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Miri Mikawa

Illustration by Aki

Sugar Apple Fairy Tale

The Silver Sugar Master and the Crimson Kingdom

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YEN ON
NEW YORK

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Miri Mikawa

Translation by Nicole Wilder
Cover art by Aki

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SUGAR APPLE FAIRY TALE VOL. 6 GINZATOSHI TO AKA NO OKOKU
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First published in Japan in 2011 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.
English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

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Yen On
150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor
New York, NY 10001

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yenpress.tumblr.com instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: June 2024
Edited by Yen On Editorial: Emma McClain
Designed by Yen Press Design: Wendy Chan

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Mikawa, Miri, author. | Aki, 1967– illustrator. | Wilder, Nicole, translator.
Title: Sugar apple fairy tale : the silver sugar master and the crimson kingdom / Miri Mikawa ; illustration by Aki ; translation by Nicole Wilder.
Other titles: Shuga appuru feari teiru. English
Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2022. | Contents: v. 6. The silver sugar master and the crimson kingdom—
Identifiers: LCCN 2022022460 | ISBN 9781975350000 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975350970 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975350994 (v. 3 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975351014 (v. 4 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975351038 (v. 5 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975351052 (v. 6 ; trade paperback)
Subjects: CYAC: Fantasy. | Candy—Fiction. | Fairies—Fiction. | Bodyguards—Fiction. | LCGFT: Fantasy fiction. | Light novels.
Classification: LCC PZ7.1.M5538 Su 2022 | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022022460

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-5105-2 (paperback)
978-1-9753-5106-9 (ebook)

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The Silver Sugar Master and the Crimson Kingdom

Sugar Apple Fairy Tale

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The Silver Sugar Master and the Crimson Kingdom

Sugar Apple Fairy Tale

Story & Characters



Silver Sugar Master
Anne



Warrior Fairy
Challe



Fairy
Mithril



Silver Sugar Master
Kat



Candy Crafter
Jonas



Fairy
Noah

The Story So Far

Anne has become the head candy crafter of the Paige Workshop, which has been chosen to provide the sugar candy sculptures needed to decorate the annual First Holy Festival. To have more room to work, Anne and her fellow candy crafters end up renting a cheap old castle, only to suffer a series of setbacks. First, they are haunted by a ghost, then an unexpected turn in the weather causes problems with the silver sugar, and now they must recruit more crafters to make up for lost time. As they face each of these problems one by one, unsure if they will make their tight deadline, something even more terrible happens…

Keywords

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



Silver Sugar Viscount
Hugh

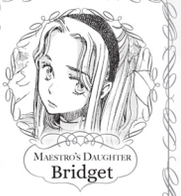
The Three Major Factions of Candy Crafters

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

Paige Workshop Maestro
Glen Paige

Mercury Workshop Maestro
Hugh Mercury
(concurrent post)

Radcliffe Workshop Maestro
Marcus Radcliffe



Maestro's Daughter
Bridget



Bridget's Fairy Companion
Gladys



Candy Crafter
Keith



Proxy Maestro and Silver Sugar Master
Elliott



Former Head Crafter
Orlando

Candy Crafter
King

Candy Crafter
Nadir

Chapter 1
BACK TO WORK

Anne was sitting beside her bed, asleep, her upper body resting face down on top of the covers. In the bed slept Noah, the fairy who had waited fifteen long years for his master's return. His breathing was calm and even. Through the power of sugar candy, Anne had been able to completely restore his life force before it faded away.

The room was wrapped in a chilly, hushed atmosphere. Bright beams of sunlight shone through the windowpanes and fell across the floor.

Anne and the others from the Paige Workshop had a lot of hard work ahead of them if they wanted to complete their sugar candy sculptures in time for the First Holy Festival. But Kat would be there to help, and that fact alone greatly reassured Anne, allowing her to relax enough to rest.

Anne was sound asleep, not even dreaming, when all of a sudden, her body was jerked backward by a strong force.

Someone was embracing her. The feeling of the fabric against her cheek and the fragrance of the person's hair, like fresh vegetation, were both very familiar. It was Challe.

When she opened her bleary eyes, Challe's silky black hair was there in front of her. It had all happened so abruptly that she wasn't sure whether it was a dream or reality.

"…Huh…Challe?"

When she called Challe's name, the arm reaching around her back squeezed her even tighter, and she felt Challe's hot breath against the back of her neck. At that point, she knew it was no

dream. As she gradually came to, the warm breath hitting her skin made her ears grow hot.

"Challe? What's the matter?"

"I won't give you away."

There was tension in his voice. What's more, Challe had his sword in his right hand. He was acting strange. This was the first time she had seen him so agitated. He was holding her tightly, almost clinging to her. As bewildered and embarrassed as she was, Anne was also worried.

"Challe?"

Just then, a scream echoed through the castle, startling Anne.

What was that?!

Challe's grip on Anne slackened, and he lifted his head. He promptly stood up, his expression stern.

"Come on," he commanded curtly, before grabbing Anne by the arm and pulling her to her feet.

"Challe?! What's happened?" Anne asked.

But Challe didn't answer. There was a fierce look in his eyes. Anne's stomach tied itself in knots, and she felt a sudden swell of fear.

When they stepped out into the hallway, she heard Elliott's voice. She couldn't hear him well enough to tell exactly what he was saying, only that he was shouting and sounded upset.

Anne and Challe ran down the corridor, emerged into the lesser hall on the second floor of the castle, and looked down over the banister. The front door was open, and the entrance hall was brightly lit.

Anne gasped at what she saw there.

"Orlando?!"

The other candy crafters had come rushing out of the east-wing workshop and were now crowded around Orlando, who was crouching in the hall. Elliott looked pale as he tried to help Orlando to his feet.

King, Nadir, and Valentine were all standing stock-still. Even Mithril was silent, sitting atop Nadir's shoulder.

Challe also paused for a moment before dashing down the stairs.

Anne rushed over to Orlando and swallowed a scream.

He was huddled on the ground, covering the left side of his face with one hand. Blood flowed through the gaps between his fingers, dripping down his chin and onto the floor. It spread across the stone below him, seeping along its cracks.

“Orlando!” Elliott cried, frantic. “Show it to us! Show us the wound!”

He put his arm around Orlando’s shoulders, trying to pull the other man’s hand away from his face. But Orlando merely groaned. He didn’t seem ready to let go.

Anne stared in shock at the vividly colored blood trickling down Orlando’s face. A chill ran down her spine.

Challe allowed the sword in his hand to vanish, then knelt on the other side of Orlando, across from Elliott.

“Elliott, call a doctor.”

Challe’s words seemed to snap Elliott out of his daze. He immediately turned around to face the other crafters.

“Call a doctor!”

Being shouted at seemed to bring the other crafters back to their senses, too. Valentine, his face still pale, spoke up.

“The Crafters Guild in Lewiston must know of a reliable doctor in the city. I’ll go fetch them!”

He was about to hurry off when King called out and stopped him.

“Wait, Valentine! I’ll get a horse so you can ride.”

King and Valentine ran out the front door.

Elliott seemed to have settled down a bit, and he started briskly handing out orders.

“Nadir, Mithril Lid Pod, Anne: Go tell Danna and Hal to boil some water and ready some clean towels. And if we have disinfectant, ask them to get that, too. I’ll carry Orlando to his bed. Challe, you help me.”

Challe nodded, then turned a stern look on Anne.

“You aren’t going to help.”

“Huh? Why not?”

“I’ll explain later. Just don’t leave my side. Come with us.”

Challe and Elliott cradled Orlando’s body. As they lifted him, Orlando cried out in pain.

“Try to bear with it for now,” Elliott said soothingly. Then he and Challe proceeded to take the injured man to his room.

Nadir and Mithril both exchanged looks with Anne.

"What in the world happened here…?" Anne asked.

Nadir shook his head with a stiff expression. "No idea. Orlando went outside to take a break. Then we heard him scream, and when we ran to him, he was like that."

"Challe Fenn Challe is acting strange, too," Mithril said nervously. "Anne, just do as he says. Stay with him. As for the hot water, towels, and medicine—Nadir and I will manage."

He was right—Challe *was* behaving unusually. There was an odd sense of urgency and tension about him.

Anne did as she was told and followed Elliott and Challe into Orlando's room.

Orlando was lying down on the bed, still gritting his teeth and covering the left side of his face with his hand. Elliott, sitting on the edge of the bed, grabbed him by the wrist and talked to him in a gentle, soothing tone.

"Orlando. Let us see the wound."

"…It hurts." Orlando spoke the words as if squeezing them through his teeth. "My eye…it hurts."

At this, Elliott's face clouded with worry.

His eye?

For a candy crafter, one's fingers were paramount. But one's eyes were almost as important. If Orlando's eye was injured, it would be a terrible tragedy.

"Who did this to you?" Challe asked, standing by his pillow.

Anne and Elliott looked at Challe in alarm. He seemed to think that Orlando's injury hadn't been an accident.

"It was him…the one we met on the highway, the red fairy."

"What did you say?" Elliott scanned their surroundings.

Anne grew uneasy, too, glancing at the room's door and windows in spite of herself.

"You can relax. I don't feel his presence nearby." Challe shook his head and frowned. "He was probably planning to catch me by surprise with a sneak attack. As he was following me into the castle, he happened to cross paths with Orlando. He must have decided that Orlando's voice would alert me to his presence, so he injured him in retaliation before running off."

"What's going on?" Anne asked.

Why had the fairy appeared now? It was completely unexpected.

"So he was after *you*, Challe…?" Anne continued. "Did you see him outside? Why would the fairy from the road come to Hollyleaf Castle?"

If he still held a grudge against Challe for injuring him, he must be quite vindictive. Just thinking about it made Anne shudder. But then Challe told them something even more terrifying.

"He's been here all along. The fairy who goes by the name of Gladys is the red fairy."

Anne's mind went blank. Then a shock of dread ran through her whole body. It was as though he'd just told her she was unknowingly holding a box containing a venomous snake.

The color drained from Elliott's face, too. "That guy?"

When the three of them fell silent, Orlando gritted his teeth and spoke from where he lay on the bed.

"Elliott…"

The man turned around when his name was called, and Orlando used his free hand to grab Elliott's.

"If that fairy is Gladys…then Bridget…"

"Oh no…!"

Elliott tried to stand, but Challe pushed him back with one hand.

"I'll go look for her. You stay here with Orlando. Anne, come with me."

Challe took Anne by the wrist, and they left the room.

As she jogged along, trying not to fall behind, Anne looked up at Challe's face. Though he'd said there were no signs of the red fairy nearby, he was extremely agitated.

They traversed the corridor on the first floor of the west wing and emerged into the great hall. In the light streaming in through the huge, open door, Anne could clearly see the pool of blood left behind on the floor.

Nadir and Mithril were in the kitchen along with Danna and Hal. Anne could hear their voices and the sounds of them busily preparing towels and boiling water.

"He's got his sights set on you," Challe said, pulling Anne by the hand up the stairs from the great hall. "He'll definitely attack again. He intends to capture you."

“How do you know that?”

“From the very beginning, he’s wanted a Silver Sugar Master.”

“In that case, aren’t Mr. Collins and Glen in danger, too?!”

“He wants *you*. If he can get his hands on you, I’ll come to your rescue, and he knows it. So out of the three Silver Sugar Masters here, you’re the one he will target. He wants to use you as bait to lure me to him.”

“So Gladys isn’t just after a Silver Sugar Master, but you too, Challe?”

They crossed the lesser hall at the top of the stairs, and as they dashed up to the third floor, Challe nodded.

“Why you?” Anne asked. “Is he bitter because you injured him?”

“His true name is Lafalle Fenn Lafalle.”

Anne frowned when she heard that. “That name. It’s like yours.”

“Apparently, he was born in the same place that I was. He wants to make me his comrade.”

“Comrade? In what?”

“No idea.”

When they stepped into the west-wing corridor on the third floor, Challe stopped briefly. He gazed all the way down the hallway, as if looking for threats. Anne followed his lead and quickly checked their surroundings. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

However, the door to Gladys’s room was standing half-open.

Challe was still pulling Anne along by the hand as they approached the doorway. Together, they peeked into the room.

Anne immediately spotted Bridget lying face down on the floor near the window.

“Bridget?!”

Challe’s grip on her loosened, and Anne left him and ran over to Bridget. She then lifted the girl into her lap.

Bridget didn’t seem to be hurt, and her body was warm. She was alive. Relief washed over Anne.

“Bridget!” she called again.

Challe knelt down beside Anne.

After Anne called Bridget’s name several times, the other girl groaned quietly, her face contorting. Then she slowly opened her

eyes. After staring into space for a few moments, she looked up at Anne.

"Bridget, are you all right?" Anne asked.

Finally, Bridget's eyes were able to focus. She blinked repeatedly and began to speak.

"…Gladys… He stole the Silver Sugar Viscount's sugar candy and ate it… He just took it, the candy meant for that little fairy. I… couldn't stop him."

Bridget lifted herself, shaking free of Anne's arms, and sat up on the floor. Then she pointed to the window.

They looked over and saw only a fyffe board sitting on the wide sash.

Noah's candy…

There is power in beautiful sugar candy. It extends fairies' life spans and gives them strength. And now that splendid sugar candy sculpture had granted its power to a fairy who would deceive and attack humans.

"Gladys was after the sugar candy." Bridget bit her lip and turned her gaze on Challe. "Catch him. Gladys said that I wasn't even worth killing… Go. Catch him."

"He fled."

When Challe answered her, Bridget put both hands on the floor and hung her head, looking suddenly deflated.

"Are you injured?" Anne asked gently.

Bridget shook her head weakly.

They could hear the panicked voices of Nadir and the others coming from the first floor. "There's no disinfectant," someone said. And then: "Let's prepare more towels."

At the sound of their voices, Bridget raised her head.

"Did something happen?"

Given the exhaustion on her face and in her voice, it seemed unfair to give her another shock on top of everything else. Anne was at a loss for words. But—

"Orlando was attacked, and his left eye was injured," Challe said.

"Challe! This is not the time."

Flustered, Anne tried to cut him off, but Challe said coolly, "She'll find out sooner or later. And she needs to know. The one

who attacked him was Gladys. He's the same fairy who has been attacking candy crafters along the highway."

"Orlando's eye…?"

Bridget looked shocked, and Challe nodded. She opened her mouth a little as if she was about to say something, but no sound came out.

"But it's a relief that you weren't injured, Bridget."

Anne touched Bridget's shoulder. But the other girl shook off her hand.

"Stop it! This is my… It's all my fault!!"

She placed both hands back on the floor as her shoulders trembled.

Challe watched her silently. It didn't seem like he blamed her, but he wasn't going to do anything to intervene. He probably knew that his poor attempts at consoling her wouldn't make any difference.

"…Bridget, you are the one who brought that fairy here. That is undeniable," Anne responded quietly.

At her words, Bridget raised her head. Her tear-soaked face looked hurt.

Though she knew it was the truth, hearing another person confirm it was painful. But if Anne had tried to lie, that likely would have hurt even more.

"He tricked you, Bridget," Anne continued, "tricked you into bringing him here. But you're not the only one—everyone was fooled. It's not your fault that you fell for his tricks. You're not to blame for being deceived, and you're not responsible for what happened."

All they could do was accept the facts. But that didn't mean they had to blame somebody for the situation. After all, depending on one's viewpoint, blame could be pinned on anyone.

Bridget clearly believed that she was in the wrong for allowing Gladys to fool her.

But although Anne understood Bridget's wounded heart as a fellow woman, she felt that she herself was to blame for not being able to do anything about it.

And from the perspective of someone else, Challe might seem to be in the wrong for failing to see through his opponent's ruse after facing off against him once already.

Yet another might find fault with Glen and Elliott, blaming the situation on how they treated Bridget in the past.

"But ultimately, it's my fault…!" Bridget exclaimed.

Anne grasped her tightly by the shoulders. "Please stop thinking that you're to blame!"

Bridget seemed startled by Anne's harsh tone and shut her mouth.

"Once you get in the habit of thinking that way," Anne continued, "every time something happens, you'll be looking for someone to blame. And you'll want to criticize that person. But doing so won't make anything better."

"That doesn't seem fair." Bridget's face twisted into a grimace. "If I can't blame myself, what am I supposed to do?"

Anne didn't have a clear answer for that. "I don't know," she said. "But perhaps you can start by thinking. If you feel like blaming yourself for how things are now, you could think about how we can improve the situation instead."

"Think about it?"

"You're much cleverer than someone like me, Bridget. If you think about it, I'm sure you'll come up with an answer."

Bridget's stiff body started to relax, and her shoulders dropped.

"Bridget?"

Anne let go of her, and Bridget stood up unsteadily. For a moment, she stared absentmindedly into the distance. Then staggering forward, she walked out of the room. Her slender silhouette looked fragile and anxious.

I'm sure she'll think of something. Anne wanted to believe in her. *After all, Bridget told us about the sugar candy right away.*

After Bridget opened her eyes, the first thing she had done was inform them about what happened to the sugar candy pieces.

She must have been upset that Lafalle had taken the candy for himself. Bridget felt true reverence toward works of sugar candy and wanted to protect them, so Lafalle's actions had deeply frustrated her.

Anne was sure that someone with a heart like hers would be strong enough not to crumple under pressure.

Orlando had been cut vertically from just above his left eye down to his cheek. The doctor Valentine and King had summoned was skilled and quickly stitched up the wound, so the bleeding soon stopped.

But Orlando's eyeball was damaged. The doctor told them that he would likely lose sight in his left eye.

Orlando's mind seemed fogged by the pain, and he only nodded vaguely, even when confronted with this prognosis. Then he took the medicine he was given, and seeming to feel a little better, he slept.

When King, Valentine, and Nadir heard that Orlando would probably lose sight in one eye, the three of them appeared even more shocked than Orlando himself. The candy crafters, usually cheerful and boisterous, hardly said a word.

When afternoon came around, Anne and Mithril, as well as King, Valentine, and Nadir, gathered in the workroom on the second floor of the east wing, where they kept the millstones they were using to regrind their silver sugar.

Elliott had ordered the still-dazed candy crafters to assemble there.

Around the five millstones were little mountains of silver sugar, ground into a silky powder, as well as barrels they'd brought to put the powder in. This was the result of the crafters' tireless work.

The expression on Elliott's face seemed more somber than usual as he looked around at everything. Then he quietly began to speak.

"I'm just as worried about Orlando's injury as all of you are. And I'm anxious that the red fairy may come after Anne."

Challe had told the other crafters about the true identity and objectives of the fairy who had wounded Orlando.

The crafters had been openly furious with Bridget, who had brought the fairy into their midst, but their anger was momentary. They simply didn't have time for such things.

Kat would be showing up soon to help. But just when they'd been thinking that the extra pair of hands would allow them to meet their deadline, Orlando had been taken out of the game.

Their disappointment was immense, coming on the heels of such hope.

Elliott must have understood that, so he spoke in the calmest tone he could muster.

"Challe has pledged to protect Anne from the fairy. So we'll leave that to him."

Elliott directed his gaze toward the corridor, visible though the room's open door. Challe was leaning against a windowsill in the hallway, watching over them.

"Kat will soon be with us to help, but now he'll simply be filling the gap left by Orlando. For the time being, we can't expect any further assistance, so we're limited to the crafters we have on hand and the time we have left."

King, Valentine, and Nadir exchanged anxious looks.

"Can we do it?" Elliott asked. "Does everyone intend to go on? At the moment, we can still ask the Silver Sugar Viscount to lend us some silver sugar. It'll put us at a disadvantage in next year's Selection and probably won't help the workshop's reputation, but it'll get us through our current predicament."

It was true that such a move would solve some of their problems. But then they wouldn't be making the best of the opportunity they had worked so hard to grasp.

At that year's Selection, Anne had gotten a good idea of the abilities of each faction's main workshop. As expected, the Mercury Workshop and the Radcliffe Workshop had both made excellent sugar candy sculptures. The Paige Workshop had only barely managed to win.

Taking that into account, if they entered the Selection at a disadvantage next year, their chances of winning would be incredibly low. It would probably be close to impossible.

They might overcome their immediate problems, but they would be driven into a corner.

Before Anne showed up at the Paige Workshop, Orlando had been its head crafter. Though Anne currently held that position, having Orlando around must have greatly boosted the other crafters' morale, since they had relied on him for many years. Losing him from the team had to come as a great shock.

When Anne heard that Orlando would be blind in one eye, she, too, was taken aback. Even though there was nothing she could do to help him, it was all she could think about.

But we must work.

If they gave in now, then entering the Selection and winning it would have been meaningless.

Anne stood up straight, steeled herself, and raised her head.

“We’ll do it,” she declared.

Even Anne was anxious. She was on the verge of tears just thinking about what would happen if they couldn’t complete their work in time.

But Anne had been appointed head crafter in Orlando’s place. If she couldn’t do this in his stead, she wasn’t worthy of the title.

“We can absolutely do this,” she said again.

The three other candy crafters smiled slightly. Anne had been worried that her attempt at putting on a brave face hadn’t been very convincing. But even so, Nadir grinned back at her.

“…Mm… That’s right—we can do it.”

Nadir’s words seemed to give Valentine courage, and he smiled, too.

“Yeah,” he said. “If we have to rely on the Viscount to make it through this, the workshop hasn’t got much of a future.”

King broke into a broad grin. “If the head crafter wants to do it, then we’ll make it happen!”

Elliott looked relieved and put on his usual wry smile. “All right, then. I guess it’s back to work.”

After that, he started drying out the remaining silver sugar, and King, Valentine, and Nadir got back to grinding it into powder with the millstones.

Anne was physically weaker, and it was impossible for her to turn a millstone on her own. Instead, she would work on adding the finished sugar candy snowflakes to their conical towers.

Anne went down to the first floor with Mithril and into the room they had prepared for assembling the candy sculptures.

She laid out the crystal snowflakes on top of a cloth spread over the floor, so she could select them by size and color at a glance.

Kneeling in front of a round pedestal that was to hold one of the towers, she took several large snowflakes in hand and affixed them to the base, carefully setting them at oblique angles.

To make them stay, she used a softly kneaded paste of silver sugar, placed only where the crystals met the pedestal. Mithril kept her constantly supplied with the paste, scooping it out of a stone bowl. Anne then applied it with a tool like a slender branch,

using it to glue the crystals to the pedestal in a way that wouldn't be visible.

Will Orlando really lose sight in his left eye? Will he be able to keep working as a candy crafter?

Will we finish in time with so few helpers? We have to try, but… can we do it?

Will that fairy come back and attack us again? If someone else is hurt… I'm so scared…

Even as she worked, all sorts of thoughts ran through Anne's mind, constantly distracting her.

Knowing she mustn't lose focus, she smacked her cheeks lightly with both hands. Suddenly, she felt someone's eyes on her.

The door to the room where Anne was working stood open, and in the hallway, leaning against a windowsill, was Challe. He was staring at her intently, keeping watch over her.

I have to concentrate.

She knew Challe was there to protect her, and that thought calmed her down a bit. She returned her attention to the task at hand.

After seeing Anne reach for some candy, Challe turned back toward the window, slightly relieved.

For a short while, Anne was free from distractions as she added crystals to the sculpture. She had just encircled the pedestal with snowflakes and breathed a sigh of relief, when Challe, who had been gazing out the corridor window, frowned.

"Anne, we have a visitor," Challe called out, sounding vaguely displeased. "For you, probably."

"A visitor?"

Having just gotten to a good stopping point, Anne stood up, walked over to Challe, and took a look out the window.

"Keith?"

She had no idea why he had come.

Just at the point where the road began to slope down the hill, she saw an aristocratic young man wearing an elegant knee-length jacket with a soft-looking tie around his neck. There was no question that it was Keith Powell, son of the former Silver Sugar Viscount. However, for some reason, he was standing in the shadows of the trees, as if to conceal himself.

He seemed to spot Anne through the window and started beckoning to her.

“He appeared over there a moment ago, and as soon as he saw me, he started trying to say something with hand gestures.”

Challe was right. For some reason, Keith was gesturing frantically. He repeatedly placed his index finger to his lips, as if urging them to keep quiet.

“I wonder what’s going on. Does he want us to come to him?” Anne tilted her head questioningly.

Mithril, who was riding on her shoulder, seemed suspicious. “Why won’t he come in through the front door?”

“He must have some reason for it, surely. Let’s go see.”

Challe, on guard against Lafalle, had apparently decided not to let Anne go anywhere on her own. As soon as she started walking, he followed her as a matter of course.

They went out the front door and cut across the garden. Then when they reached the hill road, Keith poked his face out from the shadows.

“Oh, I’m so glad you noticed me,” he said, greeting them with his usual gentle smile. “Thank you, Challe. It’s been a while, hasn’t it? Looks like you got your freedom—that’s a relief. And, Anne and Mithril Lid Pod, you’re both looking well, too.”

“What’s the matter, Keith?” asked Anne. “What are you doing out here, when you could have come inside?”

Keith’s eyes darted about like he was concerned about their surroundings, and he motioned for Anne to follow him, leading her into a thicket that was difficult to see from the castle.

“The candy crafters here aren’t likely to welcome me, are they? So I refrained from going in. I shouldn’t have come at all, but I was worried.”

“Worried? About what?”

“Your silver sugar solidified, didn’t it? It caused a big uproar at the Radcliffe Workshop, as well. The Mercury Workshop collected silver sugar from their unaffected subsidiaries and are going ahead with their work on the reserve sculptures for the festival. The Paige Workshop doesn’t have that many subsidiaries, so I was expecting an order to come down from the Silver Sugar Viscount for the Radcliffe Workshop to lend you some sugar. But

when there was no order, I wondered if the Paige Workshop was planning to regrind their sugar and use that."

"You're correct. We decided not to rely on the other workshops."

When he heard that, Keith knit his brows in concern. "That's absurd, Anne," he said bitterly. "It would be reckless even if you had candy crafters to spare, but there are only six of you. You'll be down to the wire just making the sculptures, surely. If you have to prepare your own silver sugar on top of that, there's no way you'll finish in time."

"We'll get it done. Very soon, Kat is coming to lend us a hand."

"You really think Mr. Hingley will make that big of a difference? Anne, be rational. If you don't complete the work, the Paige Workshop will go under. The faction will cease to exist. Getting help from the Silver Sugar Viscount to finish in time is the better option. You might be at a disadvantage in the Selection next year, but even so…"

Keith trailed off, then continued a bit hesitantly.

"I know I'm in no position to say something like this. I'm one of the reasons for the Paige Workshop's decline, after all. But I don't want to watch the faction where my father trained, the faction he loved, disappear."

Keith must have slipped away from his own work in order to visit them. He had chosen to train with the Radcliffe Workshop rather than the Paige Workshop, but he still had respect and fondness for his father's original faction.

That made Anne happy.

"Thank you, Keith. But I've already decided, together with Mr. Collins."

"Has that man really given this serious thought?!"

It was unusual to hear Keith raise his voice.

"That's pretty harsh, Keith."

Both Keith and Anne were startled by the cheerful voice. Along with Mithril, they spun around in surprise. Challe seemed to have already sensed the newcomer and simply turned to glance in his direction.

Pushing his way through a bush behind Challe, Elliott emerged from the foliage.

“You could have come inside. There’s no need to hide in a place like this. I didn’t know you were so shy!”

Keith’s cheeks reddened slightly out of embarrassment. “I didn’t want you to know that I was here.”

“I had no idea you hated me so much. But if you didn’t want me to see you, you shouldn’t have been hopping up and down out here, trying to draw attention. I was up on the second floor and could see you perfectly well. In fact, I’m sure I spotted you before Anne on the first floor even knew you were here.” Elliott put his hands on his hips and stood in front of Keith, looking amused.

“I didn’t think you’d be on the second floor. I heard from the Silver Sugar Viscount that your workshop was on the first floor.”

Keith, sophisticated to the last, answered with a flat expression, trying to hide his displeasure. Unexpectedly, Elliott grinned, and Keith shifted his gaze around, looking bewildered.

“Why are you smiling?” he asked.

“You were worried about the Paige Workshop, weren’t you?”

“Is that so bad?”

“No,” Elliott replied. “If I had to say, it makes me happy. But I think hiding something like that is meaningless. Your generous feelings won’t reach anyone. All right, come on. We’ll welcome you in.”

Elliott took hold of Keith’s arm, spun around, and briskly walked off, pulling a flustered Keith behind him.

“Wait just a minute, please!” exclaimed Keith.

Anne rushed after them. “Mr. Collins, what are you planning to do with Keith?”

Elliott grinned. “I thought I’d have him take a look at how the Paige Workshop operates.”

“Huh?”

“Wait, please,” Keith insisted. “I went out of my way to make sure I wouldn’t upset anyone…”

“It’s fine, it’s fine!”

It wasn’t clear what exactly was “fine” about any of this, but nevertheless, Elliott dragged Keith into the castle and up the main staircase to the second floor of the east wing. Once there, he stood him in front of the room with the millstones.

Having come that far, Keith seemed resigned to his fate. As flustered as he was, he didn’t fight it.

Keith had always believed that he had somehow betrayed the Paige Workshop. And though its candy crafters understood that he wasn't a traitor, in emotional terms, they felt like Keith had abandoned them.

With both of those things in mind, Keith had approached the castle stealthily, trying not to be discovered. However, Elliott seemed determined to spoil his thoughtfulness.

The three men in the room turned their millstones with single-minded focus. They didn't even seem to notice that Anne and the others had come to the doorway.

"Take a good look," Elliott whispered into Keith's ear. "When do you think they'll notice you?"

Looking surprised, Keith followed the crafters' movements with his eyes.

The strength of their motivation also reached Anne. Their great pride as artists was the source of their vigor. They never gave up and always worked to the very limit, doing everything they could. They didn't like to rely on others, preferring to finish the job with their own skills.

Keith must have been able to understand that. To see their pride and passion.

Some time had passed, and the crafters still hadn't noticed the people standing in the doorway.

Keith looked uncomfortably at Elliott, who winked back at him.

"We decided to do it on our own. And we believe we can." With that, Elliott suddenly turned and shouted, "Hey, you guys!"

At the sound of his voice, the three crafters finally stopped grinding and looked toward the door.

Nadir and Valentine were surprised to see Keith standing there.

King cocked his head in confusion. "Oh, it's you, Elliott. What's going on?" he demanded. "And what's with the kiddo?"

Valentine answered him with a bitter smile. "'Kiddo' is a bit rude, King. He's the son of Edward Powell, the former Silver Sugar Viscount."

King's eyebrows shot up. "Oh? The one I've heard so much about, eh? What'd you come here for?"

"I…," Keith said, then hesitated.

Elliott stepped forward, interrupting him. "He knew what happened to our silver sugar, so he was worried and came to see

how we were doing."

Nadir looked at him, eyes wide. "Huh? Why were you worried about us?"

Keith stumbled over his answer. "Because…because the Paige Workshop was important to my father."

King and Valentine exchanged looks, a touch of surprise on their faces.

"There, you see?" said Elliott. "No need to worry, right, Keith? Okay, let's go. Sorry to interrupt, everyone. Continue with your work."

Pushing Keith from behind, Elliott guided him into the lesser hall.

As Anne followed the two of them, she realized more or less what Elliott was trying to do. When she glanced over at Challe, who was walking beside her, he shrugged slightly, as if to express how bothersome all of it was.

Elliott came to a stop in the lesser hall. Then with a smile, he peered into Keith's face.

"How about it?" he asked. "Still worried?"

After thinking for a moment, Keith replied, "Still worried."

"Ouch. That hurts." Elliott jokingly staggered back, but Keith remained serious.

"However…I want to believe that your candy crafters can make it happen."

"That's great. I'm glad you think so."

"But you ought to find a way to recruit more workers."

"We would have done that already if we could. How about it, Keith? Want to work here instead? You can put in your notice with Master Radcliffe. The fact is, we asked Kat to lend us a hand, but one of our crafters got injured. Now all Kat's doing is taking his place. We're in a bit of a bind."

"I can't. I'm a traitor. Because of my decision, the Paige Workshop…"

Elliott suddenly burst into jovial laughter. "Keith, you're really full of yourself, huh?"

"What do you mean by that?" said Keith, looking annoyed.

"The Paige Workshop didn't instantly go into decline because of one decision you made, okay?" Elliott answered gently. "Problems accumulated over time, and then rumors started about what

happened with you. It's our fault we weren't able to pull it together. Then they all would've said, *Keith's an idiot for not joining the Paige Workshop!"*

Keith stared at him in amazement.

"While I'm at it," Elliott continued, "did you think you would get special treatment here for being the son of the former Silver Sugar Viscount? That's just more proof of how self-absorbed you are. Sorry, but the only people here who even knew Edward are me, Orlando, and Glen. And Orlando and I were just kids back then, so it didn't really click that he'd become some big important guy. Our crafters rely solely on our own expertise working with sugar candy, so even if someone told us who you were, we'd just say, *Oh, really?* I mean, Master Radcliffe makes way more of a fuss over you, doesn't he?"

The crafters of the Paige Workshop felt like Keith, who had chosen the Radcliffe Workshop, had given up on and abandoned them. But the truth was that Keith simply disliked the idea of following in his father's footsteps. He still had affection for the Paige Workshop, and this was a good opportunity for him to let the other crafters know that.

And at the same time, it was a good chance for them to let Keith know that he didn't need to feel guilty.

No doubt Elliott had already thought up a number of ways to turn things around for the workshop. He was still the best candidate to become its next maestro. He had the ability and the mindset for the job.

Surprised, Keith looked at Elliott for a few moments, then averted his gaze.

"With all due respect, Mr. Collins," he said, "you're a real jerk."

"So I'm often told."

Keith sighed softly and turned back to Anne.

"I'm sorry, Anne. This was none of my business."

"Not at all. Don't say that. I'm grateful you were worried about us. I'm glad."

"If I find anyone who might be able to help you with your work, I'll let you know." Keith gave another courteous bow to Elliott. "I'm sorry for butting in. Please excuse me, Mr. Collins."

"So how about it? You gonna come join us? I'm making you an offer here."

“I can’t. I…I respect my father, and I want the Paige Workshop to survive, but I still hate the idea of copying him. I will not join the Paige Workshop.”

Keith wheeled around and quickly left the castle. Something about his retreat made him seem ashamed.

“Too bad! I got rejected,” Elliott said in a singsong voice as he watched Keith go.

Looking amused, he strolled back into the room where the other crafters were drying the silver sugar.

“I feel bad for that guy—Keith—getting bullied by Elliott,” said Mithril, sounding sincerely sympathetic.

Challe added to Mithril’s sentiment, saying, “Droopy Eyes knows what he’s doing. The boy didn’t stand a chance.”

Anne smiled wryly at the two fairies’ reactions. “You might be right.”

Chapter 2
THE STATE CHURCH'S ANXIETY

"Anne! Come on—get up!"

The following morning, a lively voice called out to Anne, and the curtains in her room were suddenly thrown aside, allowing bright sunlight to stream in.

Anne groaned and squirmed, trying to crawl farther under her covers.

Thanks to the previous day's work, she had not made it to bed until after midnight. If it had been an ordinary day, she still would have been able to rouse herself somehow. But the previous morning, she had won a contest against the Silver Sugar Viscount, and she'd barely slept a wink preparing for it. She had meant to take a nap after the dreary all-nighter, but then the incident with Lafalle had happened.

That had taken quite a psychological toll. And afterward, she'd gotten more and more panicked about Orlando losing his ability to work and no longer felt like she could take time to rest. Ultimately, she had continued working past midnight along with the other crafters.

"Get up, Anne! And Mithril Lid Pod, too. And Challe!"

The blanket that Anne had been trying to crawl under was ripped away from her. She shivered and curled into a ball as the chilly air swept over her body. Mithril, who was sleeping in the same bed, snored loudly beside her.

She heard the sound of more blankets being thrown aside. Someone must be trying to wake Challe, who was sleeping on the couch.

The night before, Challe had started sleeping in Anne's room as a precaution against Lafalle. Then Mithril had whined that he was jealous and wanted to sleep in Anne's room, as well.

Though the arrangement was meant to keep her safe, it seemed silly for all three of them to be sleeping in one room when they were staying in such a large castle. But it also made Anne happy somehow.

"All right, come on! Breakfast is ready. Hey, you too, Challe!"

Who could have so much energy this early in the morning?

It wasn't the injured Orlando or any of the exhausted candy crafters. It wasn't Glen, and it certainly wasn't Bridget. Danna or Hal would have been more reserved.

Finally, Anne remembered.

It was the adorable fairy with pale-purple hair, who, until just the day before, had been so weak that he seemed ready to vanish at any moment. But from evening on, he'd steadily grown more energetic, until his complexion was positively rosy. It was Noah.

Noah was incredibly disappointed to hear that the candy fyffe set Hugh had made for him had been stolen. But when Anne promised to seek guidance from the Silver Sugar Viscount once the First Holy Festival was over and make something similar, the young fairy's face had immediately brightened. He had his own room now, too—the one Mithril had vacated the previous night.

How wonderful. He's feeling so much better.

Anne thought about saying something to him, but her eyes refused to open. Even though she was incredibly cold, she just couldn't get up.

"Starting today, I'll be helping Danna and Hal around the castle! My first duty is to wake everybody up. I decided that. It's the one thing I've always been able to do properly since long ago. After all, you just have to be persistent and keep saying, *Get up, get up*. Master Herbert was a terrible oversleeper, but I woke him up every morning."

Noah was so cheerful, he seemed like he might start dancing around the room.

"Quiet down. It's still early."

Noah had managed to rouse even Mithril. He sat up in bed, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

“…You seem well, Noah,” Challe said, sounding incredibly displeased.

“I *am* well! I wonder how many years it’s been since my body was in such good shape. I’m so full of energy, I could leap right into the air! Want to see?”

“…That’s great to hear…but I’ll pass,” Challe answered wearily. Then Anne heard the sound of rustling clothes nearby. It seemed Challe was approaching her bed.

“Anne. Get up,” he said.

“…Sorry… I can’t. I can’t get up… Just a few more minutes…,” she answered in a thin voice.

“I think you’d better get up anyway. It doesn’t bother me, but I can see your underpants.”

“……Huh? ……Wh-wha—?!”

It took a few moments before Anne realized the meaning of Challe’s words. Then her eyes snapped open like she had been struck by lightning.

She leaped up and sat on top of the bed, pulling the hem of her nightgown down in a panic.

“Y-you saw?!”

Flushing bright red, she looked up at Challe, who was standing beside the bed.

Anne’s underpants were fluffy, poofy things that covered her down to the thighs, decorated with a lacy cotton trim where the hem narrowed. They weren’t anything to be particularly embarrassed about…or so she thought. That’s what she wanted to think.

However, she was troubled that she’d been rude enough to let them show. It also meant that her legs had been in full view.

“Scarecrow-brained as always, Anne. Of course Challe Fenn Challe saw them. That’s why he told you about it, right?” Mithril said, sounding exasperated.

“So you *did* see… And Mithril… You too…?”

“Don’t worry about it! All we saw were your legs and your underpants!”

“Doesn’t that mean you saw everything?!”

Anne turned even redder, and Challe snickered.

“Properly embarrassed?” he teased.

“Of course I am…”

“Don’t worry. It wasn’t a particularly exhilarating display.” Challe was so cool about it that Anne was a little disappointed.

Once Noah had woken Anne and the fairies, he bounced out of the room, saying that he was going to wake up Elliott on the third floor next.

After that, Anne got changed behind a curtain. As she was braiding her hair, she heard King shout from the first floor.

“Hey, isn’t that Kat?! It’s Kat!”

“Kat?!” Anne couldn’t help but smile. “I didn’t think he would be here so early!”

She quickly braided her hair and dashed out of her room with Challe and Mithril in tow. On the stairs, she ran into Elliott.

“Oh, good morning, you three.”

Elliott seemed happy as he hurried down the stairs, smoothing his sleep-mussed red hair. Nadir, who had come halfway up the stairs to meet them, impatiently pointed at the window facing the garden.

“Anne, Elliott! I saw a wagon pull into the garden. A man got out with luggage and headed up to the front door. I don’t know what Kat looks like, but the man I saw had exactly the kind of presence Elliott described. It’s gotta be him!”

“Did he have a small fairy with him? One with green hair?” Anne asked.

Nadir nodded energetically. “There was a green-haired fairy about the same size as Mithril Lid Pod riding on his shoulder!”

“Then that’s definitely him!”

Everyone went downstairs and headed for the front door. Anne, unable to suppress her excitement, got there first and opened it.

“Whoa!!”

As soon as she opened the door, the man who had been standing on the threshold leaned back in surprise.

“Kat!” Anne cried loudly, overjoyed to see him.

The man was slender, with silvery-gray hair and slanted blue eyes. He wore a stylish jacket decorated with lace at the wrists, and a shirt adorned with embroidery at the collar. He had a noble air and seemed surprisingly stylish and genteel. At least until he opened his mouth.

“Oh my god, what a gloomy place you people are working in. What is this, a joke? Look at this castle.”

The moment he saw them, Kat skipped the greetings and went straight to complaining.

“This is good work.”

Kat was looking at the tower of snow crystals that Anne had partially constructed the day before. She had only finished about a third of the tower, but when he saw it, Kat crossed his arms and praised her handiwork.

“But something like this takes a ridiculous amount of time. And if you don’t craft your snowflakes well or if you handle them clumsily, it might break while you’re building it. You have to be a little clever about the kneading, too, and that will take more time than usual.”

“Yes. That’s why we need you, Kat.”

After breakfast, Anne and Elliott showed Kat the workshop on the first floor of the east wing.

Challe accompanied Anne, of course, but he stayed in the hallway. The workshop where they made sugar candy was a sacred place. Challe knew that, too, and tried not to enter the workshop thoughtlessly.

Kat had received Anne’s letter the previous afternoon and immediately set out, arriving in Lewiston as the sun was setting. He’d spent one night at the Weather Vane inn there, then left in the morning for Hollyleaf Castle.

Since he’d checked out of the inn quite early, Kat had not eaten breakfast, so he ate with the other crafters at the castle.

During the meal, Anne introduced the other candy crafters and filled Kat in on Orlando’s injury and the situation with Lafalle. Then she gave him a brief overview of the state of their work.

“I’ll start with grinding some silver sugar,” he said. “After all, if we can’t use the sugar, nothing else matters.”

From the workshop, they could hear the sound of millstones coming from the second floor. Nadir, Valentine, and King had already started their work. Mithril was with them, too, and they had entrusted him with the task of scooping the powdery silver sugar into barrels.

Elliott scratched his ginger hair. “We’re counting on you. I mean it.”

Kat snorted derisively. “Well, I suppose looking at your dumb grin is better than being ordered around by that dim-witted bastard Hugh. Besides…” He looked down at the half-finished candy sculpture again and grumbled, “This’ll be worth working on. It’s an interesting piece.”

Elliott’s expression softened in relief. “I think so, too.”

“Please help us,” Anne said, bowing.

“I will. That’s what I came to do. There’s no time, so I’m gonna get straight to work. But before that, take this one into the kitchen or somethin’,” Kat said, indicating the little green-haired fairy named Benjamin, who was currently dozing on his shoulder. “He’s a pest. The only thing he can do is cook. If he ever wakes up, that is…”

Sounding annoyed, Kat picked Benjamin up by the belt and thrust him at Anne.

Benjamin was very clear that he didn’t want to do anything other than cook, and he was always sleeping anyway, so he was basically useless. It was hard to understand why Kat kept the little fairy around.

Anne accepted him with both hands, amazed that Benjamin was still sleeping soundly, even pinched between Kat’s fingers.

“I’ll show Kat to the second floor,” said Elliott. “Anne, you take Benjamin into the kitchen, then report to Glen and Orlando. Tell them Kat’s started working.” At that, the two men headed off.

Anne and Challe took Benjamin, who still hadn’t woken up, to the kitchen and left him in the care of Danna, Hal, and Noah. The three hardworking fairies were surprised to see him dozing away despite being moved all over the place.

After that, Anne headed up to the third floor and made her report to Glen. When he heard that Kat had joined them, Glen let out a deep sigh.

“I see. Some good news for now… If only Orlando’s injury would heal.” He grimaced, as if in pain.

Sometime the previous evening, Elliott had reported to Glen about Orlando’s injury and about Lafalle. Glen was bedridden, and all he could do was listen to their reports. It must have been frustrating.

“Glen, have you seen Bridget?” asked Anne.

Bridget had been shut up in her room since the previous day and hadn't taken any meals.

Anne was certain that Orlando's injury had also hurt Bridget. She hoped that, if she could get Elliott or Glen to speak to her, it might ease her grief a little.

But when he heard Bridget's name, Glen frowned.

"I have not."

"I think Bridget is hurting, too. But if you would see her and talk to her—"

"Anne. I know what you're trying to say. But right now, I don't want to see that girl's face. I said this to Elliott, too, but for the time being, please don't let her into my room."

"But—"

"I really don't feel like seeing her. Through her foolish actions, Orlando lost one of his eyes, something vital to his work as a candy crafter."

Glen turned to face the window, as if refusing to hear any more talk of Bridget.

Anne didn't want to accept his attitude, but considering Glen's feelings, she couldn't argue the point any further, either. Glen loved both Bridget and Orlando. The situation was probably unbearable for him.

Ultimately, Anne said only that she would be back with another report later, then left the room.

Out in the corridor, Challe was waiting for her, leaning against the wall.

"I suppose Orlando's room is next," he said, straightening up.

Since the previous day, Challe had been with Anne constantly. She felt a little bad for taking up all his free time.

"I'm sorry. It must be boring following me around like this."

As they descended the stairs and headed toward Orlando's room, Challe sighed.

"It's because of me that you're in danger," he said.

"But it's only natural that Gladys—I mean, Lafalle would come after me, since he was targeting Silver Sugar Masters in the first place."

"It's because of me that he's after you instead of Elliott or Glen."

Challe's face held more than just anger. There was a hint of confusion there, as well. He was probably thinking about Lafalle,

who had fled.

Challe had said that Lafalle was born in the same place as he was. Anne wondered what meaning that held for the two fairies. If they were human, they would be brothers, relatives, or something similar.

She'd also heard that Lafalle wanted to make Challe his comrade, though even Challe didn't seem to know what he meant exactly. But without a doubt, the two of them had to mean something to each other.

What is their connection?

Fairies had their own thoughts and feelings, and Anne was sure there were some things that only they could comprehend.

It might be something I can't even understand.

That thought was a little frightening. Challe was always by Anne's side, and he had pledged to protect her. But she got the feeling that he might disappear suddenly because of some factor she couldn't grasp.

It wasn't that she doubted Challe's words. But she sensed there was something going on that the two of them didn't have the strength to fight.

When Anne and Challe entered the first-floor hallway, they found someone unexpected standing in front of Orlando's door.

Surprised, Anne stopped short.

"Bridget?"

Hearing her name, Bridget looked over at them, startled.

"Are you here to visit Orlando?" Anne asked. "In that case, your timing's perfect. I was just about to let him know that Kat has arrived, so he doesn't need to worry. Why don't you head in with me?"

Smiling, Anne trotted over to the other girl.

Bridget had probably come because she was concerned about Orlando.

Up until then, whenever something unpleasant happened, Bridget simply locked herself away in her room. She'd never left out of her own volition before. The fact that she had done so now seemed like a positive change, and Anne was happy to see it. Even if her actions were motivated by feelings of guilt, it was definitely an improvement.

Bridget hung her head and let her gaze drift.

“I don’t know how I can face him. I envy you, Anne. You’ve never been excluded like me, so you can do anything you want without hesitation.”

Anne blinked, taken aback by the unexpected statement.

“Well, things are different here,” she said. “But in the past, I was an outsider everywhere. That was even true when I was at the Radcliffe Workshop. I used to travel alone with my mother, and every place we went, I was shunned by the children there. Well, it’s no wonder. I suddenly showed up one day, and nobody knew who I was.”

At last, Bridget raised her head. She looked straight at Anne, confusion on her face. Her jade-like eyes were beautiful, and she wore a lovely, feminine dress with lots of pleats in the skirt. It suited her well. Anne found it hard to believe anyone would ever exclude such a pretty girl or treat her harshly.

“But you know,” Anne continued, “sometimes, I wasn’t being left out on purpose. In one village, I remember being jealous of all the kids playing together. I spent the whole day watching them from a distance. Then one little girl noticed me and asked me if I wanted to play with them. When I told her that I did, she laughed and said, ‘You should have said something earlier. We didn’t see you.’ Then I understood. Everyone was absorbed in their games or whatever else they were doing, trying their best in their own way. At times, that made them miss things. After that, I summoned my courage and started inviting children I didn’t know to play. Sometimes, they excluded me anyway, but…but I was left out a lot less often.”

Anne wasn’t strong, and she wasn’t particularly clever. She was just an ordinary candy crafter, not some hero.

But even she needed courage to make it through her daily life.

The courage to call out to an unfamiliar child and ask them to play didn’t amount to much. But for Anne, it required enough bravery to quash the fear of her own world ending.

Anne felt sure that for Bridget, entering Orlando’s room and expressing words of sympathy would require a tremendous amount of courage. That much was clear.

But if she didn’t back down, there was a chance that something would change.

“I thought about going in together, but I’ve changed my mind. Bridget, please tell Orlando that Kat has arrived and that everything is fine. Please. Let’s go, Challe.”

“W-wait!”

Ignoring the other girl’s panic, Anne turned her back on Bridget and quickly walked away with Challe.

“Anne!”

Bridget called after her, but Anne pretended not to hear. Then she called out to Challe, seeming even more flustered.

“Challe. Wait, Challe! Bring Anne back. I—!”

Challe glanced over his shoulder and said, “This is your job, assigned to you by the head candy crafter.”



My job? What does that mean?

Bridget was confused by Challe’s words and a little angry that she didn’t understand them.

“This is hardly a job,” she grumbled peevishly.

Sure, Anne had asked Bridget to let Orlando know Kat had arrived. But calling that a job was a joke, a pathetically transparent ploy.

That said, since she had been asked to do it, there was no avoiding it. It wasn’t like she could simply not tell him.

“Well, since this is my job…,” Bridget said, justifying to herself what she was about to do as she stood in front of Orlando’s door. After several deep breaths, she knocked boldly.

The door immediately opened, and a fairy with orange hair poked her head out.

“Ah, my lady.”

It was Danna. She was probably tending to Orlando. Her eyes widened at the unexpected visitor.

“Anne asked me to do something… It’s my job. I can’t get out of it, so I have to give Orlando a message.”

“Oh, of course. Master Orlando is awake now. Please come in.”

“That’s all right. If you could just tell him…”

Before Bridget could finish, Danna opened the door wide and called out into the room, “Master Orlando, the young lady is here.

I will bring some tea." Danna then invited her in and hurried away.

Danna, who had been entrusted with the housework, was shy and liked to avoid the attention of the Paige family and the other candy crafters as much as possible. In this situation, she probably didn't want to intrude on Bridget and Orlando's conversation. But personally, Bridget would have preferred that she stay.

Danna was gone, however. What's more, she had already told Orlando that Bridget was there. There was no going back now.

Reluctantly, Bridget entered the room. There was a fire in the hearth, and the interior was warm.

Orlando was sitting up in bed, leaning back against the headboard. He seemed listless, though his expression was dignified.

He looked at her in surprise. Half his face was covered with bandages.

It's true. His eye…

When she saw him like that, Bridget felt a dull shock, as if her head had been struck by a clod of earth.

"Bridget? What is it?"

Orlando sounded surprised, and his question startled Bridget back to her senses. She had been asked to deliver a message, and she had to tell him what she'd come to say. But for some reason, her chest hurt, like something was squeezing it.

"I was given a message for you. From Anne. So…I'm here to…"

She started to speak, and as she did, her chest tightened even further.

He's a candy crafter, and yet… Orlando—he's a crafter, but…

She felt something rise up in her throat.

When they were young, Bridget and Orlando had often played together. They had innocently vowed that they would both become candy crafters, and behind Glen's back, they had asked Grandpa Jim to give them scraps of silver sugar so they could pretend to make sugar candies.

Around that time, Elliott was also coming and going from the main house. Just as in the present day, he had been something of a joker as a child.

But he had clearly held a different attitude toward sugar candy than Bridget and Orlando.

He wasn't playing when he touched the silver sugar. Instead, he was always working on the tasks he was given as part of his training, silently toiling away. And he would watch the other crafters intently even as he did his own job.

Perhaps influenced by Elliott's behavior, Orlando gradually began to treat his sugar candy sculptures more seriously.

And then around that same time, Bridget's father told her that she could never become a candy crafter.

The two boys left Bridget behind and started down their chosen path. But Bridget had always known how serious they were. Because she had seen it from the very start.

"Kat has come to help. So don't worry…"

She couldn't bring herself to say any more. Suddenly, her vision grew cloudy, and something hot ran down her cheeks. She covered her mouth with both hands, but they couldn't hold back her sobs.

"…I'm sorry."

The rest poured out of her. It was like a dam had broken, and the words came spilling forth one after another.

"I'm sorry, Orlando. I'm so very sorry. I'm sorry I brought a fairy like him to the castle. You're a candy crafter, but your eye… I'm sorry. It's all my fault. Anne told me not to think that way, but still—still, it's my fault this happened."

Orlando looked at her in surprise.

"I'm sorry, Orlando," she said again. "I'm sorry… I'm sorry…"

"It's all right, Bridget." Orlando shook his head softly. "Even if my left eye's useless, I still have my right. It's no problem. And my fingers are fine. More importantly…I'm glad you weren't hurt. Your face is your best feature. It would have been awful if you'd been left with a scar."

My face is my best feature? What a cruel thing to say.

Even though her tears were spilling over, she had a strange feeling like she wanted to fly into a rage, or do the opposite and burst out laughing.

But Orlando's words were genuine. He had never been one to manipulate or lie. He'd been that way since they were kids. He must have truly thought that Bridget's face was her best feature.

What an oaf. How infuriating. But he did say he was glad I wasn't hurt.

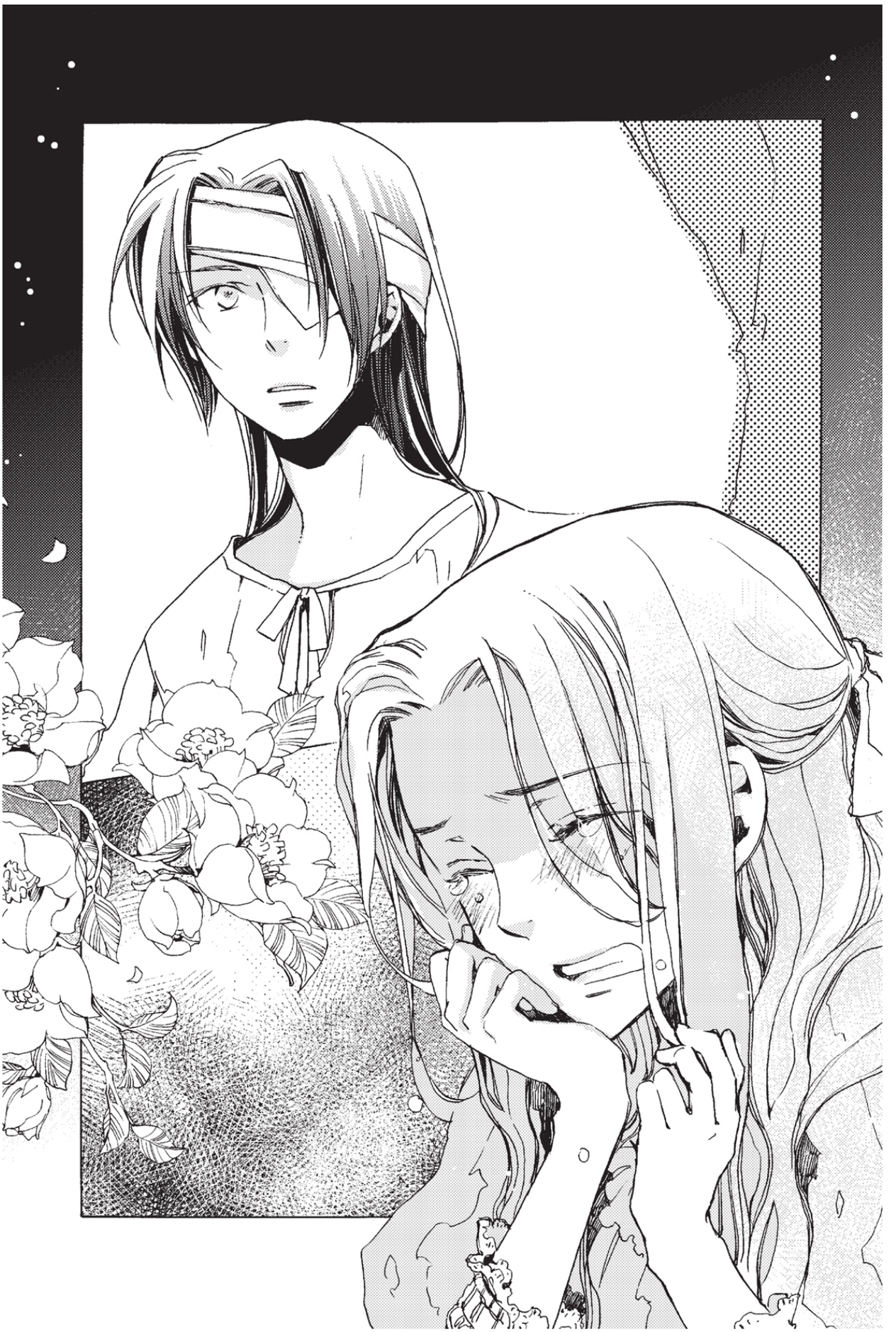
He had been worried about her.

Her feelings, which had seemed so certain, melted down into a hodgepodge, and she wasn't sure whether she was angry, happy, or sad. Adrift in a sea of indistinct emotions, she remembered Anne's words.

"*Everyone was absorbed in their games or whatever else they were doing, trying their best in their own way,*" Anne had said. "*At times, that made them miss things. After that, I summoned my courage and started inviting children I didn't know to play.*"

Bridget had always thought that everyone at the workshop was excluding her, that no one paid her any mind.

But maybe that was only to be expected. Everyone, including her father, was a candy crafter, and they were always, always absorbed in sugar candy alone. They didn't have the wherewithal to concern themselves with anything else.



But that was exactly what earned them respect as candy artisans.

Bridget had understood that she could not become a candy crafter due to her social standing. So she had given up, convinced that she had no business becoming one. But in that case, she should have found her own way forward—both to remain close to the boys and to discover her own worth.

She should have summoned her courage, taken a step closer to them, and told them she wanted to do something together.

Just like Anne had done when she was a child.

At last, she understood what Challe had meant when he told her to wise up. He'd been telling Bridget that she had yet to learn something that she ought to have learned when she was a child.

Something very simple. But something that took courage.

"Orlando?" Bridget wiped her tears away and hesitantly began to speak. "Would it be all right if I took care of you?"

"……Huh?"

Orlando frowned and made a face like someone had told an off-color joke, which naturally offended her. She stuck her lip out in a pout and turned away.

"If you don't want me to, I won't."

"Oh, that's not what I meant." Orlando sounded a little anxious. But after a brief silence, he whispered, "Please do."



Anne dashed into the front hall, almost like she was fleeing from Bridget. Challe followed, sticking close behind her.

"There you are, Anne," came Elliott's voice from the top of the stairs.

When Anne looked up, he was making his way down, a troubled smile on his face. In his right hand, he held an envelope.

"Sorry for asking so suddenly, but could you prepare for an outing? Challe's coming, too."

"What's going on?"

"This."

Elliott waved the envelope in his hand. It was made of luxurious, pure-white paper, without a hint of yellow, and

addressed to Master Elliott Collins, proxy maestro of the Paige Workshop. The sender was Hugh Mercury, the Silver Sugar Viscount, and his crest was pressed into the sealing wax affixed to the paper.

"The Silver Sugar Viscount says to come to the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell. Apparently, he heard about Orlando's injury through the doctor. And when the Viscount went to report it to the state church, the priests all went berserk. They're panicking about whether we can finish in time. And it sounds like, given the circumstances, they're even talking about having the Mercury Workshop make the same sculptures as us."

"Unbelievable! We can't let another workshop make the sculptures we all designed and worked on together!"

"I know. I mean, if it comes down to it and our sugar candy sculptures aren't ready in time, all they have to do is use the ones the Mercury Workshop made as backup. But it sounds like the head priest is really taken with our work, so now they're talking about duplicating it. Evidently, the church asked the Viscount to summon whoever's in charge over here. I can go alone, but I think our head candy crafter ought to join me."

"I'll go. The state church may be our client, but we're the ones making the sugar candy."

Elliott and Anne, along with Challe, took the workshop's medium-sized wagon and rushed at top speed toward the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell.

They went around the sanctuary, where the Selection had been held, and made their way to the priests' dormitory, which was connected to the sanctuary by a covered walkway. It was a three-story stone building, with tall vertical windows arranged in regular rows along the east- and west-facing walls. It was plain but well-built, lending it an air of dignity.

The area beyond was encircled by a high wall. The priests lived their lives within that enclosure. Inside, there was a school, a library, a chapel for their daily prayers, and so on.

Elliott steered the wagon toward the dormitory and parked it beside the entrance into the priests' quarters. He left the wagon in the care of a priest-in-training—a young man called a seminarian, who would eventually become a priest.

Father Brooke, the priest in charge of the last Selection, emerged from the dormitory.

“We’ve been waiting for you, Mr. Collins, Ms. Halford.”

They then stepped through the double oak doors into a spacious hall. A corridor paved with pure-white stone tiles stretched from right inside the doorway all the way to the back of the hall. It was surprisingly long.

Elliott, Anne, and Challe had rushed there through a cold wind, so the warm air filling the priests’ quarters was a relief. Somewhere, someone was burning incense mixed with Saint Ellis Nut, and a pleasant, refreshing fragrance hung in the air.

Another seminarian took Anne’s cape and Elliott’s overcoat, before glancing nervously at Challe.

Father Brooke also appeared perplexed.

“This fairy, if I’m not mistaken, was also in the sanctuary at the time of the Selection.”

“There’s a dangerous individual stalking our head candy crafter. This fairy is her bodyguard. Is that a problem?”

“No, not really. We, too, have warrior fairies accompany our priests as bodyguards on occasion. There’s no problem; I simply mistook him for a pet fairy.”

Father Brooke’s misunderstanding was only natural. Challe had black hair, black eyes, and an elegant figure. His long eyelashes brushed his bangs, and his skin was pale. His appearance was nothing like that of a warrior fairy.

Father Brooke led Anne and the others down the long corridor.

Doors lined the left and right sides, and there were no windows, so the farther back they went, the darker it became. By the time they reached the end of the corridor, it was so dark that they could hardly see.

There, they found another door. Beside it sat a ceramic incense burner with a thin trail of smoke curling up from it.

Father Brooke knocked on the door.

“Father, the Silver Sugar Masters have arrived from the Paige Workshop. It’s Collins, the proxy maestro, and Halford, the head candy crafter.”

“Enter.”

Anne had heard that composed voice before. It was the head priest, who had spoken last at the Selection—the one who had

chosen the Paige Workshop's candy sculpture.

"Go ahead."

Father Brooke opened the door, and a sudden burst of light hit Anne's eyes. The interior of the room was flooded with it. Bright sunlight streamed through the tall windows lining one wall. The fire in the hearth was burning warmly, and Anne could hear the firewood crackling and smell the charcoal.

There was a large desk in front of the windows, where the head priest was sitting. The light streaming in from behind him made his expression difficult to see and illuminated his gray hair, which was starting to turn white.

A tall man was standing on the other side of the desk from the head priest. He, too, was backlit, rendering his face indecipherable.

"So you came, crafters of the Paige Workshop."

The man in front of the desk spoke in a familiar voice and briskly approached them. As soon as he left the beam of light, they could tell it was Hugh Mercury, the Silver Sugar Viscount.

He walked to the middle of the room and lightly jerked his chin, gesturing to Anne and the others that they should come inside. Then as he let them pass, he looked back at the head priest.

"As requested, I have summoned them: Collins, the proxy maestro of the Paige Workshop, and Halford, their head candy crafter."

Elliott and Anne, along with Challe, stepped into the room, and the door closed behind them.

"I'm glad you could make it, Paige Workshop crafters."

The head priest's voice was gentle and kind. Now that their eyes were used to the light, they could finally identify his expression. He was smiling.

Elliott bowed, and Anne curtsied.

Suddenly, the head priest tilted his head to the side in confusion.

"And the fairy?"

Hugh answered, "A warrior fairy. The head crafter's bodyguard. He is not a pet fairy, so I don't believe he's in violation of the rectory rules."

"Oh, a warrior fairy, hmm?"

The head priest looked intrigued, and Hugh grinned.

“If you get too close,” he said, “you’ll regret your curiosity.”

Challe was leaning against the wall with a blank look on his face, not showing the slightest bit of concern that he had become the topic of conversation. He was probably used to it.

“Come closer now, Collins, Halford.”

The head priest beckoned them with his hand, and Anne and Elliott went to stand before his desk.

There were two chairs and a sofa there for visitors to use. Hugh took a seat on the sofa and crossed his legs. He looked relaxed. His posture indicated that he considered his duty done. However, he seemed interested in what was going to happen next, and his gaze was boring into Anne’s and Elliott’s backs.

“Regarding the candy sculptures for the First Holy Festival,” the priest began, “I’ve heard about your progress from the Silver Sugar Viscount. It seems as though you have yet to complete even a single candy sculpture, and at present, your numbers include only five candy crafters. Furthermore, you had trouble with your silver sugar hardening, and now you are in the process of rendering that sugar into a usable state. Therefore, construction of the candy sculptures is on hold. Does that about sum it up?”

The head priest was still smiling. Anne bit her lip as he described their difficult situation without changing his expression.

Elliott nodded. “That’s correct.”

“Given these circumstances, I consulted with the Silver Sugar Viscount about whether your candy sculptures will be finished in time for the First Holy Festival. He answered me, ‘The Paige Workshop says that they will be finished.’”

The head priest turned his gaze toward Hugh.

“Then I asked him in a different way. I said, ‘Do *you* think they will be able to finish in time?’ His answer was, ‘Considering it rationally, there’s no way they can manage it.’”

Anne and Elliott turned to look at Hugh, and he shrugged.

“Of course that’s what I said. I can’t just lie. But I can feel the Paige Workshop’s drive to complete their work. That’s why I think we should wait and see. If they aren’t done, we can simply use the reserve sculptures that the Mercury Workshop is making. That’s my suggestion anyway.”

“I found that idea disappointing,” the head priest continued, picking up where Hugh left off. “The incident that caused your silver sugar to harden was an unexpected stroke of bad luck. However, I want to see those beautiful sugar candy sculptures decorate the sanctuary. So what do you think of this? How about allowing the Mercury Workshop to do your job? You’ve faced unforeseen hardships, so we will not impose a fine on the Paige Workshop. In exchange, you will transfer the job and your sculptures to the Mercury Workshop.”

They would be allowed to forfeit their responsibility without suffering the penalty. It was a totally unexpected proposal. One might even call it merciful. But Anne was so enraged that the blood drained from her face.

Transfer the job and the sculptures?

It was like being told to uproot her pride as a candy crafter and hand it over wholly to someone else.

The state church’s proposal was probably coming from a place of kindness. But to a crafter, there could be no greater insult.

It’s unthinkable.

Elliott grinned broadly. “What a good idea.”

Anne was shocked. She grabbed Elliott by the arm. “Mr. Collins!”

“I mean, it *is* a good idea, isn’t it? Really. One rarely receives such a kind offer.”

“I won’t do it!!”

Anne shouted in spite of herself.

“I hate the idea of having someone else make the sculptures we thought up together, that we’re all building as a team! We’ll make them ourselves! If we don’t, everyone will feel awful about it. If we give up now, the Paige Workshop will go right back to where it was—gradually falling apart. What’s more, if we hand over our sculptures, we’ll be selling the very pride of our crafters. If we do that for a measly ten thousand cress, we won’t be able to face them. If we’re at the point of selling our pride, there’s no reason for the Paige Workshop to continue.”

She looked up at Elliott desperately.

“That’s what you think?” he asked.

“It’s not what I think—it’s a fact.”

Elliott broke into a smile. “That it is.”

Then he turned his gaze back to the head priest.

"It is a very nice offer. But as you just heard, not a single one of our candy crafters will accept such conditions. So we will have to decline. We will make the candy sculptures for the First Holy Festival, and we'll get them done in time."

"But the Silver Sugar Viscount says that, thinking rationally, you cannot manage it."

"He's wrong. We'll make it."

"If you're stubborn and don't finish in time, you'll face a fine of ten thousand cress, and your reputation will be ruined."

"I'm aware. If we don't succeed, I'm prepared for the consequences."

As she stared at Elliott's smiling face, Anne felt a pressure in her chest.

Prepared.

Elliott was prepared for everything.

Hugh had been watching their exchange with a faint smile. He had summoned the members of the Paige Workshop in accordance with the head priest's demands, but he had probably known from the start what decision Anne and Elliott would make.

Their choice would have been obvious to any candy crafter. The idea of handing over their sculptures to someone else was simply unthinkable.

"Very well." Quietly, the head priest nodded. "If you are so prepared, then continue your work, Paige Workshop. But remember that you have declined this offer. There will be no such kindness extended in the future, no matter what circumstances may arise."

Anne had gotten what she wanted.

Or so she had thought while she was still burning with anger. But as she left the priests' quarters and headed back in the wagon, her anxiety steadily grew until it flooded her whole chest.

Elliott, who was driving, was also unusually quiet. Challe was gazing out at the bustling town of Lewiston as it flowed past them on both sides, not looking at anything in particular.

Sitting sandwiched between the two of them, Anne felt her heart sink.

Hugh had judged the situation rationally and declared that they would not finish in time. He was probably correct.

But Anne and the others had to get it done at any cost.

Would they assign even more work to each person, further cutting down on their sleep? The crafters would likely agree and work very hard, but their bodies would bear the strain of such an unreasonable demand.

But they had no hope of finding more candy crafters who had the necessary skills and weren't allied with any other factions.

The wagon approached the amusement district, near the city wall. This neighborhood held gambling houses and bars crowded close to the city's edge, and unsavory characters were hanging around on the street. It was the type of dangerous neighborhood that a young woman wasn't supposed to visit alone after dark.

But crossing through this area was the fastest way to get out of Lewiston and back to Hollyleaf Castle.

It was the middle of the day, so they didn't see any dangerous types hanging around, though there were drunks lying on the shoulder of the cobblestone street. Most of them were men of middle age or older, but among them were some who looked younger.

One drunk—a young blond—sat slumped against the wall of a bar, his head hung low. Though his clothes were dirty, his shirt and pants seemed well-made. And if he was to wash his blond hair, it would be quite eye-catching.

Sitting on his lap was a palm-sized female fairy with red hair. She stroked the young man's hand repeatedly as she spoke to him.

Is that—?!

As the wagon rolled past the blond drunkard, Anne could clearly see the red-headed fairy.

"Wait! Stop the wagon, please!"

When she raised her voice, Elliott pulled on the reins.

"What is it?"

"I'm getting off for a second! Challe, I'm getting out. Let me by."

"What?"

Challe looked at her quizzically but let her down off the driver's bench. Anne hopped off the wagon and ran back toward the bar they had just passed, with Challe accompanying her. Elliott cocked his head and turned around to watch them from his seat.

The red-haired fairy sitting on the drunkard's lap was desperately pleading with him.

"Please get up. You're going to catch a cold, so you have to get up. I'm begging you."

As Anne rushed over, she called the fairy's name.

"Cathy!"

Startled, Cathy turned around. Her determined eyes opened wide.

Anne then knelt beside the blond drunkard and shook him by the shoulders.

"Jonas!"

Chapter 3
ONE MORE CRAFTER

Anne had heard from Kat that Jonas was rumored to be in Lewiston, but she had never imagined he'd fallen so far. She was shocked to find him in such a state.

Jonas's shoulders jerked when he heard Anne's voice from where she was kneeling beside him on the cobblestones.

"Jonas," called Anne. "Hey, Jonas. Are you sleeping? Wake up."

Challe stood behind her, looking down at Jonas coldly.

"Leave him," he said.

"I won't. Jonas helped me once. It's the reason he was expelled."

After she shook his shoulders several times, Jonas finally raised his head.

"…Jonas," Anne said again, relieved.

But the moment Jonas saw her face, he pushed her away. Then he wrapped his arms around himself and hunched over, as if trying to escape from her.

"What the hell, Anne?! What are you doing here? What do you want?!"

"Jonas, listen to me. Sammy's actions came to light at the Royal Candy Fair, and your innocence was proven! Marcus told me to apologize to you on his behalf. And he sent a letter to your home in Knoxberry, asking if you would return to the Radcliffe Workshop. You can go back."

"Is that really true?!" exclaimed Cathy.

When Anne nodded, the little fairy's eyes lit up.

"Master Jonas! Did you hear that?! She said we can go back!" Cathy clapped both hands together happily, but Jonas didn't

move.

"Jonas?" Anne called out again.

When Jonas failed to respond, Cathy looked up at Anne.

"I don't want to. I won't go back," Jonas said drearily. His voice was hoarse. "What would I get out of returning to the Radcliffe Workshop at this point? Keith is there. They'll compare me with him again, and I'll be miserable. I won't go. There's absolutely no way I'm going back!"

Jonas's position at the Radcliffe Workshop was precarious. The maestro, Marcus, preferred Keith over Jonas, his own nephew. It must have been hard for Jonas there. Somehow, he'd always managed to hold firm in spite of that. But now, after the incident with Sammy, all the other candy crafters knew that Marcus didn't trust him.

Jonas would probably have an awful time in a place like that.

"Well," said Anne, "then how about going back to Knoxberry and taking over your family's candy shop?"

"No way! If I run back home after only a year of training at the workshop, my parents will be utterly disappointed. And imagine what everyone in the village will say."

"So put in the effort and go back to the Radcliffe Workshop…"

"I won't go back there, and I won't go back to Knoxberry, either! Just leave me alone already!"

Cathy looked at her pleadingly, but Anne was at a loss for what to say in the face of Jonas's desperation.

His skills are solid, and yet…

Before, at the castle of the former Duke of Philax, Jonas and Anne had been the only two candy crafters allowed to stay.

In the end, Jonas ran away, but his abilities had been recognized. Even Hugh said as much the first time they met. Jonas was no slouch when it came to making candy.

Suddenly, something occurred to Anne.

"That's it!"

She sat up straight, smiling broadly. She was very pleased with her idea.

"In that case, come to the Paige Workshop! That's where I'm working now. We're having a hard time because we don't have enough candy crafters. Your skills would be an asset, Jonas."

At the moment, the Paige Workshop needed every crafter it could get. Given Jonas's abilities, he would definitely prove useful, and they would be much more likely to finish their work in time for the First Holy Festival.

"Huh? What are you talking about?" Jonas finally looked Anne in the face. He sounded angry. "You're always spouting nonsense!"

"I mean, if you don't want to go back to the Radcliffe Workshop or Knoxberry, why not come to the Paige Workshop? We need candy crafters."

"Don't misunderstand me, Anne. I'm sick of sugar candy. I don't ever want to touch silver sugar again!"

"Wha—? Do you really mean that?"

"I do! I'm not like you. I'm not some simpleton who can't do anything but make candy! I got good grades in school, and I'm a great swimmer. I can run fast. I've always been a good painter, and I'm good at singing, too. I can do anything at all. I don't need to be hung up on sugar candy."

Anne frowned. "All right, if you're so skilled, what are you doing sitting in a dump like this? Shouldn't you hurry up and find a different job?"

Anne had never been good at anything but making sugar candy.

She hated studying, and she wasn't exactly clever. She wasn't especially athletic, either. Furthermore, to her great dismay, she was tone-deaf.

In every town and village she'd visited, there were always two or three amazing kids who could do anything. Anne had always admired people like that. She'd envied them, certain that all sorts of possibilities would open up for her if she could do anything, like they could.

"What a waste it is, for someone who could do anything to be sitting here grumbling."

"Shut up. I don't feel like doing anything."

"Why not?!" she said harshly, losing her patience.

She didn't understand why someone who was so capable would choose to do nothing. It was lazy not to do what one could, and wasteful not to use one's talents.

Anne wanted to cry over her own incompetence, and yet there were still things she needed to accomplish in her life.

If only she were skilled at everything, she would probably be making a lot more progress.

“What do you mean, ‘why not’? I just don’t want to!”

“Isn’t that a waste?!”

“A person like you could never understand!”

“That’s enough!”

Before she could think it through, Anne slapped Jonas’s right cheek with her open palm.

Cathy shrieked and tumbled off his lap. Jonas’s eyes bulged, and he pressed a hand to his cheek where Anne had hit him, staring at her.

“What do you mean, ‘a person like me’?!” Anne shouted. “I’m not very smart, I’m a slow runner and a bad singer, and I’m not beautiful, either! Compared with you, Jonas, I’m completely incapable of doing anything!”

Still holding his cheek, Jonas cast his eyes downward.

“You can…make sugar candy…”

“That’s all I can do! But you have a lot more skills than that, right?!”

“But I can’t make sugar candy like you can.”

Why does he keep talking about sugar candy?

Her mind, which had flared up in rage, suddenly cooled.

“By any chance, Jonas…do you *want* to make candy?”

Jonas shut his eyes tight, as if to reject the idea, and shook his head forcefully. “I told you, didn’t I?! I’m fed up with sugar candy!”

“Then if you can do anything, why did you decide to become a candy crafter? Why did you start making sugar candy? Wasn’t it because you wanted to?”

“You’ve got it all wrong! Ever since I was little, whenever I made a piece of sugar candy, my father and mother were delighted. They would say how I’d make a worthy successor and might even become a bigwig in some faction! They said I was good at it. That made me happy, so I wanted to make more candy. That’s why…!”

“That’s why you grew to love it, right? And why you wanted to keep doing it.”

At those words, Jonas opened his eyes.

“Jonas,” Anne continued. “Pleasing your parents made you happy. It made you want to craft candy. So you grew to love crafting. And from then on, you made candy because you wanted to, right?”

“No! I…!” Jonas started to shout, but then he choked up. “I—”

He hunched over and hugged his knees, hiding his face. Then in a thin, trembling voice, he said, “I…I want to make sugar candy…”

Anne was certain that, at first, Jonas had made candy because he wanted to. But his parents’ expectations, public attention, and other such things had steadily overtaken his desires and crushed Jonas’s feelings.

Cathy stroked Jonas’s hand as if to soothe him as his back heaved up and down.

A cold wind blew through the street, drawing Challe’s gaze to the sky.

“Jonas.” Anne spoke once more. “Let’s go together to the Paige Workshop. If you come with me, it will really help us. I mean it.”

Jonas raised his tear-soaked face, and Anne extended a hand to him.

“Anne. But I—”

“Let’s go.”

“…Anne.”

Jonas hesitantly took her hand. His own was dirty and rough, but Anne squeezed it tightly and pulled him to his feet.

“Let’s go!”

Jonas took one staggering step forward, and Cathy trotted after him, clinging to his leg.

Challe shrugged; Anne knew what he wanted to say. She was sure he couldn’t wait to call her a busybody or a credulous fool.

But even Anne wasn’t that good-natured. When she thought about all the cruel things that Jonas had done to her, it made her angry. But he had rescued her as well. Even if it was only the one time, he had acted to save Anne. And she was incredibly grateful for that.

If Jonas hadn’t helped her back then, Anne wouldn’t have had a future to speak of.

But right now, it wasn’t only her gratitude guiding her decision.

The Paige Workshop was backed into a corner and needed candy crafters. She might have a complicated history with Jonas,

but they didn't have time for that now. They needed him as a candy crafter.

It was a stroke of luck that she and Challe had happened upon Jonas there.

The Paige Workshop had all sorts of problems. They had been struck by one misfortune after another. However, Anne felt like there was still something propping them up. They still had a little bit of luck on their side.

It's too early to give up just yet.

That was her honest opinion, without bluff or bluster.

"Whaaat? Is that you, Jonas?"

As Anne, Challe, and Jonas approached the wagon, Elliott, who was sitting on the driver's bench, made a face like they had discovered some rare and exotic animal.

Jonas shrugged and hung his head, looking like he'd rather be anywhere else.

"I found a candy crafter," Anne announced with a smile. "And I can vouch for his skills."

Elliott's shocked expression quickly melted into a grin.

"Well done, Anne. Now we might just make it."



"Jonas! This is no time to rest! Get a move on!"

"But my feet hurt."

"Your feet hurt? Don't get cute with me, newbie! When I say 'move,' you move!"

"Y-yes, sir."

Kat was "supervising" Jonas, shouting at him as he turned a millstone despite being completely exhausted.

Jonas had come to help out the Paige Workshop, and at Elliott's suggestion, Kat had been tasked with guiding his work.

At first, Kat acted like he hated the idea, complaining that it was a huge pain. But once they started working, he began enthusiastically dishing out instructions.

"It's great that he's so keen to teach Jonas, but he's really loud, huh?" Valentine said wearily as he turned his millstone. "In a completely different way from Elliott, he's just really loud."

King frowned. “Kat’s always angry. I worry all the time that he’s gonna burst a blood vessel in his head.”

Nadir, who was working alongside Mithril transferring the ground silver sugar into barrels, said, “But in a way, isn’t Mr. Kat kinda cute? Don’t you think so?”

“Listen, kid,” Mithril said. “You sure you know the meaning of that word?”

He seemed a little disturbed by the idea. King and Valentine, who had overheard them, also made strange faces, as though they’d just tasted something gross.

“But look! Mr. Kat’s working so hard,” Nadir insisted. “I think it’s cute.”

“Who said it?! Which one of you added ‘Mr.’ onto my nickname?!”

Sharp-eared Kat looked sternly around the room, and Nadir nonchalantly raised his hand.

“Oh, it was me.”

“You again, Nadir? How many times do I hafta tell you?! Never call me ‘Mr.’!”

“Why not? It’s much cuter to call you Mr. Kat than just plain old Kat.”

“Cute?! No one’s called me cute since I was five years old! Are you making fun of me?!”

“Then it’s been about twenty years, right? Aren’t you glad to hear it?”

Even Kat was at a loss for words. But Nadir wasn’t trying to be mean.

Challe, who had been watching the whole scene from the doorway, looked impressed. “That one’s the strongest out of all of you.”

Anne, who was standing beside him, nodded in agreement. “I think you might be right.”

It had been three days since Anne and Elliott were summoned to the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell.

They had finished drying all the silver sugar and were almost finished grinding all the sugar they had dried. They had about two more barrels’ worth to grind before all their silver sugar would be ready to use.

They had finished three days earlier than they'd originally expected. A sense of cheer had returned to the candy crafters, and Orlando was recovering well. Jonas had to endure Kat's relentless yelling, but he was proving to be a real asset.

"You're covered in sweat, Jonas," Anne said to him.

Jonas snorted in response. "That's because, unlike you, I don't have to make up with physical endurance what I lack in intellect."

"Well, I guess that's true." Anne responded to his usual nastiness with a dry laugh.

Just then, Mithril turned toward Jonas and, without pausing, jumped up and smacked him sharply on the back of the head.

"There's no need to be so brutally honest!"

"That wasn't much of a defense, you know," said Anne with a stiff smile. "But…oh well… I don't mind…"

With that, Anne entered the workshop and started checking the amount of silver sugar the crafters had finished milling.

Challe was in the hallway leaning against a window sash, gazing at the scenery outside.

The clouds were low and heavy. It looked like it might snow at any moment. The first snow of the season would probably fall overnight, and in the morning, the garden would be lightly dusted with white. It was already early winter.

Lafalle hasn't come back.

Challe hadn't felt the slightest hint of Lafalle's presence since the other fairy revealed his true identity and fled the castle. Challe was relieved, but at the same time, there was something ominous about the situation.

Lafalle, who had once been too weak to fight, had consumed sugar candy and regained all his strength in one fell swoop. It didn't seem likely that he would give up on kidnapping a Silver Sugar Master now that he had experienced the power of sugar candy.

And he probably wouldn't give up on taking Challe as his companion, either.

They were meant to be together. He had said it many times.

Even Challe, when he heard Lafalle's true name, had felt a deep emotion difficult to put into words. When faced with a being so

closely related to himself, Challe felt something deep inside his body react powerfully. It went beyond rational thought.

If he had gotten to me before I met Anne…

If not for Anne's presence in his life, Challe likely would have left with Lafalle without the slightest hesitation. He would have estranged himself from the human world, and…

…Done what? he wondered.

Hunted down humans without a second thought, probably.

The fact that a fairy like him was here now, living with humans, was all because of Anne. He didn't hate the humans around him. The fact that he could feel that way about any human showed how greatly he'd changed. Before he met Anne, he had found all humans besides Liz detestable.

Anne stepped out of the workroom and approached Challe with a stone bowl in her hands.

"Hey, Challe, won't you have some of this silver sugar?! I just got Mithril Lid Pod to taste it, and I think the quality's gone up! Come on—try it!"

In the stone bowl was some of the silver sugar the crafters had just finished milling. At her urging, Challe took a tiny bit of it onto one of his fingertips. It gently dissolved, as if soaking into his finger.

He sensed a gentle sweetness in his throat.

"It resembles silver sugar you've personally refined."

Anne's eyes lit up.

"I knew it! By repeating the process of drying and milling the sugar, we got rid of any impurities, and it became even better!"

Challe was amused by how happy it made her. Anne became completely absorbed when it came to silver sugar and candy sculptures, and Challe enjoyed watching her.

After touching the milled silver sugar, Kat nodded.

"The difference should show in the finished sculptures, too. With a texture like this, it'll have a good luster when it's kneaded."

Anne exchanged happy looks with all the other crafters. Even Jonas, as exhausted as he was, smiled in relief.

And that was when it happened.

Suddenly, a chill ran down Challe's spine.

It's him!

He turned toward the lesser hall to find Elliott standing there silently. His face was frozen, his skin pale.

“Mr. Collins?” Anne said, noticing him, too. She tilted her head in puzzlement at his strange demeanor.

“…We’re done for,” he said. His voice sounded detached, and his expression never changed. “He’s here.”

Challe’s body was buzzing. His wing snapped taut. And that was when he noticed—twisted around Elliott’s stiff neck were numerous shining silvery-red threads.

“Lafalle is here?” Challe asked.

Elliott nodded slightly, and Anne went white as a sheet.

The other crafters noticed the change in atmosphere and stepped out into the hallway, only to fall dead silent.

“Where is he, Elliott?” asked Challe. “Those things wrapped around your neck… Where is he controlling them from?”

Challe concentrated on his right hand. Beads of light coalesced, condensed, and transformed into a silver sword.

The red threads coiled around Elliott’s neck trailed out of the corridor and toward the lesser hall.

“The garden. He attacked me from behind,” Elliott answered calmly, despite the sheen of sweat on his forehead.

Challe glanced out the window. There was a fairy with red hair standing in the center of the garden. He had appeared without anyone noticing him.

He struck an elegant pose, holding a bunch of shining red threads at the ready in his hand. He was smiling. When he noticed Challe’s eyes on him, his smile deepened. The single wing flowing down his back seemed to quiver as it turned a deeper crimson.

“Elliott?!” Kat started to step toward him.

“Wait!” Challe raised his arm to hold Kat back.

Just then, Elliott groaned, and thin lines of blood oozed from shallow cuts in his neck. Kat blanched.

Bewildered, the candy crafters took several steps back. Any clumsy meddling would only make the situation worse.

“Elliott, I’m sure you have a message from him. Tell me,” Challe said.

Elliott grimaced painfully. “I can’t.”

The next moment, Elliott groaned again. The cuts on his neck appeared to grow deeper, and more blood flowed out of them, soaking the collar of his shirt.

The shining red threads wound around his neck must have been carrying the sounds of their conversation. Lafalle could hear everything they said.

“Tell me, Elliott. Don’t worry about what it is. I’ll take care of it. Just trust me. Tell me the message. If something happens to you, their proxy maestro, the crafters’ work will come to a complete halt.”

Elliott closed his eyes as if bracing himself, then finally began to speak.

“Hand over Anne. In exchange, he’ll release me. That’s what he said.”

As she stood there in a daze, Anne’s eyes widened in fear.

But soon, she bit her lip and mumbled, “He wants me.” She took several hesitant steps toward Elliott.

Challe anxiously grabbed her hand. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“I have to go. If I don’t, Mr. Collins will be in danger. If what Lafalle wants is a Silver Sugar Master to make him sugar candy, then I’ll be all right. I doubt he’ll kill me. I’m going.”

As if it had been waiting for those words, another red thread came flying out from behind Elliott’s back, aiming for Anne as it sliced through the air with a *hiss*.

Challe stepped in front of Anne, swung his sword, and knocked down the thread. The tip was severed and flew up toward the ceiling, where it burst into a shower of red sparks.

Just then, Elliott screamed. The shining red threads coiled around his neck had cut even deeper into his flesh.

“Stop it!” Anne shouted and stepped in front of Challe.

As if on cue, the red thread Challe had severed wriggled through the air and wound itself around Anne’s neck.

“Lafalle!” Challe shouted, overwhelmed by anger.

From all around them, red threads swooped in. Lafalle was controlling them like tentacles. He had Anne at his mercy, and his craven tactics left Challe with little room to maneuver.

As if responding to Challe’s angry shout, the shining red threads wrapped around Elliott’s neck slipped loose. Elliott crumpled to

his knees on the spot.

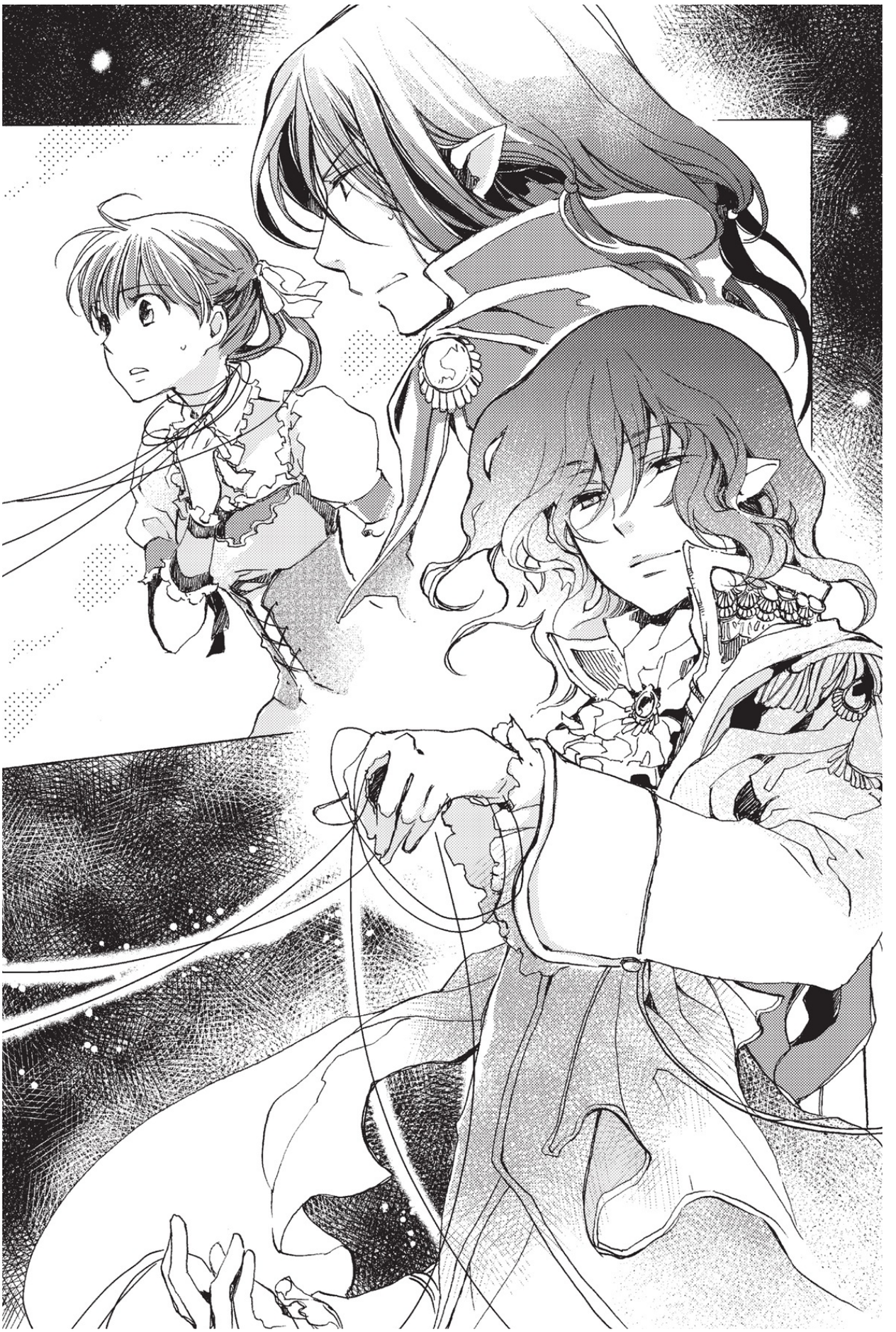
“See, I kept my promise, didn’t I?”

Challe thought he could hear Lafalle’s voice. He could almost see the faint grin on the other fairy’s face.

“Challe?!”

Anne shrieked his name as she stumbled forward, pulled along by the silvery-red threads coiled around her neck. She staggered quickly onward, like a dog being dragged along by a leash. No matter how unwilling she was, she had to keep moving.

Challe seethed with even greater rage when he saw her in that humiliating state.



It was obvious that Lafalle meant to take Anne away with him, and Challe had to make sure that didn't happen.

He threw open the hallway window and leaped out of it. He flapped his wing, intending to float gently to the ground, but because he only had one, the motion was imperfect. Landing on one knee, he quickly regained his balance, managing to stand just as Anne was coming out the front door.

"Stop there, Challe." Lafalle's soft voice echoed through the courtyard. "Be still. Anne is in my grasp, so don't do anything rash. If I feel I'm in danger, I'll take off her head. I hate to kill a Silver Sugar Master, but I can simply find another one to replace her. It's a different story for you, though, isn't it? For you, it has to be her."

Lafalle's whole body blazed with crimson light. And yet despite his brilliant glow, the scarlet fairy still seemed somehow insubstantial. He shimmered and shifted, like a flame without substance or heat. It was a beautiful, eerie sight.

Challe was facing off against Lafalle at quite a distance. Lafalle had the advantage, and he seemed intent on keeping Challe where he was.

While all this was happening, Lafalle continued pulling Anne toward him, until at last, he caught her in his arms.

Anne let out a little shriek, but he embraced her from behind, enveloping her. Then as if showing off what he could do, he kissed her hair, her cheek, and her neck. Anne went pale, and her whole body stiffened.

Challe's sword trembled in his grip.

"Lafalle. You bastard."

Lafalle whistled softly, and two horses emerged at the bottom of the sloping hill. One of them was a palomino, its coat shiny and golden, while the other one was as black as midnight.

The palomino came up beside Lafalle, and still holding Anne, he leaped lightly onto its back.

"Get rid of the sword in your hand and come over here slowly. If you dawdle, I might get angry and take off one of Anne's legs. After all, a Silver Sugar Master only needs their hands and eyes to work."

His red threads were still wrapped around Anne's neck, and he made them slither to show Challe how quickly he could move

them.

Immediately, Challe waved his hand, turning his sword into beads of light and making it disappear. Then he slowly approached Lafalle.

Looking down at the other fairy from atop his horse, Lafalle smiled.

“I’ll have your wing now.”

Challe did as he was told and dug through his pocket, producing the pouch that held his other wing.

“Take Challe’s wing, Anne.”

As ordered, Anne bent over and extended her hand. As her fingers touched the pouch to take it, Anne looked like she was going to cry. Challe pushed it into her hand.

“Challe…your wing…”

“Don’t worry.”

With trembling fingers, Anne sat back up, and Lafalle ripped the pouch out of her hand. Then he suddenly squeezed it with all his might.

A sharp pain ran through Challe, like his whole body was being bent and twisted, and he stumbled, gritting his teeth.

Anne covered her mouth and screamed.

Lafalle nodded, seeming satisfied. “Now I’m certain that this is yours.”

Lafalle put the pouch in his jacket’s inner pocket and issued Challe an order, his voice gentle.

“Get on that horse. I picked it out just for you, Challe. Doesn’t it have a beautiful black coat?”

There was nothing to do but obey. Challe was helpless. He had someone to protect, and that inevitably put him at a disadvantage against such a cunning opponent. He got on the back of the black horse.

“Follow me,” said Lafalle, kicking his horse in the side.

The fairy easily handled the startled horse as it reared its front legs and neighed, and then he was off. Challe urged his mount forward, too.

If nothing else, I’ve got to protect Anne, he thought as he followed the palomino.

The others remained glued to the spot. They had all witnessed the events in the garden from the window.

“Anne…”

Jonas murmured her name in a daze. But there was nothing anyone could do, and they simply watched as Anne and Challe left with Lafalle.

Mithril Lid Pod, who had been standing imposingly by the window, trembled as he looked on. He balled both hands into fists and stared at the two horses as they galloped away, trying to hold his anger in check.

“What happened…?” asked Elliott from the corridor. His voice was hoarse as he held a hand over the wounds on his neck.

At the sound of his voice, Kat seemed to finally recover his senses, and he ran over to Elliott.

“Elliott, are you all right?” he asked.

“What happened to Anne?”

“That red fairy took her with him…and Challe, too.”

Blood was slowly oozing from Elliott’s neck. It had soaked his shirt down to the shoulders. Paying it no mind, he grabbed Kat’s arm with one bloody hand.

“Kat, go report to the Silver Sugar Viscount that a dangerous fairy has appeared and he’s attacking Silver Sugar Masters! Tell him he’s the same one who attacked several candy crafters on the highway, and now he’s kidnapped our Silver Sugar Master. If the Viscount doesn’t mobilize soldiers to go after him, there will be more casualties! Go now and tell him! Hurry!!”

The Silver Sugar Viscount was in charge of all candy crafters. And he was also their protector.

Mithril hopped down off the windowsill and leaped onto Kat’s shoulder.

“Kat, let’s go!”

The Silver Sugar Viscount was only furnished with enough soldiers to safeguard his castle and act as his personal bodyguard. If he needed an actual military force, then the Earl of Downing, his guardian, was supposed to answer the Viscount’s call and come to his aid. Aside from the Downing family’s retinue, the Earl of Downing also had the right to mobilize one section of His Majesty’s personal army.

There was no question that this was a situation requiring help from the Silver Sugar Viscount, the protector of all candy crafters. If he judged it necessary and gained approval from the Earl of Downing, he could rally a considerable force.

Kat nodded. “On it.”

Chapter 4
FAIRIES AND HUMANS

As darkness descended over their surroundings, flurries of snow began to fall.

Anne had been shivering the whole ride, sitting between Lafalle's arms on the horse. Behind her, his body and the arm holding her waist were cold, like steel. He was a fairy, so that was to be expected, but she didn't recall feeling so cold when she'd ridden with Challe.

As for the red threads wrapped around her neck, Lafalle had dissolved them during the ride, but their icy sensation remained, along with her fear. Anne was frightened and cold.

Without her cape, she was at the mercy of the wind. Her shoulders, arms, and legs were quickly frozen stiff, and she shivered from her very core.

The black horse Challe was riding followed after them, staying a little ways behind Lafalle's palomino. Anne wanted to turn and check that Challe was still there, but frozen with cold and fear, her body wouldn't move as she wanted it to.

The horses ran west from Lewiston. They stayed off the main roads, driving deeper into the wilderness. Howling winds blew past them, and there were no signs of any houses nearby or any fields. They were clearly someplace few people went, and Anne had an idea of where they might be.

The edge of the Bloody Highway…

The Bloody Highway was the major road connecting Lewiston to the western side of the kingdom. A year and some months earlier, Anne had traveled it with Challe and Mithril.

Around it, the soil was infertile, and humans didn't settle there. There were many wild beasts and all types of bandits lurking along the way. The Bloody Highway itself was dangerous, but stepping off the road and into the wilderness was practically suicidal.

Nevertheless, Lafalle drove his horse forward without hesitation.

The wind blew past them and made the dry grass sway, sending a noisy rustle rippling across the whole plain.

Now that the sun had set and snow was falling, the cold was even more biting. Anne's body was chilled through and through, and her teeth wouldn't stop chattering. Lafalle seemed to notice her trembling, and he chuckled dryly.

"What's the matter? Are you cold? Poor thing," Lafalle whispered blithely into Anne's ear. "I'm terribly sorry, Anne. But look! We're already here."

The sky was steeped in a deep indigo blue. A black mountain range stood out against the blue sky, with an even darker black shadow perched atop it, like the mountain was carrying the dark shape on its back. It was a rugged fort made of enormous rough-hewn stones. There were rows of small windows set into the high walls, several of them lit from inside.

The two horses galloped straight up to the stronghold without stopping.

An empty stone arch served as the entrance. It appeared the door that once stood in it had been destroyed, and there was nothing to prevent anyone from going in or out.

Tendrils of dry ivy crept along the walls and over the arch. When the three of them entered the fort, Anne saw various thin trees and sparse shrubs in wintry desolation scattered about inside what appeared to be the curtain wall. The place looked like it had been abandoned for decades.

Lafalle brought his horse to a stop and nimbly got down off its back. Then lifting Anne in his arms, he lowered her to the ground.

Challe also dismounted and approached Lafalle.

"Now that we've come this far, you must be satisfied. Let Anne go. She can't possibly escape from this place alone. And you hold my wing. There's nothing I can do."

Lafalle was looking with unbridled delight into Challe's black eyes as Challe stared squarely back at him. At some point during the ride, Lafalle's hair had returned to its usual ambiguous color, like green and blue pigments dissolved into milk.

Challe would not look away, and Lafalle eventually gave in and shrugged facetiously.

"Well, I'd like to play with you a little more, but it seems that would make you impossibly angry."

Then he pushed Anne lightly on the back, sending her stumbling into Challe's chest.

"What's the matter?" he asked, startled.

Anne couldn't stop shivering or keep her teeth from chattering. Anxious, Challe embraced her tightly.

"Lafalle, give us a room. One with a hearth. I'll start a fire and get her warmed up."

"Allow me to show you in."

Lafalle gazed at their surroundings. Then all around—from behind columns, from the entrance leading into the fort, and from the thickets of thin, bare trees—countless large, dark figures appeared one after another.

Challe frowned.

He and Anne were quickly surrounded by brawny fairies with thick arms and necks, built like boulders. There were probably around twenty of them. They were obviously warrior fairies. Anne had seen many like them since her youth.

"They will show you the way."

The warrior fairies wore blank expressions as they surrounded Challe and Anne, urging them on. Challe moved forward, holding Anne by the shoulders. She could just barely manage to walk, but her knees trembled terribly with every step.

The warrior fairies led them to a room on the highest floor of the keep.

It had a wooden door and one small window set high up in the wall, just large enough to put one's head through. The walls and floor were undressed stone. There was a hearth, but it appeared long disused. On the stone floor before it lay a thick rug, but it, too, was faded and worn.

"Wait here. I'll be back soon."

Challe sat Anne down on top of the rug and left the room.

The place was dark, cold, and lonely. Anne hugged her shoulders, but she couldn't stop shivering.

Before long, Challe returned. Just seeing him nearly brought Anne to tears, she was so relieved. He had brought back all sorts of things, including a lamp, blankets, and some firewood.

After lighting the lamp, he wrapped Anne's body in blankets, tossed some wood into the hearth, and got a fire going. Anne watched in a kind of daze as Challe completed each task.

For a long while now, Anne had been working at the very limits of her ability. The emotional ups and downs had been extreme, and her troubles had seemed endless.

And now, on top of all that, she had been kidnapped. Along with the cold and her exhaustion and fear, all that stress suddenly rushed down on her, and as if a flip had switched inside her, she fell into a state of lethargy.

Once the fire in the hearth was burning vigorously, her skin gradually started to warm up. But the chill at her core wouldn't go away, like she was frozen through to the center. Challe sat behind Anne and embraced her again.

"Lean back."

Challe pressed gently on Anne's forehead, laying her head against his chest. Both Challe's body, where it touched her back, and his fingers, where they touched her forehead, were icy cold—a fairy's normal body temperature.

But it wasn't the same as Lafalle—that chill that seeped into her body wherever he touched her, cold like steel. Touching Challe felt like touching a smooth piece of pottery. He felt somehow soft, like her own body heat might gradually transmit to him.

"I'm cold," she said, finally able to form words again. It must have been the relief of Challe holding her.

"I wish my skin was warm, like a human's."

As he spoke, Challe took Anne's right hand and blew on it.

A fairy's skin was cold, but for some reason, their wings and breath were slightly warm. Perhaps the heat of their life force came flowing out in those spots. Challe knew that his own breath felt warm to humans. He had even warmed Anne's fingers like this before.

After blowing on her right hand for a little while, he moved to her left.

Anne's brain felt sluggish and hazy. Memories of Lafalle's attack kept running through her mind.

She wondered if Elliott was all right and what had become of their work. Without Anne, the workshop would probably fall behind schedule again. And then there was the matter of Challe's wing.

"Challe…your wing…"

As vacant as Anne's mind was at the moment, the loss of Challe's wing made her heart ache with bitter frustration.

His wing, which she had worked so hard to recover, was in someone else's hands yet again. But this time, it wasn't a human—it was a fellow fairy. She couldn't believe that Lafalle would do something so cruel.

"Don't worry about that. It can wait." Challe's voice was gentle and kind. "You must be tired. This is the perfect time to clear your mind and sleep. You have no work to do tomorrow."

Comforted by his words, Anne closed her eyes. She was at her limit mentally and physically. She wanted to sleep.



It was a relief to feel the weight of Anne sleeping in his arms. Their situation was dire, but for the time being, Anne was unharmed.

As she leaned her head against Challe's chest and slept, he could see the nape of Anne's exposed neck. Lafalle had kissed her there. And not only there, but her hair and her cheek, as well.

Before, when Lafalle had run his hand across Anne's cheek, Challe had felt displeasure beyond comparison.

As if to cleanse the hair where Lafalle had kissed her, Challe kissed the same spot, lingering a little. From there, he moved his lips to her cheek and gave her a long kiss there, too. Then, finally, he kissed the nape of her neck, this time with force. Over and over again.

"…Nnh."

Anne stirred fretfully, startling him.

Challe suddenly became aware of his own actions. What had he been trying to do to Anne, who trusted him so much that she felt

safe falling asleep in his arms?

Back to his senses, he stroked her hair, the same way he had done for Liz when she was young, so long ago.

He continued that for a little while, until he heard noises and felt the presence of several people outside the door.

“Oh my, did she fall asleep?”

Lafalle opened the door and was the first to step into the room. Following after him, several warrior fairies brought in a roughly built bed. They set it down in one corner of the room, then left.

Lafalle watched the fairies leave, then said breezily, “I’m not in the habit of making a fuss over humans. It never occurred to me that your darling Silver Sugar Master would require a warm bed.”

There was a thick mattress laid out on the bed, and it had several blankets and a quilt. It had to be warmer than lying on the stone floor. Without a word, Challe picked Anne up and moved her to the bed.

“Flames are so beautiful,” said Lafalle. “When I first saw humans burning fires inside their homes, I thought they were using them as decoration. I was surprised to learn that they were necessary to them. Humans are such weak creatures. Their forms resemble ours, but they couldn’t be more different. Originally, they were savage animals, ugly beasts with no intelligence or power. Those beasts aspired to be like us, and through their great yearning, they were transformed. They gained bodies like ours and began to develop some sense, you see. The account is in the fairies’ book of genesis. Did you know that?”

Lafalle stood in front of the hearth, gazing into the flames. His wing caught the light from the fire and shone with a gleaming blend of pale red and orange.

After putting Anne to bed, Challe returned to the hearth, leaned over, and tossed in more firewood. He didn’t look at Lafalle.

“I don’t want to listen to your idle chatter. If you’ve finished your business, get out.”

“But I’ve prepared a different room for you, Challe. Not a shabby place like this. You are meant to be by my side. I would never treat you so poorly.”

Challe laughed at the other fairy’s absurd claim.

“You wouldn’t treat me poorly? Are you joking? How can you say that after seizing my wing?”

“I’d like to give it back right away, and I will. Just as soon as you recognize you are meant to be with me and accept that truth in your heart. Unfortunately, you don’t seem ready yet.”

“If you understand that, then get out. You’re an eyesore. I don’t intend to leave her side.”

“You seem quite taken with her, this Silver Sugar Master. Certainly, one can detect the aroma of silver sugar on her hair and skin, which is not entirely unexciting.”

Lafalle spun around and headed toward the bed. Looking down at the sleeping Anne, he smiled faintly. “If I embrace her, do you think I might discover why you’re so attached?”

He slowly extended a hand toward Anne.

Challe rushed over and grabbed his wrist from behind. “Don’t touch her!”

Lafalle burst out laughing. “I’m joking, Challe!”

He turned around and, with his free hand, grabbed hold of Challe’s other arm. The two fairies grappled with equal strength, each holding the other fast and neither able to move.

“Let go of me,” Lafalle ordered. “I told you I was only joking.”

“I won’t forgive you even if you *were* joking. If you dare lay a hand on Anne, I’ll kill you.”

Gritting their teeth, they glared at each other.

“You think you can cut me down? While I hold your wing? You might slice right through it along with me.”

“If that’s what it takes to cut you down, I’ll do it.”

“So you’re really that devoted to her, hmm? But, Challe, we are different from humans. No matter how much fondness you may have for Anne, it can only bring sorrow to you both.”

The know-it-all look on Lafalle’s villainous face made Challe furious. “What would you know?” he spat.

“I understand even better than you do, since I can look at things objectively. Let’s say that you and Anne did fall in love. What would become of it? It would probably work out fine for you. Until Anne’s life span ran out, you could seek comfort in her. But as a human, Anne would have no descendants. She would live out her days as your pet and leave nothing behind. Do you think that would make her happy as a human?”

Challe's face went blank, and Lafalle smiled faintly. Their stalemate broken, Lafalle gradually pushed Challe backward until he was pressed against the wall.

Challe had felt it ever since he saw Anne and Keith smiling at each other at the Radcliffe Workshop.

It was more natural for humans to live among their own kind—and probably better for them. But though he believed that was true, his desire to cling to Anne and never let her go had become too strong to fight.

"Fairies ought to live with fairies, and humans with humans," said Lafalle. "That's the most natural way. You'll only make Anne unhappy."

Noticing Challe's wavering emotions, Lafalle pressed further. "The last fairy king, Riselva Cyril Sash, tried to come to an understanding with humans. But ultimately, he fought against Cedric, the human king. The fact that they ended up at odds is proof that fairies and humans cannot live in harmony. The humans killed Riselva, but you and I are meant to carry on his legacy."

This sounded like nonsense to Challe. He frowned in displeasure, and Lafalle's faint smile disappeared.

"The precious stones from which we emerged were set into the hilt of a forgotten blade. From the moment I was born, I wondered who its owner was. So I looked into it and into the significance of the chapel where it lay. One hundred years ago, the kingdom was at war. The humans' control had not advanced as far as it has now. In old castles and churches, you could still find writing that the fairies left behind. The humans won't admit it, but this script, called Highlandia, was created by fairies. And from those writings, I learned that the sword's owner was none other than the last fairy king, Riselva. Opal, obsidian, diamond. Three stones of different types but all with a similar energy. Those three stones were chosen deliberately. And it was Riselva himself who chose them."

"Traditional depictions of the fairy king say that he was born from a ruby," Challe interjected. "As a gemstone fairy, he ought to have been able to create his own blade. Riselva would have had no need to carry a sword."

“Not for fighting, perhaps,” Lafalle replied. “But no matter how long his life span, once it came to an end, he would have to leave behind a successor, surely? So each fairy king wore a sword that he didn’t need, inlaid with stones meant to birth the one to follow him. Each sword held three stones with similar energies deemed fitting to birth the fairy king’s successor. The king then prayed for one, or even all three, to give rise to new life worthy of such a position.

“However, Riselva lost the war, and his sword passed into the hands of the human king, Cedric. In place of the fairy king’s corpse, Cedric laid the sword to rest in a chapel.”

“There’s no proof.”

“Then why have I known the name Riselva Cyril Sash since the moment I was born? You should have known it, too, Challe.”

Fairies were born with vague knowledge of everything the object that birthed them had experienced.

Challe, too, had known at the time of his birth that humans were something to be cautious of.

Somehow, he’d known that the world had day and night, that it had four seasons, and that it rained and snowed. He’d known that there were stars in the sky. And he’d known that there were things such as birds, insects, and all sorts of other animals.

However, the only proper noun in his memory had been the name Riselva Cyril Sash.

Challe hadn’t even known the name of the opal inlaid beside the obsidian from which he was born. Though when he heard Lafalle’s name for the first time, he had realized it referred to the one born from that stone’s energy.

Why had he and Lafalle had that one name etched into their memory from before they were born?

Perhaps it was the name of someone close to them. Or maybe the person who had prepared the obsidian and the opal had intentionally tried to leave it behind in their memories.

“The chapel was under the protection of a human family, the Lowells. As a branch of the Millsland family, they were descended from the human king, Cedric. For ages, the second daughter born to each generation of the Lowell family was destined to spend her life protecting the chapel. You know the name of one of those

young ladies, don't you, Challe? I gather you once lived by her side."

Liz had dwelled in a castle in the wilderness from an early age. Born the second daughter of the Lowell family, she had a special role to play and was to live in that castle for the rest of her days.

The purpose of her role was never explained to Liz. She'd only been told that it was her duty to reside there. But whenever any mail arrived for her from outside the castle, there were always three particular words written before her name.

"…The Fairy Seal."

The Fairy Seal Elizabeth Lowell, the letters had read.

"The human king laid Riselva's sword to rest. But after the war, the humans feared that a new fairy king might be born from the precious stones set into its hilt. However, because the sword was interred in a chapel built by Cedric himself, the people couldn't do anything imprudent. So they built a castle to ensure that no one went near the chapel, and they enlisted a noble family to live there as its guardians.

"Even though they went to such lengths to guard the sword, I was nevertheless eventually born. A moon eagle, sharp-eyed even in the darkness, wandered into the chapel and stared at the opal. It was pure chance. Actually…maybe it was inevitable, something brought about by the fairy king's dying wish.

"We can't be born without the gaze of a living creature, but it would take one that could see in the dark, or someone to sneak in and light a lantern, for a fairy to be born in that complete darkness. I didn't think it would happen again. That's why I felt secure leaving you. But by the time I got back, you were born and had already disappeared."

Liz must have been forbidden from going into the chapel. But as a five-year-old girl, full of curiosity, she had set out to explore the place. Then she had been enchanted by the sparkle of the obsidian she saw there and started to visit frequently.

Riselva Cyril Sash did that?

It was as if an apparition had taken solid form and was standing before Challe's eyes. He could see the fairy king, who had lived five hundred years in the past and had prepared the precious stones that gave birth to Challe and Lafalle. There was an almost tangible feeling of truth to Lafalle's strange story.

“The chapel was buried in a cave-in about fifty years ago. Before it happened, I took the diamond out. That stone’s time has also long since come. But for some reason, no matter how much I stare at it, no fairy is born. There must be something preventing it. Ultimately, you and I are the only ones who were born from the three stones to which the fairy king entrusted the next generation. And it took more than one hundred years for us to finally meet. We met because we were meant to. Don’t you agree?”

Lafalle had Challe pressed up against the stone wall.

His eyes, an ambiguous color like drops of dye dissolved in milk—neither green nor blue—seemed to reflect the ambitions of the many generations of fairies before him.

As Challe faced him, he felt something resonate with his fairy nature. It wasn’t quite nostalgia, but now that he knew Lafalle’s true identity, he couldn’t help but sense how closely they were related.

“Challe,” Lafalle whispered. “We are meant to inherit Riselva’s legacy. We are meant to become fairy kings.”

“Fairy kings?”

“We must gather the fairies together and liberate them. With our strength combined, we’ll be able to rally our people and stand up to the humans. We’ll take back the fairy kingdom. For the sake of our people’s freedom, we must become kings. We can reign together. In the oldest inscription I found, it was recorded that, before Riselva, there were two kings. And when they ruled together as a pair, they were doubly strong.”

Lafalle didn’t sound like he was joking.

Our people’s freedom.

Challe had personally experienced the humiliation of having his wing taken and the agony of being enslaved. The word *freedom* appealed to him. He wanted to believe that they really were meant to do something to liberate all fairies from that agony.

Such thoughts flashed through his mind for a moment, but he soon remembered Anne.

Anne is a human.

Antagonizing the humans would mean making her their enemy as well. That was unthinkable.

And those of the Paige Workshop were also human. He couldn't regard them as enemies simply because of that. He couldn't turn his sword against them.

"I don't suppose you've forgotten the humiliation of having your wing stolen?" Lafalle continued, trying to entice him.

"The humans who tore off my wing are dead," Challe replied. "That is over. Not all humans are so detestable that I want to make the whole race my enemy. Even if your story about Riselva is true, that doesn't mean I'm meant to fulfill his legacy. Rule over the humans, you say? Just the two of us? It's a fantasy. I can't play along with a delusion like that."

"We can do it if we gather our comrades. You saw it yourself. I've already recruited many fairies with considerable combat ability."

"Think about how many humans there were five hundred years ago and how many there are now. How different do you think those numbers are? These past five hundred years, the human population has exploded. Even now, it continues to increase. There's no way there are that many of us. Even if we scrape together every fairy in Highland, I doubt it will amount to much. If you want to go ahead in spite of that, then do as you please. If fairies win their freedom, I will welcome it. Do whatever you want. But don't involve me. Even if Riselva himself wished for us to be born, I have no interest in being a fairy king."

Challe turned away.

Lafalle whispered soothingly, "Challe… Challe, you and I are two of a kind."

"You're probably right… Yes."

That was a fact Challe couldn't deny.

Lafalle smiled, looking satisfied, and loosened his grip on Challe's arm.

Not missing his chance, Challe used his whole body to thrust Lafalle away, breaking the other fairy's hold on him. This seemed to take Lafalle by surprise, and he staggered backward several steps.

"But that's all," Challe said. "You can do as you please on your own. You and I may come from the same place, but we are different people."

At Challe's cold assertion, Lafalle's face went blank. "You still say that even now that you know the reason you were born?"

"I'll decide what I was born for," Challe replied. "And anyway, how can you say that Riselva's legacy is to fight the humans and take back the fairy kingdom? He wanted to coexist with them."

"But it wasn't possible. For a fairy king, there is no other path than to fight for the sake of all fairies. Riselva was defeated, but I know he expected us to continue his fight."

"You can't say that. No one knows for sure."

"Is that your answer, then, Challe?" Lafalle glanced back at the bed behind him. "How infuriating. So this little girl has stolen your heart completely, has she?" he spat, turning his back on the other fairy. "Well, I suppose it can't be helped. If that's what you have to say, then I'll rule over you, too. I am your king, after all," Lafalle announced indifferently over his shoulder before leaving the room.

Fairy kings, huh?

Assuming that Challe wanted to, it would likely be possible to gather enough fairies to take control of part of the kingdom and place it under fairy rule.

But then what?

There was no way the humans would quietly coexist with a fairy kingdom. The fighting would never end, and the fairies would never find peace. He could see no future for them like that.

If the fairies were told they were fighting for their freedom, they would probably feel they had no choice.

But even if Challe did wish for a fairy kingdom and his people's freedom, he couldn't help but feel like there ought to be another way. He didn't know what that was or how he might achieve it, however.

He sat down on the side of the bed where Anne was sleeping and brushed back her bangs.

"Tell me," he whispered, bending down to kiss her forehead. He felt as if she might have an answer.

Why did he feel that way? What was he expecting out of a helpless, naive, scarecrow-brained little girl?

He began to grow anxious. He was worried that by touching Anne this way, by being affectionate and trying to protect her, he

might bring her sorrow instead. Lafalle's words had unsettled his heart.



Keith, full of worry, drove his horse onward toward Hollyleaf Castle.

He was in a one-horse wagon owned by the Radcliffe Workshop and used mainly by apprentices running errands. He had chosen it because it didn't require preparation and he could get moving immediately.

In truth, he ought to have asked Marcus or the head candy crafter for permission to leave work, but he didn't have time for any of that.

Anne…

That day, Keith had been hard at work as usual when a visitor arrived for Marcus. Normally, Keith wouldn't have paid it any mind, but the person who came was a messenger from the Silver Sugar Viscount, and Keith knew the Viscount was observing the Paige Workshop's progress. With that in mind, he took notice.

The messenger gave Marcus an urgent letter from the Viscount—very rare indeed. Marcus looked surprised as he quickly opened the envelope, and Keith insisted that he be allowed to read the letter with him.

Inside was a warning for all Silver Sugar Masters and candy crafters.

Recently, there had been a spate of attacks targeting candy crafters. The culprit was a fairy who had somehow escaped human control, had powerful combat abilities, and was known to be a ferocious fighter.

That same fairy had attacked the Paige Workshop's workspace the previous day. He'd injured the proxy maestro and abducted the workshop's head candy crafter along with the warrior fairy working as her bodyguard.

To protect the safety of all candy crafters and find the kidnapped Silver Sugar Master, the Silver Sugar Viscount—with the cooperation of his patron, the Earl of Downing—was sending out troops to hunt down the fairy culprit.

He urged all candy crafters to take sufficient precautions. The maestros of each faction were expected to warn all branch workshops under their authority.

That was the content of the letter.

Keith had heard rumors that there was a fairy attacking candy crafters, but he never expected that the Paige Workshop would be targeted. And the head candy crafter and warrior-fairy bodyguard mentioned in the letter had to be Anne and Challe. Once he'd heard that, Keith couldn't sit still.

Had Anne really been kidnapped? And what had become of the Paige Workshop after they were attacked? He needed to see for himself.

Keith hurried up the hill leading to Hollyleaf Castle.

After arriving in the courtyard, he pulled his wagon to a stop and gazed up at the castle. It was very quiet. All he could see through the windows were shadows moving around on the first floor of the east wing. If memory served, that was their designated workspace.

Keith headed for the front door and went to knock, but the knocker that should have been hanging there was missing. It looked like it had been torn off; there were only splinters of wood in its place. Left with no other choice, Keith opened the door and called out.

"Pardon me. Hello?!"

But no one came. He lingered a while and called out several more times. He could hear people moving around in the east wing. Eventually, he got tired of waiting and stepped inside.

Opening the door to the east wing revealed a straight corridor. There, standing in the doorway of the room closest to him, he saw Bridget. She was peering inside, looking worried. She didn't seem to notice Keith. But just as he was about to speak to her, he heard Elliott's voice.

"Orlando? Where are you going?"

"To work," a man's deep voice answered. He sounded calm and composed.

"Is he all right?" Elliott asked, and Bridget, still in the doorway, shook her head forcefully in reply.

"I'm sure his wounds still hurt. Just earlier, he looked like he was in pain."

“I’m telling you I can do it, Elliott,” the man’s voice said firmly, sounding angry.

There was a brief pause.

“All right, then,” Elliott responded, sounding deflated. “I mean, if you can, then great. But you’ve got to promise you won’t overdo it.”

“Of course,” the man’s voice answered.

Bridget shook her head again. “You’re being ridiculous.”

“Bridget.” Judging that they had reached a break in the conversation, Keith spoke up.

Bridget turned around, her eyes widening. “Keith?”

“I’m sorry. I called out, but no one came to meet me, so I let myself in.”

“The fairies who do the housework are too frightened to answer the door at the moment. Sorry about that.”

As she spoke, Bridget walked toward him. Suddenly, Keith noticed something unexpected.

Bridget’s face seemed somehow different compared with when she was at the Radcliffe Workshop. He’d always suspected that her tough attitude was merely a facade. But now, though she still seemed fragile, he could sense a kind of determination in her, as if she refused to let the world keep her down.

“Do you have some business here?” she asked.

“We received a notification from the Silver Sugar Viscount. It said that the Paige Workshop had been attacked and that Anne had been abducted. The news shocked me. Is all that really true?”

Bridget cast her eyes down and bit her lip. “Yes. It’s true.”

“What is Mr. Collins doing?”

“He’s working.”

“Working? At a time like this?!”

Anne had entered the Selection on behalf of the Paige Workshop, and her sculpture had been chosen. After that, she continued working hard to prepare for the First Holy Festival. And now she had been abducted, and no one knew where she was.

How could they simply carry on with their work as if nothing was wrong?

Could it be because Anne wasn’t originally a part of their workshop? Could they have simply used her when it was

convenient, only to abandon her in her time of need?

"Mr. Collins!" Keith slipped past Bridget and briskly entered their workspace.

"What are you doing here, Keith?"

Elliott looked up at him in surprise and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. There was a bandage wrapped around his neck, but that was the only difference in his appearance. He was kneading silver sugar as usual.

Also in the room was a man with long black hair tied up in a high ponytail. Half his face was covered in bandages. This had to be the former head candy crafter, Orlando.

"Anne has been abducted, has she not?" Keith demanded.

Elliott fixed his eyes on the silver sugar. He nodded, his hands never stopping their work. "Yeah, she has."

"And you're not doing anything?"

"We are doing something. Look—we're working, aren't we?"

"I mean doing something to find Anne or to hunt down that fairy."

"Oh yeah. There's no way. For now, we're leaving all that up to the Silver Sugar Viscount." Elliott spoke as casually as always, but he wouldn't look at Keith.

"So you're telling me you're not doing anything to help Anne?!"

"I mean…we're working, aren't we?"

"I'm asking you whether you're doing anything to *help Anne*! Why won't you help her?! Is it because she doesn't belong to the Paige Workshop?!"

When Keith began shouting, Elliott suddenly lifted his head.

The look in his eyes was terrifying. But before Keith even had the chance to register surprise, Elliott grabbed him by the collar.

"'She doesn't belong to the Paige Workshop'?! Don't joke around!! Anne is our head candy crafter!"

Keith was too shocked to move.

"Elliott!" Orlando tried to get in between them, but Elliott brushed him away harshly with one arm before tightening both hands around Keith's neck.

"What are we supposed to do?! How do you suggest we tackle an enemy who was too strong even for Challe?! We're candy crafters! So we're doing the one thing we can do! Can't you see that?! We're doing our best! If we haven't made any progress on

the job by the time Anne comes back, she'll be devastated. So we're going ahead with our work!"

Keith was in pain from being strangled, but Elliott's shouts of frustration and rage were even worse.

"What more do you expect us to do?!" Elliott yelled.

"Elliott, stop it!" Bridget screamed.

Orlando's face twisted in pain as he grabbed hold of Elliott's arm. His wound probably hurt.

"Stop! Elliott!"

Having heard the uproar, the other Paige Workshop crafters, as well as Kat, Mithril, and Jonas, came running in from the room next door. Keith was surprised to see Jonas there, and Jonas, his mouth hanging open, must have felt the same about Keith. Neither could have possibly expected to be reunited in such a place, under such circumstances.

One of the Paige Workshop candy crafters—an exceptionally tall and brawny man—ran up to Elliott in a panic and grabbed his arms.

"I dunno what's going on, but you gotta let him go, Elliott. You'll kill the guy!"



But Elliott only gritted his teeth, glared at Keith, and yanked his collar with everything he had.

Then Kat approached them. With calm blue eyes, he said flatly, “This is a candy workshop. The proxy maestro shouldn’t be defiling this sacred space. If you’re gonna fight, take it outside.”

At Kat’s words, Elliott’s grip loosened. He swiftly removed his hands from Keith’s collar. Keith dropped to his knees on the floor, coughing violently, and Kat knelt and rubbed his back.

Elliott just stood there for a minute, hanging his head.

Once Keith was breathing normally again, Elliott looked down at him and muttered, “…You okay? That was wrong of me.”

Keith shook his head, still massaging his throat.

“No… I’m the one who should apologize.”

His cheeks burned. He had never been so embarrassed.

He had lost his cool when he heard that Anne had been abducted, but now he understood how thoughtless he’d been. The crafters of the Paige Workshop were already doing the best they could for Anne. It had taken Elliott’s shouting for him to realize it.

The Paige Workshop crafters had, without the slightest hesitation, acknowledged Anne as their head crafter. Neither faction membership nor the fact that she was female mattered to them.

Keith hated the idea of following in his father’s footsteps. The thought of receiving special treatment as the son of the former Silver Sugar Viscount was suffocating.

And because he had been so concerned with that, he had failed to notice how the others felt. *He* was the one with all the shameful hang-ups.

“I understand completely. I…was being thoughtless.”

His head was still spinning a little, but he stood up.

I don’t want to do anything shameful.

Keith always tried to be fair. It was not in his nature to be dishonest or dishonorable. That was simply who he was.

He thought of his father, who had served for more than twenty years as a wonderful Silver Sugar Viscount. Young Keith had always been treated like an accessory to his father, but his pride had made him work to be his own person—to do something for himself that he could be proud of.

“I’ll lend a hand, as well. The hole that Anne left must be gigantic. If this is the best we can do for her, then I’ll help. Besides, I want the Paige Workshop to go on. I care about this place—the workshop where my father trained. So I will help you.”

“Are you sure that’s all right, Keith?”

Mithril had been standing with his mouth hanging open. But now, startled by Keith’s words, he hopped up and landed on his shoulder.

“I see you’ve been helping them out, too, Mithril Lid Pod. I’ll join you. It’ll be fine.”

This little fairy who had traveled with Anne and Challe ought to have been more worried about the two of them than anyone else in the castle. But he was holding steady, quietly working away. Mithril understood exactly what he needed to do.

Keith felt he should take a page out of the fairy’s book. He needed to forget about foolish things like factions and personal pride.

“What do you mean, ‘it’ll be fine’?” Mithril asked, looking concerned. “If you help us, won’t that old man at the Radcliffe Workshop get mad at you?”

“It’s all right. I’ve got an idea.” Keith gave the fairy a gentle smile, then turned back to face Elliott again. “Mr. Collins. Please give me a job.”



It had already been three days.

That morning, Anne had Challe open the high window, too far up to see out. The rays of the setting sun streamed through, casting a square of light on the wall. From time to time, a cold wind blew in, but she kept the fire in the hearth ceaselessly burning, so the room was warm. There was plenty of firewood piled up beside the hearth.

Anne was sitting in front of the fire, hugging her knees.

She wasn’t exactly imprisoned; she could leave her room as she pleased. Lafalle was well aware that Anne couldn’t run away. Here in this wilderness, far from the Bloody Highway, if she ran

off by herself, she would only end up dead in a ravine somewhere.

Thinking it would be useful to check out her surroundings, Anne had walked through the fort several times to learn its layout, but that was all she'd done. The interior was gloomy, cold, and depressing—hardly a good spot for a stroll.

I wonder what's become of our work, she thought, head resting on her knees.

The Paige Workshop had finally started making decent headway, but with Anne out of the picture, they would be shorthanded again. She wondered how the other crafters were handling it. Elliott and Orlando were injured and probably couldn't do anything too strenuous.

Starting the day after she, Challe, and Lafalle arrived at the fort, Challe had been going out on excursions with Lafalle. They went out early in the morning and came back after sunset. And each time, they brought back several new brawny warrior fairies. Challe didn't talk about what he was being made to do. But he seemed gloomier with each passing day, which worried Anne.

Someone knocked at the door. For a moment, she thought Challe had come back, but—

"Hi there, Anne."

—it was Lafalle, carrying a small barrel on his shoulder. He stepped right into the room without asking and lowered the barrel to the floor near the wall.

"It's silver sugar. I prepared it for you. Won't you make some sugar candy for me?"

That year's silver sugar wasn't something that just anyone could refine on their own. Anne wondered where and how he had gotten it. She knew he had probably stolen it from someone, but thinking about the circumstances of how it had been taken filled her with dread.

"Anne, I have great expectations for you. Craft something for me, my darling Silver Sugar Master."

Lafalle smiled. His whispering voice was sweet like the scent of flowers. His skin was pale, and his hair and eyes were a vague, phantomlike blend of colors. He was beautiful, though in a different way from Challe.

"No. I won't make anything," she replied, glaring at Lafalle.

“You won’t? What a troublesome girl. Well, then you’re just an ordinary, useless human. Don’t complain when that gets you killed. Once you’re dead, I’ll just have to fetch that male Silver Sugar Master from the same workshop to replace you.”

Though his voice remained sweet, the words he spoke were cruel. Anne’s face drained of color.

“Stop! Don’t touch Mr. Collins!”

Elliott was supposed to become the next maestro of the Paige Workshop. He was the only one to whom Glen could confidently entrust his legacy. She couldn’t allow Lafalle to take him.

“Well then, who will make my sugar candy?”

Biting her lip, Anne hung her head.

“…I will.”

“You should have just said that in the first place, my darling Silver Sugar Master. I’ll treat you well, so long as you obey.”

Lafalle quickly closed the distance between them. Anne felt a chill of dread, like something cold had touched her back. Without thinking, she stood up and fled toward the wall.

Lafalle followed, seeming to enjoy the chase.

“What about Challe?!” she asked. “Where is he?!”

“Washing himself,” Lafalle answered. “Understandably, he was worried that if he appeared before you in his current state, you might feel unwell.” Then he chuckled and smiled happily. “Though he says he doesn’t wish to use his sword, he is magnificent in battle. And how much more splendid he will be once he no longer hesitates! It’s a delight just imagining it.”

“What are you making Challe do?”

“Oh, nothing much. I’m just having him remove certain… obstacles for me. Are you worried about him? Do you love him? Of course you do. But if you love him enough to worry about him, you’d be better off keeping your distance.”

Anne slowly backed away along the wall as Lafalle approached.

“If you love Challe and he returns your feelings, your happiness is secure. You could keep him by your side and enjoy his company for the rest of your life. But after you are gone, he’ll be left alone again.”

Anne was startled. She recalled how lonely Challe had looked when he spoke about Liz. It had been shortly after they first met.

Liz had been killed, and Challe, who was left behind, had experienced unbelievable isolation and loneliness. She could see it plain as day in his eyes.

"Humans with humans, fairies with fairies. We are all happiest living with members of our own kind, don't you agree? If you truly care for Challe, don't you think you ought to do everything you can to help him live with his fellow fairies? Right now, he finds happiness in protecting you and your friends. That's because you all rely on him and are happy being around him. But suppose you were to reject him? He would have no reason to stay with you. If you did that, I'm sure he would eventually wish to return to his own kind. But as things are now, you'll only make him unhappy."

Anne loved Challe. And Challe had pledged to always protect Anne and stay by her side.

To Anne, this was the greatest happiness she could imagine. But what about Challe? Perhaps Challe's kindness actually brought him sorrow.

For now, Challe was with humans, but sooner or later, they would all disappear. She hoped that Mithril would stay with him when the time came, but they didn't even know how long Mithril would live.

If Mithril also passed away, Challe would be alone again.

"At least I'll never disappear and leave him behind. And it doesn't have to be just me. Someday soon, we can go looking for fellow gemstones. If you were to reject him so that he would consider living here with us, I wouldn't even mind setting you free."

The color of his eyes as he pressed in on her was beautiful, and she found herself unexpectedly drawn in by his words.

But Lafalle is a liar. He fooled Bridget. He fooled everyone.

"If you set me free, will you simply kidnap a different Silver Sugar Master?"

"That's not for you to worry about."

"I can't believe a single word you say!" she shouted as she slipped past him and rushed out of the room.

She continued to run, searching for Challe. She couldn't help worrying. She knew Lafalle wasn't to be trusted, but she also knew that there was some truth in his words.

Lafalle had said that living with one's own people was the way to happiness. That could very well be true. Anne wondered if taking advantage of Challe's kindness and wanting to be with him might make him unhappy.

While she was haphazardly running around the castle, Anne discovered a room with an open door and light shining out.

"Challe?!"

Excitedly, she peered inside, then stiffened.

It was a large room. In the center was a long table, at which the brawny fairies sat in rows. They looked like they were in the middle of a meal. All at once, their eyes gathered on her, and she was so frightened, she couldn't move.

Then from the very back of the room, something small came bounding toward her.

It was a tiny female fairy, about the size of her thumb. She stood on the edge of the table and looked up at Anne with tender eyes.

"This is where us fairies eat our meals. It's not a place for guests."

"I'm so sorry. I was looking for someone."

Anne tried to explain, but the little fairy's eyes suddenly opened wide, and she shouted, "Oh! Is it you? The young lady who gave birth to me?! It's me, Lusul El Min! Do you remember me?"

"…Oh!"

A little over a year earlier, Anne had traveled down the Bloody Highway. At the end of that trip, she had stared at a berry, and a fairy had been born. That fairy had called herself Lusul El Min, and at Challe's recommendation, she had flown off to a place where human hands could never reach her.

At that time, she had wanted a dress, but now she was wearing makeshift clothes fashioned out of bits of cloth. And on her back was only a single wing.

"What happened to your wing?! Were you captured by humans after you left us?!"

"No. Nothing like that." Lusul smiled, looking amused. "I removed it so I could offer it to Lord Lafalle."

She removed her own wing?

Once she understood Lusul's words, Anne was overcome with surprise.

“You removed it…? By yourself?”

“Of course not. You can’t remove them yourself, not with how badly it hurts. Lord Lafalle removed it. And it’s not just me. Everyone here has offered one wing to Lord Lafalle. Though the others simply handed over what the humans had taken from them. We give it as a pledge of loyalty, you see.”

“A pledge of loyalty? Why? Why would you pledge allegiance to him?” Anger welled up in Anne’s chest like something simmering to a boil.

“Lord Lafalle is the first fairy king to appear in five hundred years. Our own king. He will grant fairies their freedom. He promised it to us.”

“…How awful.”

Anne’s lip trembled. Lusul, visibly confused, cocked her head.

The sublime moment of the fairy’s birth was still clear in Anne’s mind. Her two wings had been so beautiful, and Anne had understood then that those wings were a fairy’s life force—something she mustn’t meddle with.

Then at Challe’s advice, Lusul had fled to a place where human hands couldn’t reach her.

Challe had said that the life span of a fairy born from a berry was only about one year. Lusul should have been able to enjoy her freedom, even if it was only for a year of life.

The sight of a fairy being born had gently soothed some of the wounds in Anne’s heart. And now the fairy who had shown her such beauty had lost one of her wings and wound up in a place like this.

It had been just over a year since then. Her life would soon come to an end. And yet here she was, in this awful place and missing a wing.

Awful, awful.

Even though she hadn’t been captured or enslaved by humans, a fellow fairy had removed her wing.

“I knew Lafalle was a liar!” Anne shouted. “He promised you freedom, then made you give him your wing?! If that’s true, he’s no different from the humans who want to control fairies, is he?!”

“Oh, no. He is our fairy king, so it’s only right that we offer him our wings.”

“It’s *not* right! He’s your king? I refuse to believe that. He’s nothing but an impostor!”

Lusul looked up at Anne in bafflement. “Why are you crying, miss?” she asked. “Are you sad?”

Anne only noticed the tears spilling down her cheeks after Lusul pointed them out to her.

“I’m angry!” she replied. “There was absolutely no reason for you to give away such a beautiful wing. Even a king doesn’t have the right to steal something so lovely. Why did you give it to him?!”

“‘Beautiful’…?” Lusul repeated the word as if it was the first time she had ever heard it in her life. Then her expression grew even more bewildered. “Are you crying for me?”

The warrior fairies were also watching Anne curiously as she wept. They couldn’t seem to understand why she was angry *or* why she was crying.

Then from behind Anne, a pair of hands softly came to rest on her shoulders. When she looked up, she saw Challe.

He was wearing a black jacket and trousers, but they were different from his usual clothes. Lafalle must have prepared them for him—elegant garments that resembled his own, decorated with beads. Challe’s hair was wet. Droplets of water glistened at the tips. He seemed to have washed himself, and his fingertips were even colder than usual.

Lusul looked at Challe, now even more surprised. “Aren’t you that kind person from before? You’re here as well?”

“Does no one understand the reason why this girl is angry?” Challe asked quietly.

The warrior fairies all frowned. Some of them exchanged looks.

“Lusul El Min, you don’t understand, either?”

“…Not really.”

Challe heaved a small sigh, put his arm around Anne’s shoulders, and urged her to start walking.

“Wait,” said Lusul. “Aren’t you going to tell us the reason the young lady is angry?”

Challe answered flatly, “This girl returned my wing to me. Lafalle stole it. Think about what that means.”

Chapter 5
THE ONE WHO WOULD BE FAIRY KING

Royal guards stood around a Lewiston candy shop on the outskirts of the West Marketplace, preventing onlookers from getting too close. A little ways away, a crowd anxiously gazed at the shop's entrance.

Two people emerged from the building—the Silver Sugar Viscount, Hugh Mercury, and the Earl of Downing.

"This is the doing of that fairy, wouldn't you say?" Hugh asked.

The Earl of Downing nodded, a bitter look on his face. "Over the course of the past year, there have been sporadic attacks against fairy hunters and fairy dealers, but… Recently, the number of incidents has only been increasing. This, too, must be the work of that fairy and his gang. The methods are the same as before. We must do something about him and quickly. But we don't have a single clue. How is the search going? Did you find the fairy dealer in Millsfield whom the Paige Workshop girl said she purchased him from?"

"We found him, but he was a corpse," Hugh answered flatly. "Along with his whole family, just like here. We think the fairy took his family hostage in order to ensure cooperation, then killed them anyway."

"How brutal." The Earl of Downing groaned.

The earl was a veteran retainer who had personally led troops into battle in support of the current king. Yet the terrible scene in the candy shop had still gotten to him.

"These incidents span the Sant, Charmae, and Harrington Provinces, and none of them have any idea what to do. I'll have to

be the one to chase him down."

The Earl of Downing was the current governor of Charmae Province.

Aristocrats serving the royal family each had a role to carry out. Nobles related to the Millsland family by blood became premiers or generals in charge of the royal army, or they took on a number of other duties important to the crown. Those not part of the king's bloodline received appointments from the royal family and were tasked with running the various provinces of Highland or serving as government ministers and bureaucrats.

The Silver Sugar Viscount, however, held a unique position.

Normally, aristocrats were attended by knights and retainers under their command. But the Silver Sugar Viscount had no such retainers. He was merely granted use of Silver Westol Castle and the guards who came with it, all of which were on loan from the king. Compared with the kingdom's other aristocrats, the Silver Sugar Viscount carried little military weight.

However, the Silver Sugar Viscount was responsible for making sugar candy for the king. It was rumored that his position, which allowed him to have frequent, personal discussions with the monarch, held more influence than any governor's. For that reason, the kingdom's other nobles preferred that the title of Silver Sugar Viscount fell to meek, cooperative, and unambitious individuals.

To further ensure that the Silver Sugar Viscount didn't foolishly involve himself in politics, the Earl of Downing was assigned to monitor him. The Earl of Downing, too, held a special position among his peers. Though the earl was not related to the king by blood, he received the same treatment as a blood relative. Because of that, he could, with the king's permission, borrow soldiers from the royal army and mobilize them at will.

Typically, the governor of each province was responsible for handling disturbances and disputes within their territory. However, when a problem affected multiple provinces, their governors were supposed to consult on the matter. But for an incident spanning three provinces, simply getting all three governors to show up and work together was an ordeal.

Since the current problem affected Charmae Province, the Earl of Downing—whom the royal family trusted above all others—

was the obvious choice. Moreover, the incident involved a request from the Silver Sugar Viscount related to candy crafters. It seemed the other governors were in agreement that only the Earl of Downing was fit to handle the matter.

How very fortunate, Hugh thought fleetingly.

In Charmae Province alone, the culprit had attacked a fairy dealer, a fairy hunter, and a candy crafter. Because of that, the Earl of Downing had naturally become involved.

If Charmae Province had not been affected, the other governors might have been reluctant to allow the Earl of Downing to meddle in their provinces' affairs, despite the Silver Sugar Viscount's request. In that case, it would have taken time to persuade each of them to cooperate.

We'll be able to chase after him much quicker this way. That alone is a great stroke of luck.

Despite that, they couldn't afford to be optimistic. Fairy dealers and fairy hunters were being assaulted one after another. Now even a candy crafter's shop had been attacked, and still, they had no leads. The culprits appeared suddenly and left like the wind, without a trace. Hugh wondered how Anne was faring in their clutches. Was she still safe?

"Brutal and careful, too," said Hugh with a heavy sigh.

His gaze fell to the ground. But after he stared at the cobblestones for a moment, his eyes suddenly opened wide. Then he slowly looked up, as if searching for something, and fixed his gaze firmly on the western sky.

"…It can't be."

"What is it, Mercury?" asked the earl.

Hugh looked back at him. "Lord Downing, I've found a clue."

After a sound so faint it could hardly be called a knock, the door opened, and the little fairy Lusul El Min peeked into the room.

"Hee-hee-hee. Here you are!"

She entered, grinning like a mischievous child.

Ever since Lusul El Min found out that Anne and Challe were staying in the fort, she had visited Anne's room nearly every

night. She didn't come to do anything in particular—she just liked to walk in circles around Anne and Challe as they sat in front of the hearth and chatter childishly at them.

"Everyone in the fort is a good person, but…they're not exactly beautiful to look at. This room is different, though. It's captivating. Anne, you're cute, of course, but, Challe—you're wonderful. I never get tired of watching you."

These were the sorts of things Lusul talked about. It wasn't that she had a special fondness for Challe—rather, she enjoyed observing him as she would a beautiful flower.

As he stared into the fire crackling in the hearth, Challe said offhandedly, "Lafalle is beautiful, too, if only on the outside."

Lusul smiled awkwardly. "Lord Lafalle is very beautiful, but I'm too afraid to stare at him."

When Anne heard that, she found herself hating Lafalle more and more.

Lafalle held his people's lives in his grasp, and they feared even looking at him. She didn't think a king like that was much of a king at all. He was just a tyrant.

"What's happening to the fairies Lafalle and I bring here?" asked Challe.

"Oh, them? Well, they're pretty quiet, but they say being with us is better than being enslaved by humans. They say that a lot."

"Better, huh?" Challe laughed scornfully.

"There are already more than fifty of them here. It's getting hard to feed them all. Before long, Lord Lafalle will probably make some kind of move. Don't you know anything, Challe?"

"Nope. I've just been enslaved by him, same as all of you."

"We're not enslaved," Lusul mumbled in distress, but Challe didn't let up.

"What's the difference?" he demanded. "I've been enslaved by humans before. This is just the same. Someone's got a hold of my wing, and they order me around."

Sensing Challe's irritation and unhappiness, Lusul looked anxiously at Anne.

To reassure her, Anne said, "Challe isn't angry at you, Lusul."

Lusul looked relieved.

It was the tenth day since Anne and Challe had been brought to the fort. Anne was constantly wondering about the Paige

Workshop's progress. She was concerned, too, about the melancholy look on Challe's face as he quietly sat beside her.

Challe was on the floor with one knee up, staring fixedly into the fire. In the light of the flames, his eyelashes cast dark shadows onto his cheeks. His wing was tinted a soft orange, but somehow, the color seemed to lack vitality.

When Anne saw Challe in this gloomy state, she was always reminded of the way he looked when he talked about Liz. And then Lafalle's words would ring in her ears.

"You'll only make him unhappy," he had said.

Challe had promised to stay with Anne and protect her because he was kind. She was sure he was doing it because she depended on him and because it was obvious that his promise made her happy. But if keeping his promise would make Challe unhappy, then perhaps Anne *should* encourage him to live with the fairies, his own species.

However, she didn't want him living with craven companions like Lafalle.

Another gemstone fairy, but someone kinder and more honest. Someone really nice.

They could be quartz or ruby, sapphire or jade. She didn't care what kind of gemstone they came from. Anne imagined that a beautiful, kind, and elegant fairy woman born from one of those would be a good match for Challe. If he could meet a fairy like that and start a relationship with her, that might be for the best.

But just imagining it caused Anne's chest to hurt and made her hopelessly sad.

I want to be with him forever.

Some part of her couldn't help feeling that way.

"Oh, is this silver sugar?" asked Lusul. "I wonder why it's in a place like this."

She had been wandering around the room and noticed the barrel of silver sugar.

"I am a candy crafter, you know. I made candy for Lafalle, but…"

At Lafalle's demand, Anne had made two pieces of sugar candy since coming to the fort.

For the first one, she made a white flower. She had no colored powders, so the whole piece was pure white. Lafalle hadn't

seemed pleased with it, and he soon acquired vials of colored powder and a full set of tools from somewhere.

The tools, along with a barrel of cold water and the colored-powder vials, had been neatly arranged near the sugar barrel. With everything prepared, Anne should have been able to make proper sugar candies.

But she hadn't been able to craft as well as usual.

Lafalle had ordered her to make fyffe pieces just like the ones the Silver Sugar Viscount had made. But Anne couldn't quite get the results she wanted. No matter how many times she tried to get the shapes right, she couldn't achieve the correct balance. And the colors, for some reason, were coming out oddly, too. Three days earlier, she had struggled to make one of the horse pieces, and when she showed the finished candy to Lafalle, he broke it without even tasting it. Ever since then, she had stopped working altogether. She didn't even feel like touching the silver sugar.

"What's candy?" Lusul tilted her head in puzzlement.

"You don't know?" Anne asked. "It's a treat made from silver sugar."

"I've never seen any."

"Oh, really? Well then, how about I make some for you?"

"Wow, would you?"

"Sure."

Anne stood up. Lusul watched her excitedly.

I want to show her something really pretty.

For the first time in a while, Anne was in high spirits.

After chilling her hands in the bucket of cold water, she scooped some silver sugar from the barrel and spread it out on top of a slab sitting on the floor. Then she added more cold water and began to knead.

Lusul, who was watching her intently, spoke up. "That's amazing! The silver sugar is getting all shiny and forming balls. What kind of magic are you using?"

"It's not magic. This is the craft I was talking about."

The fairy's naïveté was charming. Using a sharp, slender knife, Anne cut out threadlike stalks and jagged leaves. She blended purple and blue powders and made bright, glossy berries. Then

she attached the little berries in a cluster, poking out from under a leaf.

Lusul's eyes lit up.

"Why, these are the berries from which I was born! This really is magic!"

"Go on. Taste it."

At that, Lusul looked up at her as if to ask if it was truly all right. Anne nodded, and Lusul touched the berries. One of the berries was gently enveloped in soft light, then it crumbled into nothing and was absorbed into her tiny palm. After letting out a deep sigh, Lusul looked surprised.

"That's amazing! It's so sweet. And somehow, I feel more energetic. Hey, I wonder if I could take this and give it to some of the others. A few of them are injured, and I bet if they eat it, they'll feel better."

The "others" Lusul was talking about were the warrior fairies. Lusul had been put in charge of looking after their daily needs.

"Sure. That's fine. If it's not enough, I'll make more."

"Wow, you're really nice! Thank you!"

Lusul left happily.

After working with silver sugar and seeing how happy Lusul looked, Anne felt more energetic than she had in a while.

Challe peered at her face and chuckled. "It really does put you in a good mood to work with silver sugar, huh?"

"You can go ahead and call me simple or whatever. I know you want to. And it's true."

She sat down beside Challe, and he turned slightly to face her.

"There's nothing wrong with that," he said. "You're just acting like yourself."

The light of the swaying flames flickered over Challe's eyelashes as his black eyes fixed on Anne. They were so deep and dark, they seemed like they might swallow her up.

"Challe, have you ever met a female fairy born from a gemstone?" Anne gave in to the sudden urge to ask.

"I have," he replied. "Many times."

"And…were there any you liked?"

"What's this about, all of a sudden?"

"Nothing. Just wondering if there were any gemstone fairy women you happened to like…"

If Challe's heart had been drawn to another fairy in the past, Anne wondered if it might be best to try to find her again. Then she and Challe might fall in love and be happy together. That was what Anne wanted to say, but she felt as if something was caught in the back of her throat. Her words wouldn't come out right.

Challe's eyes wavered; he looked puzzled. "What are you trying to say?"

"I'm not sure how to put it, but I… Challe, you said you would be with me forever, and I'm incredibly happy about that. But I'm not sure if it's right for me to take advantage of your promise. I don't want to force you to do anything, and I want you to be happy. So if you—"

"Anne," said Challe, cutting her off before she could say anything else. "You can take me at my word."

Then he gently touched her cheek with one hand. He was incredibly close. Slowly, he leaned in toward her face. She could feel his breath on her lips.

"Anne."

The voice calling her name was sweet and sad. Anne's eyes were wide open, and she couldn't move.

What on Earth is this? A kiss? It couldn't be!

But suddenly—

"You'll only make him unhappy."

—Lafalle's voice rang in her ears once more, and Anne backed away.

At the same time, Challe pulled his hand from her face, looking as if he had just remembered something.

They both averted their eyes.



The words that Anne had mumbled, about wanting Challe to be happy, had conveyed more than simple affection for a trusted bodyguard. He was sure he'd sensed something like love lurking behind them. And when he realized that, Challe had lost control over his own emotions. He had touched her cheek and had been about to kiss her. But he hadn't been able to do it.

Something had hindered both of them.

The moment Anne pulled back in surprise, Challe remembered Lafalle's words.

"You'll only make Anne unhappy."

He'd shuddered with the thought that his touch might consign Anne to some miserable fate, and he'd quickly pulled his hand away from her cheek.

When he encountered her just a year earlier, he probably wouldn't have balked at killing her if he needed to. Recalling that, he felt a swell of disgust toward his past self. He wondered if it was all right for a person like him to touch Anne. Because of Lafalle's words and his own disgust at the person he'd been only a year before, Challe was beginning to believe he should keep his distance from Anne.

I mustn't touch her.

The greater his love for her grew, the more untouchable she became. Some things were like that, he figured.

From that night forward, Challe did his best not to get too close to Anne. And he felt that Anne was doing the same, carefully keeping her distance from him.



"Can I come in? Is anyone injured today?"

Anne peered into a large room lined with simple wooden platforms that only barely passed for beds.

The brawny warrior fairies, who were all in a huddle in the back of the room, turned to look at her. Then Lusul came bounding nimbly out from among them.

"Anne, thank goodness. Today, we have a few people who are really hurt!" Lusul's eyebrows drooped with concern, and Anne nodded.

"I brought some sugar candies. I made these this afternoon."

"Wow, this many?!"

When Anne held out the plank of wood she'd brought with her, Lusul's eyes lit up. Arranged on the plank were a dozen pieces of sugar candy that Anne had made. There were flowers, butterflies, and berries, as well as snowflakes, kittens, and songbirds. She'd used all her spare time to make them.

Just like Challe, the warrior fairies in the fort went out with Lafalle every day.

Challe had never been injured, but apparently, the warrior fairies frequently came back wounded. This worried Lusul, so Anne had started making sugar candy for them.

When she had nothing to do, she couldn't stop fretting over Challe and the Paige Workshop, which only depressed her. But kneading silver sugar distracted her and was much better than glumly sitting around holding her knees to her chest.

Moreover, the warrior fairies were just like Challe—somebody else had control of their wings. They were probably being ordered to do things they didn't want to. If they were getting hurt as a result, she wanted to help them recover.

When Anne tried to make sugar candy for Lafalle, the result was never as beautiful as she expected. Maybe it was because she was so nervous. She always felt sad as she worked.

But when she made candy for Lusul and the warrior fairies, her hands practically moved on their own, crafting exactly what she wanted to make. She felt relaxed and carefree, almost like she was playing with the sugar. And yet strangely, the candy always came out well. She enjoyed the process.

Delighted, Lusul called back into the room, "Hey, we've got sugar candy! Pass these to the people in the back!"

At her words, one of the warrior fairies sluggishly approached them.

"Okay, here you go." With a smile, Anne handed over the board bearing the sugar candies.

The warrior fairy frowned, creases forming on his forehead. After a few moments looking back and forth between Anne and the candies, he said angrily, "This will help."

Still looking glum, he turned his back to them and returned to the rear of the room.

"Was he angry just now?" Anne tilted her head in confusion, and Lusul giggled.

"He's grateful, despite how he looks. But these guys hate saying thank you to humans. I don't understand it, since I was never enslaved by humans, but they all say that they really hate them."

"Oh, I see."

That reminded Anne of when Mithril had insisted on coming along with them to repay her. He had declared, *"I'll repay the favor, but I'll never say thanks as long as I live!"*

Anne felt a little tickle in the back of her nose at the memory.

Mithril Lid Pod. I wonder if he's lonely.

When she stopped to think about it, Anne realized that, for the past year, she hadn't been separated from Mithril Lid Pod for longer than three days.

Even when Challe left with Bridget, Mithril had always been by her side, cheering her on. She missed the energetic little fairy dearly.

She also wondered if the Paige Workshop's job was progressing well. She trusted that they would keep working, no matter what happened. But they were shorthanded and probably full of anxiety and apprehension.

More than fifteen days had passed since Anne arrived at the fort. The air was cold, the grass was dead, and the sky was gray and cloudy—all signs that they were in the dead of winter. In less than one month, it would be time for the First Holy Festival. Anne hoped that they would somehow finish in time.

"Are you all right?" Lusul asked. "What's the matter?"

Anne must have been making a sad face; Lusul sounded concerned.

"It's nothing," Anne replied. "I just want to get back quickly and do what I'm supposed to be doing. Are the rest of you all right with being here? With your wings in someone else's hands, unable to do what you want to do or go where you want to go?"

"What else would we want to do?"

"Isn't there anything you can think of?"

"Let me see… Not really. Hey, does anyone here have something they want to do?"

When Lusul posed the question to the room, the warrior fairies all tilted their heads in puzzlement or shrugged. Then one of them slowly began to speak, as if a thought had just occurred to him.

"Uh… I've never seen the ocean. I'd like to see it."

"Never mind the ocean," someone else said. "That's boring. I'd go find a nice girl. A gemstone girl would be good."

Another fairy laughed. “With a face like yours, any girl you find will just run away.”

“I’d like to find my old fairy friends. Hopefully, they’re alive, but…”

One after another, the warrior fairies spoke up.

Lusul looked confused. “What’s the ocean?”

“You don’t know, Lusul? The ocean is like a giant pool of water. It’s so huge that the whole Kingdom of Highland could fit neatly inside it.”

“Well! That’s awful! Everyone would drown!”

Lusul was horrified, and all the warrior fairies burst out laughing.

Seeing them like that, Anne smiled a little. Even the big brawny fairies weren’t all that different from the candy crafters back at the Paige Workshop.

“I wish I could take all your wings back for you,” Anne said without thinking. “Then you could all be free.”

The warrior fairies looked at one another in surprise.

“Free?” one of them asked. “We’re out of human hands now. Isn’t this freedom?”

“I mean, how is this different from being enslaved? All that’s changed is that now, instead of a human, your owner is the fairy king.”

The fairies frowned, as if they had been struck by a difficult problem.

Do they even realize? she wondered.

Lafalle had been gathering warrior fairies under the banner of fairy liberation. And those fairies, who had long been enslaved, had agreed to fight for the cause. But the very fairies fighting to free their brethren were themselves unfree. They had to have realized that on some level.

Stars glistened sharply in the dark winter sky. After finishing his work, Keith stepped out into the garden of Hollyleaf Castle and looked up. More than twenty days had passed since Anne and Challe were taken, and the Paige Workshop hadn’t gotten any

updates on their whereabouts. They had repeatedly sent letters to the Silver Sugar Viscount asking about the situation, but it seemed he was traveling, and they had yet to receive a reply.

Anne might never come back.

Keith's anxiety only grew as he gazed up at the darkness above. He was frightened; he couldn't help it.

The candy crafters were continuing their work, trusting that Anne would somehow come back to them. Keith tended to space out, and even Kat had scolded him, saying, *"Don't think about it. Just get to work."*

When Keith had opened up and said a few words about his worries to Mithril, the little fairy had put on an extremely serious face and insisted that Anne would be fine because she had Challe Fenn Challe with her.

Even so, Keith couldn't shake his anxiety.

"You'll catch a cold standing outside in such thin clothes," said a voice from behind. "Why don't you go on to bed?"

Keith turned around in surprise to find Jonas. He was wearing a big lumpy overcoat and carrying a steaming cup of tea in his hands. The fairy Cathy was riding on his shoulder, desperately trying to pull the overcoat's hood over Jonas's head.

The coat and tea were probably Cathy's doing. The small fairy was so overprotective of her master that it was almost funny.

"You're right," Keith said. "I'll head in."

But just then, Keith became curious about what Jonas thought of their situation. Jonas seemed to have a complicated history with Anne. But for the same reason, perhaps he could see the matter more objectively than the Paige Workshop crafters and Mithril Lid Pod, without any wishful thinking.

"Jonas, um… Do you think Anne is going to make it back?"

Jonas's lips twisted a little, and Cathy frowned anxiously.

After thinking for a moment, Jonas replied, "She's definitely coming back."

"What makes you think that?" Keith asked. "More than twenty days have passed without a single lead. And it's so cold out."

"Because Anne is…stubborn."

The wind blew, and the thicket of bare winter trees rustled noisily. Jonas shifted his gaze around like he was trying to follow the sound of the wind.

“She’s stubborn,” he continued, “and she’s persistent and a fool. So no matter what happens, she’ll be fine, don’t you think?” Even as he insulted her, Jonas seemed to be desperately searching for words of hope.

Keith looked at him and smiled. “You’re right again, Jonas.”

Anne would hate to hear that he’d agreed on something with Jonas, of all people, but he nodded all the same.

“Are you going to stay at the Paige Workshop for good, Jonas?” he asked.

Jonas stared down into the cup in his hands. “I’ll… Once the First Holy Festival is over, I’ll go back to the Radcliffe Workshop.”

“You will? That’s not what I expected. Why did you decide to do that?”

“I know I’ll never be needed while you’re there, Keith. But…but I want to try to make an effort for a little while. Just this once. For myself.”

“Trying to be stubborn like Anne?” Keith teased him a little, and Jonas turned bright red.

“No! No, that’s not it,” Jonas insisted. “I just wanted to, that’s all.”

“Mm. It’s a great idea, Jonas.”

Keith nodded and turned his gaze back toward the starry sky.

“You don’t have to worry about me,” he said. “By the time you go back, I won’t be there anymore.”



Every day, Lafalle left the fort. He always took four or five warrior fairies with him—a different group every time. Challe was the only one he always ordered to accompany him.

Lafalle attacked fairy dealers and fairy hunters in order to gather more of their kind under his banner.

From time to time, he brought back worker fairies as well to do odd jobs around the castle. But for the most part, he was only after burly warrior fairies. He killed or routed the humans who owned them and took possession of the fairies’ wings.

Those wings were placed in a sturdy box with a lock on it. Lafalle kept the box in his private quarters, and the key was

always on his person.

Challe's wing was the only one that Lafalle carried with him at all times. He was clearly taking special precautions with it.

The great majority of the fairies went obediently with Lafalle. But sometimes, a fairy would refuse him. When that happened, Lafalle ordered Challe to cut them down.

It was unpleasant to kill one of his own, and attacking humans saddened him, too.

In the past, Challe had never thought about such things, but now he wondered what each person he slaughtered was thinking, whom they loved, and what they were living for. He couldn't put such thoughts from his mind.

Sometimes, he even imagined that the humans he killed were Anne and her comrades from the Paige Workshop.

More than a month had gone by since he and Anne came to the fort, and the fairy ranks had swelled.

There have to be around sixty of them by now.

It seemed that once Challe started helping them, their raids were much more successful than when it had been only Lafalle and a few warrior fairies.

That day, yet again, Challe was covered in blood.

The blood of his victims stuck to his body—from his left cheek down his neck, all the way to the tips of his hair, on his left shoulder, and up both arms. It smelled awful.

One of the fairies fighting alongside him had been injured. It didn't seem serious enough to endanger his life, but the wound was deep.

The sky was dark, and it had been snowing. A light dusting of white had started to accumulate on the dried grass and bare tree branches. It had snowed several times since he and Anne had come to the fort, but it always quickly melted away, never sticking.

That day, however, the snow was different. It covered their surroundings in the blink of an eye and didn't seem likely to melt. If the snow continued all night, then by the following morning, the wilderness would be transformed into a world of pure white.

When their party returned to the fort, the other fairies got off their horses, supporting their wounded companion on their shoulders.

Challe also dismounted and started to head to the well to douse himself with water. But before he could go, one of the fairies called out to him from behind.

"Hey."

The other fairies rarely spoke to him. He didn't know whether Lafalle had said something to them or if it was merely a reaction to seeing him wield his sword, but they also appeared a bit frightened of him.

When Challe turned around, the fairy lowered his voice and spoke hesitantly.

"Tell that girl, please. If she could…"

"That girl?"

"The one with you, the human girl. Please tell her that one of us is hurt. If she can, ask her to make us more sugar candies today. She can give them to Lusul."

"Sugar candies?"

Challe frowned, and the other fairies stepped back in surprise.

"I mean, she doesn't have to. I just thought, if she could…"

Ever since the day Anne made a piece of candy for Lusul, Challe had noticed her assiduously kneading lumps of silver sugar and found it unusual that he never saw the finished pieces. Apparently, Lusul had been bringing whatever candy Anne made to the warrior fairies.

Anne had probably been using all her free time to make candy at Lusul's request. Even here, she was still making sugar candy.

Good grief. She never stops.

Challe smiled a little, shocking the other fairies.

"I'll tell her," he said, before turning his back to them.

The well Challe was headed to was underground, beneath the fort.

A set of stone stairs led down to a gloomy, damp room with the well in the center. Near the ceiling, just about at ground level outside, was a small, high window, through which a few withered weeds were visible.

Challe took off his clothes, drew a bucket of water up from the well, and dumped it over his head. Again and again, he drew water from the well and doused himself. The water ran red and dirty at his feet. He didn't feel cold even as he showered himself with the frigid water, but his breath came out in white clouds.

As he poured the water over himself, Challe thought about the fairies Lafalle had recruited.

Each of the warrior fairies was strong, more than a match for two or even three humans.

Lafalle had assembled more than sixty such fairies—quite a fighting force.

According to the recruits, Lafalle had been gathering them for about a year, though no one knew what he had been up to before that.

Challe wondered about that time in Lafalle's life. What had he been doing and thinking about? Why had he suddenly started recruiting fairies a year ago?

Challe's bloody clothes from the previous excursion had been washed and placed in a corner of the well room. A fairy had been doing the same thing every day—washing his dirty clothes and leaving them there for him—probably under orders from Lafalle.

As he was getting dressed, Challe heard someone in boots coming down the stone stairs.

"Why don't you try going back to your room without washing for a change?"

It was Lafalle. Challe ignored him and put on the fresh clothes, using a dry cloth to blot his dripping hair.

Droplets of water fell from Challe's fingertips, from his eyelashes, from his cheeks, and from the backs of his hands. They slid smoothly over his skin, each one caressing him on its way down. The memory of battle lingered in his body, and he shuddered at the feeling of each drop. Even that sensation, which he normally would have enjoyed after a fight, was aggravating to him now.

"If she saw you as you were, even Anne would understand, don't you think? She'll see that she lives in a different world from you."

"We live in the same world. Fairies and humans both walk the same earth."

"I see. I suppose you could say that. Perhaps that's why we fight."

Challe didn't feel like staying in such disagreeable company for very long. He tossed aside the cloth he had used to dry his hair and turned toward the stairs.

“Today will be the last day we spend gathering our comrades.”

Just as Challe was about to set foot on the stairs, Lafalle announced this behind his back. Challe stopped walking but kept his back to the other fairy.

“Fine by me,” he said. “Does that mean I get a break?”

“Our ranks have grown, and the fort has become cramped, so I want to find us a more spacious home. And we’ll need to acquire some humans to serve our warriors.”

Challe sensed something horrible in Lafalle’s cheerful tone, and he frowned at him over his shoulder.

“About halfway between Lewiston and Westol, there is a small human village,” Lafalle continued. “It’s in the mountains, quite remote from other villages, but it has a good wheat crop. And there is a sugar apple forest nearby. The population numbers no more than one hundred and fifty humans. They have little contact with the outside world. Sometimes, peddlers stop there, or the villagers travel into town to go to the market, but that’s it. None of the humans there know how to fight. Quite favorable conditions, don’t you think?”

“You mean to attack that village?”

“We will make it our domain.”

Lafalle smiled faintly, and Challe felt sick.

If around sixty warrior fairies were to attack a village of one hundred fifty farmers, they would conquer the place in the blink of an eye. They would force the powerless to yield to their overwhelming strength.

“The governor of this territory won’t stand and let you take the village. Neither will the king.”

“They won’t be able to do anything. We’ll have one hundred and fifty hostages, you see. Even the humans would be loath to sentence a whole village to death.”

Lafalle’s eyes held a brutal kind of delight. His smile was cheerful yet disturbing.

That first day Lafalle had brought Challe and Anne to the fort, he had declared his purpose to Challe. He said they would reclaim the fairies’ freedom and rebuild their kingdom in place of the last fairy king, Riselva Cyril Sash, who had died five hundred years earlier. And to do that, they would become joint

fairy kings, gather their comrades, and wage war against the humans.

But Challe wasn't so sure that was what they were doing.

Something's not right.

He felt it instinctually.

Lafalle spoke about a great cause, and Challe believed he really did want the things he spoke about and hoped they would come to pass. But his present course was guided by simple, raw emotion. If not, he wouldn't be speaking about a brutal war with such glee.

Once he thought it through, Challe realized something else.

So that's it… The wings.

He finally understood.

"You seem awfully pleased," Challe observed.

Lafalle smiled and cocked his head slightly. "Oh, is that how I look to you?"

"Is revenge really so satisfying, Lafalle?"

In response to Challe's quiet question, the other fairy frowned.

Challe approached him slowly, staring at his lone wing. The long, sleek wing, which hung down past the back of Lafalle's knees, was without a pair, just like Challe's. It was a color like green and blue mixed together, and partially transparent.

"How did you lose your wing?" he asked, and Lafalle's expression instantly dropped. "You were used by humans, weren't you?"

Lafalle's hair, which had been a soft, ambiguous color, was suddenly tinged with red. There was anger in his eyes, as if he had been insulted.

"No one knows where you were or what you were doing until a year ago," Challe continued. "You appeared suddenly, called yourself the fairy king, and began gathering your forces. You were born before I was, so why didn't you act for a hundred years? I suspect it's because you couldn't. And I can only think of one reason that would be—because you were enslaved by humans."

"Be quiet…Challe," Lafalle warned, glaring at him.

"I never knew about where we came from. But you…you knew that you were chosen as the fairy king. And yet you were

captured and enslaved by humans. It must have been agony. Then one year ago, you finally escaped. Is that it?”

Once a fairy’s wing was in human hands, it was no easy feat to get away. Even Challe had never been able to escape, despite attempting it many times. The humans who used warrior fairies tended to be especially vigilant.

“You will be silent. Have you forgotten that your wing is in my hands?”

“My wing, huh? Do you hold on to the wings of the fairies gathered here because you can’t trust anybody? Why don’t you trust your fellow fairies? Were you betrayed in the past?”

Lafalle’s mouth twisted slightly, as if he was trying to suppress some strong emotion.

A fairy like Lafalle would have been difficult for humans to capture. Something must have gotten him to let his guard down so they could take him prisoner.

“Did you fall into human hands because you were betrayed by your comrades? Does your hatred extend beyond the humans to your fellow fairies? You force even those who still have both wings to sacrifice one of them. Does it make you angry to see other fairies with both their wings when you have only one? You’re like a jealous little girl.”

“You dare insult me?!”

Challe dodged Lafalle’s hand as he grabbed at him.

“Insult you? Aren’t I just telling the truth?” He chuckled.

Even for Challe, who had never known the meaning behind his birth, being enslaved by humans was so humiliating, it made his blood boil. How much worse must it have been for Lafalle, who knew that he had been chosen by the fairy king, Riselva Cyril Sash?

The anger and hatred kindled by that humiliation had burned so fiercely that it consumed his heart. And it was with that burnt, black heart that he obtained his freedom and named himself the fairy king.

He had declared that he would take back freedom for all fairies and rallied comrades to his cause. But beneath this pretext, his hatred and anger still smoldered.

Lafalle’s great crusade was simply a means for enacting revenge on humankind. And even the act of building his army

was probably a kind of revenge on the former comrades who had betrayed him.

Challe didn't know what had happened in the past, but Lafalle was trying to use force to make even his fellow fairies surrender to his authority. Controlling them was another way of dealing with his pent-up anger at his former comrades.

"You said you wanted to become the fairy king and reclaim freedom for all fairies, and I believed you. But it seems your goals are not so lofty. You simply want revenge. You're still filled with rage and hatred. All you want is to attack the humans and subjugate your fellow fairies."

Lafalle, who had failed to take hold of Challe, practically growled, "What's the difference? To free the fairies, I need to hate and attack the humans. And to do that, I need to recruit others, fairies without direction or purpose, and guide them so they don't do anything foolish. And if it so happens that I enjoy wielding my authority and taking my revenge, what's the problem with that?"

"A true fairy king should not be driven by revenge or lust for power," Challe said calmly as he ascended the stairs.

He's become twisted.

Lafalle was consumed by the conviction that he was meant to become the fairy king. But his noble motives had dissolved in a sea of anger and hatred, and now they were hardly recognizable.

Challe understood Lafalle's hatred for humans and his all-consuming anger. Until he met Anne, Challe had been living with those very same feelings.

Once again, Anne spent the day making sugar candy. Kneading silver sugar every day distracted her, and the candy made the fairies happy. The windows in the fort's hallways had neither shutters nor glass panes. The whole place was drafty, and Anne shivered in the cold whenever she left her room. At night, everything was gray outside the windows. Snow had begun to fall, and the wild land she could see outside was quickly turning white.

Carrying the sugar candies she had made that day, Anne hurried toward the fairies' quarters. When she knocked, one of the warrior fairies opened the door. As he looked down at Anne, his sullen expression softened.

"Oh, it's you."

"I brought some sugar candies. Do you need them again today?"

"Yes, thanks. You heard from him and brought them, did you?"

"Him?"

"Challe Fenn Challe. You didn't hear anything from him?"

"Challe hasn't come back to the room yet."

"Oh…right. I suppose he wouldn't want to, looking like that." The fairy frowned.

Lusul came bounding up from behind him and hopped up onto his shoulder.

"We've got injuries again today," she said. "Thank you, Anne."

"Don't mention it. Here." She offered a board laden with candies, and the warrior fairy accepted it. Then looking down at the board, he muttered a question.

"You're a human, so why are you giving sugar candies to fairies?"

"What do you mean, 'why'? Because you said you needed them."

"What are you doing?" A chilly hand suddenly came down on Anne's shoulder. "Why are you bringing sugar candies here, Silver Sugar Master?"

Horrified, Anne instinctively brushed the hand away, jumped aside, and spun around.

Lafalle was smiling. Lusul cast her eyes down, looking panicked. The fairies inside the room also took notice. They all seemed nervous. Lafalle stared at the sugar candy in the warrior fairy's hands.

"What's going on here?" he asked. "All the candies you make for me are garbage. And yet you're making beautiful candies like these and bringing them to a place like this?"

Anne moved to stand in the doorway, blocking the sugar candies from Lafalle's gaze.

"I'll make candy for you, too. But I made these for them, so…"

"You don't seem to have understood the meaning behind my question. Why are you making such beautiful candies for them,

when you only make trash for me? I would like to hear your explanation."

"It's not like I've been slacking when making candy for you. It's just… They never turn out well, and…"

Lafalle made a chuckling sound in the back of his throat.

"So it's not that you refuse to make good candy, but that you *can't* make it—not when it's for me. Your very heart refuses me?"

"I'm sorry…but—"

"You really are an aggravating girl." He was still grumbling as he grabbed Anne's arm. "Come with me."

He yanked her along, and it hurt so badly that she thought he'd dislocated her shoulder. Anne screwed up her face in pain, but Lafalle didn't seem to care. He strode off, dragging her behind him.

"Ah, um…Lord Lafalle! Wait, please!"

Despite her fear of Lafalle, Lusul called out to stop him. Some of the warrior fairies also rushed out of the room.

"What?" Lafalle turned around, clearly displeased.

Lusul paled but managed to say, "U-um… Um… That young lady. What do you intend to do with her?"

"We have no need for a useless human."

"Lord Lafalle," a warrior fairy mumbled. "She is useful. My injuries have healed."

"If she can't make sugar candies for me, then there's no point in keeping her. I'll simply go and capture a new Silver Sugar Master. She's only a human. You don't need to concern yourselves with her," Lafalle said dismissively and walked away.

Lusul and the warrior fairies watched them go, bewildered.

Lafalle pulled Anne's arm with great force, dragging her to a room with a large door—his private quarters. The spacious interior included woolen carpets spread across the floor, a large bed, and clothing chests with metal fixtures, among other furnishings.

Lafalle shoved Anne through the door, sending her stumbling across the stone floor. She pitched forward after a couple of steps, falling on her hands and knees near the center of the room.

There was no fire burning, and it was cold. Scattered snowflakes were blowing in through the wide-open windows.

Lafalle closed the door behind him and stared down at Anne.

He means to kill me, she thought as she gazed into his eyes. They were cold and pitiless, as though he were looking at vermin.

The color of Lafalle's hair changed gradually to a translucent shade of red, starting at the top of his head. He turned both of his palms upward and spread his hands out in front of his chest, where beads of shining red light began to gather.

As Anne watched from the floor, her hands trembled.

"I had given up," he said. "I thought I would never find anyone to live alongside me. Fairies were all ignorant and stupid, a bunch of fools. If I didn't take their wings and rule over them, I didn't know what sorts of messes they would make. The time for the diamond in my hands had arrived, yet it wouldn't come to life, and I didn't know why. I wasn't sure whether the obsidian still existed. I doubted he was even alive. There was only me. In order to do something about fairykind's humiliating state, I thought I had no choice but to become the fairy king."

Lafalle's tone was detached, his voice flat. But Anne only had to look in his eyes to see that he harbored an irrepressible rage.

"But the obsidian was alive, and I found him," he continued. "And yet that obsidian fairy, Challe Fenn Challe, had been seduced by a little human girl and was fighting for the humans. If only you weren't around, I know he would have had very different ideas about the world. I'm sure he would have lived as my one and only partner. So why…?!"

Lafalle slowly approached Anne as he spoke. For some reason, there was a tinge of hopelessness in his voice.

Could it be that he's lonely?

Lafalle and Challe were born in the same place. The two of them probably felt closer to each other than to any other fairies. Lafalle had said that other fairies were fools, but he must have considered Challe and Challe alone to be his equal.

Lafalle thought both humans and other fairies were beneath him, and he lived a solitary life. He had to be extremely lonely.

That was why he wanted to make Challe, the only person he considered his equal, into his companion. He hoped that, while he had control of Challe's wing and was forcing him to do his bidding, the two of them would eventually come to understand each other. Just like when Anne, who had recently lost her

mother, had hoped to become friends with Challe while she held his wing.

In a quivering voice, Anne argued back, “With or without me, Challe is Challe. The reason he isn’t warming up to you is because you do awful things and because you’re holding his and all the other fairies’ wings. If you want to be friends with Challe, you’ll have to be nice to him first.”

“How dare a mere human speak the obsidian fairy’s name! He is like me, a life force chosen by the fairy king, a person destined to become a fairy king himself.”

Fairy king?! Anne hadn’t expected to hear those words. *Challe, a fairy king? What does he mean?*

Shining red threads appeared between Lafalle’s hands, and he made them bend and warp. Anne heard them cut through the air just before they wrapped around her ankle.

“If you weren’t around, I wouldn’t have had to take Challe’s wing. I wouldn’t have had to do anything to make him stay with me. You’re the one who messed it all up.”

Anne felt the cold, silvery-red threads twist around her ankle. She was so frightened that she almost cried out.

Lafalle gathered up the lengths of shining thread as he approached, and when he was right in front of Anne, he crouched down and peered into her face.

“I’m going to tell Challe that I set you free. Even if he doubts me, he has no way of checking. As long as I hold his wing, he can’t leave. And after fifty years or so have passed, he will forget all about you. Then slowly, even if it takes another hundred years, I can change Challe’s mind. But before any of that can happen, I have to take you out of the picture!”

When Challe got back to Anne’s room, she wasn’t there. He figured she had probably gone to take the sugar candies she had made to the fairies’ quarters. He wanted to see her face right away, so he left the room again to look for her.

Tomorrow, Lafalle will attack the village.

Thinking about it put Challe in a bad mood. The dark sky was visible through the windows lining the fort's corridors, and snow was blowing in. That night, the snow was likely to stick.

If it piles up, the trail I left behind will vanish. What's taking you so long, Silver Sugar Viscount?

He turned a corner and headed toward the fairies' quarters, only to find them gathered in the hallway up ahead, looking at one another and whispering.

He had a hunch that something had happened, and he hurried over to them.

"What's going on?"

When he asked, they turned around, looking startled.

"Oh, Challe!" Lusul, who was up on the window sash, cried his name tearfully.

"What?"

"Anne was—" She had just started to speak, when one of the warrior fairies cut her off.

"Stop, Lusul! Lord Lafalle will kill you!"

Challe glared at the fairy who had raised his voice.

"Are you all satisfied," he said, "being kept by Lafalle like so many pets? Reacting to his moods and following his orders? Tell me—how is that different from being owned by humans? Really think about it. What's the difference? I don't feel like being Lafalle's pet, so I'm going to protect what's important to me."

The other fairies seemed daunted by the quiet anger in Challe's voice and held their tongues.

"What has Anne ever done to any of you?" he continued. "She is a human, and if you hate her for being human, that's fine. I won't argue. But if that's not the case, then tell me. What happened to Anne?"



I'm done for!

Just as Anne squeezed her eyes shut and gritted her teeth, she heard someone open the door.

Opening her eyes with a start, she saw Challe in a low stance with his sword out, slashing sideways at Lafalle's back. Lafalle

quickly jumped to dodge, but Challe didn't pay him any mind, slicing instead through the threads reaching from his hands to Anne's ankle.

As they split with a shrill noise and their ends flailed in the air, the silvery-red threads burst into twinkling light and vanished.

Challe turned his back to Anne and crouched in front of her, his sword at the ready.

"Lafalle, didn't I tell you that if you tried anything, I'd kill you?"

"So you heard from the others, hmm? As I expected, they're too foolish to understand my intentions," Lafalle grumbled hatefully. "There is no way to manage those idiots except to hold on to their wings and control them that way."

"If you can't even subdue a small cadre of fairies without taking their wings," Challe replied quietly, "you'll never be the fairy king."

"Well then, will *you* become king? Can you subjugate those fools without holding their wings?"

"I have no need to make them my subjects. Fairies can gain their freedom even without a king. I will find another way."

"The only thing you'll find is humiliation at the hands of the humans. It's just as I expected. I must become the fairy king and rule alone. I won't give up that right. I'll even rule over you."

As he spoke, Lafalle put his hand inside his jacket and pulled out a small leather pouch. Anne recognized it—it contained Challe's wing. Lafalle held it in one hand and squeezed it tightly, crushing it.

Challe groaned. He lurched over, supporting himself with his free hand.

"Challe!" Anne rushed to help hold him up.

"Run. Get out of this room…," he replied.

"But—"

"Go!" Challe shouted, his face twisting painfully. "You're in the way!"

Anne leaped to her feet and bolted out of the room, practically flying out the door. It was as Challe had said: Anne was in the way as long as she was near him. She had no power of her own, and even if she stayed by his side, she couldn't do anything to help.

Outside, she ran into a group of warrior fairies hanging around in the hallway. They appeared to be focused on Lafalle's room,

and when Anne came flying out, their eyes widened in surprise.

“Anne?!” Lusul rushed out from the group of fairies. “Thank goodness, Anne! Challe must have stopped him!”

“Lusul!” Tears spilled down Anne’s face. She ran to the small fairy and collapsed right there in the hallway. “Lafalle is going to kill Challe!” she shouted. “He’s crushing Challe’s wing right now!”

She lifted her head and looked up at the warrior fairies.

“Please, please! Save Challe! At this rate, who knows what could happen to him?! He was only trying to help me!”

Slowly, one of the warrior fairies stepped toward Anne. Then with great force, he grabbed her wrists and hoisted her to her feet.



“Does it hurt?”

As he crushed the pouch containing Challe’s wing, Lafalle crouched down in front of him with a faint smile.

Challe gritted his teeth and glared at Lafalle as he endured the fear and pain. It felt like his body was being twisted so tightly that it would break into pieces and scatter. It was so painful, he couldn’t even speak.

“This is your punishment for insulting me and sticking up for a human,” he said.

Then Lafalle’s expression suddenly grew serious.

“Poor thing. It must be painful. I once thought that if I ever managed to find you, we would respect and love each other as partner kings. How did it come to this? I blame the humans for all of it.”

Lafalle squeezed Challe’s wing even harder, and amid the overwhelming anguish and pain, Challe felt his sword drop from his hand.

As the fallen weapon disappeared in a shimmer of light, Challe collapsed, crumpling sideways onto the floor. He curled up, wrapping both arms around his body.

“Lord Lafalle.”

Through the open door, several warrior fairies entered in a line. They had brought Anne with them. One of them held Anne’s

wrists behind her back. She appeared to be in pain.

"We've brought her."

Anne looked up at her expressionless captor with sad eyes.

"Well done," said Lafalle. Then he leaned over and whispered into Challe's ear: "I want you to watch. Watch what happens to your precious Silver Sugar Master."

Challe couldn't speak because of the pain. Panicking, he shouted in his mind.

Anne!

Suddenly, the pain disappeared as Lafalle put the pouch containing Challe's wing back inside his jacket pocket. Then he stood up and walked toward Anne. Challe tried to put his hands on the floor and push himself up, but his whole body was shaking with the residual pain, and it wouldn't move the way he wanted it to.

The moment Lafalle reached out toward Anne, however, a little fairy jumped out from somewhere near her shoulders.

It was Lusul. Before Lafalle could so much as frown, she slipped inside his jacket.

"You?!"

The startled Lafalle tried to catch Lusul, but before he could, she flitted away again with the pouch containing Challe's wing in her hands. She bounded once, then twice across the floor and hopped into Challe's breast pocket.

"Challe! Your wing!" she shouted.

Lafalle readied the shining red threads in his hands and flicked them toward Challe. Holding Lusul, Challe rolled across the floor and dodged the threads that came flying at him. He got up on one knee and held his right hand open. Then focusing his energy, he conjured his silver sword again.

Once it was clear that Challe had escaped him, Lafalle clicked his tongue and tried to grab Anne's arm. But the warrior fairy holding her thrust her back out of the room.

"What do you think you're doing?!" Lafalle demanded, his eyes bulging.

"Lord Lafalle," the warrior fairy said quietly. "Please let that girl go. She may be human, but let her go."

"You fools!!" Lafalle shouted, jumping back and readying his red threads.

Challe dropped into a low stance and ran toward him. He swung his sword, trying to sweep Lafalle's legs, and Lafalle jumped back again.

"Run! Get out of the fort, Anne!" Challe shouted into the hallway as he slashed at Lafalle from close range.

Aided by the confined space, Challe had managed to get close enough that Lafalle struggled to extend his shining crimson threads. Lafalle leaped away, pressed back by Challe's sword. Challe followed him, swinging. He didn't want to give Lafalle any openings.

"Lusul El Min! Go! Take Anne!"

Lusul darted off, following Challe's order.

"I'll punish all of you! I'll burn your wings!" Lafalle shouted in anger, dodging Challe's blade.

Then he gave his threads another flick and ran toward the doorway. Challe sliced through the threads as they came flying at him.

The warrior fairies who had been standing clustered in the doorway scattered, pushed aside by Lafalle's shining red threads as he charged through them. Bursts of light were followed by screams as the threads hit several of the fairies, wounding them.

Challe ran after Lafalle, shouting to the others, "Take the injured with you and get everyone out of the fort!"

Still chasing Lafalle, he practically flew down the narrow hallway, then rushed up the spiral staircase. At the top of the dark stairwell was an arched doorway. Challe could see the gray sky through it.

He emerged onto the battlement—the narrow walkway that ran along the top of the fort's tall curtain wall. Powerful gusts of wind blew past, driving clusters of snowflakes into his path.

The battlement was no wider than three of Challe's strides. The outer edge of the walkway was protected by a parapet wall, with regularly spaced gaps for firing arrows. There was nothing at all in the gaps between wall sections, which were big enough that a person could easily slip between them. And there wasn't even a wall on the interior edge of the walkway—it was wide open. The fort's courtyard spread out far below them. They were at a dizzying height.

Snow whipped around them. The wind blowing through the forest struck the fort's walls and traveled upward, carrying with it drifts of snow from the ground. The fairies' hair and clothing danced wildly in the updraft.

"Come at me, Challe!"

Lafalle stood in front of one of the open crenels, facing Challe, shining red threads at the ready. Challe steadied his grip on his silver sword and assumed a low stance, preparing himself for the attack.

That's when it happened. Over the wild howling of the wind, they heard the noise of hundreds of horses down below.

Startled, Lafalle looked out over the snow-covered plain.

Challe kept his sword at the ready as he, too, looked toward the sound.

About two hundred mounted troops were lined up in orderly rows in front of the fort. Their banners bore the Earl of Downing's crest. And in the rear, Challe and Lafalle could see flags belonging to the Silver Sugar Viscount.

Gazing down at them, Challe smiled.

"You certainly took your time, Silver Sugar Viscount."

From atop the battlement, Lafalle stared down at the assembled cavalry in shock. "Why are there humans here?"

Challe slowly approached Lafalle. With each step, the snow piled on the battlements crunched under his feet.

"Stealing that barrel of silver sugar was a mistake. It was leaking the whole way back. They followed the trail."

"So this was your doing, Challe?" Lafalle looked over his shoulder with a blank expression. His translucent red hair was tossed by a strong gust of wind.

"I knew the Silver Sugar Viscount would never miss the characteristic pale sparkle of silver sugar. And the timing was lucky. In early winter, there are no insects to gobble up the sugar. I was worried the snow might cover and hide it. But the Silver Sugar Viscount made it here before too much snow could accumulate."

"So I was betrayed again, by one of my own… And to think it would be you."

"As long as you had my wing, you were my master. We were never comrades. It wasn't a question of betraying or being

betrayed. Anyone who enslaves a fairy is our enemy. One year ago, I met a human girl, only fifteen years old, who already knew that. But it seems you couldn't figure it out."

Before he had even finished speaking, Challe charged, as keen as an arrow.

In an instant, he leaped in close to a numb-looking Lafalle. The other fairy had kept his red threads at the ready, but Challe was faster. He closed the distance between them before Lafalle could bring his threads to bear, and he thrust the tip of his sword toward Lafalle's chest.

Pressed back by the attack, Lafalle retreated bit by bit and was driven between two sections of the parapet wall. The heels of his boots reached the edge of the walkway, and he stopped, barely managing to keep his balance.

"Give me the key," Challe demanded. "The key to the box where you keep the fairies' wings."

Lafalle let out a tired sigh. "They're all a bunch of fools," he said. "I don't need them anymore. Take it."

Feeling around inside his jacket, Lafalle produced a large key made of brass and tossed it onto the walkway. Then he fixed his eyes on Challe. They held no hostility or hatred, only something akin to resignation.

"If only I had found you before you met Anne. I'm sure you would never have pointed your sword at me like this."

"Probably not. You were a year too slow. Only one, but that's fate."

If Challe hadn't met Anne a year earlier, he almost certainly would have been more sympathetic toward Lafalle. He would have had the same thoughts and let the same anger and hatred guide him.

A single encounter had caused their destinies to diverge and set them on the path to one day face each other as enemies.

They should have been two of a kind. Instead, they shouldered different fates and walked different paths, like two sides of the same coin.

Challe paused for a moment, his sword still pointed at Lafalle. He saw himself reflected in the other fairy, like a warped mirror, and hesitated.

"Lafalle. It's over."

The moment Challe readied himself to strike again, Lafalle smiled unexpectedly.

“Fate, huh?”

Lafalle sounded peaceful, like he was speaking from the heart.

Then slowly, he leaned backward.

His long red hair billowed softly around him. His hands, which had been grasping the shining red threads, suddenly relaxed, and his fingers opened. The moment he stopped holding the threads, they evaporated into beads of light, sparkling as they vanished. Lafalle’s expression was vacant, and his ambiguously colored blue-and-green eyes stared up at the gray sky. Snowflakes brushed his eyelashes. His pale silhouette stood out against the dark gray and white of the wintry world. He looked terribly lonesome.

The next moment, Lafalle’s body disappeared. He’d fallen.

“Lafalle!”

Challe ran over to the parapet and looked out over the side. Amid the pure-white snow blowing in all directions, he could see a single red flower petal floating in the wind. The flower petal quickly shrank, before vanishing into the snow.



Challe stood there for a short while, looking down. A sense of emptiness struck his chest, as cold as the snow, as if something in his heart had been lost. A gust of wind sent snow swirling, and he could no longer see the ground.



Anne and Lusul, along with the warrior fairies, hurried out of the fort, where they were met by nearly two hundred mounted soldiers standing in neat rows. They marveled at the formation, so out of place in the wilderness amid the fiercely falling snow. The whinnying of the horses and the clanking of armor echoed loudly in the waning daylight.

Anne stopped and stared at the soldiers, flabbergasted.

What is this?

Lusul, riding on Anne's shoulder, stared as well with widened eyes. But the warrior fairies seemed nervous and readied their spears or placed their hands on the hilts of their swords.

The mounted soldiers seemed equally surprised, and there was a bit of a commotion as they quickly reached for their own weapons.

Tension was rising on both sides. And then—

"All troops, hold position." They heard a quiet voice from behind a gauzy curtain of snow. "Anne Halford?"

An older man in armor slowly advanced toward them on horseback, guarded by mounted soldiers on either side.

"The Earl of Downing?!"

Despite her surprise, Anne ran up to the earl and fell to her knees.

"I'm glad to see you're unhurt, Halford," he said. "Did you manage to escape?"

"Yes."

"Perfect timing. We've been tracking the fairies responsible for the attacks and followed them to this fort. We're here to subdue them in their stronghold. I suppose the ones behind you are part of the gang that has been attacking humans?"

"Wait, please!"

In a panic, Anne spread out her arms to protect the fairies behind her. Clusters of snow hit her cheeks, and her shoulders and hair quickly turned white, but she didn't feel the cold.

"The fairies behind me helped me escape. I don't know what else they might have done, but they had their wings taken from them and were forced to do as they were told. There is one fairy who has been keeping all their wings. If you're going to attack, you should attack him and him alone!"

"And where is he, Anne?"

Anne's eyes widened at the sound of a familiar voice.

"Hugh?!"

She forgot they were before the Earl of Downing and called the Silver Sugar Viscount by his first name, like she usually did.

Hugh, also on horseback, appeared from behind the earl. Behind him, Salim followed on his own horse. Hugh was wearing armor beneath a thick cloak. Fighting attire suited him surprisingly well, and he had a wild look about him.

"He's in the fort! Challe is fighting him…right now. So hurry up and help Challe! Please, Hugh!"

Anne felt a surge of anxiety as she explained the situation. She wondered what had happened to Challe after he squared off against Lafalle.

"Well, now…" Hugh smiled and looked behind Anne. "Seems everything is all right. In fact, it seems like it's already over."

Anne followed Hugh's gaze and turned around.

Through a heavy curtain of snow, they could see the stone arch of the fort. And beneath the arch, a black fairy was walking toward them like a silent shadow cast over the white field. He was carrying a chest with a heavy lock on it. The snow seemed to swirl around his enchanting figure, as if it were caressing him or following him like a loyal retainer.

"Challe!"

The Earl of Downing watched Anne run off, then frowned and turned back to Hugh.

"What's going on here, Mercury?" he asked.

"The fact he came back means it's over, most likely. The fairy we were chasing is probably gone."

Anne kicked her way through the snow, running straight for Challe. Once he noticed her rushing toward him, he stopped and

lowered the box to the snow.

"Challe!" When Anne reached him, she reflexively threw her arms around his neck and embraced him. "Challe! Thank goodness, Challe!"

"I'm glad you're safe."

Challe returned Anne's embrace, squeezing her tightly. Then the little fairy Lusul popped her head out from somewhere near Anne's shoulders.

"Challe, what about Lord Lafalle?"

"He fell from the battlement. From that height, I doubt he could have survived."

Challe answered plainly, and Lusul cast her eyes downward, looking a little disappointed.

"I thought that might be the case. That poor fellow."

The warrior fairies approached, surrounding Challe but keeping their distance. Challe noticed and whispered into Anne's ear: "Haven't had enough?"

She looked up at him blankly. She didn't understand what he was talking about. Then she noticed his teasing smile.

"If you'd like to embrace me some more, we can do it later. If there's time, I'll let you hold me as long as you want."

"Ah!"

Anne finally realized what she was doing, and she jumped away from Challe in a flash.

Then Challe felt around inside his jacket and pulled out the brass key. He offered it to Lusul atop Anne's shoulder.

"Everybody's wings are inside that box. Use this to open it and take back your wings. And this time, find real freedom."

Lusul was half the height of the key Challe was offering to her. But she took it, hugging it against her body. And then—

"Freedom?" she asked, staring up at Challe anxiously.

Challe nodded, and Lusul appeared even more troubled.

"If Lord Lafalle is gone, who will become the fairy king? Won't you become our king, Challe?"

At Lusul's words, Challe looked over the faces of the warrior fairies around them. Some nodded. An air of confusion and anticipation passed among the group of fairies.

The words *fairy king* filled Anne with alarm. Lafalle had said the same thing—that Challe was meant to be king. She wondered

whether that was really true.

It worried her. If that *was* true, Challe probably had duties and a destiny far removed from someone like her.

But Challe shook his head. “You don’t need a fairy king in order to be free,” he replied. “Each of you can take back the thing most important to you and live wherever you please.”

“But there might come a time when we *do* need a fairy king,” Lusul said anxiously. “If we want freedom not just for ourselves but for all the enslaved fairies, we won’t know what to do.”

“Just gathering a big group to attack the humans won’t get you anywhere,” Challe told them quietly. “You’ll end up in a constant battle, and you’ll never be able to build a stable fairy kingdom. If you’re asking what to do to avoid something like that, well, I don’t yet have an answer. But if we find a way, then when the time comes, I’ll consider it. As you are now, I don’t believe you need a fairy king. So go. Go somewhere that human hands cannot reach you.”

Then he walked through the group of fairies and slowly approached the Earl of Downing and Hugh Mercury.

The fairies instinctively moved out of Challe’s way to let him pass. A kind of elegance and dignity hung in the air around him. He was like the fairy king in the ceiling mural in the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell, only with different coloring.

Hugh narrowed his eyes and murmured, “Truly beautiful.”

The black fairy standing amid a world of white was captivating, like a being straight from the land of fairy tales.

The soldiers, too, stared at him breathlessly.

Challe stood with natural grace and cheerlessly looked up at the Earl of Downing. “I disposed of the fairy who was attacking humans. It’s over. There is no need to mobilize your troops,” he said casually. “The fairies over there now have no master. I do not believe any of you are fairy hunters, so I would like you to leave them be. If you intend to enslave them, I will not be inclined to stand by and watch quietly.”

For a moment, the Earl of Downing peered down at Challe in surprise. He looked confused as he struggled to work out who the fairy speaking to him might be. However, as one would expect of a veteran retainer, he quickly handed down his decision.

“We are servants of His Majesty the King, tasked with protecting His Majesty and His Majesty’s subjects. We do not hunt fairies.”

Challe smiled. “You have my thanks.”

The earl nodded back at him.

Challe turned to look at the other fairies and saw one of the warriors take the key from Lusul’s hands. Using it, he opened the lock on the box.

The inside of the box was tightly packed with what looked like sheets of thin silk.

The fairies peered into it, one after another. They each seemed to know exactly which wing was their own, and as soon as they spotted it, they reached out and grabbed it.

With their wings now in hand, the fairies glanced back toward Challe and Anne, then quickly ran off into the snow.

Going forward, they would have to stay out of sight and live cautiously to avoid being hunted by humans. Some of them might even find their own ways of living as part of the human world, like Challe and Mithril.

One tiny little wing was left at the bottom of the box. Anne leaned over and picked it up. The beautiful, minuscule wing fit snugly in the hollow of her palm.

“Here, Lusul. Your wing.”

She offered it to the tiny fairy riding on her shoulder, and Lusul took it with a pleasant smile.

“I had no idea that my wing was pretty, you know? When you said it was pretty, that was the first time I ever noticed. After that, I saw that my wing was a beautiful thing. Somehow, that made me happy and proud,” she said, leaping off Anne’s shoulder.

“Lusul, what will you do now? Where will you go from here?” Anne asked.

Lusul leaped into the air again and onto the shoulder of a warrior fairy standing nearby. The warrior fairy looked startled, but Lusul ignored his surprise and said, “I’ve decided to go with this person. I’ve never seen the ocean before, and I’d like to go see it. That’s where you’re going, right? Isn’t that what you said?”

Lusul had jumped onto the warrior fairy who’d said before that if he won his freedom, he wanted to go see the ocean. He stared

blankly at the little fairy for a moment but then shrugged and smiled in agreement.

“Sure is.”

Then he walked off. As Anne watched Lusul and the warrior fairy leave—the last ones to go—her chest began to ache. Her breath turned to ice as she exhaled. She finally began to feel the cold and started to shiver.

And yet she couldn’t move. She didn’t want to take her eyes off Lusul and the warrior fairy, not until she couldn’t see them anymore.

Challe approached Anne. He saw that she wasn’t moving and asked curiously, “What’s the matter?”

“Challe, you told me before that Lusul will only live for about a year, right? It’s already been over a year since she was born. Will she…be able to see the ocean?”

“Well, she ate your sugar candy. That should be enough to extend her life span. So…”

Challe joined Anne and solemnly watched the retreating fairies. He looked as if he was offering a prayer.

“I have a feeling Lusul El Min will get to see the ocean.”

“I hope she does.”

In the thick carpet of fallen snow, there were many footprints leading in every direction.

The snow was white like silver sugar and covered the world in a powdery blanket.

Anne wished that all the fairies in the Kingdom of Highland could be free like these ones and walk away in whatever direction they chose.

All Anne could do at the moment was pray. But the beautiful, strong fairy by her side might someday find a way for his fellows to live in peace and freedom.

Could Challe really become the fairy king someday, for the sake of all fairies?

She wondered whether she would be able to remain by his side when the time came, whether it would be all right to stay with him. Her chest ached again, and she wondered if it was the cold air she was breathing.

She looked up at the sky. From high above, snow was falling, as if to purify the world, with all its suffering and sadness.

Meanwhile, the Earl of Downing's soldiers began to re-form their ranks in preparation for heading home.

Chapter 6
ONE FINAL ADDITION

Everything, including the hill and trees, was now covered in snow. Even the courtyard of Hollyleaf Castle was transformed into a featureless white square. The morning light reflected off the pure-white landscape, making Anne's eyes hurt. At the castle, smoke curled into the air from the chimneys of the west wing. Anne suspected there was a fire in the hearth of every room except the workshop.

Hugh's carriage brought them as far as the bottom of the hill, but the snow hadn't been cleared from the path, and the carriage couldn't make it up the slope. Without any other choice, Anne and Challe got out and climbed the hill themselves, kicking up the ankle-deep snow as they walked.

Anne was anxious. There were only ten days left until the First Holy Festival, and she wondered how the work was coming along.

They had made it back to Lewiston the night before, but it was past midnight when they arrived, so Anne and Challe spent the night in Hugh's private residence in town. While there, Anne asked about the Paige Workshop's progress, but Hugh only smirked and said, *"Oh, it's going pretty well."* No matter how many times she asked, he wouldn't give her any more details.

Sweating with exertion, she cut across the courtyard and arrived at the big front door.

As soon as Anne stepped into the hall, she called out in a loud voice: "We're back!"

Then removing the cape Hugh had given her, she said once more, “We’re back, everyone!”

For a moment, everything was silent. Then she heard a commotion from the east wing, and a flurry of footsteps approached.

The door leading to the east wing’s first floor flew open, and Mithril Lid Pod came rushing out.

As soon as he saw Anne and Challe in the great hall, he stopped in his tracks, looking shocked. Then tears welled up in his blue eyes, the color of lake water.

“Anne! Challe Fenn Challe!” Mithril bounded across the floor and leaped into the air, jumping straight into Anne’s chest. “I—I thought you two were goners already; I really did! I thought they would never find you!” he cried.

Grasping tightly at the fabric of Anne’s dress, Mithril ground his head into her chest as though checking to make sure she was real.

Anne hugged Mithril close.

“I’m sorry for making you worry,” she said.

Mithril glared sternly at Challe from Anne’s arms. “Hey, Challe Fenn Challe! Why didn’t you come back sooner?”

“I thought we were gone just the right length of time,” replied Challe, an apathetic look in his eyes. “I’d just about managed to forget your face.”

“Don’t joke around! You don’t really mean that!” Mithril jumped from Anne’s chest onto one of Challe’s shoulders and yanked his hair. “Can you even imagine how worried all of us were about you?! That guy seemed so strong, and he had Anne. Even knowing how powerful you are, I…!”

One moment, Mithril was shouting and pulling wildly at Challe’s hair, and the next, he sat down in a slump on Challe’s shoulder. Then he burst into another round of tears and started sobbing.

Challe shot him a sideways glance and said kindly, “Sorry to keep you waiting, Mithril Lid Pod.”

Mithril nodded repeatedly. Then he used Challe’s hair, which he was still holding, to scrub the tears from his cheeks. Challe looked a little disgusted.

After Mithril, Orlando emerged. The bandages covering the left side of his face were gone, and he was now wearing a leather eye patch over his left eye. King, Valentine, and Nadir appeared next. All of them stared with open mouths, like they couldn't believe their eyes.

Following the candy crafters was Elliott. As soon as he saw Anne and Challe, he made his way over to Anne, stepping past the stunned candy crafters.

"Can't you see you've startled everyone, returning out of the blue like this?" he said, shooting her his usual foolish grin. "… Welcome back, you two."

"Mr. Collins, we're glad to be back."

Then the other candy crafters snapped out of their shock and rushed over to surround them.

"We're back, everyone," Anne said. "Orlando, has your injury healed?"

Orlando made a bitter face. "You'll have plenty of time to worry about me later," he said. "Are you in good health?"

"Yes, we're fine."

Nadir sniffled. "I thought the two of you were never returning… I'm so glad."

Valentine rubbed Nadir's back as he wiped a tear from the corner of his own eye. "Thank goodness. I'm so glad."

Meanwhile, King's face was contorting wildly, like he was barely managing to hold back his tears.

"It's just like I told you," Anne heard Kat say. "Nothin' to worry about. They were always comin' back!"

Kat sounded irritated as he emerged from the workshop with Jonas in tow, but in spite of his confident words, he smiled with noticeable relief.

Jonas stood behind Kat and avoided looking at Anne. But she could see his eyes were moist.

"We're back, Jonas," she said.

Jonas just grunted and turned away.

But then Anne saw the last young man to come through the door, and her eyes widened in shock.

"Keith?!"

The young man approached her with the same gentle smile he always wore.

“Thank goodness… Anne, Challe, I’m so glad you’re safe.”

“Why are you here, Keith?”

“I’ve been helping with the job.”

“Can you do that?! Won’t Marcus get angry with you?”

Keith smiled impishly. “It’s fine. I’ve got an idea, you see.”

Anne looked at the faces of the candy crafters gathered around her. They had all come from the workshop. Despite how early it was, they had all already started working. They had done just as Anne believed they would and kept going the whole time she was gone.

Elliott and all the crafters of the Paige Workshop had been hard at work, with help from Kat, Jonas, and, to her surprise, even Keith.

Anne had been locked away in a fort in the wilderness for a little over a month, and she had spent the whole time freezing and anxious. Those memories, which had settled in a corner of her mind, were already fading like some fleeting dream. All the fear and tension began to melt away. Anne felt relief well up from the bottom of her heart.

We made it back. I can do my job.

She was so happy, she could hardly stand it.

“How have the sugar candy sculptures turned out?!” Anne asked excitedly. “How far has the work progressed?!”

Keith chuckled. “That really is all you think about, huh?”

Elliott smiled and winked. “That’s our head candy crafter. Before we celebrate her return, I think we’d better show her our work first, don’t you agree?”

Anne followed the others to the workspace in the east wing.

“All right, here,” said Elliott. “Take a look.”

He took Anne directly to the room beside the workshop, where they stored their finished candy sculptures. When Anne took a step inside, her breath caught in her throat.

“Isn’t it terrific?” Elliott threw out his chest proudly.

The room was filled to the brim with rows of towers made of sugar candy snowflakes.

There were some much taller than Anne, as well as half-sized towers and towers one third as large as the biggest ones. All stood quietly in the dimly lit room.

Anne looked back at Elliott, and he nodded.

“Mr. Collins,” she said, “these sculptures… How many have you made?”

“Right now, we have eight of the largest ones, ten of the half size, and ten of the one-third size.”

“You mean—”

“Yep. We have all the candy sculptures we were planning to make. We’ll be done in time, Anne.”

The moment Anne heard those words, a warm feeling surged up from deep within her chest.

She remembered their panic and despair when the silver sugar hardened, and how nervous and disheartened she’d been when she competed with Hugh. She recalled her happiness when Kat had come to help, and the confusion and hope she’d felt when she found Jonas. She thought about how worried she’d been staying with the fairies in the fort in the wilderness.

All sorts of thoughts ran through her head.

We’re going to make it.

So many things had happened, but they were going to finish in time.

“We’ve already reported our progress to the Silver Sugar Viscount. He even came by and gave us his approval.”

The night before, when Hugh wouldn’t answer her about the Paige Workshop’s progress no matter how many times she’d asked, he must have already known. Hugh really was a gentle and kind person, but he could be a bit mean sometimes. That was probably why Kat disliked him.

We’re going to make it!

Anne’s joy overflowed, and a big smile formed on her face.

There are ten days left before the First Holy Festival. We’ve got ten days to go, and everything is already finished.

Then she looked at the other crafters again.

Between Elliott, Kat, and herself, they had three Silver Sugar Masters, plus the four candy crafters of the Paige Workshop, as well as Jonas and Keith and, of course, Mithril.

They had ten whole days and so many candy crafters.

Anne had a feeling they could complete something beyond what they had planned. They could do it, and she wanted to try. An idea bubbled excitedly to the surface of her mind.

“Mr. Collins!” Anne turned around to face Elliott. “We’ve got so many days left and so many candy crafters. I feel like we can make something more.”

When he heard that, Elliott grinned. “I had the same thought. Do you have anything particular in mind, head crafter?”

The most important thing was to perfectly execute the work required and expected of them. But if that work was finished, Anne couldn’t help wanting to go a step further.

What sort of thing will take our sculptures beyond what is expected and required?

“We can’t make anything other than snowflakes,” Orlando warned sternly. “We’ve got to consider the harmony of the works as a whole.”

Nadir stuck out his lip in a pout. “But just making more towers isn’t very interesting.”

Valentine nodded. “He’s right. The difference between having eight snow towers and ten isn’t that impressive.”

King grinned as if to hide the moisture still in his eyes. “If we’re gonna do it, I wanna show off. Let’s give it all we got!”

“Everyone’s sure energetic,” Jonas grumbled. “I’m dead tired. I don’t even want to think about doing more…”

At that, King smacked Jonas lightly on the back of the head. “Like I told ya, you’re still a rookie here!”

Keith smiled wryly. “Well, I can’t say I don’t appreciate how Jonas feels, but since this is a special occasion, I’d like to make something that will surprise everyone who sees it.”

We have to use snowflakes, but we can’t just make more towers. It’s got to be flashy—something that will surprise everyone who sees it.

Anne let her thoughts run as she stood there, quietly staring at the towers of snow.

These candy sculptures were art pieces meant to invite a year of good fortune for the whole Kingdom of Highland. She wanted them to summon as much good fortune as possible, and for each person who laid eyes on them to sing the praises of the Paige Workshop’s head studio.

We need something that won’t overextend us but that we can work on right up to the very last minute. And at the same time, we have to keep the sculptures looking perfect.

This was snow. It covered and purified the Kingdom of Highland, bringing the new year's good fortune far and wide, to every living being in the kingdom—humans and fairies alike. No matter where someone was in the kingdom, Anne wanted this good fortune to reach them. She wanted them to feel it.

"That's it…"

Anne finally hit on an idea. She turned to face the other candy crafters.

"Is everybody ready? Let's show off!"



Now that he no longer had to worry about Anne's safety, Challe slept well for the first time in a long while.

The following morning, when he awoke and went to the lesser hall, the candy crafters were just standing up from the breakfast table, heading to work.

"You overslept, Challe Fenn Challe! You just missed breakfast. I ate yours!"

Mithril stood on top of the dining table with his hands on his hips, cackling.

"Don't eat someone else's food without asking."

"Bwah!"

Challe flicked Mithril sharply in the back with one finger, and the little fairy went flying off the table and rolled across the floor.

Having made it to the dining table, Challe rested his chin in his hands, still absent-minded from sleepiness, and brushed his hair out of his face.

Anne, who had been about to walk away with Mithril and the other candy crafters, turned back, as if just realizing he was there.

"Challe, would you like me to go to the kitchen and ask for your meal?"

"I can do it myself. Get going."

Starting that day, Anne would begin her work alongside the other candy crafters. The cheerful expression on her face made plain how happy she was about the job.

"Mm. But are you all right, Challe? Are you tired?"

She came over and peered into his face with concern. He chuckled.

“What? You want an encore?”

“Huh?”

“You want to hug me again?”

Anne looked at him blankly for a moment before she realized what he was talking about, and her cheeks turned bright red.

“N-no! What?!”

“Then go. You have work to do, don’t you?”

Challe could still amuse himself teasing Anne like this, but ever since he almost kissed her that night in the fort, he had become hesitant to touch her.

Challe stared vacantly at the fire burning in the hearth, his chin still resting in his hands. The flames brought to mind the color of Lafalle’s wing. His words, too, played in Challe’s mind.

“You’ll only make Anne unhappy.”

They wouldn’t leave his thoughts. Even though Lafalle had to be dead, like some kind of ghost, he had settled into Challe’s mind, along with those words. However—

Did Lafalle really die?

Challe hadn’t been able to find any of Lafalle’s clothing at the bottom of the fort wall where the other fairy had fallen. The bodies of dead fairies turned into beads of light and disappeared, but everything that Lafalle had on his person should have remained. And there had been nothing. Plus, Challe was not able to find the diamond Lafalle claimed to possess anywhere inside or outside the fort.

But he had fallen from such a great height. There was no way he had survived. He simply couldn’t still be alive.

“Hey, Challe? Are you really okay? What’s the matter?” Anne asked as he stared off into space. She sounded worried.

“I’m all right. It’s nothing.”

A few moments of awkward silence passed between them before a voice from the staircase interjected.

“About your breakfast… Shall I bring it to you?”

It was Bridget. Hesitantly, she stepped into the lesser hall. She kept both hands behind her back, as if she was hiding something.

“Challe, you haven’t eaten yet, right? I’ll bring you your food,” she said. “It’s my job, after all.”

Bridget was working in the kitchen now, along with Danna and Hal, and Noah and Benjamin. She had been devotedly looking after the candy crafters. As always, she kept a formal distance from them, but it was clear she was trying to help. The others seemed to realize this and were treating her less coldly than before.

"Sure," Challe replied.

Bridget nodded, but she didn't move away. Instead, she stood there, fidgeting. After a few moments, however, she seemed to make up her mind and spoke up.

"Um, Anne…"

Anne looked surprised when she heard her name. "Oh, yes?"

"While I'm here, I'll give this back."

Bridget thrust the object she had been hiding toward Anne. It was Anne's shawl. Anne's eyes widened in surprise, but soon, she was smiling again as she received it.

"Thank you very much. I appreciate you holding on to it for me."

As Bridget handed over the shawl, she muttered, "The candy sculpture of the little green bird that you made… Danna kept it for me. And then while you were gone, she gave it to me, saying it was mine. Right now, it's decorating my room. Thank you."

As she spoke, Bridget hung her head lower and lower, and her cheeks grew more and more red.

Anne blinked repeatedly and made a face like she'd just heard something unbelievable. But after a few moments, she put on a cheerful smile.

"That's wonderful. I'm delighted that you have it on display."

"I have that little kitten on display, too. Who made that one?"

"I'm not sure if I should be the one to tell you. If that person feels like fessing up, I think he will come to you himself."

"Well, I can be pretty certain it wasn't Elliott."

Challe smirked at that. Bridget knew her fiancé very well. It was ironic, considering that neither member of the couple was particularly fond of the other.

Bridget heaved a small sigh.

"Elliott doesn't pay the least bit of attention to me. He never even looks my way. The only things he cares about are the workshop and sugar candy. In fact, I don't particularly want to

marry him, either. That's why I…I want to dissolve my engagement to Elliott."

"Oh, but… Will that be all right?"

Hearing Anne's question, Bridget lifted her face.

"I've always thought Elliott was an amazing artist. That's why, when my father asked me to marry him, I thought I would be happy being with someone so talented, and I agreed. But I think, because my heart wasn't really committed to the engagement, it's been difficult for me. Instead, I believe my father ought to hurry up and adopt Elliott and have him take over as maestro. That would be a relief for me, too. Then I could start looking for a way of life that doesn't make me so sad. Whether that's marriage or something to do with the workshop."

Bridget glanced at Challe as she spoke. Her eyes resembled Liz's eyes after she grew up. They were the eyes of someone in love. But he could also see clearly from Bridget's expression that she had given up on that love.

"Tell Glen," said Challe, and Bridget cocked her head. "Tell him that you've thought about your life and about the workshop, and that you've decided to dissolve your engagement to Elliott. Then recommend that he move forward with adopting him. Tell him. I'm sure Glen will understand. And then you can have peace of mind."

"But…"

Bridget was still a little lacking in courage, so Challe said exactly what he thought to her: "You're a good person."

"…Thank you, Challe."

Bridget smiled bashfully. Relieved, Anne smiled, too.



The feeling of silver sugar against her hands was pleasant. The twice-milled silver sugar had improved in quality, and whenever Anne touched it, she was filled with joy.

The other crafters had completed all the snowflake towers they had planned to make while Anne was gone.

Now, over the next ten days, they would create something beyond what they had planned. Though they were under no

obligation to do so, the crafters were enthusiastic about taking their work even further. They were doing this out of pure love of the craft.

Orlando and King had already started kneading silver sugar dough. Orlando's technique was exceptional. He didn't put all that much power into it, and yet the silver sugar quickly gained luster. He had a characteristic way of pulling his hands back, and he seemed to use just the right amount of force, so even if someone else imitated his style, they wouldn't be able to produce the same luster as quickly. The silver sugar he kneaded was glossy and pulled into fine strings, as if he had woven it out of a bundle of silk threads.

King bent low over the vials of colored powder lined up on his workbench and eyed them intently one by one, as if interrogating each in turn. Once he found the right one, he abruptly picked it up and added it to the silver sugar—carefully, a little at a time. Then he kneaded. After that, he added another different colored powder and kneaded again. When he was done, his silver sugar dough was a delicate, pale hue.

"Hey, this one's good to go, Jonas!" King shouted as he moved the finished dough to the workbench in the adjacent room.

"Ah, got it."

For a moment, Jonas looked annoyed, but he soon set his face into a determined expression and picked up a rolling pin. Smoothing out the kneaded sugar dough on top of a stone slab, he rolled it out uniformly, so thin that it became translucent.

He was only moving the rolling pin monotonously back and forth, but looking at his eyes, it was clear that he was concentrating hard on using just the right amount of force. He worked earnestly and silently, flattening out the silver sugar dough.

Once the dough had been rolled into a thin sheet, Valentine and Elliott cut it precisely into snowflakes. They used their tools with great precision and didn't waste any dough.

"I really like going with a girl when she's picking out a dress, you know?" Elliott said. "The way they put on one after another, deciding one is great and another's awful. Somehow, it's just thrilling to watch. Don't you think? Hey, isn't it exciting?"

Though there was no waste in his movements, Elliott was full of idle chatter.

“I don’t agree,” Valentine answered. He already sounded fed up. “Or rather, I’ve never had that experience.”

“Oh, it’s so much fun. Give it a try sometime, Valentine. I know, you could get Anne to let you go shopping with her. Hey, Anne. You like to have someone there to help you choose, right?”

Anne and Keith were carving patterns into the snowflakes Elliott and Valentine had cut out. She was sitting across the table from Keith, using paring knives of various sizes to make minute, regular, lacelike patterns radiating out across each snowflake.

Their tools tended to get cluttered, but Mithril was quick to put them back where they belonged so that when one of the crafters went to get one, it would be there when they reached for it.

“Yes, I guess I do. Whenever I can, that is.” Anne’s hands slowed only a little as she answered.

Keith smiled gently. “If you asked me to, I’d go with you,” he said.

“Listen—you hear that, Valentine? Keith enjoys it, too! All right, next time, you ought to go shopping with Anne. It’ll bring a little spice to your life, I guarantee it.”

“Argh! Just shut up already!” Kat, sitting next to Nadir by the window, had been carving fine details into the tips of the snowflakes. He stood up, needle still in hand. “Can’t you shut yer trap for a minute, Elliott?!”

“I wasn’t even talking to you, Kat.”

“It’s still distracting! Goin’ on about choosing or not choosing women’s clothes. Yer idea of entertainment is stupid through and through!”

“Well now, sounds like you were listening after all, Kat. Could you possibly be jealous? Do you want to go shopping with Anne, too?”

“I’m not jealous, and I’m not going! So you can just shut up!”

“Well, all right.”

Anne and Keith watched Elliott shrug at Kat, then looked at each other and started giggling. Fuming, Kat picked up his needle again and stabbed the pointed end into the delicate tip of a snowflake.

Only Nadir and Kat could manage the fine work required for the snowflake crystals' edges. The other crafters could get it done if they really tried, but it took ten times as long.

Each of the crafters focused on one stage of the process.

They made snowflakes ranging from the size of a person's hand to a person's face. Their colors were based around pure white and included pale purple, pink, green, and blue. The inside of each snowflake was carved with delicate, complex fretwork, and they were engraved with dainty patterns stretching from their centers all the way to the very tips in order to powerfully refract light.

The crafters produced snowflake after snowflake, working rapidly.

The more they could make, the better. Everyone understood that, so even while they exchanged pointless conversations and yelled at one another over silly things, their hands almost never stopped working.

They continued even during meals. For lunch, they ate sandwiches brought from the kitchen in their spare moments.

They worked after dinner, too, continuing until almost midnight.

On the sixth day of their final project, Anne and Elliott set out for the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell.

The city of Lewiston was blanketed in snow, and there were many overlapping wagon-wheel tracks on the roads.

They met Father Brooke at the rectory behind the church. He seemed aware of the various disasters that had befallen the Paige Workshop and was amazed to hear that the expected sugar candy sculptures were all finished.

"Incredible."

He was at a loss for words.

They gathered in a small room near the entrance to the rectory, which served as Father Brooke's office. It was furnished with a table surrounded by four chairs, and along one wall stood shelves holding a cluttered mess of papers and books. Anne and Elliott sat down next to each other, facing Father Brooke.

With a humble expression, Elliott began, “The sculptures are finished. So we’d like to discuss the lead-up to the First Holy Festival.”

“Ah yes. Of course.” The priest looked at the calendar hanging on the wall. “Including today, there are four days left before the festival. Starting tomorrow, the sanctuary will be closed to regular worship in preparation. And so, let’s see… How about you bring the candy sculptures the day before the festival?”

“If you’re stopping regular services tomorrow, would you mind if we start preparing our sculptures then?”

“Do you need that much time to bring them in?”

Ordinarily, the sugar candy sculptures for the First Holy Festival were made at a workshop and simply carried into the sanctuary. Even sculptures that were difficult to handle could be brought in and installed in a single day at most.

“We’ll need three days. If you can give us three days, I promise we can deliver something greater than anything the Paige Workshop has made so far.”

Elliott sounded a little like he was bluffing, but Father Brooke considered his words.

“There is no precedent for it, of course. Preparing the sugar sculptures has never taken three days.”

“That might be so,” said Anne, refusing to back down. “But you, the head priest, chose the Paige Workshop, didn’t you? So please have faith in us.”

After thinking for a few moments, Father Brooke slowly raised his head.

“We questioned whether the Paige Workshop would finish its candy sculptures in time, and yet you managed it, just as you said you would. So I believe we can trust you to do as you say this time as well, as you prepare your final piece.”

“Yes.” Elliott nodded firmly.

“Very well. Starting tomorrow and for the following three days, I ask that the Paige Workshop prepare its sugar candy sculptures.”

At Father Brooke’s words, Anne and Elliott shared a look. Elliott grinned, and Anne nodded back at him.

The two of them hurried back to Hollyleaf Castle and headed straight for Glen's room.

Glen was sitting up in bed, leaning against his headboard and reading a bunch of letters spread out across his lap. When Anne and Elliott entered, he greeted them with a quiet smile.

To their surprise, Bridget was by his bedside, preparing tea. Elliott put his hand on her waist and said, as if scolding a troublesome child, "Now listen, Bridget. I thought I told you we didn't want you going into Glen's room."

Bridget started to open her mouth, but before she could say anything, Glen raised his hand slightly.

"Oh, it's all right, Elliott. It's good that Bridget is here. More importantly, do you have something to report?"

Elliott and Anne stood by the bed, while Bridget moved tactfully over to the window and gazed at the snowy scenery outside.

Anne had heard that when she and Challe went missing, Glen had started suffering from fits due to the terrible shock. After that, his condition had swung from better to worse, then back again. Around the time the work on the planned candy sculptures was nearly complete, his condition had finally stabilized, and ever since Anne and Challe had returned unharmed, he had stopped suffering from the fits and seemed comparatively well. Well enough to be sitting up, at least.

"Starting tomorrow and for the three days remaining before the First Holy Festival, we will be going to the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell in order to prepare our sugar candy sculptures."

"For three days? Starting tomorrow? Why do you need so much time? One day should be plenty to carry in the sculptures."

"We're not just carrying them in. We're preparing something extra."

Glen's expression brightened, and his eyes lit up with expectation. "You've got something up your sleeve, don't you, Anne?"

"Yes. We all do. So come see it on the day of the First Holy Festival. As long as you're well enough, please come to the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell and take a look for yourself. Come see what the Paige Workshop has prepared for the festival. Orlando, King, Valentine, Nadir, and all the rest of us made them because we want you to see them, Glen."

At Anne's words, Glen's smile grew.

"I'll go. I wouldn't miss it," he said. "Even if you all can't come to get me, I'll go there on my own."

Elliott flashed him a sympathetic look that made his eyes appear even droopier. "Just sit tight until we come to pick you up, please. I'm afraid you really will try to come on your own, Glen."

With another smile, Glen lifted his gaze.

"So you're giving *me* orders now, Elliott? *Sit tight, old man*, he says."

"I never called you old, but I must insist that you wait patiently."

"Well, I guess I'll do as you say. You are my son, after all."

"Your son? You mean your future son-in-law, surely?" Elliott cocked his head in puzzlement, and Glen slowly shook his head.

"No, I mean my son. Once the First Holy Festival is over, Elliott, I intend to start the procedure to adopt you. It will mean taking the Paige family name in place of the Collins name, however. Do you have any objections?"

Elliott was stunned. He didn't know how to answer.

Bridget, thought Anne. *She must have told him, all on her own.*

Anne looked at Bridget, who was still standing by the window, gazing out intently. Her awkwardness was charming and sweet.

"I'm dissolving the engagement between you and Bridget. Instead, I intend to take you as my adopted son. This is also what Bridget wants. She spoke with me, and I finally understood."

Glen's gaze dropped to his hands.

"I considered your engagement the best path forward for Bridget and for the Paige Workshop," he continued. "You both accepted it, so I thought I didn't need to worry. But it seems I was wrong. According to Bridget, I've been too overprotective of her. And then out of concern for her future, I tried to make her walk a path I'd chosen. I've been made to realize that this was my own parental selfishness, wanting peace of mind for myself. For the first time, instead of throwing a tantrum, Bridget has expressed her thoughts to me clearly and with a level head."

At Glen's words, Bridget stuck her lip out in a pout. "It's hardly the first time!" she insisted. "I just rarely talk about my feelings, that's all."

Elliott, who had been completely taken by surprise, finally seemed to gather his thoughts and turned to face Bridget.

"But, Bridget, are you all right with this? If I take the Paige family name and become the next maestro, won't it be difficult for you to stay? You and I will be related only by name, after all. And if I get married, you'll be in a difficult position."

"Of course. That goes without saying." Bridget turned away and stared out the window again. "But it's better than getting married to you, Elliott. If it becomes too difficult for me to stay, I'll find someplace else where I can live comfortably on my own. I'll manage."

"How cruel… To think you hated the idea of marrying me that much."

"If that was true, I wouldn't have gotten engaged to you in the first place. I think you're an incredible person, Elliott, and I respect you. I like you. Really, I do. I just don't want to marry you. I'm sure you feel the same way."

At that, Elliott broke into a smile. It wasn't his usual joking grin, but something more natural.

"You're right. I don't feel a burning desire to marry you, though I do like you. I like your pretty hair, your cute face, and your lovely dresses. And I like your girlish selfishness. It's charming."

The two of them stared at each other for a moment, then smiled awkwardly.

The First Holy Festival was right around the corner.

Outside the window was unending white. Snow covered everything, and a new world was coming. That was how it felt to Anne, at least.

"So now, it's on to the arrangements for the First Holy Festival," Glen said. "We can work out the rest of the details after that's over. I'm sure the festival preparations will be a significant undertaking—not only for the candy crafters but also for the fairies. Everyone will have to work together, of course. Anne and Elliott, you go on ahead. Then in three days, come back to get me."

Anne and Elliott nodded in unison. Then Anne rushed over to Bridget and took her hand.

"You come, too, Bridget. Please! If everyone doesn't work together, we won't make it. We need your help!"

Bridget cocked her head. “Me too?”

“We need everyone in the Paige Workshop.”

“W-wait a second!”

Anne ran off toward the lesser hall, pulling the bewildered Bridget along by the hand.

Soon, everyone but Glen was gathered there. All the fairies, the candy crafters, and Bridget and Challe. They each took a seat at the dining table or lined up against the wall. Anne walked to the very center of the hall.

“It’s settled. Starting tomorrow, we will begin preparing our sugar candy sculptures in the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell’s sanctuary. We’ll carry in the ones we’ve already finished and, at the same time, begin work on our final tower. I’ll need everyone to help out.”

Anne turned her gaze toward Bridget, who was standing by the wall, then looked at Challe where he stood leaning against the brass railing.

“Bridget, Challe, I want the two of you to assist the candy crafters with their work in the sanctuary.”

“Is it all right for me to help them?” Bridget asked, surprised.

“Yes, please do.”

Bridget nodded, looking happy and a little bashful.

“You too, Challe, okay?”

“I will,” Challe answered, curt as always.

“I’d like to ask Danna, Hal, Noah, and Benjamin, as well as Cathy, to remain here and look after Glen, and to prepare food for us. I think we’ll end up staying overnight in the sanctuary for the next three days. But we’ll need to eat. So if possible, I’d like to ask you to make three meals a day and bring them to us.”

When Anne turned to face the fairies loosely clustered near the stairs, Danna and Hal looked at each other and smiled.

“Yes, we’ll do it,” Hal said. “Right, everyone?”

Benjamin, who was sitting atop his shoulder, smiled buoyantly.

“Mm, okay! I’ll cook. I love cooking.”

Only Cathy, who had been sitting on the banister, puffed her cheeks out, looking a little dissatisfied.

“Does that mean I’ll be separated from Master Jonas?” she asked. “But I have to lay out his clothes, set things up so he can

brush his teeth before bed, fix his hair after he wakes up in the morning, and all sorts of other things."

Jonas blushed a little when she revealed how much she pampered him. "Cathy, I can do all those things myself. You stay here," he ordered brusquely, trying to hide his embarrassment.

Everyone burst into laughter, and Jonas only grew redder and redder.

"Well then, everyone," Elliott said, stepping into the middle of the hall as it filled with the echoes of their laughter. "Let's follow the instructions of our head candy crafter. And I'll say this in Glen's place, as the current proxy maestro—" His expression turned serious as he lowered his voice and said pointedly, "Keep working hard right to the very end and don't let up."

The air in the room crackled with tension. They had work to do.

Chapter 7
A NEW DREAM

The following day was sunny. The surface of the snow covering the roads of Lewiston melted slightly, and glistening clumps of it sparkled in the sunlight.

The inside of the sanctuary of the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell was also flooded with light. Anne took one step inside and was momentarily dazzled by its brilliance. When she thought about decorating the space with sugar candy sculptures, she buzzed with joy and excitement.

They had eight snow-crystal towers that were a little taller than Challe, ten half that height, and a further ten one-third the size of the tallest ones.

To transport them from Hollyleaf Castle, they loaded the towers onto a wagon. They surrounded each tower with a wooden frame, protected it with cloth, and lifted it onto the wagon. They drove very carefully so that the wheels of the wagon wouldn't slip on the snowy roads.

Normally, only one of the huge doors leading into the sanctuary was open, but on this day, both had been spread wide.

The sugar candy sculptures themselves were light, built out of irregularly stacked snowflakes made of open fretwork. It had been like piling up sheets of thin ice. Though it took a team of five crafters to move a single sculpture, that was less because of the weight of the sculptures and more due to the weight of their wooden frames.

They made one round trip between Hollyleaf Castle and the church in the morning, and two more in the afternoon,

completing three trips in total. By the time they'd carried all the finished candy sculptures into the sanctuary, the sun had completely set.

Danna, Hal, Benjamin, Noah, and Cathy brought them potato soup and bread for dinner. The crafters ate on the steps outside the sanctuary.

It was chilly eating dinner on the windswept stone steps, but the candy crafters, who had been complaining that they were starving, finished their meals before the cold set in and hurried back into the sanctuary.

Inside, they lit candles. Then by their light, they arranged the sugar candy sculptures, placing each one in exactly the right spot. By the time they were finished, it was nearly midnight.

They had decided to leave the wooden frames in place until the day of the First Holy Festival and to only remove them that afternoon, for safety.

Moving the sugar candy sculptures had really worn down their nerves, and the crafters seemed more mentally exhausted than anything else. Once they decided that they'd done enough work for the day, they quickly lay down to sleep.

They were staying in the priests' anteroom in the back of the sanctuary. It was a cold, bare stone room, but it contained several couches long enough to lie down on. They wrapped themselves in blankets, curled up on the couches, and got to sleep.

Anne and Bridget were the only girls, so they got to use the head priest's anteroom instead. It was small, but it contained a sofa spread with blankets just the right size to function as their bed. The two of them lay down and curled up to sleep.

Bridget seemed exhausted from the unfamiliar work, and she soon began snoring quietly. Bridget's body heat warmed the space under the blankets, and a lovely floral scent wafted off her. Anne figured she must be wearing perfume.

What a nice smell.

It was a very elegant scent, and it made Anne jealous. So far in her life, Anne had never done anything fashionable. She wondered if she put on lovely dresses, wore perfume and makeup, and painted her nails like Bridget, if she could become more mature and lovely, like a regular sixteen-year-old.

Then would Challe stop thinking of me as a scarecrow?

She recalled that night in the fort out in the wilderness.

Challe's hand had touched her cheek, and his face had been so close. Back then, she'd really thought he was going to kiss her. Maybe he'd simply felt like doing it on a whim.

For someone so brusque and cold, Challe was actually very kind. He realized that Anne relied on him and had promised to stay with her always and to protect her.

That made her so happy.

But Lafalle had told her she would only make him unhappy.

Challe might indeed be the one the fairies were waiting for—the one meant to become their king. And yet right now, he was with Anne. That might well bring him misfortune.

Instead, he could be freely traveling the kingdom, finding his fairy comrades and living among them. He could wed a fairy woman born from another gemstone someday and live with her for a very long time. Thinking about it objectively, that seemed like the most ideal, most natural path for him.

I'll be so lonely.

The moment she imagined Challe's future, a voice in her heart whispered those words to her. Feeling disgusted with herself, she got up with a sigh. She'd been struck with an overwhelming desire to look at sugar candy.

Anne slipped out from under the covers and groped around for the lantern sitting on the floor. She was careful not to wake Bridget as she left the room, and once she was out, the moonlight streaming through the windows in the hall was bright enough to see by. The moon's light reflected off the snow and shone radiantly. Anne decided that she didn't need the lantern, so she set it down on the spot before heading into the sanctuary.

As soon as she stepped through the door behind and to the right of the altar, she stopped in her tracks.

Challe was already there, sitting in a pew in front of the altar. He had one knee up and was staring intently at the mural on the ceiling.

There in the sanctuary, which was filled with bluish-white light and freezing-cold air, Challe's wing was a peaceful light-blue color. In the dim twilight, his pale profile seemed to sparkle faintly, and thin white puffs of breath escaped his lips. He was

unbelievably beautiful, with a beguiling quality that would enchant any human.

Anne wasn't sure what to do, but after a moment, Challe looked up at her, so she approached him.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I couldn't sleep. I wanted to look at the sugar candy. What about you, Challe? Were you looking at that?"

She glanced up at the ceiling and saw the figure of the legendary fairy king, Riselva Cyril Sash.

The first time she saw that painting, she had thought there was something about the fairy king that resembled Challe. Their coloring was different, but she had sensed his elegant strength and was struck by his beauty.

Anne took a seat beside Challe. The pew was chilly. Cold, even. But she saw that Challe was unbothered and remembered that fairies didn't feel the cold.

She and Challe even experienced temperature differently. That was one difference between their two species, and one more difference between the two of them.

When she had first come to this place with Challe, Anne had thought that fairies and humans weren't that different. But as Challe had said back then, the truth was that they were.

That night at the fort, Anne had been particularly aware of those differences. And once she noticed them, she began to feel guilty for getting too close to Challe. He also seemed to feel the same way and had been keeping his distance from her. Now the two of them were sitting next to each other, but there was still a vast space between them.

"The fairy king…," said Anne. "That's what Lafalle called himself. And he said you were one, too. The fairies all seemed to expect something from you. Why was that?"

"Lafalle and I were born from gemstones collected by the last fairy king, Riselva. He intended for them to produce an heir for the next generation. That's what Lafalle believed. And it seems like the other fairies believed it, too."

Anne was astonished to hear that there was truth to the legend. But if Challe said that was the purpose of his birth, she found she could believe him. Compared with other fairies, Challe seemed to have something special about him.

“What are you going to do, Challe? After this?”

“About being the fairy king and all that? I don’t know. It’s not something I can simply decide to do, now that I’ve found out about it. If a time comes when I am needed, I may have to take some kind of action, but now is not the time.”

“So what will you do? Now, that is.”

Challe shifted his gaze from the ceiling down to Anne and answered her quietly.

“I’ll keep my oath and stay by your side always. I’ll protect you. I will not break my vow.” Challe stared straight into Anne’s eyes. “I’ll protect you so you can live a happy life as a human. And for that purpose, I will be with you always. Do what you want to do and go where you want to go. Love who you want to love. I’ll protect you so you can do it all.”

Those words made Anne want to cry.

Challe really was kind. Even though he was aware of the differences between their races, he had still promised to protect her.

Ever since that night in the fort, Anne had been keeping her distance from Challe. But even though he could sense the growing gulf between them, he was still trying to shelter her. It felt impossible not to fall in love with him.

That was why, when he said she could love whomever she wanted to, her heart ached terribly.

She had to give Challe something back in return for his kindness. Something that would lead to a happiness of his own.

“Thank you… But if I ever feel like I am perfectly happy, then there won’t be any more need for you to protect me, right? And if there’s no need for you to protect me, won’t that mean you’ll have fulfilled your vow? If that ever happens, you don’t have to stay with me forever. Then you can do whatever you want and go wherever you’d like and love whomever you will. Actually, I wish you could do that now. But if you say you can’t break your oath, then you’ll have to do it after you’ve fulfilled your promise.”

Anne forced herself to smile.

“You made a troublesome vow, didn’t you? I’m sorry, Challe.”

It was probably a weakness in Challe’s nature that made him unable to leave her be. She seemed to him like a baby bird

struggling helplessly before his eyes. Among animals, fairies, and humans alike, the strongest were probably the most kind.

Challe smirked. “Usually, the word *forever* means…”

“Huh?”

“Nothing… If that’s what you want.” He stared at Anne with his beautiful black eyes and smiled. “Anne, complete your final tower and bring good fortune to every living thing in the kingdom.”

Anne was surprised to find that despite the vast, suffocating distance between them, their conversation felt so tender and light.

She gazed up at the sanctuary’s ceiling. She wanted to fill this place, this world, with the good fortune of sugar candy. Her heart ached with pain and sorrow, and that was exactly why she wanted to do it.

It was her job.



When Challe said “forever,” his meaning was not as trivial as Anne believed.

He studied her face in profile as she stared up at the mural on the ceiling.



Even if Anne fell in love with someone else, settled down, and achieved perfect happiness, Challe would never be able to leave her side. He would stay somewhere nearby, never losing sight of her and remaining hidden so she wouldn't be aware of his presence. He wouldn't allow even the slightest unhappiness to visit her and would protect her for the rest of her days.

That was the meaning of "forever."

But he couldn't say that to Anne. If he did, Anne would start worrying about him instead. And that was the one thing he didn't want.

No matter what he did, Challe couldn't seem to rid himself of these powerful feelings. Though he truly wished for Anne to find perfect happiness, when he'd said she could love whomever she liked, the words had tasted bitter on his tongue.

I want to touch her.

Even sitting here now, it was all Challe could do to keep himself in check.



Early the next morning, the candy crafters started their work.

The eight largest sugar candy sculptures were lined up with four to either side of the altar. The medium and small sculptures filled in the gaps.

The interior of the sanctuary had a wide aisle running down the middle from the large double doors straight up to the altar, with pews on either side. About midway down the aisle, there was a gap in the pews forming a second aisle that intersected the first in the shape of a cross.

King, Orlando, Elliott, and Kat had worked together to install a round, flat pedestal of polished silver sugar at the intersection of the two aisles. The pedestal was so big that two adult men could just barely get their arms around it.

Nadir saw it and marveled. "It really is huge, huh?"

"I know it's a bit late," muttered Jonas, sounding fed up, "but can we really do this?"

"Don't give me that!" Kat yelled as he carefully brought over some snowflakes. "We're doin' it! Jonas, help carry these!"

All of them—every candy crafter, along with Challe and Bridget—carried countless snowflakes over to surround the pedestal. They had made them over the course of seven days, and there were enough of them to build three large towers.

"One more."

Anne looked back and forth between the pedestal and the ceiling, which sloped down from the middle like an opened umbrella, judging the distance. The pedestal sat just below the sanctuary's tallest point.

They would make their final tower there. Starting right then.

Normally, sugar candy sculptures were constructed in a workshop, then brought in for display. Building an entire sculpture on-site from start to finish was practically unheard of. But it was necessary for them to construct their last sculpture here.

Off to the side, Mithril was putting silver sugar and water into a stone vessel and mixing it into a paste. The lightly blended mixture would be used to fix the crystals in place.

"I'll go work on the south side," Anne said.

Elliott raised his hand. "All right, I'll take the west."

Kat stood to the east of the pedestal. "I'll start here."

Orlando silently took the side to the north.

The four veteran crafters stood around the circumference of the huge pedestal at the four cardinal directions. And behind each of them stood another candy crafter.

"Let's get started," Anne said. "We don't have much time."

Anne and the other crafters all knelt down in their positions. Anne turned to Keith, who was standing behind her.

"The largest size," she said. "White ones. Two of them."

Keith nodded and carefully used both hands to pass her two large white snowflakes. Anne took them and stood them up on the pedestal so that the two crystals would support each other. Then without a moment's delay, Mithril came to stand in front of Anne's knees, holding up the stone bowl. Anne used the tool resting in the bowl—a stick like a thin wooden twig—to scoop up some of the lightly blended sugar paste. Then she touched it to the points of contact between the pedestal and the crystal snowflakes, setting them into place.

Directly across from her, Orlando was doing the same thing, getting his crystals from Valentine. Elliott got his from Nadir, and Kat from King. Each of them had someone to pass them crystals.

Jonas was stirring up another batch of sugar glue in Mithril's place. Challe and Bridget each sat on opposite sides of the sanctuary, watching the work.

The only sounds echoing through the chilly sanctuary were the hushed voices of the candy crafters.

"Would you hand me a little one? The smallest size, in white. Just one, please."

Even Elliott was holding his breath, reining in his usual chatter.

"Bring me one of the big ones, light blue."

Kat's stern expression never relaxed.

"That one. That one's good. Give me that."

Orlando, too, seemed tenser than usual, like he wasn't yet used to working with one eye and might still be in pain. Even so, it didn't affect the precision of his work.

Though it was freezing cold inside the sanctuary, beads of sweat gradually appeared on the candy crafters' foreheads.

"Keith. One more. A big one."

Anne was focusing her attention on her own fingertips, affixing sugar crystals to the sculpture and thinking about which ones she would need next. She made her request in almost a whisper, and Keith's subdued voice confirmed her orders.

"White next, right?"

"Mm."

With perfect timing, just as she took her fingers off the crystal in front of her, Keith, working behind her, had another one ready.

The sun rose high into the sky, then fell again, and the light of sunset passed through the sanctuary's stained glass windows.

The candy crafters had worked all day long, practically holding their breath.

"I'm not surprised, but this is really taking a while…," Kat said with a sour look on his face. He let go of a snowflake and wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. "It's evening already. The First Holy Festival is tomorrow night. At this rate, we won't be getting any sleep."

Elliott finished attaching a snowflake and looked up. "Oh, were you planning on sleeping, Kat?"

“I’ve gotten used to the ridiculous way you people work,” Kat retorted. “So no, I never expected to sleep.”

Anne sighed deeply and looked at the finished section in front of her. Sure enough, the way things were going, they wouldn’t have time to rest. The tower she had imagined wasn’t even one-third of the way built.

“We’re going to need ladders soon. Where are they kept?” Orlando paused and turned to look at Valentine behind him.

“Jonas and the others are bringing them now.”

No sooner had Valentine spoken than Jonas and Challe entered the sanctuary, carrying the ladders.

Bridget had brought as many lanterns and candlesticks as she could find to illuminate their workspace.

“Bridget,” said Anne, “please set up the lights where the candles will be during the First Holy Festival.”

“Why? Isn’t it better to have them closer to where you’re working?”

“Uh-uh. We need the same lighting we’ll have on the night of the festival.”

After thinking about it for a moment, Bridget replied, “So you’re trying to see what the light will be like then?”

“Right. We’re not just making a candy sculpture and setting it there. We want to make use of a whole sanctuary’s worth of light. So I’d like to see how it will look.”

At Anne’s reply, Bridget smiled and nodded, then moved the lights to where the ornamental candles would be placed the following day. Under the illumination of the gently flickering lights, the crafters launched back into their work.

They labored continuously, all day and all night. At dawn, the interior of the sanctuary grew faintly brighter.

When Elliott noticed that it was getting light outside, he looked around him.

“Jonas, Valentine, King: You three take down the frames around the sculptures already in place. Careful, now. Nadir and Keith, please assist us until the three of them finish with that.”

Having received their orders, the candy crafters scattered across the sanctuary.

As time passed, all superfluous thoughts left Anne’s head.

What color next?

What size?

How is it reflecting the light?

She thought about the balance of each snowflake as she attached it. All her thoughts were focused on a single purpose.

More, more.

When Anne had decided to make one last tower, she had wished that the good fortune summoned by their sugar candy would reach everyone, everywhere in the kingdom. In order to do that, she had to make the tower as tall as the sky. The sky was visible to everyone in the kingdom, so she wanted her sugar candy to reach up toward it. Anne stared at the sculpture they were building and let her gaze sweep all the way up from her workspace to the ceiling.

"It needs to be higher," she mumbled.

That night, for the sake of the new year's blessings, she wanted to gaze upward.

Higher.



Snow was falling silently.

It was the night of the First Holy Festival, and the whole of Lewiston was lit up. There was a tradition that on this night, every window should have a single light placed in it. There wasn't a dark window in the city. Tents and stalls had been erected in the West Marketplace, the plaza in the south, along the triumphal road, and all across the city. People were selling hot wine and fried sweets.

That night, when the church rang its bells to mark midnight, a new year would begin.

Everyone was thinking about the year to come, and a restless but happy mood prevailed.

Right at that moment, behind the closed doors of the sanctuary, the king and his nobles were attending the First Holy Festival. The people of Lewiston had gathered outside, and once the ceremony was complete and the king and his nobles had departed, the sanctuary would be opened to the public.

Once the church's midnight bells rang out, the heavy sanctuary doors would be pushed open by twenty priests. Then the people gathered around outside could solemnly enter and offer their prayers.

As they waited impatiently for the sound of the bells, the onlookers whispered to one another as they watched the flickering lights through the stained glass windows of the sanctuary.

"I heard the Paige Workshop made the candy sculptures this year."

"The Paige Workshop? But they've never made them before, not even once. I wonder if they're okay."

"The state church selected them, so they must be all right."

"I just hope they're good. Good enough to bring a whole year of happiness to the kingdom."

Anxious, expectant, and curious, the people crowded together, exchanging opinions.

Then the bells rang, echoing through the snowy night air.

All kinds of bells were rung at once, and their sounds blended together, covering the city and filling the sky.

The huge sanctuary doors began to move. From inside, twenty priests pushed the double doors open all at once.

Bright light spilled out over the people crowded on the steps and in the front garden.

Once the doors were completely open, the head priest stood in the doorway, lit from behind by dazzling candlelight. He wore black ceremonial robes and a tall, thin black hat. Around his neck hung a slim sash made of gold and silver threads woven together.

"Best wishes for the new year. May renewed fortune come to every one of us."

After the head priest had spoken, he smoothly extended both arms, drawing a sacred symbol in the air with his fingers above the crowd.

Then he stepped aside, and the people at the front quickly climbed the stairs. The moment they made it to the top and entered the sanctuary, they stopped and gasped.

The whole place was sparkling brilliantly.

Along the walls on either side were rows of ceremonial candles, making the interior of the church as bright as day. That wasn't

unusual, and in the well-lit interior, they could see the stone pillars and altar of the sanctuary, with sugar candy sculptures decoratively arranged around them, as they were every year.

However, something was different. The sanctuary looked like an entirely new place.

It was much brighter than usual because the sugar candy sculptures all reflected the light of the candles.

There were large, medium, and small conical towers lining the room. But the sculptures didn't hinder the light—because Anne and the others had built them out of irregularly placed, extremely thin snowflake crystals—and light passed through the gaps. The patterns carved into each and every snowflake scattered the candlelight, and it glinted sharply where it hit the tips of the crystals.

The bright-white sugar candy sculptures captured the very essence of snow. It was obvious to anyone who looked at them.

And among those pure-white snowflakes, here and there were delicate, faintly colored crystals. It was like a host of angels had descended on a snowy field, leaving signs from above.

And most surprising to people was the enormous conical sugar candy sculpture installed in the very center of the sanctuary. Looking up, they could see its topmost point, as small as the tip of a finger. It had been built in the same way as the others, constructed out of paper-thin crystal snowflakes. The enormous tower of snow stood there, taking in all the light in the sanctuary and watching over the people and the kingdom. The room was so bright because this enormous tower was gathering the candlelight and glowing all the way to the tips of each snowflake. It softly scattered the light up to the highest reaches of the sanctuary, where the candles' illumination usually didn't reach.

It was a gentle kind of brightness. But sometimes, a sharp glint caught the eye.

And even though it was so bright, it was clearly a scene of snow—a fantastical landscape like no one had ever seen before.

The sugar candy sculptures weren't just sitting there, either. The crafters had taken into account the placement of the lights when they were situating and building their sculptures. They had turned the space itself into a field of snow. Their sculptures

weren't simply decorations—they transformed the whole sanctuary into something new.

Glen Paige made his way into the church, leaning on Hal's shoulder.

The moment they entered, Hal said, "Wow…"

Danna and Noah, who came in behind them, both looked amazed as well. Even Cathy and Benjamin marveled at the sight from atop Danna's shoulders.

Glen gasped in surprise. A lively twinkle sparkled in his eyes—they were the eyes of a candy crafter.

"It's so large. Did they build it here? The effect it's having on the light… The sugar candy has changed the atmosphere inside the sanctuary… I see. I had no idea this was possible… And with only sugar candy."

Glen stood there, gazing intently at the scenery before him.

"Glen, it's time we headed farther in."

After a few moments, at Hal's urging, Glen started walking. As he moved, he hung his head. Drop by drop, tears fell to his feet as he made his way slowly forward.

When he noticed the tears, Hal peered anxiously at Glen's face.

"Glen? What's the matter? Are you in pain?"

Still hanging his head, Glen forced himself to smile.

"No, no. I was just appreciating the audacity of youth… I'm delighted."

Glen raised his head again and admired the light-filled sanctuary once more.

"Where do you think our candy crafters have gone off to, Hal?"



As it happened, the crafters were in the priests' anteroom in the back of the sanctuary. They had worked through the night and used up every last bit of their strength, and as soon as their work was complete, they had returned to the anteroom and flopped down to sleep. They had each covered themselves with a blanket and were huddled together like a nest of rabbits in winter, snoring away.

Even Bridget was curled up in a corner of the room.

Anne, however, was alone in the back garden of the church.

The garden was set apart from the path that connected the sanctuary to the priests' quarters, so other than Anne, it was currently deserted. The space around her was faintly illuminated by the light coming from the windows of the priests' quarters and from the sanctuary.

Anne stared up at the sky. A continuous flurry of snow was falling. Even though she hadn't slept, for some reason, her mind seemed half-awake and half in a daze, like she had awoken from a long slumber.

She hadn't been able to sleep. Her own words about reaching for the heavens still lingered in her mind.

"Lusul El Min."

She wondered whether the good fortune from their sugar candy sculptures would reach the little fairy who had said she wanted to see the ocean, and all the other fairies who had left. Anne had wanted to make the final sculpture as tall as possible, for their sakes—so that the good fortune would make it to them, no matter how far away they were.

"Anne."

Someone called her name, and Anne turned around.

"Hugh?"

Hugh Mercury came walking toward her through the snow with a grin on his face and one hand in the air. He was wearing the formal uniform of the Silver Sugar Viscount.

"What's the matter?" asked Anne. "Why are you here, and in formal clothes, no less?"

"Well, I am the Viscount. I attended the ceremony, you know."

Salim was there, too, of course, following behind Hugh. He was moving quietly, as if trying not to intrude.

"You did a great job," said the Viscount. "The other nobles in attendance were absolutely astounded. Until now, all the candy sculptures for the First Holy Festival have been simple statues, sitting there inert. But this time, your work showed them that sugar candy sculptures can transform a whole space. From next year on, I bet the way people make candy sculptures for the festival is going to change. With this, the name of the Paige Workshop will become world-famous. Starting tomorrow, it will be flush with job offers. What's more, all the candy crafters who

used to work there will hear rumors about this, and many of them will want to return. The Paige Workshop is going to make a sudden comeback."

"That's wonderful."

Anne was happy to hear this news, and her lips turned up in a genuine smile. But Hugh's own grin was strained.

"'Wonderful,' huh…? Are you really happy with just that, Anne? You may become known as the head candy crafter for the Paige Workshop, but as the Silver Sugar Master Anne Halford, you still don't have a single accomplishment to your name."

Hugh wasn't wrong. The sculptures for the First Holy Festival were the work of the entire Paige Workshop. They did not exist because of Anne alone, but through the strength of the whole team. Anne's own abilities were only a small part of that.

"If you want to be the head candy crafter of the Paige Workshop and work your whole life there, that's fine. It's a good job, too. If that's your dream, that is."

My dream…

Anne wondered exactly what that meant for her. The question took her by surprise. She had no idea what kind of work she wanted to do in the future or what kind of crafter she wanted to become.

Anne simply wanted to hone her skills as a Silver Sugar Master. If she wanted to chart a clear path for her life, however, she needed a goal to pursue, not just a vague desire. But an image of what that looked like hadn't yet formed in her mind.

Maybe I could fulfill my dreams with the Paige Workshop, she thought suddenly.

Her current position was comfortable. It was fun, and she was satisfied with the work.

But since I don't know what my dream life looks like, can I really say this is it? As it is, I've been following the path that Glen and Mr. Collins laid out for me. I'm probably taking their ideas as my own.

"Think about it," said Hugh. "It's your future, after all."

Anne stood there, motionless. Then she heard a voice coming from behind her.

"Silver Sugar Viscount. Are you hitting on our head candy crafter?" Elliott strolled over from the direction of the sanctuary. Challe was with him. "When I woke up, I was surprised to see

that Anne wasn't there. We've gone through an awful ordeal, so I reflexively shook Challe awake and came looking."

Hugh smiled wryly and waved his hand dismissively. "I considered hitting on her, but Challe scares me. I'll go now."

Hugh started walking away, and Elliott bowed.

"Thank you very much, Viscount, for rescuing our head crafter from that wicked fairy."

"It's my job. Besides, I just went to pick her up. I didn't save her."

That was all Hugh said, before walking off with Salim in tow.

Challe pushed Anne gently on the back. "Go somewhere with a roof. Your head is white with snow."

"Challe, I—" As she started to walk, Anne grabbed the cuff of Challe's jacket. "I made the decision to work at the Paige Workshop until the First Holy Festival. But I never thought beyond that."

As she stepped under the eaves behind the sanctuary, Challe sighed deeply and brushed away the snow that had accumulated on her head.

"A scarecrow brain, as always…"

Elliott, who had stepped under the eaves with them, roared with laughter.

"It's true that you only pay attention to the things right in front of your face, Anne. You aren't very good at planning for the future, are you?"

She didn't think she was bad at it; she'd just never really considered such things. Anne had always given only vague thought to what she wanted to do next and then recklessly thrown herself into whatever task happened to be in front of her.

"A word of advice for our dear Anne." Elliott stuck his index finger in the air and said smoothly, as if reciting from a book, "First, speaking from my position as the proxy maestro of the Paige Workshop, we'd like you to stay with us. This is purely because you have done such fine work, so I believe it will benefit the workshop if you stay. However, I have one more opinion, as your senior Silver Sugar Master. If you're thinking about your future, the first thing you ought to do is gain more experience. The Paige Workshop is small, and what you learn will be limited. If you want to become the kind of candy crafter who can stand

shoulder to shoulder with the Silver Sugar Viscount, you can't possibly remain with us."

Anne thought about Hugh.

I want to be like him.

She had never thought hard about her future, but that was the one thing she was certain of. And in order to make that happen, she needed to think about her own path forward.

I can't stay at the Paige Workshop…

A painful feeling welled up in her chest. She felt at ease where she was. She had come to love all the candy crafters there, along with Elliott, Glen, Bridget, and the fairies. And yet she couldn't stay.

It must have shown on her face, and Elliott bopped Anne on the head.

"Now, don't get too worked up, okay? If you ever hate what you're doing, you can just come back. You are our head candy crafter, Anne. You're welcome anytime!"

Anne looked up at Elliott in surprise. He gave her a casual wink, then turned and started to walk away.

"Uh-oh…," he said. "Everyone fell asleep, and we forgot to send someone to get Glen. Knowing him, he already made it here on his own, though. Yeah, I bet he's already inside. I know it. And I'm in for a scolding."

Grumbling, Elliott nevertheless skipped off with nimble steps and headed back into the sanctuary.

He said I'm welcome anytime.

Anne had never thought that hearing such a thing would be so gratifying and reassuring. She had a place to return to. She had people waiting for her there. If she grew weary, they would greet her warmly and pat her on the head.

A place like Mama.

She could venture on precisely because she had a place to return to.

"So then what's your conclusion, scarecrow brain?" Challe asked, holding back laughter.

"I…can't stay at the Paige Workshop."

"So you're leaving? What then?"

"Huh? Um, well…uh…I…"

“Take your time and think about it. Do whatever you like. I’ll come with you.”

Challe started walking, and Anne followed him.

He went through the back rooms of the sanctuary and stepped out the door to the side of the altar. Anne stood beside him, and they gazed out at the fantastical scene, at the people’s cheerful faces, and at the sugar candy.

A new year had come. And with it, new good fortune for the Kingdom of Highland.

Challe had said that he was coming with Anne. And he was standing by her side at that very moment. And yet she still felt a distance between them—the distance between humans and fairies. Suddenly, sadness overcame her, and she felt the urge to cry.

Challe… Challe.

The harder she tried to suppress her feelings of love, the more they overflowed. Even though she knew it would be better if those feelings disappeared, they simply wouldn’t go. She found herself wishing that the good fortune filling the room, brought by their sugar candy sculptures, would somehow close the distance between her and Challe. It felt like she had been thrown into a lake without knowing how to swim, and she was struggling even though she knew it was hopeless.

Someone sitting in a pew in front of the altar finished his silent prayers and stood up. It was Keith. His gaze wandered their way, and he noticed Anne and Challe standing beside the altar. He raised his hand in a casual wave and walked over to them.

“Anne, I was looking for you. There’s something I’d like to consult you about.”

“Consult?” She stared at him blankly. “What is it?”

She couldn’t think of anything that Keith might want to ask her for advice on.

He smiled mischievously. “The truth is, after I decided to help the Paige Workshop with this job, I quit the Radcliffe Workshop.”

Anne was taken aback by this sudden confession.

“You quit? Why? Why would you suddenly quit?”

“After watching the candy crafters of the Paige Workshop, thinking about the factions and my father’s legacy and everything else seemed foolish. So I quit. I’m not going to be part of any

faction anymore. That's what I wanted to ask you about, Anne. Are you going to stay at the Paige Workshop and remain their head candy crafter?"

"No. I decided to leave, but…"

"In that case, listen, Anne… Would you start a sugar candy workshop with me? I want to form a new one, with you."

Keith stared directly at Anne and smiled gently, as he always did.

Anne looked back at him, stunned by the unexpected invitation.

The two of us, start a workshop?

They were surrounded by the soft glow of the sanctuary as shimmers of reflected light danced around them. Their sugar candy, inviting good fortune far and wide across the kingdom, lit up the room.

Keith offered Anne his hand like he was looking for a handshake.

Challe watched Anne intently. Though his face was expressionless, she sensed that his beautiful black eyes were swirling with mixed emotions.

Anne hesitated, perplexed by Keith's offer. She stared at his outstretched hand, wondering whether she ought to take it.

As she puzzled over her decision, the sound of church bells echoed in the snowy night air.

AFTERWORD

Hello, everyone. I'm Miri Mikawa.

This is the sixth volume of *Sugar Apple Fairy Tale*. Suddenly, before I noticed it, there was a huge number of characters in this story, enough to make even me break into a cold sweat. And yet I added still more in the last volume.

In Volume 5, the fairies Lafalle and Noah made their debuts.

When it came to Challe's birth, I always had a vague setting in mind, but it had absolutely nothing to do with the initial main storyline, so it was completely pointless to establish it. I knew the day would come when it would be revealed like this, though, and I found it moving to write.

Lafalle was a great character, wasn't he? Though, I'm sure he was a huge nuisance to Anne and Challe.

I actually thought up the character of Noah intending use him in a different short story, but he ended up making it into this one. That short story didn't go anywhere, but I was able to change it a little bit and realize it here instead.

Noah was great, too, don't you think?

I don't believe Anne or Challe would give me a dirty look if they heard me saying that. Mithril got flung across the room by Noah twice in the previous volume, so he might have a word or two of complaint. But the action wasn't malicious, so surely he should forgive Noah, right?

I'm surprised that my little story has gotten as big as it has. But if I can be honest, I'm glad. Every time I write a new volume, I put myself in the mindset for a great adventure, and I really feel as though I'm exploring new worlds together with all you readers.

Every world is expansive, without visible edges, or perhaps without edges at all. Finding out how much of the world we will actually get to see fascinates me.

My manager continues to always look after me in all sorts of ways. I rely on them too much, and I feel bad about it…but at the same time, I'm going to keep doing it! Please continue to look after me.

To Aki, the illustrator: I was amazed to see Lafalle, a man so frightfully beautiful that he could measure up to Challe, appear just as beautifully as I had imagined him. Incredible!! Really, thank you so much. The moment I picked up the book, I was filled with gratitude.

I'm working on new adventures even as we speak, in hopes of bringing you all as much delight as I can! All right, then. Until next time.

Miri Mikawa

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