



## The Candy Boys

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The old man woke up to the feeling of a fleshy stump resting in his dry mouth. It had been decades since he had lost his tongue, yet it still felt freakish. He covered his mouth in exhaustion, irritation, and regret and heaved his elderly bones out of bed. Thanks to the glorious council's generous rehabilitation efforts, he arose to a view of his candy shop's new ceiling. The pattern was garish and dotted in rows of eight like spider eyes.

From where it stood high above the capital, the legislative building judged as he waited for heavy yeast to rise, cut sheets of dark fudge, iced white tea cakes, washed crates of plump fruit, and suffocated as he struggled to swallow down the burning air that the oven produced. He baked all the words he couldn't say into his sweets. The tang of freedom elevated their taste.

By the time the old man was able to open his candy store, the sun burned in the sky, and the boardwalk glistened flat and slick and purple from the spit of the sea. That slickness had not dried for decades, not since it had been lumpy and slippery with piles of crushed organs.

Directly in front of his shop, the bay was shaped like an eye, blue with a pupil island in the middle. The bay was always angry, and the people that came off it were angry, and the ideas and weather and fish and demands it brought were angry too. Nervous, paranoid tension wafted alongside the inescapable fishy smell of it, one that he was unable to beat off with sugar. The entire area was scarred with evidence of the boardwalk's past. It had once been such a crucial, wrathful haven.

Ugly fishermen, leaving behind boats marked with the flags of Holy Nephew Michellias, whistled and cussed at each other, fighting over pastries. Captains sailing flags of the native Sacred Sect of the Son, or other foreign ones the capital tolerated, camped out in the bay, afraid to be harassed. Blind to nationality, the irritable and devious bay wind agitated the ships this way and that, urging them to escape the bonds of sailor knots. Late in the afternoon, this same bitter bay wind tore open his shop's door, censoring the cheerful, wild greetings from a pair of brothers that routinely visited.

"How much do we have again?"

Simon, the oldest, spread his fist open, revealing a hefty stash of coins.

Little Simon (his younger brother and miniature, actually named Gideon) gasped in delight and began to point out strawberry candies. Simon followed behind him with an uncharacteristically contemplative look.

He and his brother both had alert, bright eyes and rosy pink cheeks. Simon, in particular, always looked well-kept, with blonde hair that had an eerie likeness to the halo of Nephew Michellias. He exuded preternatural confidence. Every word he spoke was clear and charismatic, though never dogmatic, floating free from the cracks and selfish roughness of boys his age. It reminded the old man of his own voice, an extinct sound that was surgically stolen from him. Simon walked with smooth, strong security and an iron-straight spine like a lion gliding across the still plains; it was nothing like the old man's hobble, which resembled a wounded giselle. Simon's uniform, though the same as the rest of the schoolboys, seemed tailored to him. His shoulders rested perpetually back, exposing his red beating heart, confident no one would dare touch him.

Yet now, without his worshipful crew of friends, his shoulders slumped, and he studied the white- and salmon-tiled ground.

"Stop eating all those samples," Simon hissed. "Your fingers are so sticky and disgusting."

"Jealous?" Little Si retorted through a mouthful of dense, gooey sugar.

"Not of how fat you'll be."

"Don't tell me what to eat. You aren't Mom! Just 'cause you boss your friends around doesn't mean you can boss me."

"Who's holding the money, *Gideon*?"

Little Si twisted away from him. "I'll tell Jamie! I'll tell him what you did instead of picking me up."

Simon's face grew dark and his voice low. "You wouldn't dare, you twit! You promised you wouldn't speak of it if we came here! I'll beat you—"

"Oh, heeeey Jamie! Great timing!"

The bell shivered with silver joy, and the cunning wind eased up to let Simon's best friend through the door. Jamie was the favorite of both the brothers, and they quickly pulled apart like sticky pieces of banana bread.

"Simon, Little Si! I missed you after the bell rang. Was it because of class today? Someone told me you had rushed off, and I had to get directions to track you down. Can you just picture me scrambling around, asking about 'a pair of

brothers with golden hair?’ I ran like a fool. Like it was Stones season again, and our game was getting intense!”

Jamie was no musician, but his voice came out melodious and soothing, placating the hot air of the shop. He waved at the old man, gentle as the waveless bay. Jamie’s hair was dark and curled in towards his sweet sunburned face, eager to reach the round, kind eyes that projected his soul outwards. Instead of fighting for dominance, the boyish curve of his face coexisted with the sharper lines of manhood to create something symmetrical and calm. Shorter than Simon, he stood relaxed, with his head slightly tilted and his lips pressed in an observant smile.

“What are you talking about? We left you, not the other way around,” Simon, in a shift from his previous lack of affection, threw his arm around Jamie, restored to his typical confidence. Blocking slices of the orange sun, Simon cast a shadow over Jamie. “I had to get out of there. Some people at that academy know nothing.”

“Hey, speaking of that, could I borrow some of your family’s books for the project I was talking to the professor about? I checked the library, but they just had...none.”

Simon weakened and pressed his free hand over his side as if he had been stabbed.

“Are you alright?” Jamie supported all of Simon’s weight.

He recovered and brushed Jamie off. “Yeah, it’s fine. Nothing. But why don’t you just visit the bookstore?”

“Oh, you know...I can’t really right now...” Jamie lowered his voice and whispered into Simon’s ear.

“Jamie, what are you worrying about? I’ll just lend you some. Pay me back later.”

“No, don’t...” Jamie started to pull away. The old man watched between them, too late realizing Simon was watching him back.

“Old man, finally going to talk to us, instead of being creepy? No, no, don’t rush to say anything,” He joked. Jamie, conjoined at Simon’s side, smacked him with the back of his hand.

“Ah—you got blood on me!” Simon pulled away, examining the apparent stain on his mellow, maroon uniform, molded to mock the maturity of the capital universities.

“Relax, that color conceals it.”

“My dad can tell.”

“It’s true, really, crazy, true!” Little Si exclaimed, popping out from the candy shelves. The bandages on his face quivered with his conviction. “He’s horrible about us being clean.”

“You’re just a slob,” Simon said. They looked about to bicker, but Jamie laughed, interrupting with a question about today’s sample. He reached out to try one with florid fingers, and the brothers leaned in for his reaction as the door slammed open, the wind more bitter and temperamental than it had been the whole afternoon.

“Look, *Kit*—I am just saying that you ought not to let them seduce you out of singing! I have never heard a lovelier voice from a teenage boy.”

“Hugo...it’s my choice. Let it...go.”

“I will *not* let it go; do you not see me as a wise friend? Why do you refuse your talent? I would kill to have one good skill, Kit. I am so interested in everything I wind up with nothing.”

“I...said...to call me Christopher...”

The final two of Simon’s crew, Hugo and Christopher, barged in, arguing. There was an impenetrable energy between the two of them, a game of tug of war with an electric wire. The old man wasn’t sure if they were friends or if Simon had forced them together.

Hugo was squat and rather round, and his uniform appeared a deeper red than the rest of the boys’. He had large, black eyes that ever so often peeked behind his glasses to reveal their blinding illumination. His glasses hardly kept the radiance from being overwhelming. Everything about him took up space, as if his opinions and intrigue with the world couldn’t fit into one body. He spoke in a loud tone that expanded any room.

Christopher—or Kit, as Hugo insisted shorting it to—had recently been added to the group. Christopher was lanky and starved, but he slumped forward, avoiding eye contact, which gave off the illusion that he was smaller and his uniform fit. His hair was cut to the scalp, aligning with religious tradition, but also because the church, his sponsor, couldn’t bother to give him haircuts. Every so often he would rub his head, uncomfortable in his own skin. His voice was wispy, slow, and soft, but he sang more sweetly than Nephew Michellias could ever aspire to.

“Jamie, is your hand alright?” Hugo asked, tripping on his way to peer at Jamie. “Sir, is there anything we could use to clean off Jamie’s hands? It could

get really infected, you know. Maybe even amputated. We have no idea what crawls on the professor's ruler."

"Oh...don't frighten him, Hugo," Christopher chastised. Like a flock of bay gulls reunited after migration, the group exploded in noise. Little Si whined for candy. Hugo and Kit resumed arguing despite Jamie's attempt to ease them. The multitude of conversations overlapped like dark waves before a storm.

"Enough, enough. It's alright. Jamie says he's alright," Simon silenced them all with a golden word. He bloomed, basking in his friends' rapture. He put his hand on Jamie's shoulder and guided him in front of the counter, back facing the wild bay. His friends lined up in silence. "Old man, can you give us a napkin or something?"

The old man turned over a previous Rose Paper that he had smuggled in days ago and wrote down a question in chalk: *What happened? Let me help.*

The boys all looked at Jamie, who became sheepish, but held the back of his hands out for everyone to see. The blood made wet, red starbursts on his knuckles. "Oh, it's nothing. It hardly hurts. All I wanted to do was ask the teacher something. But the way I asked it was 'too disruptive.'"

"Jamie, did you forget...that asking disruptive questions is Hugo's job?"

"Hey!"

"Everyone was wondering about it. I was just trying to help them. Lucille said it made her feel better."

"Who cares if it makes a girl happy?" Little Si grumbled.

Simon shook his head. "How much longer until the professor ignores me when I stand up for you? It could be worse than a hand beating next time. Just discuss the topic between the four of us instead. Or not at all. We're too young for all that."

It seemed little had changed in teaching methods since the old man was a student. It was still the majority discipline.

"So what, Simon, he should resign to suffer in fear, unable to speak his mind?" Hugo demanded. Ever since he was a boy, Hugo had always been the first to jump to conclusions. Christopher raised his eyes to the glorious Nephew Michellias.

"Don't worry, I'll speak my mind if I have to," Jamie said, amid his friends. "My hand doesn't even hurt. You don't fret, Simon. I know your dad is never pleased when you risk your skin for me."

“Well...” Simon hesitated, and the pink in his cheeks darkened into a more miserable red.

Little Si huffed. “Who cares about that old man? He can’t do anything without his ankle cracking. *I’ll* always protect you, Jamie.” Jamie ruffled his hair, and a bit of blood fell onto Little Si’s forehead and grew fainter and lighter as it trickled down.

He gently took Jamie’s hands, which burned in an effort to heal themselves. He swiped away the blood and bandaged up the wound—small, but nevertheless inflicted, just as injuries had been on the drenched boardwalk decades ago.

Jamie thanked him and blissfully wandered off with his group to scan the sweets selection: fig tarts, dipped apples, whipped cream, vanilla sodas, sugared pomegranate seeds, cherry pops, orange ice, creamy cookies, plum and grape and banana hard candies, chunks of chocolate soft as limestone, and saturated, layered cakes.

The old man never tasted a single one of his sweets. He lived through his customers.

Hugo, as always, was the first to buy. He also bought the most, consumed with a boundless lust for sugar. His father, a professor (and once a child the old man mentored during the war), provided plenty of money to indulge his appetite. Hugo bought lots of pomegranate seeds, plus extra for later, heaps of sugared, dried apples, and a large honeyed pear that he tried to split with sweet-adverse Christopher.

Little Si was almost as infatuated with candy as Hugo, though his admiration stemmed from his age. Gazing at the old man with flushed cheeks and a gap-toothed mouth, he bought an orange ice pop. Then he begged, begged, *begged* Simon to buy him some pomegranate seeds. His older brother refused, although they could afford it. Jamie caved and bought him some. Then he bought a sparse strawberry and chocolate tart. Jamie was short a few cents, but the old man dismissed his debt with an unconcerned hand. He was a good kid. By this point, the boys had slowly shuffled out of the shop and onto the saturated boardwalk, chatting under the pink of the umbrellas, content to be stuffed with rich sweets.

Simon lingered behind.

The old man, thus far, had written down the totals each of the boys owed him. Simon picked out a cherry swirl and took a lazy, showy bite out of it. He

wasn't a huge fan of sweets, so the old man figured he was done and began to scrawl the price.

With a sudden and provocative force, Simon came down upon his feeble hand with claw-like fingers. He leaned forward. His breath was stifling with the stink of humid cherry. "Say, what would be the price if I added some of the candy my brother asked for?"

The old man, accustomed to tricks, and sure that this was one Simon had no doubt learned from his father, did not answer. He fought to write. It was a restrictive way to communicate, but his only way. Noticing this action, Simon's voice, normally a rich, solid bar of pinkish-gold light, melted into a brittle, broken red. "No, please, just tell me. Can't you just say the price out loud?"

The old man fixed his wise gaze upon the boy, who had returned to the darkened state that haunted him before Jamie arrived.

"Say something." The chocolate air was too stale. It made Simon's words cling between them, static and flat. No, this was no trick of his father; it was too desperate. "I know about you. Father told me all about you. About what you did when he was a kid. Was it fun?" His perfect eyebrows drew close together and created a single flaw in his face.

The old man fought to pull away, but Simon latched on, tighter, fiercer.

"All of us know about those tabloid Rose Papers you distribute. Hugo's professor dad lets him read them. And I don't need *my* father to tell me what this shop used to be. Terrific job renovating, by the way." Simon's shoulders hunched forward, and his eyes narrowed into slits. Despite the disgust in his eyes, they also glinted with fearful, darting admiration for what the old man had once been. "Is it true? What you said, and the way you did it? Say something, demonstrate! I just need to know."

The old man nodded to his first question. The distortion of history ruined his character; his heroic speeches were banned in schools. But once he had talked. Oh, how he once had orated, painting the peaks of stained glass chapels and sculpted college campuses with his paragraphs of delicious silky rose gold and his soliloquies of invigorated, nuanced sugar.

Simon recognized the emotion that misted across the old man's face. He loosened, hesitant. "Old man, we were talking in class...we hardly get to discuss things in class, but we were today, about the war. You were a veteran, right?"

“Which side won? Which side won the war? It was the Nephew’s army, right? Jamie’s irritating mother always insists we look at it from the Sect’s point of view. But they’ve practically assimilated.”

Simon got distracted, softer, talking about his best friend. The old man, like an animal taking advantage of its predator’s negligence, freed himself from Simon’s claws. He stared at the boy’s face, at his eyes bright and open, at his slim, raw ignorance that shimmered in the light, exposing its scarlet cracks with each question. Which side won?

*Both*, the old man wrote on the back of an old Rose Paper. He held it up to Simon, and the word nearly disappeared in the brilliance of the sunset’s colorful layers. The mouthed word felt like a ghost on his lips. *Both*.

“Old man, both?” Simon repeated in despair, though he quickly became aware of his friends and tamed his expression in case they looked back and saw him troubled. Simon had been a master of controlling his countenance since he was a toddler. It ran in his family. “Of course...of course you’d tell me that. You’ve always been evasive. But no, I bet you believe it too.” He backed away. A war was taking place in his eyes, pitting nature against blood.

“I’m sorry for hurting you. I’m sorry if I frightened you. I wanted so badly...I *needed* to hear you speak. I just thought that, maybe, if you did, it would prove him wrong...prove *me* wrong. Because, old man, you’re like a grandpa to me. I’ve come here forever. My father thinks you’re trouble, but I really need your advice.

“I think I’ve made a mistake.”

Very few things could shake Simon to this degree: *Is it about your brother? Your friends?*

“No, no, not directly. I’ve stolen something.”

Like the repentant Son when the Holy Nephew abandoned him, Simon looked up, and it sent a stinging piercing through the old man’s heart. He remembered Simon as a boy, clinging to his younger brother’s hand and watching tenderly over him. He remembered Simon making a mess of the floor with his ice cream and splitting cookies with just Jamie on the dock as their parents argued in the legislative tower above. He remembered how much trouble Simon had been, collecting friends like shells and leading them in mischievous and inventive games. He even remembered Simon’s bothersome father, who had been a devil in the womb, who had grown up too fast, too turbulently.



Simon snuck an envious look backwards towards his friends, who soaked and sipped up the sunset. Framed by the candy shop's pearly pink window frame, the four of them looked so far away, and vivid, as if they were just a memory. Behind them, as if it had been shot down from the sky, the red sun fell deeper and deeper into the bay, spilling blood across the water. Simon had never looked younger, and he had never felt older. Their reflections, hopeful and uncertain, faced each other in the frosted glass case.

"Say something, old man. Please speak."

The old man tried, pulling the words out of a vast pantry of regret, guilt, nostalgia, and above all, pity.

But his voice came out like a guttural gurgle, a drowning man. This response shattered Simon's glistening hope, and an odd expression solidified forever on his angelic oval face. The last vicissitudes of youthful pink faded from his cheeks. Red light spooled into the store, causing Simon's academy uniform to grow a darker and darker color, until it appeared a nasty purple.

Simon's hand drifted towards his mouth, but he refused with resolve, instead lifting the coat jacket of his academy uniform. It created a red curtain, a finale, and an invincible shield. On the stage, a stolen book.

"This," he said, "I stole it today. I refuse to become like you. I won't become some reckless 'free' radical. But old man, I can't steal it. Not when Jamie...not when my friends look at me like they do."

The book smoldered as it stared up at the old man and boy, dividing them with this fundamental choice. "I thought stealing it was for the best, really...Father told me it would preserve Gideon's innocence if I took it from the library and gave it to him to destroy. The book regulations being passed aren't enforced enough for him. But Gideon doesn't appreciate me at all. He has no idea how good he has it." The old man thought he could say the same about Simon and his crew. Life was built on looking backwards.

Simon scoffed at the book. He returned to his resigned sentiments: "But I don't want to lose my voice like you for refusing. That will never happen to me. It can never happen." The old man had thought that of himself as well, back when he had done the inverse of Simon and spoke like an undammed river.

Yet still, despite his invincibility, alone that evening on the boardwalk he felt the sharp sear of an enemy knife pushing past his lips and gritted teeth, as his knees scrambled against the slick of the bloody boardwalk. Alone he stared at the sticky, fragile remains of his tongue dying on slats of wood. Alone he felt

the choking loss of words, of taste, of connection, and of all delightful things. His cramped rebel haven was seized before his eyes and stuffed into a pink tutu, transformed into a lie he was forced to act out.

The old man bottled up the memory like a tonic inside of him. He didn't regret any of his actions. He just mourned for the child in front of him.

Simon was right; he would not get his tongue cut out. He would be the one holding the knife.

"Take it," Simon said, recognizing the angry shift in the old man's expression. His voice quivered, coated in the fresh stain of a deep maturity. Simon thrust the book forward, and its vermilion cover was iridescent like crystallized sugar. The words vibrated beneath it, dangerous. "You know what to do with it, right? You have experience; you can fix this. Old man, I really don't want it. Not for my father, not for Gideon, not for me."

Simon didn't have to ask twice. The old man cradled the book in protective arms.

"Just put that down. Bury it here. Pretend I never dared to touch it. Let me buy some cherry candy." Simon sighed a hot breath. Bossy gold had completely abandoned his voice, even as he commanded orders. He paced around and pulled out an overcompensation of money. "Once my father finds out what I've done, that I've given it to you, I'll be a traitor to him. I won't be the good, perfect first-born anymore. I won't come buy candy anymore. Sir, please, sell to me one last time!"

He gave Simon the candy; he was a customer, first and foremost.

The man—Simon seemed so old now—attempted resurrection, lifting the dark red candy to his mouth, and brightening in anticipation. But here he stalled out, and his mouth twisted at the newly bitter taste. Simon spit it out onto a handkerchief. He threw it aside, looking at his friends in hope, but they couldn't see him through the window. His attempt to guide, protect, and preserve them had ruined himself, and now they occupied a different world.

Simon's eyes grew as dark as two portals of turmoil. They seethed above his flushed, rudish hand, which, upon the realization he could never enjoy candy again, had unconsciously risen to conceal his mouth.

Afraid or, perhaps, unable to speak.