticed that the board was indeed the real thing.

Noah opened his eyes wide. "You used that?"

"You played your games on it, right?"

At Hugh's question, Noah's lip began to tremble, and he nodded weakly.

"It seems that Lord Herbert's fyffe pieces were plundered and went missing," Hugh continued. "But the artisan who made them is still alive. His hands are in poor shape, and he's not capable of such craftsmanship anymore, but he remembered them, and he drew a detailed sketch for me. How do you like them, Noah? Are they the same as the ones that you and Lord Herbert used for your games?"

Noah's eyes had grown vacant and distant, as if he was yearning for bygone days.

"Yes. These are the pieces that I often used with Master Herbert," he said. "They're exactly the same…"

Suddenly, Hugh announced, "Lord Herbert was a fyffe master, you know."

“Huh?” Noah looked up at him quizzically. “No. That’s not right. Master Herbert wasn’t very good at fyffe—,” he insisted.



“There is no doubting his skill. He was so good that he always won at the official tournament held at the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell. His record still stands.”

“But Master Herbert was so bad at fyffe that no one else would play with him. He told me I was the only one who would.”

“I’m sure it’s true that no one wanted to play against him. Who would want to challenge the kingdom’s greatest player to a match?”

“Ah…”

Understanding seemed to dawn on him, and Noah opened his eyes wide in astonishment.

“You didn’t know, did you?” said Hugh. “I bet you were the first one to suggest a game.”

Noah nodded slightly. “But why did Master Herbert say he was bad at fyffe?” he asked. “Why would he tell such a lie?”

“Lord Herbert was probably delighted to be invited to play for fun rather than for competition. I think he probably decided to give himself some sort of handicap so that he could enjoy the game with you.”

Noah’s purple eyes began to fill with tears.

“He simply enjoyed playing with you,” said Hugh.

“You think so? Really?”

“Didn’t he seem like he was having fun?”

Noah nodded, and Hugh asked another question.

“Were *you* having fun?”

“I…”

Noah started to mumble something as he looked over the rows of fyffe pieces, one by one. He bit his lip, and tears began to spill from the corners of his eyes.

“I also…had fun… It was fun…” His lips trembled. “Such fun…”

“Those playing pieces are yours. You can do as you wish with them. You can even pick them up, like you used to.”

Hugh’s words made Anne realize something.

I see. He chose something that Noah would pick up.

He had set a fondly remembered item from Noah’s memories in front of him, knowing that if the fairy picked up a game piece like he used to, the action would likely encourage him to eat.

Hugh had probably started off by thinking about what he could get Noah to take into his hand. A fairy picking up a piece of sugar

candy was the equivalent of a human bringing that candy to their lips. If Noah did that, he would probably be drawn by the smell and the sweetness to eat it.

This is the true power of the Silver Sugar Viscount.

Given the quality of the craftsmanship—how detailed and elaborate the pieces were—it was also amazing that he had made every one of them in a single night.

But the most shocking thing of all was that he had ascertained that Herbert was a master fyffe player and that Noah had played the role of his opponent. What's more, he had reproduced something that had gone missing fifteen years earlier, down to the very last detail.

"…It was fun."

Noah stared hard at the game pieces and mumbled the same words again. His voice trembled. He grasped the front of his shirt tightly, as though waves of heartache were lashing at his chest.

Hugh watched Noah with a nearly expressionless face. Then after a few moments, he spoke.

"Noah. There's still one more present remaining."

Hugh signaled to Anne with his eyes, and she set the stone slab she had brought down on top of the bed.

I was a fool to think I could ever win.

The gap between their abilities was too wide. She didn't even feel bitter about it. She only regretted that she had lost any chance of getting help from Kat. That alone pained her. She had no idea how the Paige Workshop was going to escape its current situation.

After having Hugh's creation flaunted in front of her, she felt ashamed of the crests that she had brought, which were simple, ordinary things that anyone could have made.

Even if she couldn't win the contest, her saving grace was that the crests might bring Noah just a little bit of joy.

"These are yours, Noah. I made them for you," she said, removing the cloth.

When he caught sight of the crests, for some reason, Hugh's gaze turned downcast. Noah's eyes, meanwhile, lit up the moment he saw them.

"Crests?!"

Noah crawled toward the pile of crests and looked down at them.

There wasn't the slightest bit of Anne's creativity in the crests. She had simply and faithfully recreated the crest of the Chamber family. All she had done was make the blue of mercy deeper, the shining silver and white of the swords and shield representing strength more powerful and stately, and the purple lion stronger and gentler. To do this, she had given luster to each element and patiently mixed the colors.

She hoped that the heart of the black-haired man she had seen in her visions dwelled there in the crests.

"Why?" asked Noah.

With tears still in his eyes, he smiled faintly. Then Noah picked up one of the crests, almost in spite of himself. He stared at it like he had found a treasure.

"It's the crest. Master Herbert's crest!" Noah cried. He sounded overjoyed. "It's so beautiful!" he said, looking up at Anne's face.

"It's beautiful?" she repeated.

"Yes, beautiful. A beautiful crest!"

"I'm glad."

Noah turned his gaze back to the crest lying in the palm of his hand. His face, lit up with happiness, finally looked lively again.

I hope my idea makes it through to him, even just a little bit—the idea that Lord Herbert's soul resides in that crest.

Anne looked at the sugar candy wrapped up in Noah's frail hands and sighed with relief. Simply being enveloped in those hands made the ordinary piece of candy seem like an incredibly precious object, a true glistening gem. Anne was happy.

Just then, a soft light glimmered between Noah's fingers where they were holding the crest.

Noah was gazing at it intently, a faint smile on his lips. As he did, the crest dissolved into light and seemed to sink into the fairy's hands. His pale cheeks were tinged faintly red.

"…Ah…"

Without meaning to, a small sound slipped from Anne's mouth. Challe was watching, too, and was clearly surprised. Hugh, for his part, burst out laughing. It was a self-deprecating kind of laugh.

The crest in Noah's hand dissolved completely and disappeared. After letting out a long, relieved sigh, Noah stared down at his

own empty hands.

"…I ate it." He looked stupefied, as if he couldn't believe it. "I…I ate it."

Perhaps amazed that he had disobeyed his orders or stunned by the shock of doing so, Noah gazed down at where the crest had been. He looked on the verge of tears.

Hugh moved quickly. He picked up another candy crest and placed it in Noah's hands.

The fairy looked up at him. "Silver Sugar Viscount?"

"You can eat as many as you like. Lord Herbert won't be angry. I'm sure you've known that for a long time, haven't you?"

Then Hugh turned his gaze on Anne.

"This Silver Sugar Master will make you as many of these as you want," he said. "Isn't that right, Anne?"

Anne nodded firmly. "Yes."

If someone wished for something as strongly as Noah did, she would make it anytime, regardless of what it was. That was what being a candy crafter meant. Even if its image was banned, she didn't care. Rules like that were just someone else's selfishness.

"As long as someone needs it, I'll make it, no matter what anyone else says."

When he heard her answer, Noah's face scrunched up with emotion. He looked happy, but at the same time, unbearable sorrow burst through like a dam, and tears spilled from his purple eyes.

"As long as you hold it in your heart, this crest will never truly vanish," Hugh told him quietly.

"Master Herbert." Noah cast his eyes down and stared intently at the crest. "Just as I thought, you were here." Noah wrung the words from his throat. "You were in here all along. Playing fyffe with me, eating sugar candy, smiling. I knew it—you were here, right here, Master Herbert."

The master he had been waiting for was never coming back, and all evidence that he had ever existed had been completely destroyed. Anne was sure that after fifteen years, even Noah's pleasant memories had started to seem like phantoms.

But now Noah had the crest in his hand—proof that his kind master had once lived there.

For the first time in fifteen years, his memories of his master were not phantoms. That was what the crest was telling him.

“I had fun. I…really did.”

Quite a few tears fell from Noah’s downcast eyes into his lap. But his lips were still curved up in a smile.

“I had fun, Master Herbert,” the fairy whispered. It sounded like he was talking to someone with whom he had finally been reunited with after a very long time.

Leaving Noah in Challe’s care, Hugh pushed Anne out of the room. Once they reached the window in the corridor, he stuck both elbows out behind him and set them on the windowsill. Leaning back against the glass, he said, “It’s your victory, Anne.”

She was stunned by the unbelievable outcome. Anyone could tell that Hugh’s candies were more magnificent. Anne knew it, too. Even Noah must have been able to tell. But Noah, seemingly without meaning to, had eaten the crest-shaped sugar candy.

“Why…? Why did Noah pick up the crest?” Anne couldn’t help but wonder. She had absolutely no clue why she had won.

Hugh looked casually up at the ceiling and smiled wryly.

“Because it was proof that his dead master once lived, that he was once in this world. To someone like Noah, who adapted himself to the customs and thinking of the aristocracy, the meaning of a crest is perfectly clear. It signifies the spirit of those born into that noble house. It’s only natural that he would see Herbert’s heart in that crest.”

“But Noah hasn’t really accepted that Lord Herbert is dead.”

“Only if you take his words at face value. But think about it. No matter how thickheaded someone is, they must understand that a man who lost a war and didn’t return for fifteen years is dead. He simply didn’t want to accept it. Even knowing that his master was dead, he kept on waiting.”

“That’s awful…”

“Not only had Noah set himself a futile task in waiting for his dead master, but he was also facing an even more difficult reality. The castle was wrecked, the crests were burned, the portraits were slashed, and every trace that Herbert ever existed was

seemingly wiped from this world. That must have been the most painful thing. Among all that destruction, he held out hope that the crest, proof that his master once lived, would be resurrected."

Noah had stubbornly refused to eat the whole time they'd known him. It was both an attempt to obey Herbert's orders and, at the same time, the result of losing the hope necessary to go on.

With only despair, emptiness, and his memories, Noah couldn't muster the energy to continue. But as long as he had even just a little bit of hope, he could find the will to live on. Resurrecting proof that someone important to him had once lived, proof that Noah himself had thought was destroyed, seemed to have given him that hope.

"You did well to realize it," said Hugh. "Why did you think of making the crest?"

"Because it was hidden on the back of the portrait that Noah was always staring at."

"That crest has been banned. Didn't you consider that it might be bad for a Silver Sugar Master to make it?"

"Just for a second, I did." Anne bit her lip. "But I think being a Silver Sugar Master is meaningless if I can't make the things I want to make. Are you going to report me to His Majesty and the Earl of Downing and see that I'm punished?"

"Of course not. I'm not that much of a bureaucrat. So you made the crest even knowing that it was banned, huh? Very interesting. That means you weren't afraid. That's why you won."

When he finished speaking, Hugh turned his gaze out the window. The morning sun was illuminating the courtyard. A pale moon hung in the western sky. Something about Hugh's face looked melancholy.

"But if you gave it that much thought," said Anne, "if you understood everything, then why didn't you make the crest, Hugh? I can't imagine you threw the match. If you were going to do something like that, you would have given me your rights to Kat from the very beginning."

Hugh looked back at Anne. "I didn't mean to let you win. At first, I also made a crest."

"Huh?"

"I made a crest, but then I smashed it. In its place, I chose something that had a high chance of winning. If you hadn't made

the crest, I would have been victorious."

When she heard this, Anne remembered something. The previous afternoon, when she took up the tea, she had overheard Salim and Hugh talking inside his room. *"Now, Viscount?"* Salim had asked, sounding puzzled.

He must have been asking Hugh if he was going to start over.

"Why did you destroy it? If you knew all that and had already made it?"

"I am the Silver Sugar Viscount. I serve His Majesty the King and make sugar candy only for him. For a man like me to make a crest that His Majesty…that the Millsland royal family has banned would be unthinkable. In fact, it's something that even an ordinary Silver Sugar Master ought to consider very carefully."

"But the idea that you can't make something—"

"You're right. As long as you're prepared to face the consequences, you can make anything you want. For an ordinary Silver Sugar Master, you can expect a reprimand or, at worst, house arrest. But it's different for me. I am a servant of the king. The best I could expect is imprisonment. At worst, execution. The Silver Sugar Viscount absolutely cannot betray His Majesty. So I couldn't make that crest."

Hugh's tone was detached. He was smiling, but in his eyes, Anne detected a faint shade of misery.

"The rest of you have such freedom," he said.

"Why did you take a post like Silver Sugar Viscount, Hugh?" Anne asked, unable to stop herself.

She had truly never considered the fact that the Silver Sugar Viscount couldn't make sugar candy for anyone other than the king before. For a candy artisan, it would be like having one's wings clipped. It meant being bound and restrained.

Even if someone was nominated to be the Silver Sugar Viscount, it ought to be possible to decline. No one would be happy to be so constrained unless they were after political power.

"Kat asked me the same thing. *'Why didja hafta accept somethin' like that?!'* he said. He was mad. He was just as mad when I took the Mercury surname and when I became maestro of the faction. But I ignored him and ultimately ended up as the Silver Sugar Viscount. Kat really hates it when candy crafters have their freedom taken from them. I don't think he's ever been able to

forgive me, his favorite rival, for making such a decision. He asked me if I was really so hungry for power."

"Were you?"

Anne didn't understand, either. As an artist, having her creative freedom taken away was the most painful thing she could imagine.

"Yeah. I was." Hugh's eyes narrowed. "If you don't have any power, some things are simply out of reach. That's why I wanted it. When I was a kid, I was helpless, and because of that, I allowed my little sister to die. Back then, I made a vow. I swore that one day, I'd have the power I lacked. The religious power of sugar candy wasn't enough. I wanted something more direct."

Hugh stood up straight and gently patted Anne on the head.

"This time, it's genuinely your win," he said. "You weren't afraid, and that's why you won. I yield my right to control Kat to you. There's no time for dillydallying. Go get him right away."

Hugh quickly turned around and walked off.

"Let's go, Salim," he said.

Salim, who had been waiting at the end of the hallway, followed him like a shadow. There was no hesitation or regret in Hugh's stride. He was walking straight down the path he had chosen for himself.

Anne stared at his back and balled her hands into fists.

I lost.

If only Hugh had not been the Silver Sugar Viscount, he would have made the banned crest. And Hugh, who clearly understood the meaning it held for Noah, probably would have presented it to him in a totally different way, even though it would have been the same crest.

It would have been exactly the same, and yet Noah would have chosen the crest that Hugh made.

I can't possibly say that I won.

In the end, Anne was no match for the Silver Sugar Viscount. Someday, she wanted to become a Silver Sugar Master like Hugh. But she didn't want to have her wings clipped like he had.

She stood there awhile, motionless.

After a time, the door to Anne's room opened, and Challe came out and stood next to her. Anne was still staring down the hall with an intense expression.

“Noah fell asleep,” said Challe. “The sugar candy seems to have greatly improved his condition. He won’t die on us.”

“I see… That’s great.”

“So you won.”

Anne shook her head hard. She bit her lip, but tears welled up in her eyes, unbidden.

“I lost, Challe.”

She felt bitter. Not because she hadn’t truly won, but because the finest sugar candy crafter in the Kingdom of Highland had lost his freedom. And she had been victorious because of it.

She wiped away the tears that threatened to spill down her face with her fist.

“Anne!”

Suddenly, she heard a flutter of footsteps. Nadir came running from the direction of the lesser hall.

“I just overheard Elliott and the Silver Sugar Viscount talking! Anne, you won?!” Nadir grabbed hold of both of Anne’s hands and pumped them up and down.

“I didn’t win,” Anne replied. “But I got him to cede me his rights to Kat.”

“What? I don’t really get it, but whatever. That means Kat is coming to help!”

“Yeah.” Anne nodded, and Nadir leaped into the air.

“Whoo-hoo! We’re going to finish in time for the festival!”

“Indeed, we are,” came a voice from the end of the hall.

Elliott strolled leisurely toward them. “The Silver Sugar Viscount has gone. I heard a summary of your competition. You seem dissatisfied, Anne, but a win is a win.”

“I’ll go tell everyone!” Nadir cried as he nimbly dashed away.

Elliott watched him go, then smiled at Anne. “I understand perfectly why you’re so unhappy. That’s why you’ve got to keep improving more and more.”

Anne was startled by his words. What if she had won by surpassing Hugh’s abilities instead? She had a feeling Hugh would have flashed her a casual, happy smile. She wouldn’t have caused that melancholy look in his eyes.

“One day, you can truly defeat the Silver Sugar Viscount and settle the score, okay? But for now, you’ve won. We’re saved.

Everyone's thrilled. So let me tell you in Glen's place… You did well, Anne."

When he had finished, Elliott ruffled Anne's hair, like one might do to a child.

"Okay." She managed to nod obediently, perhaps because Elliott's words had made her happy.

More and more, I'll keep improving.

Then one day, she hoped, she would become a Silver Sugar Master capable of facing Hugh head-on.

One day, for sure.

Determination filled her heart.

After that, Anne immediately wrote a letter to Kat.

She told him that she had gotten Hugh to give her the right to ask Kat a favor, so as promised, she wanted him to hurry to Hollyleaf Castle in Lewiston.

She handed the letter to a courier—an acquaintance of Elliott's. She paid him extra, and he assured her he would deliver it to Southcent immediately. If he did, then Kat could arrive at Hollyleaf Castle as early as the next day.

Elliott ordered Anne, who had stayed up all night completing her job, to rest that whole day. With a stern look, he warned her that they would be in trouble if she joined in while sleep-deprived and bungled something up.

Anne thought that was reasonable, so she agreed. But before she went to rest, she wanted to check on Noah one more time. She peeked stealthily into her room and saw Noah sitting on top of the bed. He was staring absently at the sugar candy crests sitting on the side table.

"Noah?"

When she called his name, Noah looked at her with a start and flushed bright red. Then he energetically dived under the blanket.

"I wasn't looking at the candy or anything!"

Anne smiled in spite of herself at Noah's excuses. She was happy to see him so lively.

"No, of course you weren't," she said.

When Anne crouched by the bed, she noticed something different about the side table. The game board and candy fyffe pieces, which had been set up there, had disappeared. Only the candy crests that Anne had made remained.

“Huh? What happened to the candy that the Silver Sugar Viscount made for you?” she asked.

“When I woke up, only the candy crests were left.” Noah timidly stuck his head back out from under the covers. He looked like he might cry at any moment. “Maybe the Silver Sugar Viscount took it back with him. I don’t suppose I can ask him for it…? I promise to treasure it forever. So I’d like to ask him…to please let me have it.”

“I don’t expect the Viscount took it back with him, so don’t worry. You should be able to have it. He made it for you, after all. But how strange… I wonder if someone took it away without asking?”

While she was pondering this mystery, Noah cautiously spoke up.

“Um…uhhh. So *Thief*…is not your name, but…”

“What? Oh right. I’m Anne.”

“Anne?”

“Yes?”

“The sugar candy…,” Noah said softly. “When it’s gone, will you really make me more?”

“I will. I’ll make as much as you ask for, Noah.”

“And there’s something else I want to ask you, Anne. Those two fairies—you gave them back their wings?”

“That’s right.”

“Why did you do that? Is it because the two of them weren’t useful to you?”

He sounded anxious. Anne chuckled a little, because she knew perfectly well what Noah was worried about. She knew he had truly loved his master and couldn’t help wanting to be of use to him.

“Master Herbert was kind, but he was a liar. He told me he was bad at fyffe, but the Silver Sugar Viscount said he was actually really good at it. So he might have told me other lies, too. When he said that I was useful to him, that was probably a lie. I bet he left me behind in the castle because I wasn’t of any use.”

“You’ve got it wrong, Noah. I returned their wings because it’s wrong to own my friends. We live together, as equals, and I think they’re just the same as me, so I gave their wings back. I’m sure that Lord Herbert also treasured you as his friend, Noah. I think that’s why he returned your wing. To Lord Herbert, you were a dear, dear friend. Don’t you agree?”

When she said that, Noah slowly turned to face her.

“A dear friend?”

“I’m sure of it. Whether you were useful or not had nothing to do with it—he simply liked you.”

When she gave him this answer, Noah smiled softly. It was a wonderful smile, like a blooming flower.

Anne tucked the covers around him, then squeezed Noah’s hand.

“Now, get a little sleep. Then you’ll feel even better.”

“Okay.”

Noah obediently closed his eyes. His cheeks had taken on a little more color, and seeing them reassured Anne. She breathed a sigh of relief and suddenly felt very sleepy.

As her eyelids fell, she heard the sound of someone breathing nearby. Somewhere in her conscious mind, as she was about to be dragged down into slumber, she understood that Herbert was somehow there.

She was no longer the slightest bit afraid. She simply wondered curiously why Herbert did not appear to Noah.

As she pondered this, she heard a voice.

“If I went to see the boy, I know what he would say. He would tell me to take him to the next world with me.”

Herbert was right. Noah would most likely cling to Herbert’s shadow and tearfully demand to go with him.

“I thank you, young Silver Sugar Master.” Quietly, gently, the voice told her, *“Now I, too, can finally leave the castle with peace of mind. This time, for good.”*

Then the voice vanished. The breathing and the presence disappeared as well.

Anne knew that Herbert had gone.

It was said that human souls ascended to heaven on the Pure Soul Day of the year they died. But Herbert’s soul had spent

fifteen long years stuck in this castle. He must have refused to ascend to heaven out of concern for his loyal fairy.

And now, at long last, he was able to leave. With his soul departing the castle, she wondered whether it would wander around the earth for all eternity, drifting like the breeze, traveling aimlessly throughout the kingdom. Or whether, when the next Pure Soul Day came around, it might be permitted once more to ascend to heaven.

I'll make a piece of sugar candy for Lord Herbert on the next Pure Soul Day.

She knew that there probably hadn't been anyone to arrange the candy for Herbert's death fifteen years earlier. In that case, Anne would prepare it this year. She had a feeling that, though it had taken fifteen years, the doors of heaven would open to him with the blessing of sugar candy.

But before that, I've got to somehow finish the candy sculptures for the First Holy Festival.

In her thoughts, scattered by drowsiness, Anne saw the faces of Elliott and the other candy crafters of the Paige Workshop. She recalled Glen's face, too. And last of all, Kat's.

It's okay. Kat is coming to help.

They had finished enough of the snowflake-shaped sugar candies in various sizes to assemble them into a sculpture of the same sort as the one they had presented back at the Selection. But because their silver sugar had solidified, the work of assembling it was still on hold. They hadn't completed even a single snow tower.

We'll make it. I know we will…

Anne drifted off to sleep, as if buoyed on gentle waves.



That morning, Nadir was talking loudly about the fact that Anne had won her contest against the Silver Sugar Viscount. When Bridget heard him, relief washed over her.

If Kat joined them in their work, they were likely to finish their sculptures in time.

Now reassured, Bridget was in a bit of a good mood. She felt like having tea but hated the idea of drinking it alone, so she decided to have Gladys join her and headed for his room.

But Gladys was always off wandering around the castle. Even when Bridget wanted to see him, she was often unable to locate him right away. When she walked around the castle searching for him, she almost always found him somewhere near the east wing. It was clear to her that he was interested in the sugar candy.

She felt sure he would once again be off somewhere else, so she opened the door without knocking and peeked inside.

Unexpectedly, Gladys was there.

He was standing near the window, smiling. The window beside him had a wide sill, and on it was a magnificent fyffe board and all its pieces.

There were no such fyffe pieces at the Paige Workshop. And such beautiful pieces as those had no business being in a castle that was all but ruined. There was no doubt they were the sugar candy fyffe pieces that the Silver Sugar Viscount had made.

Why does Gladys have them?

Gladys had picked up one of the king pieces and was staring at it. Before long, the game piece was surrounded by a faint golden light, and its shape began to disintegrate. In the blink of an eye, it dissolved and was absorbed into Gladys's palm.

"What on Earth are you doing?!" Without meaning to, Bridget raised her voice.

Gladys seemed startled and turned to look at her. Then before Bridget could open her mouth again, he came up to her with shocking speed and seized her by the shoulders.

"Be quiet, Bridget," he whispered sweetly.

He pulled her forcefully into the room and closed the door, then dragged her over to the window.

"Gladys! You can't steal sugar candy! It's unforgivable!"

"Is it?"

Gripping both of Bridget's wrists with one hand, Gladys used his other, free hand to gently caress one of the queen pieces. It sparkled faintly and dissolved, absorbed into his palm.

“What are you doing?! Stop it—stop it right now!”

Bridget struggled, but Gladys was much too strong. He was unyielding.

“Its power fills me,” Gladys mumbled to himself.

He sounded ecstatic. He didn’t even seem to notice Bridget struggling against him. His hand passed over the game pieces one by one, dissolving and absorbing them.

“Just what I would expect from the Silver Sugar Viscount. Magnificent. I was losing patience with the Paige Workshop’s sculptures taking so long, so it’s a stroke of good fortune that this fell into my hands. It was worthwhile, coming here.”

“Gladys! Don’t tell me you were only after sugar candy?”

Bridget had considered that it might be too good to be true. That she should have been suspicious about why such a beautiful fairy had just happened to appear before her. Why the fairy dealer had given him to her for so little. Why Gladys had treated her sweetly and kindly, just as she had wished.

“I was wounded, Bridget. I needed sugar candy in order to recover my strength. I suppose I was wrong for using you. But unfortunately, I don’t feel the slightest bit of guilt.”

He thrust her aside, and Bridget fell on her rear on the floor.

“It’s unforgivable!” she shouted. “Stop it now!”

Oddly enough, she felt no pain at Gladys’s betrayal. She had always known that he had no affection for or interest in her.

Bridget had simply used the fact that she possessed his wing to seek comfort from him.

Even she found her own foolishness tedious. So when Gladys defied her, she felt no pain.

But she couldn’t allow the beautiful sugar candy pieces before her eyes, the ones made by the Silver Sugar Viscount, to be so casually dissolved into nothing. Sugar candy was a sacred food. It was something precious.

The only one allowed to destroy or consume these pieces of candy was the childlike fairy for whom they had been made. That was the point of sugar candy. It existed for the happiness of the one to whom it was given.

Bridget was the daughter of a sugar candy faction’s maestro. No matter how twisted up her feelings might have become, her

reverence for sugar candy was the one thing that remained unchanged.

She pulled out the small pouch she kept tucked in her breast pocket and removed the wing inside.

Gladys smiled faintly. “What are you going to do?” he asked.

“I think you know!”

With determination, Bridget squeezed the wing tight.

However, Gladys’s smile remained unchanged.

“Huh…?” For a moment, Bridget’s mind went blank. Why wasn’t he suffering?

“Poor thing. Somewhere, the owner of that wing is in a lot of pain.”

At Gladys’s words, Bridget felt a stab of fear. She tossed the wing aside and scooted away, trying to escape. But Gladys knelt right in front of her and peered into her face.

“You’re interrupting my meal.”



Challe felt slightly relieved.

The life of the little fairy who had been waiting fifteen years for the human he adored had been saved.

Wanting to wait one hundred, two hundred years, or more, even knowing that the other person had died—that was something Challe understood very well. That was why he wanted that fairy to live. If Noah wanted to wait, he could wait forever. He could pass his time waiting, or he could decide to set off anew. Fate would surely lead him one way or the other.

Challe stepped out into the courtyard and felt the cold autumn air on his skin. Bright rays of sunlight shone down on the neglected garden.

In the distance, he could see the candy crafters moving around in their workshop in the east wing. They were in high spirits with the anticipation of Kat joining them the following day.

The wind rustled through the trees, and the dry branches scraped against one another loudly.

Challe felt a presence behind him. Someone similar, surrounded by a cold, tense aura. He knew immediately who it was.

“Challe.”

It was Gladys. His hand landed on Challe’s shoulder.

“Don’t touch me so easily.” Challe shook off the hand and turned around. “That’s enough of this,” he said. “I don’t feel like pretending to be friends with you. What’s your purpose for approaching me?”

Challe fixed his eyes on Gladys, who broke into a smile.

“What pretty eyes,” Gladys remarked, smiling ambiguously.

“Quit your joking. I’ll cut you down.”

At that, Gladys’s aura suddenly changed. He was still smiling, but there was something cruel showing through, like a creature that had found its prey.

“I’m not joking,” he said. “Long, long ago, I imagined them so many times. The eyes of an obsidian fairy—I just knew they would be beautiful. Challe Fenn Challe. I’m glad I got to hear your name. If I hadn’t heard it, I might not have realized… I might not have known that you were the one I’ve been searching for.”

Searching?

Challe frowned.

“I didn’t know your name or your face. But I did know that you had been born. So I searched for you. Finally, I managed to guess where you were. But just as I was on my way to meet you, war broke out, and your whereabouts became unclear once more. At that point, I thought I might never see you again, for all eternity. I gave up looking, and a hundred years passed. I never expected to meet you like this.”

A certain possibility had occurred to Challe when Gladys had mentioned the dark chapel. There was one way to verify it.

“What is your true name?” Challe asked.

Slowly, Gladys answered, “My name is Lafalle Fenn Lafalle.”

Challe was taken aback, but at the same time, he wasn’t surprised. Confronted by the name, a chill ran through his body.

Lafalle Fenn Lafalle.

Fairies take their names from the resonance of the energy in the object from which they are born.

It was a familiar sound. A sound that had always been there, right next to him, close at hand. Challe knew that, and he was sure the other fairy knew it, too. He knew their names were echoes of things that had been close even before they were born.

“The obsidian that birthed you was inlaid into the hilt of a rusted sword, I believe. The sword was enshrined in the dark chapel in order to hide it. And on that same hilt, there was also an opal and a diamond—do you remember?”

He recalled a large opal of ambiguous color. It had been glistening right beside the obsidian from which Challe had come. That opal lacked the energy required to birth a fairy, so he had assumed that no fairy had been born from it. But the fairy must have already been born, and thus the stone’s energy was already gone.

There was no doubt about it. The fairy who had introduced himself as Gladys, Lafalle Fenn Lafalle, knew about the dark chapel where Challe had been born. And more compelling than anything else, his name was a sound that Challe recognized from long ago.

“I was born from that opal. The gemstones from which we came were specifically selected and inlaid into that sword. They were chosen with the expectation that someday, their energy would congeal and we would form from them. We’ve been destined to be together since before we were born.”

“But who…?”

Challe had occasionally wondered who the owner of the sword was. Lafalle must have known something to be able to tell him that the three stones on its hilt had been deliberately chosen.

“Who chose them?” asked Challe. “Those three stones?”

“The owner of the sword.”

“Tell me who that was.”

“Don’t fret, Challe. I’ll tell you everything you want to know. I was born first, and I waited for you. I even thought that when the time came, and your stone was full of energy, I would stare at it and cause you to come into being. Once you were born, I wanted to teach you everything I knew and walk by your side. But through a series of unhappy accidents, that never came to pass. But we are supposed to be together. The fact that we met like this

after a hundred years is proof of that, I think. Come with me. That is your fate."

Lafalle slowly extended a hand, as if to tenderly invite Challe to come along.

"What are you talking about?" Challe demanded.

"There's no need for you to live with humans. Break free from their domination and come with me."

Human.

At that word, a cheerful face flashed into Challe's mind.

Anne.

His thoughts, which had been growing chaotic, gradually settled down.

How could I ever let myself be led astray?

He wanted to know all the things that Lafalle was offering to tell him. But he didn't want it badly enough to turn everything he had now upside down.

What a waste of time those hundred years spent fixated on his past with Liz had been. He understood that now. Perhaps Anne had taught him that.

Anne, who was always living life to the fullest. What she valued was the present, and from the present, she could look forward to the future. By watching her carefully, Challe had come to that realization.

It would be foolish of him to get hung up on things that had happened before he had even encountered Liz—like his own birth, which Challe himself did not remember.

Suddenly, he laughed. "Fate? That's idiotic. Why should I go with you? I don't need you. My destiny has nothing to do with the likes of you."

"You want to be controlled by humans?"

"My wing is in my own hands. I'm not controlled by anyone."

"But if you can't separate yourself from the humans, then in the end, once someone finds out you're a fairy without a master, you'll be chased down by fairy hunters again, won't you? I imagine that's why you've chosen to work for the girl."

"You're wrong," Challe insisted.

But Lafalle sneered suggestively. "Oh, really? Am I?" he asked. "Then as I suspected, you find the girl charming and can't pull yourself away? That suits me just fine. That girl is a Silver Sugar

Master. I can simply make her mine as well. If I do that, you'll come with me, right?"

"I have no intention of handing her over."

"Then I'll take her. By force."

"You talk big for someone whose wing is in the hands of a young woman, Lafalle Fenn Lafalle."

Challe quickly opened his right hand. Sparkling beads of light gathered there.

"What do you think?" the other fairy asked. "That I can't do it?"

As he spoke, Lafalle turned his right palm upward and stretched his arm straight out to the side. Shiny red sparkles of light began to gather there, and his hair suddenly took on a gleaming reddish tinge, starting at the top of his head and moving down to the tips.

Challe felt a wave of energy coming off Lafalle's body, pushing against him like a powerful wind.

Lafalle gripped a bundle of fine, bladelike strands of light with his right hand. His hair shone bright red. There could be no doubt that he was the fairy who had attacked the Paige Workshop's wagon on their way to the Selection. Challe had faced off against this fairy before.

"It was you?" Challe grit his teeth. He felt renewed regret for letting Lafalle get away the first time.

Ambiguity was a natural property of opal. The color and brightness of a fairy born from opal changed with their mood and the light that hit them. They had all kinds of hidden colors, so it was impossible to know what shade they might become at any time.

Bright red must have been Lafalle's battle color.

"After you cut me, well, the injury took its toll. When I first met you here, I was so weak that I couldn't fight. But now, thanks to the sugar candy made by the Silver Sugar Viscount, my strength is entirely restored! Look, I'm able to fight, like this."

A silver blade had appeared in Challe's hand, too. Along with it rose a thrilling feeling of excitement, almost joy. His wing grew taut and took on a hard, silver glint.

"Revealing your true form. What nerve," said Lafalle.

The corners of Challe's lips tipped up. "This time, there will be no escape."

Lafalle smiled, too.

“What a mess. I don’t usually run away, you know. And seeing as you injured me, I was planning to slice you to bits. But the circumstances have changed. You are meant to be with me. I don’t want to harm you. And so I am at an overwhelming disadvantage. So instead of fighting, I will take that girl. If I do that, I expect you will become mine as well.”

Without waiting for Lafalle to finish speaking, Challe crouched low and slashed at him. Lafalle took a huge leap backward and landed among the trees.



Challe sprang after him and swung his sword to the side as he landed. But Lafalle jumped back even farther and dodged the attack. Flexing the razor-sharp threads in his hand, he mowed down the small trees surrounding them.

Challe vaulted away, dodging the shower of branches. He quickly glanced at his surroundings, but Lafalle was nowhere to be seen.

“I will have that girl.”

Challe swung his sword in the direction of the voice, but he merely sent shreds of ivy flying. He clicked his tongue and heard a chuckling laugh in his ear.

“You are meant to be with me.”

The voice sounded like a far-off echo. Then Lafalle’s presence and voice vanished, as if dissolving into the air.

This is bad!

Challe immediately took off running.

Anne!

She should be with Noah at the moment. Challe left the woods, cut across the garden, and ran up to her room on the second floor of the west wing, all in a single dash. Bright sunlight was shining into the building, and it was much too quiet.

He opened the door.

Anne was there, sitting beside Noah’s bed. She was asleep, her upper body resting face down on top of the covers.

Challe rushed over to her, knelt, and, without thinking, embraced her with his left arm, the one that was not holding a sword.

“…Huh…Challe?”

He felt incredibly relieved to hear Anne’s voice, though she still sounded half-asleep. He pressed his face into the nape of her neck. She smelled sweet. Without a doubt, this was Anne.

Anne was caught by surprise and squirmed in his embrace. So as not to let her get away, he hugged her even tighter, holding her head with one hand. His face was close against her neck, and he could see her turning red.

“Challe? What’s the matter?”

“I won’t give you away.”

Squeezed against her, he could feel her heart pounding in her chest.

Lafalle wanted a Silver Sugar Master. And Anne was someone very special to Challe. Lafalle had obviously realized that.

There were no signs of Lafalle's presence around them. But now that he had regained his strength, he was sure to come after Anne before long. That might be in a few hours, the next day, or the day after that.

Just try and take her, Lafalle.

Challe couldn't let his guard down, even for an instant. He would keep his fighting senses sharp.

I swore to be by her side, always. To protect her. I won't hand her over to anyone.

That's when it happened. A shriek pierced the air and echoed through the interior of the castle. Outside the window, a startled flock of songbirds took flight all at once.

AFTERWORD

Hello, everyone. I'm Miri Mikawa.

This was the second story focused on the Paige Workshop, on Anne and the fairies, and on their delightful colleagues there.

At the end of Volume 4, Anne made the decision to work with the candy crafters of the Paige Workshop to make sugar candy sculptures for the First Holy Festival, and so—

"All right, let's get to work crafting right away!"

—here we are in Volume 5.

The candy crafters are hard at work, as usual. No matter what kind of job they have, their work always seems difficult.

Speaking of work, while I was writing this volume, my dear computer, the tool I use to write, was in a bad mood and caused me all kinds of trouble.

It's not like I was being unreasonable with it. Not at all. I was quietly typing words into my word processing software, when suddenly, the computer completely froze. I thought it was going to give me a blue screen. I couldn't get it to turn off, no matter what I did. In my panic, I mashed the main power button. Of course, the section of the manuscript that I hadn't saved yet was gone. This kept happening nearly once every hour.

"Why? How?" I grumbled, but there was no way that a tech novice like me was going to understand it.

I had to write this book. I had to, but the shock was doing a number on my heart.

I was nervous about losing my work, so I tried saving as often as possible. I was pushing the main power button on my machine over and over again. I was anxious and worried that it might break at any moment.

In the end, I felt guilty about pushing the main power button so often. I thought, *Am I trying to destroy my computer with my own hands?!*

Well, in the end, I finished writing the book, so hooray for that!

Now then, leaving all that aside.

There's a good chance that shortly before this book goes on sale in Japan, around July 21, 2011, a magazine book with the title *Premium The Beans*, Vol. 1 will go on sale, reviving the long-running magazine *The Beans*. In it, you will find a *Sugar Apple Fairy Tale* short story they graciously allowed me to submit.

Anne, Challe, and Elliott are featured in the story. Mithril is drunk as usual, because the setting is the good old Weather Vane inn.

And to my delight, it sounds like we will also get color pages and maybe even manga drawn by Aki. What a luxury to have color illustrations and manga! Just what you would expect from a premium publication.

Once again, I am deeply, deeply grateful to my manager, for whom I have caused so much trouble. I always shrink when you give me your critiques over the phone. This time, I was so embarrassed that I shrank down to about the size of a grain of rice. I'm probably going to submit many more strange and bizarre things for your approval in the future, so please take good care of me.

Now, to Aki, who draws such magnificent illustrations for me: Thank you very much again. Your drawings are so, so beautiful every time, and I always look forward to seeing them.

To my readers, thank you for your continued support. Every time I think about having all of you with me, I feel warm and fuzzy inside.

Countless things take place on this earth, where humans live. When something I could never have imagined happens, I space out and can't do anything. I'm a weak human. I'm useless. I'm miserable, pathetic, and hopeless. And yet when it comes to the things that I can do, I want to do them properly, without making any compromises.

Well then, good-bye for now. Perhaps we will meet a little earlier than usual next time? Maybe? I have a feeling we might.

Miri Mikawa

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