WELCOME TO Olivia's Magic Jewelers

1



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Welcome to Olivia’s Magic Jewelers Volume 1

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OLIVIA MASEKI HOUSHOKUTEN E YOUKOSO~IE TO MISE WO OIDASARETANODE, OUTO NI MISE WO KAMAETARA, NAZEKA MOTOKONYAKUSHA TO GIMAI NO KEKKONSHIKI NI DERO TO IWAREMASHITA~ volume 1
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First Digital Edition: May 2025

ISBN: 979-8-88560-186-3


Elliot Dicks
A reserved and logical person. On the surface, he seems gentle and kind, but he's the type who keeps walls up between himself and others. He met Olivia at the station in Daregas, and their relationship strengthened over time.
Olivia Carter
An honest, hardworking person with a good head on her shoulders. She's openly grateful for those around her. She has a soft spot for good food and eats a lot. False accusations led to the end of her engagement. She was then chased from her home and shop, which was when she went to the capital to work as an artificer.
WELCOME TO
Olivia's Magic Jewelers


Rose
The receptionist at Gordon's Magic Appliances. She's beautiful, kind, and always looking out for others. Often lends aid to Olivia, who works so hard.
Harrison
Assistant manager and skilled artificer of Gordon's Magic Appliances. He's a gentle, empathetic man and devoted husband. His specialty is large magic items, and he handles the shop's biggest sellers of magic heaters and stoves.
Gordon Baggs
The manager of Gordon's Magic Appliances, a shop in the capital. He was a friend of Olivia's father. Olivia has come to rely on him, and he supports her with kindness.
Gordon Magic Tool Shop

Prologue: Engagement Broken; Home and Shop Stolen

UGH, *it's so bright*.

Olivia couldn't help but squint as her blue eyes took in the drawing room in her home, a room she hadn't stepped in for nearly a year. The wallpaper was studded with gold leaf, and gold ornamental objects glittered around the room while the massive magic chandelier lit the room as radiantly as the noon sun.

It was far from gentle on her tired eyes, seeing as she had only just gotten home after work.

What tacky taste. This drawing room has none of the elegance it used to have. It would never look like this if Mother and Father were still alive.

She couldn't hold back her sigh.

Her attitude must have irritated the pudgy, middle-aged man perched on one of the sofas in the center of the room. He was clad in a gold jacket and bore a throbbing vein in his temple as he shouted, "Olivia, are you listening?!"

"Yes, I'm listening," she replied flatly, shifting her gaze back to the four people sitting on the sofas.

The yelling man with a beet-red face was her uncle and adoptive father, Baronet Carter. Her adoptive mother wore expensive-looking clothing and a mocking smile. Joining them was Olivia's blond-haired, green-eyed fiancé, Henry, with an angry expression in place of the usual sweet mask he put on for the ladies. Clinging onto and pouting up at him was Catherine, Olivia's adoptive sister, clad in a revealing pink dress.

Thinking this was a rather depressing combination of people, Olivia spoke evenly, "I'm very sorry. I'm sure you can agree a misunderstanding here just won't do. Could you please say that again?"

Her adoptive father's face was bright red as he howled, "That's exactly the sort of attitude of yours I can't stand!" He stamped his foot and thrust a plump finger in her direction improperly. "Listen up! As of today, you are fired! Get out immediately!"

Olivia paused. "May I ask why?"

His mouth curled up triumphantly in response to her calm question. "You know why! The magic jewelry you claimed to design was all Catherine's creations. Someone who steals their sister's work and claims it as their own isn't fit to be an artificer!"

Henry's fine features twisted even more in a scowl, and he hurled, "I've also heard you've been tormenting Catherine for so long, bullying her for every little thing—even taking her belongings. You are despicable."

"Oh, Henry, it was so painful," cried Catherine. Her strawberry-blonde hair swayed and a delicate tear slipped from her green eyes.

Olivia looked at them with an unamused expression. *They honestly believe it, don't they?*

Catherine was both Olivia's cousin and adoptive sister. She was lazy, hated working, and had no interest in magic items—Catherine had never once been to the shop. Olivia had heard she didn't have enough mana to become an artificer even if she wanted to. Why would these people think someone like that could design magic jewelry?

And I'm *the one who had to live through hardship.*

Shortly after Olivia's mother and father passed away about a year and a half ago, Olivia's uncle and his family moved into her family's mansion, claiming she was underage and making themselves her guardians and adoptive family.

She lost so much to them. They took the rooms with good sunlight, her favorite clothes and jewelry, even the right to manage the home and her father's shop, Carter's Magic Items.

In the end, she only had a small room with barely any sunlight, a position in title only as "assistant manager" at the shop, taxing work, and a paltry salary.

Olivia was the one who was tormented and stolen from, not Catherine.

Her silence must have annoyed her adoptive father because he bellowed, "As manager of Carter's Magic Items, I have ordered you, Assistant Manager Olivia, to be removed from your position as of today. And as your father, I cut all ties with you! Get out, now!"

"And I am also informing you that our engagement is over. I no longer love you," proclaimed Henry in a shrill voice as he put a protective arm around Catherine. The girl smiled triumphantly.

Olivia slowly narrowed her eyes. She wanted to say so much, but they wouldn't listen even if she did. And if they listened, she would just be forced to watch more of this farce.

I've put up with so much this past year to protect Father's shop, but I'm done.

She whispered a secret apology to her father, then lifted her head with resolution—she would leave with her head held high. Olivia was not being chased out; she was walking out.

With a straightened back, she looked her adoptive father straight in the eyes and cooly said, "I understand."

"Uh…what?"

Apparently, they hadn't expected that response from her because all four looked utterly taken aback.

Her adoptive mother annoyingly shrieked, "Do you even understand what we're saying to you?!"

"I do. I am to leave the house and the shop, and my engagement is over. Is that right?"

"Y-yes…that's right." Her adoptive mother flinched back from Olivia's calm reply.

Catherine scowled and yelled, "What is with you?!"

"What do you mean?"

"How can you be so…so normal about this?!"

It seemed like Catherine had been confident that Olivia would cry and scream. Instead, she looked coolly at Catherine as she

thought, *This is the last time I'll see them. Might as well say everything I want to say*.

She glanced at the gathered party and gave an exasperated shrug. "Honestly, there's no reason this would surprise me."

"What?"

Olivia slowly turned her eyes to her adoptive father. "Three months ago, you brought two new workers into the shop. I thought that was odd. You barely gave me a salary, yet you insisted they were to help me because I seemed to be having a hard time. It was odd you'd use such a compassionate reason for hiring someone. You actually wanted me to train them so they could replace me, yes?"

He looked away guiltily.

"And you, Henry. You haven't come to visit me these past six months. You haven't even sent letters or gifts. It was like you'd forgotten we were engaged. However, I've seen you often in town with Catherine, so perhaps you were too busy with her."

"I-I…" Henry's face turned red, then white as his mumbled words failed to leave his mouth.

At that, Olivia's adoptive mother stood with a nearly demonic expression and screeched, "Stop saying such insulting things!"

"Speaking of," continued Olivia, looking at her with emotionless eyes, "yesterday, you told me to lend you money. At that point, the decision would have been to chase me out of the house after borrowing my money, knowing you wouldn't have to return it. Unfortunately, I had no money to lend you."

"Agh!" The woman's lips flapped in sheer rage.

Olivia watched her out of the corner of her eye as she went to leave the room. Baronet Carter shouted, "Wait! Where are you going?!"

"To my room. I need to pack my things."

"No need for that. I packed for you. I can't allow a thief to roam the house." The enraged expression fell from her adoptive mother's face and was replaced with a smirk. Catherine smiled mockingly and added that she helped with the packing.

Olivia glanced at the dirty, worn-out suitcase in the corner of the room and shrugged. "No, thank you."

"What?"

"I said, no, thank you. You've probably shoved all sorts of unwanted objects in there, haven't you?" She brought the suitcase to the middle of the room, expressionless, as she ignored her adoptive mother's shrieks to stop and opened the luggage for all to see.

"Ah!"

The inside was crammed with patched and faded clothing, underwear, scraps of paper, and other useless things. None of it looked like anything more than garbage.

Henry was at a loss for words, stammering something at the sight of how horrible it was, while Catherine and Olivia's adoptive mother went pale and started to make some meaningless excuse.

Olivia ignored them and quickly ran her eyes along the suitcase's contents. *I didn't think there would be anything good here, but I am honestly surprised at how bad it is*. Upon further inspection, she let out a small sigh. *And my design sketchbooks are missing*.

Amounting to around twenty small pads, her sketchbooks contained her own ideas. There were original designs for things like brooches and pendants drawn in detail. They were essential for when she made new items.

I see now. That's why they're so forceful.

They must have thought that with her sketchbooks and a replacement artificer, they didn't need her anymore. She really wanted to get them back but dropped her eyes instead.

I didn't sign my sketchbooks. I can't prove otherwise if Catherine claims they were her drawings. She could insist she'd drawn them, but putting that to this group would only warrant calling her a thief again. *I don't like it, but I guess I have to accept it's my fault for leaving them out in my room*.

She gnawed on her lip, trying to listen to her own advice as she scanned the clutter again. "Where's my bank card? Wasn't it in my room?"

Her adoptive mother looked sly as she answered, "I don't know, I didn't see it. Where did you put it? I can go look if you tell

me."

"…No, thank you," she replied flatly, and her adoptive mother grew angry again.

"I said I'd go look for it for you! Just tell me!"

"And I said, no, thank you," Olivia repeated coldly, thinking that even if she did tell her, she would pretend she never found it and steal all the money from Olivia's account.

The woman glared at Olivia, who softly shifted to look at Catherine. "I look forward to seeing what designs you come up with. Though, I imagine I'll have seen them all before."

"H-how mean of you! Why do you always have to bully me?" barked Catherine as she broke into sobs and leaned against Henry.

Olivia didn't bother watching the farce. She took two worn silver keys from her well-used leather bag and set them side by side in front of her adoptive father. "This is the key to the house, and this is for the shop. As you can see, I have returned them. Henry, you can be witness to that, yes?"

"Uh, yes." His eyes widened, but he nodded, Catherine still in his protective embrace. Her adoptive father was caught off guard by her forthright behavior.

"Now, I wish you all the best," she bade, leaving the four of them flapping their mouths in an attempt to say something.

She left the room, her back straight, and everyone behind her. Olivia walked down the gold carpet on the hallway floor and out of the mansion. She closed the front door behind her and leaned back against it.

"I'm so tired…" she let out with a sigh.

She straightened up once more, fixed her eyes directly ahead, and disappeared into the night town without one look back.

Chapter 1: She Decides to Leave Town

OLIVIA was born and raised in the town of Daregas in the southern region of the Kingdom of Alexia.

That night, she walked down a residential street with her bag in hand and a severe expression on her face.

What do I even have with me? She thought through the contents of her bag, the sole object she left home with, as she passed by the silent houses. *My wallet, handkerchief, book on magic circles, and magic toolkit. Also, a few jewelry pieces.*

She glanced down at the self-defense magic ring on her left hand that emitted a mild shock. Remembering she had just enough money to stay in a hotel for the night, she sighed in relief.

It would have been better if she could have left with more, but the one silver lining was that she had her magic toolkit, which contained everything she needed for work.

The big question is, what do I do next?

She'd decided she hadn't been forced out—she'd left of her own volition—but that didn't change the fact that she was now forced out on the streets. Olivia may not be penniless, but her home and shop had been stolen from her. Thinking about what would come next made her anxious and put her on edge. She shook her head vigorously, trying to shake off her worry.

Well, let's start with deciding what to do about tonight.

Her thoughts raced as she walked the dark street.

I could go to someone's house? But that'll make them worry. I should stay in a hotel, I suppose. But this is a small town. I'm sure to run into someone I know, and they'll ask what happened…

She stared at the toes of her flats as she walked around worriedly. After a while, she found herself in a familiar location.

Huh… I must have walked here without thinking about it. I do come here every day, after all.

Ahead of her was a small shop enveloped in a gentle orange light. She could see the magic lamps illuminating the shop's interior through the shop window.

She walked over to the shop and looked up at the wooden placard above the door that showed signs of having been repainted several times: Carter's Magic Items, Magic Lamps and Magic Jewelry.

I was working here just earlier today, and now I can't even go inside.

She gently placed her hand on the polished brass doorknob, her eyes cast down as she reminisced.

When she was a little girl, her mother would often bring her along to the shop when delivering her father his lunch.

"Mother, what does Father make in the shop?" she asked one day.

"Magic items," replied her mother.

"What're magic items?"

"They're useful things that let normal people use magic even if they're not magicians. Your father is a very skilled artificer."

Like her mother said, Olivia's father was a very skilled artificer specializing in lamps and jewelry. He was exceptionally proficient with jewelry, and many customers visited him, speaking only words of thanks.

"That anti-poison bracelet you made me is incredible! I've not had digestive problems since! You, sir, are incredible!"

"Thank you. My hip feels so much better because of the painkiller brooch you made."

"My eyes don't get tired now with the earrings you made me. You have my thanks."

Olivia felt proud as she watched those people go home with smiles. Her father was such an amazing person.

On the way back from the shop one day, Olivia asked, "Can I be like Father?"

"You can if you have a lot of mana."

"Mana?"

"Yes, mana. You can become an artificer if you have a lot of mana."

That was why, a few years later, it was only natural she would follow in her father's footsteps after learning she had plenty of mana.

"I want to become an artificer that can make people smile like Father does!"

She had decided to work forever in this shop, just like him.

And now I'm leaving like this. I guess you really can't know what life will have in store for you.

She let out a heavy sigh. The shop's sign distorted in her tear-laden eyes, and she felt something would break inside her if she stayed any longer.

She turned on her heel and looked up at the starless night sky to keep her tears from spilling down her cheeks as she walked slowly to the town center.



TWEET, TWEET.

Sunlight slowly dyed the sky from the east early the following day. Olivia washed her face in the fountain of the empty park as she listened to the birdsong and sighed.

I feel better now. Good thing the weather isn't too cold yet.

After leaving the shop, she walked from the town center to a park on the outskirts, where she spent the night. She'd considered staying in a hotel but had dreaded the idea of running into someone and having them pry into everything. She ended up wandering around town until she arrived at the park.

"I never imagined I'd spend a night sleeping on a park bench…"

Sitting on the fountain's edge, she took the faded handkerchief from her bag and wiped her face dry. She then stood up and gave herself a good once-over.

Thankfully, her white blouse, ink-black blazer, and long A-line skirt didn't wrinkle easily, so she still looked presentable. Once she thoroughly smoothed it down, her navy hair was also passable.

She was a little worried about the horrible dark circles she assumed she had under her eyes and the faint algae smell lingering on her because she washed up in a fountain, but…

This isn't the time to be focusing on that!

Olivia smacked her cheeks, revving herself up in the morning sun. Last night, she'd been thrown off kilter by the unexpected events, but she had the night to calm down and felt refreshed.

Now, let's get down to business!

First, she went to the bank near the town center to file a notice of her lost card and request a new one. Based on how they had acted yesterday, she guessed her adoptive family hadn't found her card in her room, meaning Olivia could protect the money in her account and the belongings in her safety deposit box if she reported it first thing in the morning.

She cut across the central square, wrapped thick with a blanket of morning fog, and entered the quiet bank that had just opened for the day. The familiar woman at the counter smiled at her.

"Oh, hello, Olivia. You don't often come to the bank this early," she noticed.

"No, I don't. I actually lost my bank card and wanted to open a new account," responded Olivia, and the people in the bank began to buzz.

The woman sounded tense as she replied, "I apologize for the inconvenience, but we currently have a policy of asking some detailed questions if anyone lost their bank card. Would you mind coming to another room?"

Olivia was a little confused. The woman acted different than usual, but she followed her to what seemed like a meeting room where an older man in a suit sat with a somewhat intense expression.

"I'm very sorry, but things have gotten quite severe," he began. "There have been some reports of bank card fraud in a neighboring country, and it's spread to this country.

Olivia's eyes went wide. "Is that kind of fraud even possible?"

"We have seen cases, so yes, it is possible."

He told her the scammers would withdraw all of a victim's money after claiming they lost one of their bank cards, generally targeting merchants and people with their own shops.

"Which is why we must be consistent in questioning those who have lost bank cards," he explained. "And we question anyone who does happen to come in later with the lost bank card."

Olivia smirked inwardly at the thought of her adoptive parents frantically trying to explain the situation when the bank caught them.

I feel a little bad for them, but they'd be trying to withdraw money from someone else's bank account without permission. At that point, they reap what they sow.

Olivia answered the man's questions in detail, telling him about the events surrounding the loss of her card and that her family told her they didn't know anything about it.

"That is all for my questions," he concluded. "I've confirmed that the money in your account is untouched. Please wait here while I process your new account."

He left the room just as the woman from the front came in. "I have your new bank card," she explained.

Olivia sighed as the woman left.

Now what?

At the very least, she had secured her money. There was enough savings to live off for a short while, but that would only shrink as things were.

But…where can I work?

As absurd as the claims were, she had been fired from her shop for allegedly stealing designs, which was the worst reason ever—that would make it difficult for her to work as an artificer in this town. There was the possibility of pursuing a different job, but she'd been single-minded about her desire to become an artificer ever since she was a young child; Olivia couldn't even imagine doing anything else.

She considered going to live with her cousin on her mother's side, with whom she was on good terms, but she'd only just had a baby. Olivia didn't want to impose.

What do I do?

A sigh slipped out. She was blocked in every direction.

Just as she was thinking how her main priority should be to find a place to live, she remembered something her father had said when he was still alive: "If you ever find yourself in a tough spot, open this letter."

He had given her a letter when he was sick. She couldn't bear to look at it after he'd died, so she put it in her safety deposit box along with her other keepsakes from him.

That's right! I have that! This is exactly the sort of time he meant for me to open it!

She jumped to her feet faster than she could think and told the woman who brought her new bank card that she wanted to go to her safety deposit box. Olivia was then led to a secure room with rows of tiny doors. She took a small key from her wallet, and her eyes misted with tears the moment she opened the door.

Oh, so many memories…

Along with the letter were some jewelry and a watch she'd inherited from her parents. She'd hurried to hide them here because she suspected her adoptive family might steal them.

She fought back the tears brought on by all the memories as she took out the letter and opened the envelope. Inside was a letter and another sealed envelope.

The paper was a little rumpled, but her father's neat writing read, *"If you ever find yourself in trouble, take this letter to Gordon's shop in the capital. I've told him about you. Love, your father."*

Her eyes went wide—she hadn't expected that.

Gordon was one of her father's fellow apprentices when he was studying magic item crafting in the capital. Olivia also knew Gordan well since he'd spent six months in Daregas for work seven years ago. He'd also traveled all the way out here from the capital for her father's funeral and made sure to tell her when he was leaving to let him know if she ever needed anything. Her father must have said something to him before he died.

She slipped deep into thought as she stared at her father's letter.

I'm surprised by what the letter says, but going to the capital might actually not be a bad option.

She'd heard the capital was ten times the size of Daregas. Surely, there would be somewhere that would hire her as an artificer.

Olivia slipped the letter and envelope into her bag and closed the safety deposit box. After thanking the bank worker who had been watching from a distance, she withdrew enough money to cover her living expenses for the time being and left the bank.

The sun had risen high as Olivia stepped into the open square just outside the bank; people and horses bustled across the cobblestone. She looked up at a clear blue sky. As she gazed, she made her decision.

"To the capital."

Even though she was forced out, she couldn't bear the thought of leaving town and her father's shop behind—but she also knew she would feel nothing but regret if she gave up on being an artificer just to stay here. It would also make her parents sad. She decided to go to the capital, work hard, and become an excellent artificer like her father.

Now that I've decided, I need to buy a ticket to the capital.

With a look of determination on her face, she set off at a brisk pace, cut across the chaotic square, and passed down a street lined with stalls selling breakfast foods.

She stopped before a particularly large building and looked up at the Daregas Horsecar Rail Station sign.

The rail line utilized horse-drawn carriages pulled by a special breed twice as powerful as your normal horse. They ran along two rails laid on the ground, cutting the usual two-day trip from Daregas to the capital down to only half a day. Tickets were costly, so Olivia hadn't ridden it in a few years, not since she had to travel to her cousin's wedding.

Olivia entered the station into a space as vast as an open square in the city, with a high ceiling that reminded her of a church. Well-dressed people bustled back and forth, carrying luggage. In the back, she saw the large horses, stone platforms, and silver rails that stretched into the distance.

She gulped.

The place's unique atmosphere made her question if everything really was all right, but she straightened her back and gave herself a reassuring pep talk before losing her courage.

Get in there! You can do this!

She set off through the station, even though her steps were a bit awkward, and went to the ticket desk. She approached the bespectacled lady working there and crisply told her she wanted to go to the capital.

"The next horsecar isn't until noon. Is that all right?" asked the woman.

"Yes. I'll take that one."

She retrieved her wallet and dished out enough money to support a family of four for two weeks, then took the palm-sized ticket that displayed the date and time of the horsecar.

Once she stepped outside the station, she let out a sigh. All she'd done was buy a ticket, but she still felt as worn out as if she'd worked all day. She didn't have time for a break now, however.

Let's take care of the things I need to get done before I leave.

She boarded one of the carriages outside the station, and it whisked her off to the cemetery outside town. With her head hung in front of her parents' relatively new graves, she told them she would be back to visit someday.

Afterward, she returned to the carriage, traveled to the area near the station, and ordered a simple pasta dish from one of the stalls to fill her belly.

About twenty minutes before the horsecar was scheduled to depart, she was already waiting on the platform. Several horsecars were at the various platforms, and people milled about as they boarded and disembarked. She stood on the largest platform with the sign saying "Capital" and let out a little sigh.

I wonder what the capital is like.

She stared into the distance where the rails disappeared, a mixture of unease and anticipation inside her.

Not too long before her horsecar was meant to arrive, she heard a man and woman behind her talking.

"Hello, handsome. Where are you off to?" asked the woman.

"Hello, miss. I'm on my way home," replied the man.

"Will you be coming back to this area anytime soon? I'd love to grab a bite with you."

"As much as I appreciate the invitation, I don't have plans to visit again at the moment."

"Oh. That's unfortunate. What if we went right now?"

Olivia found herself scowling as she listened to their conversation. It made her think of the gloating faces of her ex-fiancé Henry and Catherine.

I don't think I want to hear any conversation less than that right now.

She closed her eyes and turned her face down to hide her irritation. Suddenly, a harsh bell rang loudly as a station worker's voice echoed through the station.

"Capital horsecar now arriving! Capital horsecar now arriving!"

Four massive black horses thundered toward the platform she was standing at, drawing behind them two linked carriages.

Oh gosh!

The sight was so imposing that she found herself stumbling back. She tried hard to plant her feet so she wouldn't fall over backward.

"Careful there," came a voice from above as a strong arm cradled her back. "Are you all right?"

With the help of that arm, she managed to regain her footing. She spun around and bowed low. "Th-thank you; you stopped me from falling."

"It's no worry at all. I'm just glad you're not hurt, madam."

"Excuse me?" Olivia froze, still looking down.

"Uh, I just, I'm glad you're all right, madam." He sounded confused by her intense reaction.

Maybe it was because this was the man who'd been having that chat that annoyed her, or perhaps it was because the title "madam" was only meant to be used for married women over thirty, or possibly it was even because she was on edge after having spent a

sleepless night in a park. Still, she found herself glaring at this man who was more than a whole head taller than her.

He gulped when he saw how young she was.

"I am *not* a madam!" she shouted.



NEEEIGH!

Her voice echoed through the station along with the horses' whinnies.



THE man apologized profusely before Olivia boarded the opposite carriage from his, a stony expression on her face.

The carriages were long and thin, with wooden benches filling both sides enough for twelve passengers. There were only seven passengers in that carriage, including Olivia, perhaps because it was after peak time.

She sat by the window, leaned against the cool wall, and sighed.

I just blew up on him. I don't care how rude he was; shouting like that isn't good, either. Regretting her behavior, she also snorted at herself. *And it's probably not that surprising he'd call me madam.*

If you were being complimentary about the navy clothes Olivia wore, you might say they were free of influence from fleeting trends. If you were being critical, you could call them unfashionable. There was a time when Olivia dressed herself up more, but she didn't have time to spend on her appearance after the store workers quit without notice, so she ended up dressing like this.

To top it off, she'd barely slept the night before—she was exhausted. From behind, she probably looked like an unfashionable, tired woman. It was no wonder that man thought "madam" was the appropriate term of address.

While she was smirking at herself, a bell rang loudly, and the conductor shouted, "Capital service now departing!"

The horses neighed, and the carriages slowly began to pull away to the sound of clip-clopping hooves. The view of the station outside the window transformed as she stared out. Her eyes soaked in those sights, the familiar town beneath a cloudy sky, as she tried to burn it into her memory.

The horsecar passed out of town and entered a swath of farm fields. She pulled her eyes from the window, sighed, and took out

her reference book on magic circles loaded with notes she used when making magic items.

I don't really feel like reading, but I have the time. Might as well get some reading in.

She flipped to the bookmarked page and began reading, but she didn't become engrossed like she usually did. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't process the information. After reading the same passage several times, she gave up and closed the book.

It's no good. I just can't manage it today.

She set the book on her lap and turned her unfocused eyes toward the scenery flying by outside the window. Suddenly, she found herself thinking about Henry.

Six years ago, when she was thirteen, she designed a piece of magic jewelry that received praise. They called the creation a breath of fresh air, and it won an honorable mention from a magic item design competition in the capital. It was nothing more than an extra award, nothing like the gold and silver winners of the competition, but her father went around bragging about how incredible she was after that.

Talk of her winning the honorable mention had spread through town, and the news reached the ears of someone in the Clockmakers Association in Daregas. Daregas was famous for its clocks, and the Association approached Olivia.

"We would love you to design a wristwatch for women."

Despite being meant to be worn around the wrist, most wristwatches at the time were large, heavy objects only used by unrefined men. As more and more women began to participate in further areas of society, feminine wristwatches became high in demand—which led the Association to seek a new design.

Olivia gladly accepted the request and proposed a concept. The slender watch she created with birds and flowers on the face was a hit amongst the working women. The Clockmakers Association was delighted by this and returned to her every year to request a new design.

It was during that time that Henry's father, Viscount Perigord, came across her work. He was the lord of the town and region, and

he decided he wanted to bring her talent into his family.

"Your daughter has an incredible eye for design," he complimented. "I would like her to marry my son, Henry."

The Viscount's proposal shocked and concerned Olivia's parents.

The country they lived in had a system of nobility. Much of the population were commoners. Those who had achieved significant accomplishments or donated large amounts of money to the government could receive the title of baronet, which was considered a "life peer" title that did not pass on to their children.

Hereditary peers were nobles whose titles passed down from generation to generation, including barons, viscounts, counts, marquesses, and dukes. At the top, they were all governed by the royals.

Olivia's father had received a baronet title in recognition of his accomplishments in the field of magic item development. He was technically a noble, but he didn't rule any land, and his life was not all that different from other commoners'. And yet, their family had received a marriage proposal from House Perigord, the house that had ruled the region for generations.

Of course, they were going to be surprised.

And while Henry might only be the Viscount's fourth son, he was still very much the son of a noble. The daughter of a baronet like Olivia couldn't possibly be suited for him.

However, the Viscount insisted that the difference in rank was not an issue, considering Olivia's talent, accomplishments, and the fact that she was likely to take over Carter's Magic Items in the future. If their lord was that firm on the issue, there was no way Olivia's parents could refuse.

Olivia sighed as she thought about those days.

My heart fluttered when I first met him. He was so handsome.

After their engagement, the two began to spend time together as instructed by the Viscount. They would gift each other presents for their birthdays and go on outings about once a month. When they went out together, Henry was the one who did most of the talking, while Olivia mostly listened.

Most of what he spoke about wasn't that interesting since he was a well-mannered but superficial man, but he did often talk about parts of the world Olivia didn't know, so it wasn't like the time was unenjoyable. She was also more interested in maintaining a peaceful relationship and not rocking the boat. He was good-looking, and she didn't dislike being with him. She figured she could do worse in terms of a marriage partner.

But the year after their engagement was formalized, Olivia's parents passed away in short succession from a disease that was spreading around, and Olivia's uncle and his family moved into the house. They took the shop's money without permission and used it to buy her uncle a baronet title. That was when Olivia's world was upended.

Henry's attitude toward her slowly began to change. The once-a-month visit turned to once every two months, then once every three. He also didn't send her birthday presents. Olivia heard rumors he'd been seen strolling around town enjoying Catherine's company, and, in the end, he broke off their engagement. Henry chose Catherine, a lazy liar who hated working. Olivia felt like she was being forced to face the fact that all her work until then had no value.

I pretended it didn't bother me, but it really was a shock.

Olivia's eyes fell on her hands with neatly trimmed short nails in her lap. She knew she was average-looking. Her navy-colored hair was rather plain, and her eyes were a common blue color. Her facial features and build were utterly normal as well. She didn't have the attention-grabbing looks Catherine had, but she was proud of the fact that she'd studied and worked hard.

But none of that mattered in the end…

Really now, what is with this dreary attitude of mine?

Olivia jerked her eyes to look out the window as she felt her nose sting. The horsecar continued toward the capital, passing several other carriages along the way.

After nine hours, the horsecar arrived in the capital just as the sky began to tinge with rose.



TH-THIS *is the capital?!*

The conductor signaled their arrival, and Olivia nervously disembarked the horsecar with wide eyes.

It's so big!

The ceiling, supported by massive pillars, was so high that she had to crane her neck to see it. The platform seemed to stretch on forever; she'd never seen a building so large. There were so many people that she almost wondered if some festival was going on.

Anyway, she should at least go outside. She picked up her things and joined the long line under the sign for the exit. After she handed her ticket to a surly worker, she stepped outside, and her jaw dropped at the sight.

W-wow! Oh my gosh, this is just…just wow!

The square in front of the station was so huge it could fit ten of the mansions she grew up in, and she'd never seen so many people bustling about.

And the buildings are so tall*!*

A tall building in Daregas was at most three stories high; the majority were two stories spread among some single-story buildings.

Here, though, all the stone buildings she saw were five stories high, lining the straight streets. She was surprised at what she saw from the horsecar window, but it hit her even more once she got out on her own two legs.

"I guess that's why they say Daregas is basically the countryside…" she murmured, frozen at the edge of the square with her bag in her arms. What she saw was so far beyond what she imagined that she was filled with shock and unease.

Can I really make it in a place like this?

Right then, her eyes fell on something she recognized.

Ah! That's a magic item!

At regular intervals along the cobblestoned path were streetlights. They were of a much more elegant design than the ones in Daregas and filled the evening streets with a soft light. Olivia approached one of those familiar objects on unsteady feet and placed her hand on its cool post as she looked up at the light.

Amazing! It's the newest type!

Then she realized the people passing her wore magic items she'd never seen before.

That's a poison-detecting cane, isn't it?! I've never seen one in real life before. And those earrings, I've never seen that sort of magic stone! I wonder what it is…?

She looked hungrily at people's accessories and was so focused that she didn't notice anything happening around her. It wasn't until someone said, "Excuse me, is everything all right?" that she realized people were giving her sidelong glances.

Oh, gosh! How embarrassing!

She must have looked like the sort of person best avoided. Her face turned bright red, and she felt embarrassed at how she'd already messed up the moment she'd arrived in the capital.

The person who'd shaken her out of her obsessive zone sounded relieved as he said, "Oh, good. You seem fine. I was certain you were feeling unwell."

It was the same young man who had called her "madam" before. He doffed his cap and gave a polite bow. "Hello, *miss*. I'm sorry about earlier."

"O-oh, no, please don't worry about it. I'm sorry for shouting like that." Olivia looked away apologetically and returned the bow. She was embarrassed he'd also happened to see her acting awestruck.

He politely asked, "Pardon me for asking, but where are you headed?"

"Uh…" Olivia faltered. She wasn't sure if she should tell a man she didn't know where she was going.

He seemed to guess her inner thoughts and gave a reassuring smile. "It's all right. I only thought I could take you to wherever

you're going as an apology for earlier. As you may have guessed, I'm quite familiar with the capital."

She then took a good look at him. He was tall and wore a brown, pinstriped suit with a matching flat cap. Unruly, pale blonde hair peeked out from beneath the cap, and he wore a pair of green-tinted spectacles that merchants often wore. His clothing and the briefcase he carried made Olivia think he was a trader of some sort. She guessed he was in his late twenties and was from a well-off family, based on his put-together appearance and good looks.

He did apologize both then and now. He doesn't seem like a bad person…

This was her first time in the capital, and she barely knew her right from her left. She would appreciate someone showing her the way. Luckily, she had essentially no luggage. If something happened, she could run.

"Well…if I could take you up on the offer, that would be appreciated," she relented. "This is the address." She took a piece of paper from her bag and gave it to him.

He looked at it in thought. "This is in the center of the shopping district. I think it would be faster to walk than to hire a carriage. It should take about fifteen minutes. Is that all right?"

"Yes, that's fine."

"Then let's head off," he proclaimed and started at a slow pace.

Olivia followed a pace behind, feeling overwhelmed by the size of the capital as she walked. Buildings towered over her from either side of the cobblestoned road that seemed to go on forever. There were so many people in fancy clothing and a myriad of things she'd never seen before.

What caught her eye most, though, was the magic jewelry—she became obsessed with observing what people were wearing.

That man's cufflinks are incredible. There must be skilled artificers here. And the magic stone on that bracelet is huge. Is it a ruby?

The young man leading the way watched her with amusement as she did nothing but stare at the jewelry of people passing by. "Do you have an interest in jewelry?"

"Not jewelry, per se, but magic jewelry, yes."

He looked somewhat surprised. "Magic jewelry? That's quite the specialized field. Do you mind if I ask your profession?"

"I'm an artificer," she replied in an offhand way while she quizzically examined a large brooch a lady walking by wore.

"Ah, that makes sense," he noted with a nod. "You do seem quite passionate about observing magic jewelry."

"It's all things you don't see in Daregas. I'm learning so much."

After fifteen minutes of walking through the crowded streets, they arrived at a magnificent five-story-high shop. The large windows in the front were decorated with all manner of magic items, and the grand shop sign overhead displayed "Gordon's Magic Appliances" in gold lettering.

Olivia's jaw nearly dropped.

Oh my gosh, it's enormous! It's got to be ten times the size of Father's shop!

As she looked up at the building, the young man stated, "I suspected that address was for Gordon's Magic Appliances."

"You know it?"

"I do." He nodded. "It's arguably the finest magic item shop in the capital. Will you be working here?"

"Oh, no, no, that's not it…" She looked away. She was proud of her significant experience as an artificer and confident in the skills she learned from her father, but she was still just a country artificer. Could she really make it in the capital, where everything was far more advanced?

The man saw her uncertainty and smiled. "I don't think you need to worry," he continued.

"What?"

"I think you can manage fine in the capital, or anywhere else for that matter. I can tell. I have a good eye for people." He smiled encouragingly, then pointed at a building further down the road. "That hotel has a reputation for being reasonably priced and serving good food. I'd recommend staying there."

And, in the time it took Olivia to look at the hotel, he bade goodbye and turned away. By the time she looked back, he'd

disappeared into the crowd.

Olivia sighed. He'd been kind enough even to recommend a hotel, but she didn't have a chance to thank him.

It annoyed me when he called me madam, but he seems kind.

Feeling bad about her attitude toward him, she decided to thank him properly if she ever met him again.

She then reasoned she shouldn't drop in at the shop late in the evening and asked for a room at the hotel the young man recommended with plans to visit Gordon tomorrow morning.

Chapter 2: Gordon's Magic Appliances

THE morning after arriving in the capital, when the wave of people heading to work subsided, Olivia left her hotel for Gordon's Magic Appliances.

It really is an incredible shop.

She looked up at the five-story stone building with its elegant shop sign glittering in the morning sun. This was likely the largest or second-largest building, even among the other stores along this road.

Was it all right for someone like her to go in?

Despite the anxiety washing over her, she gripped the straps of her bag and gave herself a pep talk.

Keep at it! You've come this far. You can't turn back now!

She huffed out a breath before opening the wooden door to the delicate sound of a bell, only to freeze in place with wide eyes the moment she set foot inside.

It's massive! Are these all *magic items?!*

The first floor was large enough to easily fit one of the horsecars and the horses and was filled with large shelves displaying magic items. Upon first inspection, Olivia believed you could get any magic item here.

She hesitated, feeling overwhelmed, when a beautiful, demure woman in an A-line skirt smiled at her from beside the entrance. "Welcome to Gordon's Magic Appliances. If there's anything specific you're looking for, I can show you where it is."

Olivia snapped back to herself and took the envelope addressed to Gordon from the letter her father left. "My name is Olivia Carter. Could I ask you to give this to Mr. Gordon?"

"Of course." The woman took the envelope and led Olivia to a round table with chairs, supposedly used for talking with customers. "Please wait here. Can I get you anything to drink?"

Of course, they'd even serve beverages in the capital.

"No, thank you," Olivia declined politely. After the woman left, she let her eyes wander around the shop.

The first floor seems to be for daily magic appliances.

It was well-lit in the store thanks to the large windows and lamps hanging from the ceiling. Along with the lights, Olivia noticed hair dryers, fridges, stoves, and various magic items in multiple designs. Everything was laid out so customers could easily test out the assortment of products; an energetic, well-dressed worker was available to explain the details of each one.

The shop seemed fairly popular as well. Despite it being morning, there were quite a few customers. Both the scale of the shop and the number of customers were far beyond what Olivia knew of for a magic item shop.

It's even more amazing than I could tell from the outside. I knew Gordon had a shop in the capital, but I never imagined it was this big.

Until she'd seen the shop, she had been thinking of asking Gordon if he had an opening to bring her on as an artificer. Getting a job there would have been reassuring since she trusted him and was anxious about working elsewhere in the capital, where she barely knew up from down.

But…I'm not experienced enough as an artificer to work in a shop like this…

The shop's scale was one thing, but the products on display were also top-class. A mere glance told her how high quality they were. They must have a staff filled with skilled artificers.

I'd like to try working in such an astounding shop, but I need to polish my skills more first.

Just as she decided to ask Gordon if he could introduce her to a trustworthy workplace, the woman from earlier returned.

"I apologize for the wait," she said. "Gordon is waiting for you."

Feeling nervous, Olivia hugged her bag close, stood, and followed the woman up the stairs to a room on the second floor that was slightly smaller but also filled with display cases.

"This is part of the shop as well?" asked Olivia.

"It is. This is where we display our magic jewelry and the like."

Olivia was struck by the urge to look but then shook her head.

First, I need to see Gordon.

They cut through the room and approached a door at the end of a hallway. The woman knocked and announced, "Miss Olivia is here."

"Come in."

The woman opened the door to reveal what looked like a reception room with two three-seater sofas in the center facing each other. Sitting on one of the sofas was a well-built man in a casually worn white button-up shirt and slacks. He seemed like a genial middle-aged man, the epitome of a craftsman with his beard and receding hairline.

He stood and smiled at Olivia as he offered his hand. "It's been too long, Olivia. The last time I saw you must have been at your father's funeral."

"Yes. I'm sorry for not keeping in touch." The door softly clicked behind Olivia as she hurried over to accept the handshake. There was something reassuring about his large, rough worker's hands—just like her father's.

Gordon gestured to the other sofa for her to sit before setting her father's letter on the table between them. He looked at her soberly. "I've already read the letter. If you're here, it means something's happened, hasn't it?"

Olivia's lips pulled tight as she cast her eyes down. She felt pathetic because she'd have to tell Gordon she was unable to protect her father's shop—she was ashamed.

I have no choice but to tell him exactly what happened…

She lifted her head with determination and looked into Gordon's somewhat concerned eyes. "I, um. I was fired from the shop yesterday."

"Uh, what?" His eyes grew wide. "Fired? But it's your shop."

"My uncle altered the deed."

"Your uncle? You have an uncle?"

"Yes. He's my father's younger brother. They were estranged for a very long time. After the funeral, he appeared out of nowhere and made himself my legal guardian. He and his family even moved into the house…"

Olivia bit her lip as she replayed the events.

I was too naïve. I knew I shouldn't trust him just because he's my uncle, but I was so scared after Mother and Father died…

Gordon seemed to gather what had happened. With an intense scowl, he asked, "What about that worker you had in the shop? Uh, Jack?"

Jack had been a long-time employee of Carter's Magic Items. Olivia admired him because he was as good an artificer as her father was. When her uncle stole the shop from Olivia, Jack went to the government office to inquire about the abnormal situation.

"But they insisted all legal procedures had been followed and turned him away," she relayed.

After that, her uncle found several assignments from who knows where. They were the sorts of things nobles would buy, such as dog collars and gate keys, which led to an explosion of responsibilities Jack had to do. He worked so much that it ruined his health, and he had to return to the countryside.

Olivia's voice kept catching in her throat as she told the story. Gordon listened with a stern expression that flashed with anger at several points throughout the tale.

A silence enveloped them once she was done. Then, he slowly opened his mouth and said, "I think I have a general idea of what happened. My question is, what do you want to do next?"

Olivia let out a sharp breath and looked Gordon straight in the eyes. "I want to work in the capital."

She asked him if he could introduce her somewhere and bowed her head, and he responded by looking at her in thought. He opened his mouth to say something, but then his eyes fell on the letter on the table. "Maybe this is fate," he murmured. After a small sigh, he met Olivia's eyes and stated in a level tone, "There are several

places you could work in the capital, but are you sure that's what you really want?"

Olivia nodded with a solemn look. She'd given it a lot of thought over the past two days and was certain.

"I see." Gordon closed his eyes. After a moment of contemplation, he slowly asked, "According to your father, your specialty is magic jewelry?"

"Yes."

"Why did you choose that?"

"Because I liked the magic jewelry my father made."

The corners of his mouth twitched up at her prompt response. "All right. That's understandable. Right. I made a promise to your father, but first, I'll need to see how good you are."

Olivia wondered what this promise was but nodded.

She'd only just been bowled over by the vast city and huge store and wasn't feeling confident, but Gordon was likely going to support her. He needed to see what she was capable of.

He grinned. "Good. Let's jump right to it." He shoved himself to his feet and opened the door to the hallway. "This way."

Olivia clutched her bag once more and stood, feeling nervous as she followed him.

They left the room and walked down a narrow hallway. "When you say you need to see how good I am, what did you have in mind?" asked Olivia.

"Thought I'd throw you in the deep end and have you make me a core."

She nodded in understanding. The core was the energy source for a magic item, made from a magic stone with a magical effect applied to it. How well the core was made significantly impacted the final item's quality, which was why it was used to test an artificer's skill.

Gordon opened one of the doors along the hallway and led her into a large workroom with one wall covered in cupboards. There was a row of large worktables, and one was occupied by a man in glasses who looked like a craftsman. He was busy fervently scribbling something down.

"This workroom is for guests," explained Gordon as he gestured for the man, who stood up to greet them, to sit back down. "The real workrooms are on the third and fourth floors." He brought her to one of the large worktables in the back and opened a cupboard. "I'd like you to take care of this one."

He took out a black brocade tray with a blue feather and a blue, gleaming magic stone about half the size of Olivia's pinky nail. She looked intently at the tray's contents.

A sapphire and an ice phoenix feather. Both look expensive.

Many of the magic stones were mined. It was harder to mine larger stones in pristine condition, which added to their value. The stone on the tray was beautiful and large, making Olivia think it must be expensive.

The feather also came from a bird that only lived in the north. Olivia judged it to be expensive too, since it was in such good condition.

In a serious tone, Gordon said, "Today, I'll be having you use these to create a core that activates when the wearer has been harmed or is at risk of being harmed. The triggering conditions and effect are detailed here."

Olivia accepted a sheet of paper filled with tiny writing from him. This sort of work would be considered challenging. Enchantments using ice phoenix feathers required fine-tuned control —he chose this specifically to test her skill.

All right. Get in the zone.

Forgetting to feel nervous, she became engrossed in reading the document.

"I see," she muttered. "The triggering conditions are either when the wearer wishes to activate it or when the wearer's magic aura detects intent to harm the wearer. The enchantment's power must be limited to half capacity should the wearer not intentionally activate it…"

She talked to herself as she read and reread. Gordon watched her, looking a little concerned.

About five minutes later, Olivia had completely grasped the specifications. She looked up at Gordon and asked, "May I borrow a

magic plate?”

“Sure.” He handed her a silver-colored metal plate about the size of a chair’s seat from the next worktable.

She placed it on her worktable, sat down, and took a small toolkit from her bag. From her kit, she took out four items: a quill with a white feather equipped with a magic stone, a protractor, a ruler, and a compass. She diverted her mana into the pen and began drawing a magic circle on the plate.

“Activate when the wearer wants it to. The wearer can also adjust the power. But if the wearer didn’t purposely want it to activate, it should be kept to half the available power. And then…”

Gordon stood behind her, watching as she drew and muttered to herself. “That’s precise,” he murmured.

Once the magic circle was complete, Olivia sent a small jolt of mana through the plate to test it before setting down her pen. “The magic circle is complete. May I apply the enchantment now?”

“Go on,” Gordon granted, and he took a step back.

Olivia stood, placed the ice phoenix feather and magic stone on the circle, and held her hands above them. “Activate magic circle.”

Mana poured from her hands, and the magic circle glowed.

“Levitate.”



Her mana wrapped around the feather and stone, and they gently lifted to her eye level as they glowed.

This was where things really got started. Olivia took a short breath to steady her breathing, then focused her mana into her hands as she quietly intoned, "Extract effect. Imbue effect."

Her mana turned into a powerful rush. The shining light grew stronger, and blue-colored mana flowed from the floating feather into the magic stone.

Before long, it was done; the beautiful core now showed a richer blue hue than at the start. Olivia pinched it between her fingers, and the light faded.

Maybe it's because the materials were of higher quality, but I feel like it turned out really well.

"I'm done," she announced, holding the stone out to Gordon, who was looking at her in a daze.

"I figured you'd be good seeing as you're his daughter, but that was more than I imagined," he replied, then muttered how she must have studied hard.

He took the stone from her and carefully examined it from all angles before turning to the now impressed bespectacled man and asked, "Shall we test it? Come with me."



THE three left the shop and went down a set of stairs out the back that went underground. Glancing around, Olivia noticed the basement had sturdy-looking stone walls with patches of black scorch marks scattered across them. This was apparently the test room.

"All right. Fire away," called Gordon, and the bespectacled man tossed a ball at Gordon.

PA-CHING.

The moment before the ball could strike Gordon, it froze and dropped to the ground.

"Hmph. Not bad. Excellent activation speed and power. Keep going," Gordon continued.

They tested it out in a wide variety of situations, adjusting the threat level or even having the man try to touch Gordon with a gloved hand with the intent to harm him. Olivia was nervous as she watched, though she sometimes assisted as well.

After about ten minutes, Gordon nodded. "Incredibly well made. One part of your enchantment process was slightly old-fashioned, but the quality is perfect."

With his shoulders heaving from exertion, the bespectacled man muttered, "She's quite something to do this at her age."

Oh, good, I pulled it off.

Olivia sighed in relief as Gordon grinned and held his hand out to her. "Right, now I have no qualms saying you're hired! Starting today, you're an artificer at Gordon's Magic Appliances."

"Uh, what?" Olivia's eyes widened. "I can work here?"

"Of course! In fact, I wouldn't want such a skilled artificer getting snapped up by some other shop." His face looked serious, and the bespectacled man was nodding in agreement.

Tears in her eyes distorted her vision. Her heart was so filled with different emotions—surprise at being able to work there, worry that she wouldn't be able to manage it, reassurance that she would be working with someone she trusted as much as Gordon—and she couldn't get any words out.

Gordon gently patted her back. "Let's go back upstairs. We should talk about what happens next."

She bowed her head in thanks—and to hide the tears about to spill from her eyes—as she exclaimed, "Thank you so much! I promise to work hard!"

Afterward, in his office, Gordon went through the salary and work expectations in detail. Olivia was to move into one of the dorm rooms in the employee lodging on the fifth floor, which was currently empty, and start as an apprentice artificer for them.



THAT evening, Gordon sat on the sofa in the center of a reception room cluttered with books, documents, and half-made magic items

and sighed. He was holding the letter from Ralph Carter, Olivia's father and his friend from his apprenticeship. The letter read in somewhat shaky writing:

Dear Gordon,

If you are reading this letter, it means I am no longer in this world. As unfortunate as that is, it is the way of things, and I lived a life blessed with family and friends.

However, there is one thing that remains to worry me: Olivia.

She has a good head on her shoulders, but she's still a child. She can be foolhardy like me and naïve in some ways. She has her fiancé and Jack, but life can bring surprises.

That's why I would like to ask you to help her should she find herself in trouble. I've told her to come to you with this letter if she is ever in a difficult spot.

If you see this letter, please ask her what has happened and offer her support.

Please.

Lastly, I wanted to let you know that I am grateful for everything you have done for me. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Ralph Carter

PS: If you can, please do what we discussed.

Gordon met Ralph about thirty years ago. Ralph was already an apprentice for a famous artificer in the capital when Gordon joined as one. They immediately got along, partly because they were both from the countryside, and the two were often together.

Ralph was what you might call a "magic item maniac," utterly ignorant of anything outside magic items. There were days when he would collapse after not eating properly for days, or he'd fall asleep standing up after not getting enough the night before. He was essentially a child in man form, but few artificers were more skilled than him, and he quickly rose to the top.

At the time, their country of Alexia was at war with the neighboring country, the Garde Empire. Ralph shone brilliantly, even receiving a baronet title for his magic item design contributions, which led to victory in the war.

But one day, he resigned from the shop without warning. Years later, Gordon learned from Ralph's letter that he'd returned to his hometown of Daregas and set up shop there.

I was surprised. He even invited me to his wedding despite not having been in touch for so long.

The bride was a blue-eyed seamstress with a good head on her shoulders, and Gordon was relieved when he met her. Even Ralph could manage a decent life if he had her to whip him into shape. Sometime after that, he spent six months in Daregas for work, when he met Ralph's twelve-year-old daughter, Olivia.

She had talent, having managed to enchant a magic stone before she was even ten. The future held promise for this girl, who was as manic about magic items as her father and had as good an eye for fashion as her mother.

Ralph became just as obsessed with his daughter as with magic items. One day, while out drinking, he bragged on and on to Gordon about her.

"My daughter is a genius! She has so much mana, and, more importantly, she's got a good eye like her mother!"

"That's good that she didn't get your style."

"I know! My little girl gets angry at me for my dull designs!"

After bragging for a while longer, Ralph's expression turned serious.

"This'll probably be a while down the road, but I'd like her to study at your shop," he disclosed.

Gordon looked at him with confusion. "I don't mind, but aren't you teaching her?"

"Of course. I'm drilling into her everything I know, but my shop only makes two things: lamps and magic jewelry."

"I thought specializing was what made an artificer."

"Generally, yeah, but I also think she should experience as many different types of magic items as she can while she's young."

Gordon grinned. "Well, in my opinion, you're not going to be able to let her go, but if she wants to work in the capital, she can come to my shop. She's more than welcome."

Ralph shook his head, looking stern. "No. That won't work. I don't care how cute she is—favoritism ruins people. You need to give her a test. Only let her work there if you think she's good enough."

Gordon couldn't help thinking how like Ralph that request was and nodded. "All right. I promise."

To think that conversation actually turned into reality.

Gordon sighed and leaned back into the sofa. In all honesty, when he heard Olivia's story, he was thinking of helping her get her shop back. Even if her uncle was her legal guardian, he shouldn't be allowed to get away with stealing her assets. Gordon thought he'd get the shop back even if it meant taking her uncle to court. He even considered stopping Olivia briefly when she mentioned she wanted to work in the capital, but then he remembered what Ralph had written, *"PS: If you can, please do what we discussed."*

Thinking of that made him feel that's what Ralph would have wanted. He tested Olivia just as promised and decided to hire her after evaluating her skills.

She was to start work in two days.

Maybe this was fate too.

He sighed and moved over to the window. As he looked outside, he recalled his friend's face, which looked much like Olivia's. Staring at the flickering light of the streetlights outside, he murmured, "Don't worry, Ralph. I'll make her into an even better artificer than you."

Intermission 1: The Adoptive Family and Former Fiancé

A few days after Olivia left for the capital, Henry's father paid a visit to her childhood home. In the glittering gold reception room with its blatant nouveau riche style, the regional lord, Viscount Perigord, sat in his clearly expensive suit.

He glared down at Baronet Carter and proclaimed, "You've caused quite the stir while I've been gone."

"Ah, yes, about that…" In his tacky gold blazer, Olivia's uncle stammered as he explained.

The corners of the Viscount's mouth quirked up in a cold smile. "I see. So, the majority of the magic jewelry at Carter's Magic Items was designed not by Olivia but by Catherine?"

"Yes, Lord Perigord. Particularly those from this past year. Those were all thought up by Catherine. Apparently, even the design that won the award was originally Catherine's." The Baronet gave a flustered smile as he rubbed his hands together and bowed his head.

"And what does Catherine have to say about this?"

"She said she couldn't admit anything sooner because she was afraid of Olivia."

The Viscount gave a ridiculing snort of laughter. "Hmph. She didn't seem that timid a girl to me. And wasn't she becoming rather close to my son Henry, who was engaged to her adopted sister? I can hardly imagine a girl as bold as that would remain quiet if her designs were stolen. Is what she says true?"

"Y-yes, it is true," Baronet Carter stuttered, wiping the sweat from his face with a gold handkerchief.

Sitting next to him was his wife, wearing a dress with a plunging neckline. In a calm voice, she agreed, "It is true. Please look at this." She indicated a small, well-used sketchbook on the coffee table. "These were all drawn by Catherine. It seems Olivia took what Catherine had made in books like these."

The Viscount grunted and took the book to flip through its pages. Inside, designs of jewelry covered every inch of the pages. "Is this all?" he asked.

"No, all of these as well." The baroness smiled and placed ten more similar sketchbooks on the table. "I can attest to the fact that Catherine drew these. I've seen her work on them myself."

"I see," murmured the Viscount. He saw the signature "Catherine Carter" on the last page of the sketchbook and turned to the Baronet. "Henry told me something similar. If two people close to me say the same, then I suppose it must be true."

"It is," said the Baronet with a vigorous nod. Then he leaned closer to the Viscount and whispered, "And I'm not sure I should say this, but, while Olivia does have excellent technique, she is inflexible. She may become an…inconvenience."

"I see." The Viscount frowned. "Well, we can handle that later," he said with a grim nod. "I originally made Henry her fiancé after being won over by her excellent design sensibility. However, if those designs were, in fact, Catherine's, then there is no reason for him to remain Olivia's fiancé. I accept the dissolution of their engagement and his engagement to Catherine."

"Th-thank you!"

"I am, however, concerned that an engagement immediately following the dissolution of his previous engagement may result in unwanted rumors. They will be officially engaged one year from now, and the wedding will take place a year after that."

"Understood." The Baronet and his wife grinned broadly.

Catherine was eavesdropping from the next room and pumped her fists in victory. *Yes! Now I am officially Henry's fiancée!*

She clung to Henry, who was beside her and also celebrating. "Thank you, Henry, I am so happy!" she exclaimed.

"As am I, Catherine." He put his arms around her with a lustful look as he let out a satisfied sigh. *Ah, finally, I can lead a life suited to someone like me,* he thought.

Henry was born the fourth son of Viscount Perigord. Having noble status from birth and being blessed with good looks made him believe from a young age that he was special. That was why he was so utterly disappointed when Olivia was introduced to him as his fiancée.

Why must someone as special as me marry a plain-looking mock noble like her with nothing of value to her other than her designs?

But his father would not budge on the issue. Henry began to court Olivia, as much as he hated it.

The one saving grace of the situation was that Olivia didn't have a particularly horrible personality, although she was quite the bore. He dreaded the time they spent together.

But one day, a girl named Catherine moved in to live with Olivia, her cousin. Henry was shocked by how enchanting she was. *This* was a girl worthy of being with him.

They began going for walks together, which was when he noticed something odd. Sometimes, she would take out a sketchbook and draw fervently inside. Glancing inside, he saw what looked like magic jewelry designs.

Thinking it suspicious, he confronted her about it, and she broke down into tears as she confessed to him that her cousin had been stealing her designs for years.

Henry immediately told his father about this. He then hit that lying woman, Olivia, with the news of their engagement ending and proposed to Catherine. They wouldn't be able to marry for some time yet, but that was a small price to pay for being with a woman that suited him.

He stroked Catherine's hair as he held her, a triumphant smile on his face. Now, he would finally have the life he deserved.



CATHERINE also smiled triumphantly in Henry's arms.

Finally, finally, I have everything.

In the beginning, Catherine's family was well-off. Her great-grandfather left them a significant sum, meaning they had enough money to live in luxury even without working. They lived in a big house filled to bursting with expensive objects, and all their clothing was of the highest quality. Add into the mix her incredible looks, and she was pampered like crazy.

But when she was twelve, her father got conned, and they lost their fortune. They had to sell their home and belongings and move to a hovel outside town.

Her father was incompetent regarding work, and her mother seemed uninterested in working. The life that awaited Catherine was a life of poverty where she would be dressed in rags and struggle to find food for the next day.

Her friends that had flattered her up until then now paid her no attention, and the people around her looked at her with ridicule.

Why do I have to face such hardships?

She was filled with such anger that she wanted to scream.

Then one day, Catherine saw Olivia in town. She was wearing beautiful clothes and walking pleasantly with her fiancé. Rage bubbled up from the pit of Catherine's stomach. How unfair it was that she had to go through this.

Catherine already knew what she would do when she and her family moved into Olivia's mansion the following year.

"I am going to steal everything from her."

She took her room, clothes, accessories, and fiancé. Catherine even schemed with her mother to swipe her designs and chase her out of the house and shop.

The next day, she was officially Henry's fiancée—she could barely stop smiling.

Once Henry left that day, she returned to her room and opened a drawer. Inside were the twenty sketchbooks she'd stolen from Olivia's room. There were over 500 designs for rings, necklaces, and even earrings. If she put out ten designs each year, they would last her fifty years.

And then they'll see me as a genius designer too.

There were many fans of Olivia's designs. Since Catherine now had those designs, her security as a designer was now all but guaranteed.

All that's left to make this perfect is to find her bank card, and I only need to look little by little for that.

If she had Olivia's card, she could withdraw her savings and steal what was in her safety deposit box. Once that was done, Olivia would have absolutely nothing left.

Catherine closed the drawer and smiled contemptuously.

"Thank you, sister. And goodbye."

This is the start of my rosy life.



ABOUT a week later…

"Ah! I found it!"

"Is that where it was hiding?"

Catherine and her mother found Olivia's bank card on the worn bookcase in her room. They practically skipped to the bank, knowing this would let them take everything Olivia had.

"That card has been reported stolen," reported one bank worker.

"How odd," noted another. "Miss Olivia told us herself that her family said they didn't know anything about her card."

And so, the two became the subject of intense questioning, but Olivia wasn't yet aware of that.

Chapter 3: The First Day of Her New Life

IT'S *morning already, isn't it?*

It was the second day after Gordon officially hired Olivia at Gordon's Magic Appliances.

Olivia woke to birdsong in her employee dorm room on the fifth floor of the shop. She sat up in bed and stretched before looking around her. Her small room had a wooden floor, white plastered walls, and an angled ceiling. Some old wooden furniture, such as a wardrobe and a dresser, decorated her new quarters.

She put on her slippers and stood to open the white curtains. A narrow strip of blue sky peeked through between her new lodging and the row of other five-story buildings across the street. Everything about the scene was so *city* it made her sigh.

I still can't believe I'm living smack dab in the middle of the capital. She reached high in a stretch before patting her cheeks. *Time to get to work! Let's do this!*

Taking the light shawl hung over the chair, she wrapped her shoulders before leaving the room. Outside, in the dimly lit hallway, was a row of similar wooden doors and the complete silence of the early morning. She padded down to the very end of the hallway to bathe in the cheery bathroom with a small window.

Once she returned to her room, she put the magic kettle on to boil and laid out five of the pastries and tarts she'd bought the day before. Drinking her aromatic black tea, Olivia ate the baked goods while looking out the window into the clear morning sky.

Mm! That's good!

The walnut-filled pastry was flakey and fragrant, while the milky bread was nice and moist. One of the tarts filled with icing was so delicious her eyes widened as she bit into it.

The capital is incredible. They've got such amazing bakeries in the city. Though…this doesn't hold a candle to that old woman's salted rolls.

She was thinking back to the small bakery near her father's shop, where the old woman always gave her pick-me-up treats with a big smile, making her eyes crinkle into little lines.

I wonder how she is. She must be worried since I disappeared all of a sudden…

A long sigh escaped her lips as she thought about her far-off hometown and her father's shop, but she shook her head to ward off the thoughts.

Don't get yourself down. You decided you'd stop thinking about that.

She'd established the day before to "Stop reminiscing and ruminating on it. Look to the future."

Thinking about the past and worrying wouldn't change anything—the past year had driven that lesson home. Since she was here in the capital now, it also seemed pointless to worry herself sick over what had happened in the past in the distant town of Daregas. And so, she would make herself face forward, even if she had to force herself to. She would work so hard at growing as an artificer that one day, she'd look back and think, "I'm glad I went to the capital back then."

She would give it her all and become the kind of artificer who puts smiles on her customers' faces, just like her father.

"Face forward, and deal first with what's right in front of you," she murmured encouragingly as she went to work on the pastries. Olivia then gulped down the rest of her somewhat cool tea and energetically pushed herself up to get pumped.

First things first, get dressed!

She changed out of her pajamas and took a new white blouse, deep green skirt, and wine-red blazer from the wardrobe; her new ensemble was purchased at a store owned by a friend of Gordon's at his recommendation. She tied a bow at her neck and, as always, put an earring on her right ear.

She quickly combed her fingers through her hair and then patted her cheeks.

All right, let's do this!



ABOUT an hour after waking, Olivia was at Gordon's office on the second floor, her heart racing. She knocked and entered to find Gordon at a desk covered in stacks of paper.

He grinned when he saw her. "How do you find the dorms? You sleep all right?"

"Yes, thank you. I've been very comfortable."

"Good." The corners of his mouth turned up more, and he looked up at the clock. "Let's get right to it then. I'll give you some info before we go around and introduce you to everyone."

"Sounds good," replied Olivia with a tense expression. It was finally happening. She took a pen and notepad from her pocket.

Gordon gestured for her to sit in the chair across from him and began, "So, we have thirty-seven employees in total. Sixteen of them work in this shop, of which six are artificers and ten people who do sales."

"Where do the other employees work?"

"Our branch stores and the Royal Research Institute. Some have set up stores out in the country."

Olivia was in awe as she took notes. She should have known that the typical magic item shops with only a few employees were incomparable to large shops in the capital.

Though, despite being in the capital, few women seemed to be working with magic items. They had only one other female employee, the one who showed Olivia to Gordon's office when she first came to the store.

Gordon then explained how she would receive her own workroom on the third or second floor once she became a fully-fledged artificer. Until then, she'd use the group workshop on the second floor. Olivia fervently took notes, stopping occasionally to ask questions.

After some time, Gordon glanced at the clock and stood. "It's time. We should get moving."

"All right." Olivia let out a tense sigh and stood.

The two left the office and went to the third floor.

"First, we'll visit Harrison," explained Gordon.

"Harrison?"

"He specializes in heat generation items. He's a talented artificer who works on our flagship products: stoves and heaters. I want you to work with him first to diversify your skills."

"All right." Olivia nodded firmly, her heart pounding faster at the idea of a new job.

I wonder what kind of person Harrison is.

She felt a mixture of tension and unease as she followed Gordon and forced herself to take several deep breaths to calm her nerves.

He stopped at the furthest door on the third floor and announced, "Here we are," before entering. Inside stood the stern-looking middle-aged man with black-rimmed glasses who had been there for her test. He had on a vest over his shirt and a neatly tied necktie.

"Harrison, I've brought Olivia. I'd like you to look after her starting today," explained Gordon.

"It's a pleasure to be working with you," greeted Olivia, glad that he was someone she already knew.

She bowed, and Harrison spoke in a friendly tone, "We met at your test, didn't we? The pleasure's mine."

Olivia nodded, thinking Harrison seemed like an intelligent man.

He and Gordon exchanged a few words, then Harrison looked at Olivia and said, "It seems you'll be busy for the rest of the morning. Could I have you meet back here after lunch with your things? I'll explain what you'll be doing then."

Olivia nodded, feeling nervous. "Yes. I'll be here. Thank you."



"AND, with that, we're finished."

Gordon shuffled the stack of paperwork Olivia had filled out on the desk to even it out.

"Ah, done, finally…" Olivia leaned back heavily in her chair.

After saying hello to Harrison, Gordon took her to meet all the other artificers in their workrooms, greet the sales staff on the first floor, and finally returned to the second floor. Waiting for her in Gordon's office was a veritable mountain of paperwork ranging from entry to the Artificers Guild to registration with the Artificer's Association of the Royal Capital. She'd written so much her hand hurt.

Gordon smiled wryly. "It's because the royals live here in the capital. All magic-related occupations are strictly regulated."

"Really?"

"Yep. It's just the lot you're given, working with magic in the capital."

Olivia shook her numb right hand, realizing the many frustrating things in the capital. She also started thinking about how it was nearly lunchtime when a gentle knock rapped on the office door.

"Come in," called Gordon, and the door slowly opened to the elegantly beautiful woman with light brown hair from before. She was wearing a classy blueish-gray dress.

She smiled softly. "Hello, Gordon."

"Ah, Rose, what can I do for you?"

"I was thinking I might invite Olivia to lunch today. Would that be all right?"

"Ah!" Olivia's eyes popped at the offer. She had thought it would be nice to make friends with her, the only other woman at the shop, but never expected an invitation from her.

Gordon looked happy. "Of course. We're finished with work. Feel free to steal her."

Rose nodded, then turned her smile to Olivia. "Would you be all right with setting out now?"

"Yes, that's fine."

"Is there anything you can't or don't want to eat?"

"No, nothing in particular." Olivia was nervous as she replied, but Rose smiled.

"All right. Shall we go then?"

"Yeah." Olivia stood, looking at Rose with gratitude. She was sure Rose was going out of her way to be friendly.

Rose smiled softly. "We'll go out the back. This way."

The two stepped out of the shop and walked along a wide, bustling street lined with tall buildings on both sides. Outside was pleasant, and the soft green buds on the trees lining the street gleamed in the gentle spring sun.

Rose stretched and sighed as they walked. "The weather's so nice today."

"It really is," replied Olivia. She looked up at the sky, eyes narrowing against the springtime sun. It almost seemed like the air was pleasantly cool here compared to Daregas.

As they walked, Rose pointed out a cute shop on the road. "That's the most popular patisserie on the main street; their orange cake is famous. Oh, and the shop there on the corner makes business cards. You can pop in there and make an order if you need some."

She pointed out all sorts of stores and offerings as they walked, detailing the shops Olivia might find useful or the restaurants with good food.

Olivia felt a little on edge but was filled with curiosity as she listened.

They turned onto a somewhat narrow street and walked for a few minutes to a stylish restaurant boasting a patio filled with rows of tables and white umbrellas.

"Here we are," Rose announced. "Let's go in."

Olivia was amazed by what she could find in the capital as she looked up at the fancy sign. She'd never seen a place so elegant in Daregas.

The restaurant was bustling with the lunchtime rush as classy ladies engaged in bubbly conversation over their food. A friendly server led Rose and Olivia to a table on the patio. They sat across from each other and looked over the elegant menu.

"The lunch set here is so good. There are three options to choose from," explained Rose.

Olivia's heart thumped. She was certain the food was good. Look at that menu and the clientele!

After they had ordered, they started chatting again.

"Where are you from, Olivia?" Rose asked.

"I'm from Daregas."

"Oh?" Her eyes widened. "That's near where I'm from. I'm from Leeds, only two towns over."

"What? You're not from the capital?"

Rose chuckled softly at Olivia's surprise. "No. But maybe I look like I am; I have lived here for seven years." It turned out she was also the daughter of an artificer with a magic item shop in Leeds. "My father is a friend of Gordon's. He introduced me to him seven years ago and asked if I could work at his shop."

Olivia told Rose how she had been introduced to Gordon through her father too as a feeling of kinship toward Rose grew within her. She'd been tense having lunch with such a mature, more experienced coworker, but having something in common made her feel more at ease.

After some time, the server brought out their food. "We have the spaghetti carbonara set and the spaghetti in butter mushroom sauce set."

Olivia's eyes sparkled as the server set the steaming food in front of her. Her heart leapt with joy at the sight of the thick chunks of bacon and the aroma of rich cheese.

"It looks so good!" Olivia twirled the pasta around her fork, and her eyes shot open when she popped it in her mouth.

It's amazing! It's even better than I expected!

The smooth cream sauce coated the pasta in the ideal ratio, matching excellently with the fragrant black pepper used as an accent, and the rich bacon was fried exquisitely. It all worked together beautifully.

And the pasta is perfectly al dente. It's so good!

"You seem to be enjoying that," noted Rose with a happy smile as she watched Olivia dig in with a joyful expression. "I didn't have it

this time, but their Hamburg steak is also wonderful."

That gave Olivia something to look forward to.

"That was delicious!" exclaimed Olivia once they finished eating.

"I'm glad you liked it."

They continued talking as they sipped the complimentary black tea.

Ah. That really was a great lunch.

Olivia drank her tea, feeling satisfied, while Rose watched her with a smile. Now more acquainted with one another, they shared a small ice cream dessert as they gabbed more.

"My mother was angry at my father for practically brainwashing their daughter into loving magic items," divulged Rose. "Did you have any of that?"

"Yes! Oh, and did you ever get any magic accessories with odd self-defense functions?"

"I did. I once broke out into terrified sweats when I tested a pendant, and it shot out flames."

They were having fun reminiscing about their "artificer's daughter experiences."

"Thank you for today," exclaimed Olivia. "The food was amazing. I'd love to do this again sometime."

"Me too. Should we head back?"

And so, they made their way back to the shop, their steps light.



AFTER finishing lunch with Rose and returning to the shop, Olivia picked up the things she'd left on the second floor and went to Harrison's workroom on the third.

"Hello, Mr. Harrison," she greeted him after knocking.

"Ah, you're here. You don't have to knock in the future. Feel free to come right in."

"All right," she replied, feeling nervous.

Harrison gave a kind nod and gestured to a largish table in the corner of the room. "You can use that desk when you're here. Set

your things down and come over here with your magic toolkit. I'll explain what we'll be doing."

"Sure thing." Olivia did as she was told and brought her toolkit over to the central worktable where Harrison was. "Thank you for teaching me, Mr. Harrison."

"Shall we begin? First…" Harrison opened a large wooden box on the worktable. "Do you know what these are?"

"Uh, magic stones and…claws of some sort?"

The box was crammed full of red gemstones nearly as big as her fist and large, red claw-like objects as long as her index finger.

"You're right about the magic stones; they're red agate. I acquired them at a discount from a merchant I regularly work with, as they're not ideal in size. The claws are phoenix talons; they haven't been used in a while."

According to him, phoenix talons had been incredibly valuable a while ago, but another more effective material was discovered, rendering them nearly antiquated.

"I suppose that's just what happens with the changing times," he murmured before looking at Olivia. "I heard your specialization is magic jewelry. Have you made anything else?"

"I've made lamps."

"Right, it's safe to assume you've never made a large core, is that correct?"

Olivia nodded.

Large magic cores were used in larger magic items—and uncharted territory for her as they required different techniques from the small cores used in magic jewelry.

Harrison pointed to the magic stoves and heaters in the corner of the room. "As you can see, my specialty is in large magic items. Obviously, that means I often deal with large cores. That's why I'd like to have you make them."

"All right," she answered, thinking this must be what Gordon meant for her to expand her horizons.

Harrison took a piece of paper with a magic circle already drawn from a shelf and placed it on the worktable. "First, I'd like to

see what you can do. It's all right if it doesn't work well. Just go ahead and try making a core using these stones and talons."

She hadn't expected the sudden hands-on task, but she picked up the paper anyway. "This core is for…an oven?"

"Yep. It's a simple one that only heats. They were popular more than a decade ago. This type lost out to newer kinds that came along later, but it's perfect for practice."

Olivia sat down and took her quill, compass, protractor, and other tools from her toolkit. She poured mana through her quill as she began drawing the circle on a magic plate while referencing the paper example.

I see… You use more mana for larger magic stones and materials. It's going to be hard to control my mana.

Harrison quietly watched over Olivia's shoulder as she analyzed the makeup of the circle she drew. Once finished, she sent a small jolt of mana through the plate to test it, turned around, and asked, "May I try it?"

"Of course."

She stood, placed a stone and a talon on the plate, and held her hands over them.

"Activate magic circle."

The circle glowed as her mana poured out and enveloped the talon and stone. She let out a sharp breath because the actual trial was about to start and closed her eyes as she intoned, "Extract effect. Imbue effect."

Her mana grew more powerful as red-colored mana was drawn from the talon to flow into the magic stone. Usually, she would be done once there was no more mana inside the talon, but this time…

Ack! It's too abnormal!

She struggled with everything she had but was having a hard time drawing the mana out of the material well. Even when she finally did extract it, she couldn't get it to flow smoothly into the stone.

Beads of sweat stood on her brow as she wrestled for control of the mana. Even the magic circle—which was normally an ally to her—wasn't doing what she wanted it to.

She somehow managed to imbue the mana into the stone at long last, but the core that resulted was a horribly crude piece riddled with uneven strips.

This…this is bad.

Her shoulders slumped in disappointment. It would be just about usable, but calling that a core would only cause annoyance as it couldn't maintain steady heat output or activation.

"I'm sorry," she uttered. "It turned out horribly."

She held it out to Harrison, who looked at it in shock. He inspected it without a word, then grinned with surprise. "Wow. I can't believe you got it to work."

"What?"

"No one's ever made a core that works on their first go. I mean, there were a lot of problems with your process, but you can improve—and you've got a knack for it. I feel like it's safe to think of you as already ready to fight…"

Olivia cocked her head as he muttered to himself. Did that mean it wasn't bad for her first attempt?

Harrison rolled up his sleeves and said, "Right, I'll do it now. Watch closely."

He sat at the worktable and opened his own toolkit. He passed mana into his well-used quill and quickly drew out the magic circle without using a compass or protractor.

Wow! He's so fast!

Olivia's jaw dropped. How much experience did someone need to have to be able to draw such a neat magic circle without even using a compass?

While his hand raced across the plate, he explained, "The larger the magic stone, the stronger its peculiarities. If you want to control those, you can't only use the magic circle as it is, or it won't go well. There's a variety of methods, but I usually directly draw the circle to match the stone's features."

As Harrison walked her through the process, he pulsed mana through the stone to reveal the stats and then drew commands that weren't on the example sheet. She admired his technique and finesse as she watched—stared, really—while he worked.

Once the magic circle was complete, he stood. “Activate magic circle.”

The circle glowed as his mana coursed through before enveloping the talon and stone. Olivia’s eyes went round. She’d never imagined someone would use such powerful mana.

Quietly, Harrison recited, “Extract effect. Imbue effect.”

Growing even more powerful, the pure-red mana from the glowing talon flowed out in one swoop.

Olivia was flabbergasted, but Harrison’s expression was calm as he explained, “Materials like this have so much mana that you have to draw it out in one pull, or you end up in a sort of tug-of-war. Same with the magic stone. It’s easier to imbue it evenly if you do it in one go.”

As he spoke, the mana drawn from the talon poured quickly into the magic stone.

And then it was done: a beautiful core with uniform color and mana quality.

W-wow!

She was shaking from how incredible it was. Obviously, there were some tricks to handling large magic stones, and you needed experience, but what really wowed her was Harrison’s delicate yet bold manipulation of mana. In that area, he was likely even better than her father had been.

Harrison smiled. “It’s just a matter of repeated practice. Once you can make one type of large core, you can adapt that to others. And we’ve got plenty of magic stones and materials for you to practice. Use as many as you need to.”

“I will!”

Olivia looked at him with respect. What an incredible artificer he was.

He smiled sheepishly. “Well, give it another go. I’ll watch.”

“All right!”



"I have some paperwork from Mr. Harrison," Olivia said that evening in Gordon's office.

"Thanks. You must have worked hard today." He took the papers and flipped through them, signed the top sheet, and set them aside before looking at Olivia with a grin. "Now that's the face of someone having fun."

"Yes, I am! Thanks to you."

She nodded enthusiastically, and he nodded in satisfaction. "That's good. Seems it was the right choice, having Harrison look after you. What did you find the most interesting?"

Olivia thought about it. She'd learned so much today. It was interesting talking about magic heaters and next-gen ovens and stoves. But the most interesting thing was probably when they talked about current research into technique.

"It was interesting talking about crimson flame stones," she relayed.

Crimson flame stone was a new type of magic stone discovered about a year ago. It had unique characteristics, such as melting under powerful mana, apparently allowing it to be molded like metal.

Gordon nodded like he understood her interest. "That surprised me too. No one expected to be able to form what we thought were tiny stones into large magic ones."

While he was talking, Olivia thought about how glad she was to work in this shop.

That's when the clock chimed. Olivia looked up and saw it was five o'clock—closing time.

Gordon grinned. "You finished with work?"

"Uh, yes. Mr. Harrison said I was done once I delivered the paperwork."

"Good! Shall we go?"

"Uh, what?"

He smiled and stood. "Today's your welcome party!"



"IT gets dark here at night."

It was the night of her first day at Gordon's Magic Appliances. She was walking up the fire escape on the outside of the closed shop, relying entirely on the streetlights to see. She went slowly, heading toward the top fifth floor where her dorm room was. Once there, she took her key from her bag and felt for the lock.

CREEEEAK.

The un-oiled hinge squealed as she opened the door. She searched for the switch for the magic lamp hung on the wall using the faint light coming in from outside and turned it on, filling the hallway with a gentle orange glow.

Oh, good. Found it.

With a sigh of relief, she made sure to lock the door, then picked up the lamp and walked down the hall. The shadow she cast on the walls rippled. She reached her room at the opposite end of the hall, unlocked it, stepped inside, and sighed.

I made it home. It's a little scary here at night.

She set her things on the table before switching on the larger lamp in the corner of her room and collapsing into bed.

Phew. That was fun.

Gordon and Rose had thrown Olivia a welcome party. Every employee at the shop today came out to the restaurant they'd booked, one of Gordon's favorites. Olivia was nervous at first, but everyone was so friendly as they spoke to her that it ended up being an enjoyable time. She giggled as she remembered her and one of the salesmen comparing their knowledge of magic item facts. She hadn't laughed that much in a long time as she watched her coworkers test each other's knowledge or talk about the latest weird magic item they'd found.

I surprised them with how much I ate, too, but that was part of the fun.

After a moment, she pulled herself up with a groan. Tomorrow was an early start again. She went to shower and get ready for bed. Once finished, she wrapped her shawl around her shoulders over her pajamas, then opened the window and looked down.

The city is impressive. It's still awake even at this time of night.

People were happily strolling below her window along the streetlamp-lit cobblestone road. Many of the shops were still open, and a soft light came from their windows.

She felt the nighttime spring breeze on her cheek as she gazed at the glow and thought through the day's events. From dawn to dusk, it had been filled with new experiences. She'd been so busy, but it was very fulfilling.

"I think I'll remember this day for the rest of my life…" she murmured, and then she closed the curtains.

She turned off the lamp, crawled into bed, and murmured, "I'll work hard tomorrow too," as she drifted off into a deep sleep.

Chapter 4: They Meet Again

"WHERE am I…?"

The rain had just let up over the hectic activity in the capital, though clouds still hung overhead, and Olivia, in her wine-red blazer, stood in a daze with a map in one hand.

"I am totally lost."



OLIVIA'S new life in the capital had gotten off to a fantastic start. Harrison was caring as he passionately guided her through imbuing large magic stones, a task she was struggling with due to inexperience. Her other artificer colleagues were also kind and taught her everything they knew about their own specialties. She was nearly swallowed up by the tidal wave of new information and skills, but she spent her days diving in and learning.

But at the same time, she was struggling to sleep.

It's because of that*, isn't it…*

She'd told herself she shouldn't think about it but would find her thoughts going back to what happened in Daregas at unexpected moments. Sometimes, when she couldn't stop the intrusive thoughts, she wouldn't get to sleep until morning.

That's probably why I haven't been able to think of any new designs.

Before, new magic jewelry designs would come naturally to her, but nothing had since she'd left Daregas.

Perhaps her spirit was more worn down than initially thought.

She'd spent her days sighing, thinking she needed to do something about it, but was unable to come up with any way to get

past it.

Then, her first day off came.

The employees of Gordon's Magic Appliances received two days off after every ten days of work—and now it was her turn.

How should I spend them?

Considering her insomnia, she wanted to do something that would knock her out of her rut. She asked Rose how she spent her days off, and she said she often goes to cafés. Apparently, it was common in the capital for people to have a leisurely lunch at a café on their day off.

That's when Olivia remembered the cousin she was amicable with boasted about doing the same in the capital. Since Olivia was there now, she decided she wanted to try doing something like the locals.

"All right, I'll go to a café then."

When she told Rose about her decision, she kindly recommended one popular for its incredible pancakes.

Ooh! Pancakes!

Olivia's heart did a little dance—she loved pancakes.

She set off into town the morning of her day off, right after the rain let up, with a map in hand and well before lunch to get there before it got too crowded.

"Uh, there's no street here… I'm not sure this is right, but I think it's probably this direction?"

And so on, as she used her intuition to guide her until she had absolutely no idea where she was.

W-well, I need to figure out where I am at least…

Olivia walked with the crowds, staring intently at her map, but she still had no clue where she was. She looked around to find someone to ask, but they all seemed so busy she felt bad flagging them down.

What do I do?

At her wits' end, she came to a stop, and that's when she heard it.

"Hello."

It was a young man's voice from behind.

Huh? Who's that?

She jumped at the sound and turned around to see a tall, handsome young man wearing a well-tailored brown jacket and green-tinted glasses beneath his flat cap. It was the young man who'd called her "madam." Recognizing him, she jerked herself into a bow.

"H-hello. Thank you for showing me the way to the shop the other day. I never said thank you."

He responded politely by tipping his cap and asked, "May I ask, why are you standing in the middle of the road?"

"Uh, well, I'm sort of lost…"

"May I see?" He leaned over to look at her map and pointed to a spot with his large hand. "We're here now. Is this red circle where you'd like to go?"

"Yes, it is."

"I see," he murmured. After a moment of thinking, he told her, "I'll show you the way."

"Oh, but it's not exactly nearby. I'd feel bad…" Olivia was surprised and flustered. She would feel awful having him show her the way twice when they barely even knew each other.

He softly asked, "Pardon me for prying, but where did you start today?"

"Gordon's Magic Appliances."

"I thought so." He nodded and pointed to the map. "This is Gordon's Magic Appliances here; this is where you're trying to go, and this is where we are now. You went the exact opposite direction."

"The opposite direction?"

"Yes. The streets here are complex. And I don't mean to barge into your business, but I do think it may be best if I showed you the way."

Olivia hung her head guiltily. She'd known for a while now that she had barely any sense of direction. He was probably right, and it would be best if he showed her the way.

She bobbed her head and uttered, "Well then, if you don't mind…"

"Not at all."

The two set off across the still-damp cobblestones, side by side, with some distance between them.

He walked slowly to match Olivia's stride and asked, "Is the mark on your map a restaurant?"

"It's a café called The Tabby Cat."

"Is that the one famous for its pancakes?"

Olivia's eyes rounded, and she looked up at the handsome young man walking beside her. "It is! You know of it?"

"Well, it is famous. Do you like pancakes?"

"I do! I love pancakes. I've been looking forward to trying them since last night," she rambled excitedly, and he looked at her with amusement.

"By the way, you mentioned you set off from Gordon's Magic Appliances. Are you working there?"

"Yes, I am."

"That's wonderful. Working there is proof you're excellent at what you do. May I ask what your specialty is?"

"Magic jewelry."

"Ah." He nodded. "Now that you mention it, you did say you were interested in that. At the moment, bridal jewelry is gaining popularity in the capital. It may be a good idea for magic jewelry to engage with that market as well."

Olivia was surprised at how well-informed he was despite his appearance. She'd thought of him as a kind but not very serious young man, though it seemed he was surprisingly dedicated to his work.

The two walked, chatting about work-adjacent things as blue sky began to peek through the clouds. They turned onto a lavish street, and the young man pointed to one of the buildings. "We're here. That's The Tabby Cat."

Oh! It's so fancy!

The café with its cat shop sign had cream-colored walls, a white wooden door, pots of red flowers, and the most wonderful aroma was wafting from it.

Olivia ran up, her eyes gleaming. She had a feeling the food was going to be even better than she imagined.

But her shoulders slumped when she saw the sign on the door: Tables full. Two-hour wait.

Oh… I left early too, but I got lost, and now it's their busy time.

Her heart sank. It was her fault for getting lost, but it was still so unfortunate.

The young man watched in her silence as if in thought. "Maybe this is fate," he murmured, then spoke louder, "I've started to crave pancakes as well. Would you mind if I joined you?"

"What? N-no, I don't mind, but it's a two-hour wait…"

He smiled at her wide-eyed look. "Just follow me."

He went inside and exchanged words with the hostess, then a middle-aged man with a friendly smile appeared from the back and greeted, "It's been too long, Master Dicks. How is your father?"

"He's well, thank you. Is our room open?"

"Of course. This way, please, and your guest as well."

Olivia followed, her mouth agape. She had no idea what she'd witnessed.

The man led them to an ornate private room with cream walls and white tables and chairs by the windows. The young man gestured for her to take a seat, then showed her the menu that was on the table.

"What would you like?" he asked.

"Uh, I…" She looked with confusion at his handsome features.

This is a special room, isn't it? Who is *this person?*

"Ah," he began quietly, seeing her confusion. "My family's company financed this café. That's why they let us in this special room."

"Oh, r-right. And, may I ask who…?"

"Of course. It's odd to dine with someone whose name you don't know, isn't it?" He brought a hand to his chest in a graceful motion. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Elliot Dicks, third son of the founder of Dicks & Co."



"M-my name is Olivia Carter. I'm an artificer at Gordon's Magic Appliances," she replied, managing to fumble out an introduction, but it all made sense now.

She'd only been in the capital for about two weeks, but even she had heard of the trading company Dicks & Co. It must have been quite a big company.

If he was a trader, it made sense he'd know so much about bridal things and magic items.

Tentatively, she asked, "Um, are you nobility…?"

"My father is a baronet. You?"

"Oh, yes. My father was also a baronet."

Olivia was relieved. She wouldn't have known what to do if he was a high-ranking nobleman, but it seemed they were equals.

But I guess that is how the capital is different. We're both children of baronets, but he seems way more like nobility than me.

After that, the two ordered the café's famed pancake set. The food came out immediately, almost like it'd been ready for them, and Olivia's eyes shone when she saw the dishes.

It looks so good!

On top of two nicely browned pancakes was a generous dollop of fresh whipped cream and honey with colorful nuts and berries scattered alongside.

"I can't wait," she exclaimed as she carefully cut the pancakes and took a bite. She sighed when the elegant sweetness filled her mouth.

Oh, this is bliss…

The first striking thing about it was the cream. It was fresh, delicately sweet, and whipped to the perfect consistency. She felt happiness the moment it touched her tongue. It paired well with her black tea and provided a new culinary experience each time she tried it with a different topping. Adding that on top of the fluffy pancakes made the whole thing so delicious she nearly cried tears of joy that she was alive.

In the beginning, Olivia was conscious of Elliot's presence and ate politely, but by the time she got halfway through her pancakes,

she was so enchanted that she forgot he was there and tackled her pancakes with gusto.

As he watched her, he murmured things like, "You really can eat," and, "I've never seen a woman eat like that," with a smile. He also looked after her, offering to order seconds and more tea.

After about an hour, Olivia had polished off two plates of pancakes and three desserts and set her fork on her plate, feeling fulfilled.

Oh, that was amazing. I enjoyed that so much.

"Well done," complimented Elliot with an amused smile as he poured her another cup of tea. That's when she realized she'd practically forgotten he even existed.

Oh gosh, it's so rude to ignore someone you're dining with and do nothing but eat without talking…

Feeling guilty, she looked away uneasily. Elliot seemed to guess her thoughts as the corners of his mouth turned up, and he emphasized, "Don't worry. I enjoyed myself as well."

"But…you only ate one plate of pancakes…"

"You make that sound like it's abnormal."

Afterward, Olivia offered, "I'll pay. As a thank you."

"I believe it's standard for the man to pay. I'll cover it."

"It can't be right for you to pay when you not only showed me the way to the café but also ate only a fifth of what I did."

"Yes, you did eat more than me, but—"

"I insist!"

After their back-and-forth, they finally settled on Olivia paying the bill and Elliot buying her a box of the café's popular chocolates as a thank-you. They each paid and left.

"I'll show you back to Gordon's Magic Appliances," offered Elliot.

"Thank you. I appreciate it."

They set off side by side, strolling toward the shop under a now completely clear sky. Their conversation was more dynamic than their first trip, perhaps because they'd eaten together.

Olivia glanced up at his handsome features as they walked next to each other. *He's not at all what I expected him to be.*

Based on the banter he had with the woman at the station in Daregas, his looks that she imagined made him popular with the ladies, and his tinted sunglasses, she'd pegged him as "kind, but un-serious and flirtatious." Once she actually spent time with him, though, she realized that wasn't the case at all.

When a cute waitress at the café flirted with him, he did nothing but act like a perfect gentleman, and he didn't seem to notice at all when beautiful women passed by while they walked. He wasn't flirtatious at all. If anything, he seemed uninterested in women.

And when they talked, she sensed dedication in him and depth in the knowledge of what he talked about. That impression was far from "un-serious."

I guess it's true you can't judge a book by its cover. I feel so bad deciding he's flirtatious and undedicated without even getting to know him.

As she was reprimanding herself, Elliot asked an unexpected question. "I've heard people say that artificers need an aptitude for making the sort of locks popular these days that use the most popular magic stones. What sort of aptitude is that?"

It was quite a technical question. "I wouldn't agree that you need any sort of natural aptitude for it. It'd be more accurate to say it's just incredibly difficult to do. The magic circles used are very complex, and not many people can do it."

"I see. How many artificers are there that could handle it?"

"Well…" Olivia pondered. "I don't have an exact number, but all the artificers at Gordon's can. But in Daregas, there were only two."

Elliot sounded impressed as he noted, "You're very good at explaining things."

"Am I?"

"Yes. I have a better understanding now. Thank you." Then he pointed down the street and relayed, "If you go straight down this road and turn, you'll be on the main road."

That was when she noticed the floral patterns all around her. They were mostly used in the clothing and parasols of young

women. She felt like she hadn't seen that when she arrived in the capital.

"I feel like there's a lot of floral patterns around," she murmured, and Elliot nodded.

"Floral is popular right now. Stars were popular for a while before that, but it seems floral is going to take over."

"Really?" she murmured, thinking how cute floral motif magic jewelry would be.

I could do a design with flowers bursting into bloom. Put the magic stone in the center and use magic metal for the petals, and I could make it even more elegant. And the stem…

For the first time in a long while, a design was coming to her, and her spirits lifted. She was confident it was an outstanding design.

Elliot watched in amusement as her expression cycled through different emotions.

They came to Gordon's shop, and Olivia gratefully accepted the cutely wrapped package of chocolates.

"I should be going," said Elliot. "I enjoyed our conversations. We should exchange information again sometime. Next time, maybe we should go have roll cake."

"Roll cake! Absolutely! Thank you for today."

After Elliot left, Olivia eventually realized something.

You know, I didn't think about my uncle and his family or Henry at all today.

Olivia had been suffering before, their faces popping into her mind at random moments when she was alone in her room or walking through town, but it hadn't happened once today. Both her body and spirit felt a little lighter.

I'm filled with good food and fun conversation, I guess.

She was grateful to Elliot. It was thanks to him that she felt so content.

That night, she plucked delicious chocolates from the box as she thought of nothing but designs, and then she slept well for the first night in a long time.



AT the same time, Elliot was in a spacious, somber office lined with high mahogany bookcases under the light of a magic lamp, smiling to himself as he remembered moments from the day between his paperwork.

Sigh. Today was fun. He was thinking of shining blue eyes and cheeks stuffed full of pancakes. *I've never met a woman before who eats with such enthusiasm.*

It was generally said that women should eat sparingly. They'd usually cut their food up and eat it piece by tiny piece. That trend was even more common among noblewomen.

But this girl, she didn't seem to mind at all. She cut her food into large pieces and quickly devoured it. She'd finished her pancakes off so quickly he'd suggested seconds, and then she even managed to fit in several pieces of cake. It made him happy just watching her look so happy.

Once they were done eating, she didn't scrutinize him or attempt to read him. She was frank in both her actions and words, and she only seemed interested in magic items and cake.

He never realized he could have so much fun or be so at ease with a woman.

Elliot nearly laughed out loud when he remembered how her eyes shone when he suggested they get roll cake sometime. She was also deeply knowledgeable about magic items, which provided for interesting conversation. He liked her unpretentious personality and her passion for the things she enjoyed.

It was also his first time having a woman pay for his meal, but he also enjoyed how direct she was. Putting that all together with her joyful way of eating made him look forward very much to their next time together.

"…I'll have to ask the maids where you can get roll cake," he murmured, his mouth quirked up in amusement as he went back to his paperwork.

Chapter 5: Magic Item Design Award

FIVE months had passed since Olivia began working at Gordon's Magic Appliances. One day, after the summer heat had passed and the trees along the roads had started to change to the colors of early fall, Olivia knocked on the door of a workroom on the fourth floor of the shop.

"Mr. Laraconia, it's Olivia. I'm coming in."

She opened the door to a disorderly workroom. In the center was a pool of water the size of three beds pushed together with stone statues of people and animals placed at random around it. The floor was covered with stacks of books and papers on the verge of collapse.

Olivia smiled to herself. *It's always hard to find a place to step in this room. I can't believe it's the same size as Mr. Harrison's room.*

Just as she was thinking about how a person's personality did seem to show in their room, the cheery face of a small man popped up from between the statues.

"Ah, Olivia! You're here!"

Laraconia was one of Olivia's mentor artificers who specialized in magic items relating to water. He threaded his way through the statues out to Olivia and grinned.

"This is a huge help. How much time do you have today?" he asked.

"Gordon needs me this evening, so I should have about three hours free."

"Right. Then, can I ask you to do five of the cores for small fountains like you did before? The magic stones and materials are in the usual place, so feel free to dive right in."

"I'm on it."

Olivia went over to the cabinets, dodging things on the floor as she did. She opened one cabinet labeled "For Fountains" and took out a large box and a magic plate. After setting them down on a moderately tidy worktable nearby, she took out a sky-blue magic stone the size of her fist and a deep-blue scale about the same size.

Let's get to work.

It was popular at the moment among nobles to have small fountains in their gardens, and the shop was swamped with orders.

Olivia sat and quickly drew out the magic circle, sent a jolt to test, and stood up to place the stone and scale on top and run mana through it again.

"Levitate."

Her mana encircled the stone and scale above the magic circle.

"Extract effect. Imbue."

She drew blue mana from the scale, which flew through her own into the magic stone. A few moments after the glow subsided, she lifted the stone and carefully examined the color to check there was no unevenness in the mana gradation.

Looks good. I think that went pretty well.

She repeated that four more times with breaks in between. Once she had completed five deep sky-blue cores, she sighed and turned to Laraconia, who was working on something else in another corner of the room. "Mr. Laraconia, I'm finished."

"Ah! You're done?" He came over to her with a broad smile on his face, crunching objects below his feet as he went. Olivia chuckled as she watched. He took the cores from her, then moved to the pool in the center of the room, stepping on things again as he did. "Right! Let's test them out right away!"

"Please do."

Laraconia set the cores in the water. Olivia watched somewhat nervously. "Here we go," he murmured as he touched one and gently sent mana through it, causing water to burst upward from it. He carefully checked the amount and force of water, then smiled with satisfaction. "It's perfect! It's the best one you've done yet. You're a huge help, Olivia. Thank you!"

Olivia did a little internal victory dance at the compliment from the more experienced artificer. *Yes! Mr. Laraconia's the hardest one to impress, and he's finally complimented me!*

Laraconia took a small package from a worktable covered in things and tossed it to Olivia. "This is for you."

It was a cute pink package emitting a sweet aroma. Olivia saw the name of one of her favorite confectionary shops on the packaging, Platinum Sweets, and her eyes shone. "For me? Really?"

"Yep. It's a thank you for always helping me out," he replied with a huge grin.

Olivia smiled back and bowed, though she couldn't help wondering how someone this brisk and diligent could have such a messy workroom. "Thank you!" she replied.

About four months earlier, Gordon stopped Olivia in the hallway on the second floor.

"How're you finding work? Everything going all right?" he asked.

"Yes. Mr. Harrison has been taking good care of me. I've been trying to work on adjusting switch components while I continue practicing making cores."

"Ah." He nodded. "So, you've been here for a month now. Anything stand out to you? Your strengths? Your weaknesses? Anything at all."

Olivia thought about it for a moment. "Well… I think I've confirmed I'm not great at large cores, like I thought."

It was something she'd realized during that month. She'd never handled large cores at Carter's Magic Items, and she was very bad at them.

"I've also realized that I know almost nothing about anything other than magic jewelry and lamps," she added.

Gordon nodded. "Well, you hadn't worked on anything else before, so that makes sense. However, this does mean you have a narrow scope as an artificer. Now that you're here at our shop, which deals with a wide variety of items, I'd like you to take advantage of this opportunity and spend some time with each of our

artificers. Learn about the different offerings they do while you keep tackling those cores."

After that, Olivia worked with five different artificers and learned about their specialties as she made cores from morning until night. She didn't work very efficiently at the start because she was inexperienced, and needing time to redo her mistakes meant she sometimes worked late into the night, but she approached it with dedication.

Some of the older artificers were skeptical of her skills at first, but they came to respect her for her talent and—more importantly—her hard work, so much so that they started going out of their way to teach her.

Then, finally, today, five months after starting her job here, she was told by Laraconia, the harshest of all the artificers, that something she made was perfect.

These five months have been so long…

She walked down the hall on the fourth floor, filled with elation, and took the stairs down to the second floor to Gordon's office. Olivia knocked before entering and found Gordon looking up from his paperwork, backlit against the orange evening sun coming in through the window.

"Ah, Olivia. How have you been lately?" he asked.

She sat in the chair in front of his desk, to which he'd gestured, and answered, "Good. I'm getting help from everyone as I assist Mr. Harrison in his work developing new products."

"Harrison said you're incredibly fun to work with because you have interesting ideas and a unique perspective."

Olivia looked away; she couldn't stop the grin spreading across her face at the compliment from the person who'd supported her the most.

Gordon looked at her warmly, then shifted his position in his chair like he was about to change the subject. "Right. So, there's a reason I called you to my office today."

"Yes?" Olivia adjusted her position as well, feeling like something very important was about to come.

Gordon took a sheet of paper from his desk and looked straight into Olivia's eyes. "Do you have any interest in entering the Magic Item Design Awards in three months? Specifically, the category for women's magic jewelry?"



THE Magic Item Design Awards was a competition held once a year by the Artificers Guild. It was divided into several different categories, such as vehicles, household items, commercial items, decorative items, and so on. The best entries were awarded gold, silver, or honorable mention.

It had a long history and was widely recognized. If an artificer won gold, it was like having a "gold badge"—a symbol of their excellence as an artificer.

Gordon leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. "I know you once received an honorable mention. That's a good award, but it comes with a sort of implication that the winner is a young person with good potential. Thinking of your future, I think it'd be best if you took gold soon."

"Gold?"

"Yes. And they don't give gold out every year. It's not easy to get, and you might have to enter several times."

Olivia nodded. *Ah. It sounds hard…but it could be a good opportunity.*

At the moment, she was completely immersed in her work with large-scale magic items, partly because she was assisting the other artificers. She did sketch out designs in her sketchbooks, but she'd taken a step away from magic jewelry. Olivia still loved magic jewelry and wanted to focus entirely on crafting some for the first time in a long time.

On top of that, she had another reason for wanting to take on the competition.

Catherine stole my last award when I won an honorable mention.

She gritted her teeth upon remembering how Henry and her adoptive family treated her like she'd stolen the designs she'd made herself. It obviously wasn't true. She had won that award for magic jewelry—there was no arguing with that—but that accomplishment had soured somewhat, like it'd been sullied somehow, and it bothered her this entire time.

I'm sure I'll feel better if I can win a new award.

Gordon saw her expression and smiled. "It looks like you've made your decision," he observed as he slid the paper on the desk to her. "These are the requirements for pieces submitted to the women's magic jewelry competition."

Olivia took the paper, feeling nervous.

Women's Jewelry Entry Guidelines
Submissions: A piece of magic jewelry for women
Judgment Criteria: Function as a magic item, design

Last Year's Winners
Gold: Anti-poison brooch
Silver: Not awarded
Honorable Mentions: Anti-paralysis brooch, Anti-eye fatigue pendant

Olivia was surprised as she looked at the submissions that won last year's competition. They were so *normal*.

"I was sure it'd be something outrageous like a flamethrower necklace, but they're so average," she remarked, and Gordon chuckled.

"There's no point in a magic item that can't actually be used. I guess they're looking less for outrageous and more for practical." He then bent over and opened the safe under his desk to pull out a new-looking golden key. "This is the key for the cabinets in the last workroom on the second floor. You can use any of the materials in there—and don't be stingy."

"I won't."

"Also, make sure you have a clear picture of what you're making in advance. You'll find yourself in trouble down the line if it's too vague."

Olivia took the key and bowed with gratitude. "Thank you. I won't let you down."



THAT night, in her softly lit room with stars visible through the window, Olivia rummaged through her wardrobe in her usual blue shawl and white pajamas.

"There it is! That's where I shoved it."

She pulled out a wooden box small enough to fit in her palm, wrapped in a white handkerchief. Olivia placed the box on the table and let out a slow breath before sitting down and gently opening it.

I'm sorry for shutting you away for so long.

Inside the box was a pair of gold earrings, each about half the size of her pinky nail. This was the piece she'd submitted that won her the honorable mention at the competition when she was twelve.

She always carried it around with her in her bag until she came to the capital. Remembering what happened in Daregas caused her so much pain that she shoved it somewhere out of sight.

Her finger gently traced the earrings.

It was so long ago…

She thought back to the making of these earrings.

It was nearly seven years ago. Olivia had been minding the shop on her own, and an older lady she knew came in. She was wearing magic earrings, and young Olivia noticed the right one had a prominent nick on it.

"How'd your earring get damaged?" she asked.

"Well, my hearing is worse in the right, so I need to be careful when I'm putting them in. But as I've been getting older, my eyesight has gotten worse. The color of the magic stones looks the same to me, so I marked one to feel which is which."

The lady then hid her right ear and apologetically added how bad she felt about damaging such a lovely pair of earrings Olivia's

father had worked so hard on.

That made Olivia wish the lady could smile happily because she was wearing a piece of magic jewelry.

There's got to be something I can do…

And then the light bulb lit.

If the right and left earrings are different shapes, she'll be able to tell them apart!

Olivia smiled as she remembered her younger self. She'd taken the lady's earrings and worked the right one into a star shape and the left one into a crescent moon. Olivia still remembered the joyful expression on the woman's face when she picked the earrings up.

I was so happy. I'd never made another person that happy before.

After that, Olivia's mother, who was a seamstress, taught Olivia how to sketch her designs and improve them.

Magic jewelry had initially spread through the noble class until the more well-off commoners began to wear it in recent years. Design was easily influenced by what was popular amongst the nobles. At the time, it was common for nobles to show off their wealth through the size and quality of the magic stones.

This meant that most magic jewelry designs focused on making the stone as prominent as possible, resulting in simple offerings such as a modest setting or attached to a chain.

Olivia reviewed those designs and actively worked to incorporate motifs popular among women to create things like butterfly-shaped brooches and star-shaped earrings. Her creations were viewed as something fresh and cute, to the point that clients came from afar just to buy her jewelry.

Olivia doubled down on her research to live up to her clients' expectations of her. It was all to put smiles on their faces. She kept on thinking about how she wanted to be an artificer like her father—someone who made people smile—and she sometimes found her own path toward that.

Olivia looked down and gently stroked the golden earrings as they glittered in the lamplight. "I think I have to go with the

concept, ‘magic jewelry that puts a smile on women’s faces,’ don’t I?”

It was where she started, and it was who she was. It was completely natural that she would focus on that as her concept. But still, “women” was a broad category. After much thought, she settled on a more focused idea.

Let’s go with “the working woman.”

There were a lot of women busy at work in the capital. Olivia wanted to develop something that would make them happy.

“The problem is how do I make women like that smile?”

Olivia yawned as she thought long and hard, then glanced at the clock on a shelf. It was nearly midnight.

“Well, let’s think more about it tomorrow.”

She took off her shawl and hung it on the back of the chair, switched off the magic lamp, then slid into bed as the white moonlight slipped in through the crack in the curtains.

“I can’t wait,” she murmured as she slipped into a deep sleep.

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“IS it this café?”

“Yes, this is it. Thank you.”

A few days after deciding to enter the competition, Olivia had her next day off. The early fall sun dazzled in the blue sky as Olivia, in her light burgundy coat, stood in front of a café in the center of an area popular among young women. Next to her was the tall form of Elliot in his brown flat cap, club-collared coat, and tinted glasses.

He held up two fingers toward the server who approached them. “Could we have a table for two on the patio?” he asked.

“Of course. This way, please.”

She led them to the patio that faced the bustling road and sat them at a round table with a white umbrella.

They sat across from each other, and Olivia looked at Elliot with gratitude in her eyes. “Thank you for agreeing to this café.”

Ever since she got lost five months ago and he showed her the way to The Tabby Cat, he’d become her regular companion for

exchanging information on work and magic items while they had tea. Usually, they'd agree on a date and location in advance by letter, but this time, Olivia asked if they could visit a different place instead.

"I'm sorry for suddenly changing plans even though you go to all the effort of showing me the way," she offered meekly.

Elliot smiled softly at her apology. "Don't worry about it. The weather's nice; an open patio like this is better on days like this. Besides, I assume there's a reason. Is it something to do with magic items?"

Olivia's eyes shot open. "Wow, Elliot. You're right on the mark. Good guess."

"Well, this is our fifth time having tea together. I have a general idea of the sorts of topics you think about. Do you mind if I ask what the reason is?"

Olivia nodded. She didn't mind at all, though she leaned forward and insisted he not tell anyone as she whispered, "I'm going to be entering the Magic Item Design Awards."

Elliot leaned in to listen as well. "Is it already that time of year?" he murmured. "What category are you entering?"

"Women's magic jewelry."

"Ah. That's why you wanted to come to this café. For market research."

"Exactly. This location is popular with women right now. I have a feeling I'll see things that can teach me a lot."

Olivia realized that no matter how much she thought about how to make women smile, she didn't have enough to work with to come up with ideas.

For the past five months, I've been focused on large magic objects. Even when I go into town, that's all I look at. I've stopped looking at people.

Coincidentally, it was due time for her and Elliot to have their outing. If she was going out, she might as well use the time to observe magic jewelry and the women around her. That's what made her request they go to the café right in the middle of the classy district.

With a look of understanding, Elliot opened the menu between them as a server walked up and stated, "I think I'll have coffee and a slice of chiffon cake."

"Um, I'd like tea, a fruit tart, an apple cinnamon roll, and a piece of chocolate cake."

The server asked, "Will another person be joining you?" to confirm, considering the amount of food she'd ordered. Once the server left, Olivia turned her eyes toward the women walking by on the street.

A crowd of young women wearing elegant, knee-length dresses in bright colors like pinks, reds, and florals walked across the white cobblestones, making them almost look like brilliant flowers swaying beneath the clear blue autumn sky.

"Floral-patterned dresses seem popular right now," she observed.

"They are. The women's fashion department of Dicks & Co. thinks floral will remain popular for some time."

Their sweet-smelling cakes and hot drinks were served as they chatted.

"It looks so good," exclaimed Olivia, her heart thumping as she cut a large bite off from her fruit tart. A look of rapture spread across her face when she popped it in her mouth. She couldn't get enough of the harmony between the fresh fruit and the smooth pastry cream.

"This is the best," she sighed. "Whoever thought to put fruit and custard together is a genius."

"You do really seem to enjoy it," chuckled Elliot with a smile as he lifted a bite of his chiffon cake with an elegant fork.

Olivia continued people-watching the women in town as she enjoyed her tart.

I was aware, but seeing it now drives home how trends really have changed.

In the past, magic jewelry designs were simple to emphasize the magic stone as the most prominent aspect. But what she saw now on the passers-by was the exact opposite. She noticed flashy designs with large and prominent external metal pieces.

It was apparent from the women who walked past her or visited the cafés she dined at that the trend had changed, but it was really evident here among the throng of people.

They're much less austere than before.

Elliot watched her become immersed in observing people, a fork in one hand, and his eyes crinkled in a smile behind his tinted glasses. He asked the server for refills of his and Olivia's drinks, then took a book from his pocket with a smile.

"I'll read. Take your time," he told her.

"Thank you."

She munched on her desserts while watching the street, grateful for Elliot's consideration. He looked at her with a soft smile before dropping his eyes to his book.

It was peaceful between them.

Thirty minutes later, Olivia let out a "Hmm" as she sipped her tea.

"What is it?" asked Elliot, raising his head from his book, his legs crossed.

Olivia looked consternated as she folded her arms. "Well… I'm not sure how to explain it, but I feel like, while currently popular designs are beautiful—incredible, really—they don't really fit the lifestyle of the women here."

"Oh?" Elliot looked at her with interest. "What do you mean?"

Olivia discreetly pointed to her right. "Do you see the two women at the table over there? There's one in a flowy white dress and one in a blue sweater."

Elliot glanced in that direction. "I see them."

"Does anything strike you about the magic jewelry they have on?"

Elliot pretended to be looking in the distance past the two women as he examined them. "The diamond-shaped pendant and brooch?"

"Yes. They're jagged and sharp."

"Well," Elliot's eyes fell as he thought, "I suppose I just thought about how that jewelry is mimicking what's popular among the noble ladies right now."

Olivia mulled over the new information. “So, that shape is popular among nobles, right?”

“Yes. It’s become popular recently.”

Olivia was impressed; obviously, a trader would know that sort of thing. “That explains it,” continued Olivia as she lowered her voice. “Do you see how the woman’s sweater has been damaged, like it’s caught on something?”

“I do.”

“I think that’s where it’s caught on the brooch. And the woman next to her, she’s been stretching her neck like it hurts—that pendant is far too heavy. For them both, the jewelry will get caught on their clothing when they change. So, basically,” she lowered her voice even further, “the design doesn’t fit their lifestyle at all. And, of course, it wouldn’t. That design was made for nobles. Their lifestyle is basically the opposite of commoners.”

Noble women wore elaborate dresses you couldn’t change out of without the help of several maids and spent most of their lives barely moving. Commoners, on the other hand, wore light dresses they could put on by themselves and moved around a lot. A design made for noble women who had everything done for them wasn’t going to suit a commoner woman who worked and moved on her own. It was harder to see in the simple designs that had been popular up until now, but these large, jagged designs now gaining traction emphasized the difference in lifestyles.

“Huh. That’s a fascinating perspective,” murmured Elliot, sounding impressed.

Olivia cocked her head. “What I don’t understand is why did a design that was so unsuited to their lifestyle become so popular.”

Magic jewelry usually had effects like lessening back pain, preventing eye strain, or warding against food poisoning. They were the sorts of things that only had a point if you wore them every day.

This design trend was admittedly interesting and beautiful, but didn’t it get in the way of life for everyday people?

“Hmm,” uttered Elliot as he fell into thought, looking serious. “There are quite a few shops with the mindset of utilizing the selling point of ‘popular among the nobility,’ because it means if they offer

these for sale, they will certainly sell. Once they appear popular, more women wear them. Perhaps that's it."

Olivia's head bobbed up and down. That was perhaps how trends became a thing.

The two continued to analyze the jewelry with verve.

"Perhaps these women haven't even thought about how inconvenient this jewelry is," pointed out Olivia.

"That's very likely. It's surprising how common it is for people to accept something as normal even if it is inconvenient."

After some time, Elliot's serious expression broke into a laugh.

"Hmm? What is it?" asked Olivia, confused by the sudden change.

He smiled. "It's nothing. I was just enjoying this. It's been a long time since I've had so much fun."

"Really?"

"Yes. Lately, I've found myself surrounded only by people who turn the conversation into some sort of duel if I let my guard down at all."

Olivia looked at his weary expression and felt bad for him. "It must be hard being a trader if you have customers like that."

Elliot half smiled then changed the subject. "Right, so, what are you going to do next?"

Olivia looked down for a moment. "Well…thanks to you, I've got a vague idea of my direction now. Next, I need to align it with my concept, then start sketching designs."

"Your concept?" He looked intrigued. "May I ask what that is?"

"Magic jewelry that puts smiles on the faces of working women. It seemed like a perfect fit since I became an artificer because I wanted to make magic items that make people smile."

Elliot's eyes crinkled in a smile as if he was looking at something incredible. "It's a good concept. And it's very you."

"Thank you." Olivia scratched her head bashfully as she thought about how the jewelry would need to be convenient to wear if it was to make her target demographic happy.

I've decided. I'm going to go with an easy-to-wear design that suits the lifestyle of the working woman. I'm sure it'll turn out lovely

if I incorporate a floral design, which is so prevalent in clothing right now.

Elliot smiled at Olivia, who seemed to be having fun working through things.

After that, she continued the conversation with joy as she told him about currently popular magic offerings.

As the time came for Olivia to head back, they made their way out of the café when Elliot asked if she would join him for a stroll. She obliged, and he took her down the scenic route back to Gordon's.

"Thank you for today. I learned so much," gushed Olivia.

"No, thank you for the engaging conversation. May I write to you again?"

"Of course."

With that usual agreement, Olivia waved to Elliot as he disappeared into the evening city.



THE evening after her day off, Olivia was in the back of the second-floor workroom, standing in front of a waist-high cupboard with Gordon's golden key in hand.

It's about time I see what materials I have to work with.

Materials played a big part when it came to design. She'd have more options if there was a large variety for her to choose from.

Olivia settled on making a ring because she thought it would suit a working woman well since it could be taken on and off easily and matched seamlessly with different clothing.

Right, what's in here…

Her heart raced as she unlocked the door to find five drawers. She pulled open the top one, and her eyes nearly bulged.

"What?!"

Inside was a shocking number and variety of magic stones. The other drawers had expensive-looking metals and magic materials.

She gulped. In this one set of drawers alone was more money than five years of sales at Carter's Magic Items.

I really can make anything with this variety at my disposal!

With a pounding heart, she took stones and materials out one by one and checked them over.

The sky through the window had dissolved from the colors of evening to night by the time she set a tray on the worktable holding a red magic stone the size of her thumbnail and metal for the ring band.

If I'm going to use anything, I think it'd be something like this.

She turned on the magic lamp in the now-dark workroom and stared at the red stone on the tray. The gem glistened almost like a bead of water beneath the lamplight.

I've never worked with something this size before. I should test how it feels.

She picked up the stone and fastened it in the metal to make the ring. It was a simple ring, but she had one now with a red stone. She put the ring on her right-hand middle finger and stood.

First, let's try moving around and stuff.

In the glow of the magic lamp, she went about various daily activities: carrying a bag, tidying her hair with a comb, taking off her blazer, and writing, all the sorts of things she did regularly and which she thought the average woman might do. Lastly, she tried opening and closing the door several times, then crossed her arms and contemplated.

Right. A ring with a stone this big does really get in the way.

It caught on her bag when she'd tried to reach in for something and on her jacket when she took it off. It also tugged at her hair when she combed it, and she was nearly panicking when opening the set of drawers because it seemed like she'd hit it against the furniture and damage it.

And it's just plain heavy.

The ring needed a hefty setting to hold a stone of that size, making it surprisingly heavy. Add that to its inconvenience, and Olivia really didn't think you could call this a piece of jewelry that would make women smile.

The problem was, if you used a smaller stone, you significantly decreased the power of the effect you could imbue into it.

Olivia mulled it over as she stared at the sparkling gem on her finger.

What do I do?

From that day on, she experimented late into the night.



IT was a month and a half before the deadline for the Magic Item Design Awards, and it was another fall afternoon threatening to rain.

Olivia felt her heart thud in her chest as she stood in front of the door to Gordon's office.

I wasn't sure how it would turn out, but I've finally made it. She was holding the magic ring that she had made after many late nights. *It's been such a long road to get here…*

Her eyes glazed over as she thought about all the days of trial and error. The imbued effect was better with a larger stone but at the cost of sacrificing convenience and design. But if she used a small stone, she'd have to sacrifice effect.

It was incredibly challenging to align ease of use, design, and effect, but she believed she managed to pull it off. It was the best work she'd ever created.

Oh, I'm so nervous.

She let out a little huff and tried to steady her breathing, then told herself it'd be all right—she'd given this everything she had—then knocked on the door.

"Come in," called Gordon.

She opened the door and stepped into the dimly lit office.

Gordon looked up from whatever he was writing on his desk. "Ah, Olivia. I thought you'd be paying me a visit soon."

"I haven't finished imbuing it yet, but I've finished the exterior," she told him as she nervously placed the box with the ring on his desk.

Gordon grinned. "I'm excited to see what's in there. I'm sure it's not just any piece of magic jewelry, is it?"

"I hope not." She nodded humbly.

With a smile on his face, Gordon picked up the box and popped open the lid. “Huh,” he let out. “I wasn’t expecting this. So, this is the direction you went.”

Inside the box was a beautiful ring with a flower that looked like it had just burst into bloom. In the center were five sparkling pink magic stones arranged as the petals. Vines twined around the band to make an incredibly refined piece that gave the impression of a nearly translucent pink flower opening on the wearer’s finger.

“I was aiming to create a stylish piece of magic jewelry that the working woman could use daily,” explained Olivia. “I incorporated a floral motif as that’s popular at the moment and used five small stones rather than one large one, maintaining a high level of effect while increasing its usability.”

Sounding impressed, Gordon uttered, “It’s amazing. I’ve never seen anything like it. What is the core?”

“The stones are pink diamonds. I plan to imbue all five of the diamonds with lyle seeds, increasing the effect.”

Lyle seeds had an anti-poison effect. Wearing something with its effect would reduce the efficacy of any poison in the wearer’s body by 50 percent. Five cores together would bring the efficacy to nearly 100 percent.

Gordon nodded. “Hm. It looks nice. The design is groundbreaking. And, this doesn’t have anything to do with the contest, but using small stones reduces the cost. It’s very well balanced.”

Olivia was relieved that Gordon seemed thoroughly impressed. She let out a sigh at the idea of this working.

That was why what Gordon told her next shocked her to her very core.

“Unfortunately, though, this will never take gold,” he broke to her.

Olivia gasped. It felt like time stood still. What he said was so unexpected that she was at a loss for words. “But, why?”

“It’s a fairly simple reason. You haven’t figured it out yet?”

Olivia stared at the ring in a daze. She had no idea; she thought it was perfect.

Gordon hmphed; she clearly was at a loss. Then he looked at the calendar on his desk and murmured, "I guess I have no choice." He opened the safe below his desk, removed an incredible leather box, and placed it on the desk. "This is the same as the piece that took gold in the women's magic jewelry category last year. The anti-poison brooch."

"Ah!" Olivia's eyes flew wide open.

"I know the person who made it. I had reason to see him recently and asked to borrow it since it might be good for you to see."

Olivia stared questioningly at the leather box. She was dying to know what sort of piece could take gold, especially considering she'd just been told her very best piece had no chance.

"May I see?" she asked.

"Of course. That's why I borrowed it."

Somewhat nervously, Olivia gently slid the box toward her, undid the clasp, and slowly opened the lid.

"Huh?"

She was once more speechless.

This *took gold?*

Inside the box was a brooch shaped like a long, narrow diamond with a bright red magic stone the size of Olivia's thumbnail. The metal around the stone was meticulously worked into an intricate and jagged design.

This is the same shape I've seen women wearing around town, the one that's so popular among the nobles right now.

Gordon looked at Olivia in her shock and began, "It was made by a veteran artificer in his fifties. The function is the same as yours, anti-poison, and apparently, the design has been trending among nobles."

Olivia was confused. She could tell by looking at it that it was a well-made magic item. It was evident from the core's luster that it was created with high skill.

But why did this take gold? It's obvious it wouldn't be very practical.

Gordon stared into her confused face and murmured, "Guess I need to help." He lifted the box with Olivia's ring. "Normally, I'd like you to work through on your own how that brooch got gold, but, unfortunately, we don't have time. I'll give you a hint, this once." He set the boxes side by side in front of her. "Let's imagine, for argument's sake, you wanted to give Rose a piece of anti-poison magic jewelry."

"Uh, all right…" Her eyes showed her confusion at the unexpected theoretical situation.

"You go to the shop with plans to buy one and see these two pieces. If it were you, which one would you give Rose?"

Olivia thought about it. If it were an anti-poison piece, it would need to be worn at all times, meaning usability was paramount. What was more, it was Rose, a working woman. It would, of course, be better for her to have a design that didn't hinder her movement.

I'd obviously go for mine.

She went to point to her ring but then hesitated and let out a heavy sigh before slowly turning her finger not toward her own piece but the brooch.

"I'd…get that one."

Gordon nodded. "And that's your answer."

Olivia's shoulders slumped. She hadn't picked her piece because of its efficacy as a magic item. The large magic stone used in the brooch had been imbued using a scale of a pale fish, a material with a complete anti-poison effect, giving the brooch a 100 percent defense against poison.

Olivia's ring, on the other hand, used lyle seeds, which only gave a 50 percent anti-poison effect. She'd used five stones, the most you could use in a single item, to increase the efficacy, but that only brought it up to 97 percent. It was 3 percent short of completely defending against poison.

"The design of your ring is outstanding and fresh, and it would certainly sell if we put it in the shop," continued Gordon. "But in terms of effect, it does lose out to pieces that use large magic stones."

"You're right… If you're giving someone a gift, that means they're important to you. You'd choose the brooch," she muttered in a quiet voice.

According to Gordon, the brooch had been selected for gold due to its incredible technique, high efficacy, and excellent design.

"The judges evaluated it highly due to its efficacy and technique, especially since it incorporated a design that was only just starting to become popular."

Olivia hung her head.

I've had blinders on.

It was magic jewelry. The most important factor was its effect, and yet, she'd only been focused on its convenience and design to the point she barely paid attention to effect.

I've failed as an artificer.

As Olivia reflected on her mistakes, Gordon softly said, "There's still time. You can rethink things." Then he rubbed his chin. "But you know, it is interesting. This piece is the exact opposite direction from all the men."

"Hmm?"

"They always perfect the efficacy aspect, almost to the point of going too far, and destroy design and how it feels to use in the process. Perhaps men and women have different sensibilities when it comes to these sorts of things."

Olivia thought back to how her father had been utterly committed to the effect. "You may be right," she replied, her eyes crinkled in a smile as memories came back to her. Then, she turned to Gordon with gratitude. "Thank you. I see the problem now. I want to think this through more and create a piece that can win gold."

Gordon grinned. "I expect good things."

Olivia swore she would improve her idea now that she knew the problem.

However, things didn't go so smoothly.

Nearly three weeks passed.

"Olivia. Olivia."

Someone shook her shoulder, and she lifted her head to find herself in the workshop on the second floor, the morning light slanting through the window. The next thing she saw was Rose's concerned face.

"Huh? Rose? Why are you here?"

Rose looked into Olivia's confused face with an expression of relief. She planted her hands on her hips and replied with annoyance, "No, not 'Huh.' You scared me. What happened? Didn't you go back to your room last night?"

Olivia checked the clock with bleary eyes. It was seven in the morning. Apparently, she'd worked late into the night and fallen asleep there.

Rose sat across from her, looking concerned. "You look terrible. Are you making sure you eat?"

"Yeah… Well. Sometimes, I eat. Sometimes, I don't."

"For goodness' sake. I'm gone for one month, and this happens." She stood with an exasperated sigh. "Today's your day off, right? You go to your room and get some sleep. I'll tidy this place up. I'll come get you at noon and make sure you get a proper meal in you."

"But, my piece…" She wanted to keep going.

Rose smiled at her. "Olivia. Think this through. Do you really think any good ideas are going to come to your exhausted brain?"

Olivia didn't say anything.

"It would be more efficient for you to get some sleep, don't you think?"

Overpowered by Rose's mysterious force, Olivia agreed, then thanked her and staggered to her feet.

Ugh… Every joint is popping.

She spurred her fatigued body on, squinting her eyes against the morning sun coming in through the window, and just about managed to drag herself up to the fifth floor. Once in her room, she fell face-first onto her bed.

Sigh. I guess sleeping once every three days isn't going to work. Are there any, like, magic items that give you ten hours of sleep after only one hour?

Three weeks had passed since that day in Gordon's office, where she realized the problem with her piece. Olivia had become so engrossed in refining her idea to maximize effect without sacrificing ease of use that she could barely find time to sleep. She tried several iterations of designs that used large stones, changing the stone, reading academic books, and trying new imbuement methods —she tried everything.

But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't find a path to a solution. There was a month left before the deadline for the competition, and she found herself at a real dead end. If she were being entirely honest, she wanted to go back down to the workshop on the second floor and keep trying…

But I really shouldn't worry Rose that much.

Rose was right, and Olivia was out of it from lack of sleep. She might as well do as Rose said and rest.

Olivia managed to haul herself out of bed to sluggishly undress, promptly falling back into it and crawling under the covers.

Suddenly, there was a quiet knock at the door that woke Olivia, and she realized it was already noon.

"Olivia, are you all right?" came Rose's voice.

"Yes, I'm fine." She sat up and rubbed her eyes. It was like time jumped forward to noon. Perhaps that was how deeply she'd slept.

"I'll come get you in another thirty minutes, and we'll go have lunch together," muffled Rose's voice through the door.

"All right. Thank you." Olivia got out of bed, her joints popping as she stretched as far as she could.

Still in a daze, she showered, combed her hair, and put herself in order before getting dressed.

Half an hour after Rose woke her up, the two were stepping out of Gordon's Magic Appliances and walking toward one of the usual cafés.

"I'm sorry, Rose. Thank you for looking out for me," apologized Olivia.

"It's all right. You just surprised me. I thought I'd come in early today since I've been away for so long, only to find you collapsed in

the workroom. I was nearly panicking," she replied with an awkward smile.

Rose had been sent to help set up a branch store in a nearby town. She had been gone for a month and a half and had only returned the day before.

"It's a nice place," she noted. "It's about an hour away on the horsecar rail. It's not as big as the capital, but it is plenty big enough to be a city, and seems nice to live in."

"Yeah?"

"The local lord is a duke named Flarance. He's one of the Four Great Dukes, and he has an incredible mansion in the center of the city. His crest has a lion on it, so there are lion statues all over town."

Olivia made the occasional comment while Rose talked. She was listening, but her head was filled with thoughts of her piece.

Once they sat across from each other at a table at the edge of a fancy café, Rose looked at Olivia with concern. "Seeing you again for the first time in a while, I feel like you've lost a lot of weight. You're not pushing yourself too hard, are you?"

"It's nothing," Olivia replied hurriedly, evading the question. There was no point to all of this if she didn't succeed—even if she had to push herself to get there.

Rose sighed as she saw Olivia's gloomy expression. "That Gordon. He normally seems like a kind fatherly type but really cracks the whip when it comes to magic items."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. By the way, Olivia, do you know how many times someone has actually won gold in the women's magic jewelry category in the past twenty-nine contests?"

Olivia thought about it. She had been told they didn't give out gold every year. Which meant maybe it was awarded once every three years?

"About ten times?" she ventured.

Rose laughed. "Not nearly that much. Twice, Olivia. Twice."

Olivia's eyes nearly popped out. "What?! But that would only be once every fifteen years!"

"It is. It's said to be the most difficult category."

"Why is it so difficult?"

Rose lowered her voice. "This is simply a rumor, but they say it's because nobles do the final round of judging, and they're prideful. If they don't absolutely love it, they won't give it gold."

Olivia let out a heavy sigh. "Ah. That makes sense."

Rose looked at her quizzically, and Olivia explained how last year's winning piece was fashioned after a design popular among nobles.

Rose looked like it was all falling into place for her. "Huh. That was why gold was awarded last year for the first time in a long time. But wouldn't that mean this year will have loads of similar submissions?"

Olivia looked down. Rose was absolutely right. Everyone who looked at last year's gold-winning piece would think they could win gold if they just made a design for nobles that maximized effect. And she was thinking that was as close to the correct answer as possible.

This is getting even harder…

She cradled her head in her hands. Settling in her mind was the word "compromise." She'd been vaguely aware these past three weeks that if she compromised on convenience and design and instead made a design for nobles, she would increase her chances of winning gold. And based on what Rose told her, a design for nobles was the easiest path toward gold.

Maybe…I need to compromise…

There were reasons Olivia absolutely wanted to win gold this year. One was what happened with Catherine; she wanted to win gold and rid herself of the negative feelings she had over being made out as a design thief. The other reason was everyone's expectations. Gordon was rooting for her, of course, but Laraconia, Harrison, and all the other artificers at the shop were too. Even Elliot had helped. She didn't want to let them all down.

If I want to ensure I'll win gold, I should change tack toward a design for nobles. But is that really the right decision?

The sight of Olivia's pained expression made Rose inquire, "Is everything all right?"

Olivia looked up and asked, "If you were making a piece to submit to the contest, what would you do? Would you compromise on your design and make something for nobles so you could win gold? Or would you stick to your own style?"

The sudden question left Rose looking uncertain. After a moment of silence, she sighed. "If it were me, I'd choose the easiest path. I love my job, but I'm the type who likes to finish work at a reasonable time and go home to do what I enjoy. So, if there were an easier path, I'd choose that one. I guess that means," she paused to smile encouragingly, "I'd choose to stick with my own style."

She'd choose her own style?

Olivia considered that. She was trying to become an artificer who made people smile. Could she really say she was being true to herself if she won gold with a piece that didn't do that? Could she even be proud of that?

No. I couldn't.

Maybe people would laugh at her for being childish enough to insist on this point, but the artificer Olivia Carter could not bend in this one respect.

I don't care if it takes years; I'll win gold my *way.*

Olivia looked at Rose like a weight had been lifted from her.



"Thank you. I think I've made my decision," Olivia proclaimed.

"That's good." Rose smiled again. "Right, should we eat? I'm sure you'll come up with great ideas once you've got some good food in you."

After lunch with Rose, Olivia returned to the shop and went around gathering all the academic books in the building. Just thinking wasn't going to bring about any new ideas, so she began searching through books to find knowledge that would lead to something.

But, after reading ten complicated technical tomes, even after twenty, she still hadn't found any clues to a solution. It was two weeks until the deadline, when she was staggering about on sleep-deprived legs, that she began to think it was impossible.

Her solution came out of the blue.



"I am utterly stuck…"

It was two weeks before the deadline. Olivia was in Harrison's workroom, closing the final technical volume with a sigh.

I've read every book in the shop and got nothing.

She hung her head. Reading that much and getting zero out of it made her want to cry.

Harrison looked at her with worry and called, "Everything all right?"

"I'm fine," she replied, looking up, and then she gasped. Her eyes fell on the red magic stone Harrison was holding. "Mr. Harrison," she began, "that's a crimson flame stone, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

She saw that stone basically every day, but today, it seemed to have a new special light to it.

Olivia started thinking. Crimson flame stone was unique because it became malleable under mana, allowing you to turn multiple stones into one larger stone. It could handle any shape, couldn't it?

"Could you apply that way of thinking from crimson flame stone onto other magic stones?" she posed. "Like, make five smaller stones into one big stone?"

Harrison folded his arms. "The Royal Magic Research Institute tested it with all known magic stones, but I haven't heard of any other than the crimson flame stone that can do that."

Olivia smiled wryly. He was right, of course. The leading artificers of the Research Institute would already have investigated it, so she doubted she could come up with anything else herself, but she'd already read all the technical books they had. This was her only option left.

I don't have any other clues right now. It might be worth looking into.

"Would you happen to have the results of the Institute's investigations? I'd like to see it," she asked.

Harrison smiled and nodded. "That's fine. I'll give it to you later."

That night, Olivia was alone in the now quiet workshop on the second floor. Under the orange glow of the magic lamp, she read the report Harrison had given her.

The people at the Institute really did try all sorts of things.

They checked everything, from average stones Olivia knew to ones she'd never heard of, to see if any of them had properties like the crimson flame stone.

The report concluded: "Crimson flame stone is a unique stone which exhibits characteristics similar to all other magic stones."

Magic stones were like people: each one had different characteristics. You had to adjust your mana based on those peculiarities, and being able to do that showed an artificer's skill. According to the report, all stones other than crimson flame stones were so individual and different from each other that there was no way to make multiple of them act as one together.

Accepting this conclusion, Olivia pinched the three small diamonds in front of her between her fingers and lifted them.

They look like the same sort of diamond, but how mana flows and passes through each of them is entirely different. There's no

way to make these work as one.

She sighed and laid her head on the table. This too had been a wasted effort.

Olivia pushed herself to her feet to put the report away, and that's when it hit her. There was one other possible way of making multiple stones have the same peculiarities.

It's an utterly ridiculous method, but theoretically possible based on the conclusion of this report…

After some waffling, she looked up and took the magic lamp in her hand. She cut across the dark workshop to the set of drawers in the corner, unlocked it, and picked one stunning magic stone from it.

It blazed in the light, a star diamond of the highest purity. The gem was the size of her thumbnail and, at wholesale price, would cost ten years of Olivia's salary.

She gulped as the hand holding the stone trembled.

Olivia had been too afraid to bring herself to use it, but she now had no choice.

As she stared at the stone, it twinkled beneath the moonlight. She steeled herself as she whispered, "I'm sorry, Gordon. I'll work enough to make up the loss if this fails."



IT was three days before the deadline for the Magic Item Design Awards.

Olivia stood before the door to Gordon's office, a weary expression on her face as she took a deep breath. In her hands, she clutched a white box with her ring in it.

I wonder what he'll say…

She'd managed to overcome the problem he pointed out to her last time, but the method was a bit…questionable. The problem now was what he'd say about her process.

Olivia vigorously shook her head as her thoughts verged on turning negative.

Don't go thinking you're so stupid you might as well not have thought of anything. Right now, you've just got to keep forging

ahead!

It was only three days until the deadline. She had no choice but to show him.

Making up her mind, she knocked on the door and heard Gordon call, "Come in," from inside. Bracing herself, she went inside and saw Gordon, Harrison, and Laraconia. It looked like they'd been having some sort of meeting, as there was paperwork scattered across the desk.

Oh no! I was so nervous that I didn't realize there were other people in his office!

"I am so sorry, I'll come back later!" she exclaimed and went to jerk the door closed, but Gordon stopped her.

"Wait, in your hand, is that your piece for the competition?" he asked.

"Yes…"

"I'll look at that first. It's more urgent. Do you mind?" he questioned the men. Harrison shook his head, and Laraconia peered curiously at the box Olivia was holding.

"Ah, the competition everyone's been talking about! I'd love to see your entry," Laraconia encouraged enthusiastically.

Olivia froze, but Harrison nodded and urged her on, "I'd like to see it too."

Gordon looked at Olivia. "The more people who can give you their knowledge, the better. Do you mind if these two see?"

"Uh, no. Please, go ahead."

Feeling like this had turned into some big thing, Olivia walked stiffly to the desk and set the box down.

Gordon opened it, and the three let out impressed sounds.

Inside was an elegant ring with pink-hued metal gleaming as flower petals. Ten tiny magic stones glittered in the center of the flower and on the parts shaped as leaves.

Gordon let out a sound of admiration. "This is another refined design."

"I imagine women will like that," murmured Harrison, impressed, but Laraconia looked uncertain.

"It is beautiful, but those small stones will mean this piece has no chance on an efficacy basis. It may manage silver, but gold would be out of reach."

A shadow fell over Gordon's expression as he agreed and commented on how that was the same as her previous design.

Olivia smiled. "Gordon, could you please try passing mana through the ring?"

He did as she asked, looking confused as he did. The next moment, his eyes snapped wide in surprise. "This was imbued with a pale fish scale! Which means it has a 100 percent anti-poison effect!"

"What?!" Laraconia snatched the ring from Gordon. "Impossible! You can't imbue stones this small with a pale fish scale!" Then he looked taken aback when he ran mana through the ring. "You're right…"

Olivia puffed up with pride. "I made the ten stones on the ring act as one magic stone for imbuing!"

The three's mouths worked up and down in their shock, then Laraconia shouted, "Are you serious?! This is the breakthrough of the century!"

"I don't believe it!" uttered a bewildered Harrison. "But it definitely is a pale fish scale…"

"Olivia, this is incredible! How did you do it?!"

Pressed by the three, she cast her eyes aside. "I broke a large star diamond."

"You…what?"

They stiffened and looked at her with an expression that said they didn't comprehend her admission.

Olivia let out a long breath and cast her eyes down guiltily. "I had a magic stoneworker break down the large star diamond that was in the drawers to make ten small stones with the same characteristics."

The idea that came to Olivia had been that if she couldn't make stones with different peculiarities act as one stone, she could break down a large, perfectly pure stone of the highest class to make several small stones with the same characteristics.

It might just work, was her reasoning.

But that was where things got complicated. She took the magic stone to the stoneworker she usually worked with.

"Break apart a magic stone? What are you thinking?" he argued. "Smashing such a good magic stone is utter madness!"

After reasoning with him for an hour, he finally relented, "Well, if you really insist…" and he cut the stone into ten pieces.

Obviously, that alone wasn't enough, either. After that, she had to conduct several trials. She worked late into the night, all the way until morning, on several occasions.

Then, using a new technique in which she placed several stones on the same magic circle and treated them like one, she finally finished her piece.

It was thanks to the skills she'd developed for imbuing small stones, which she gained through crafting magic jewelry, in combination with all the experience of imbuing large stones with strong personalities that she'd been working on like crazy these past seven months, as well as the skills for controlling magic circles she'd developed. They all played a large part. If one of those had been missing, she wouldn't have been able to do it.

Laraconia burst into laughter. "Break a star diamond? You're a curious one! No normal person would think of that!"

"Well, good job, I suppose, for thinking of breaking such an expensive stone into smaller ones," commented Harrison, looking taken aback but smiling.

Gordon, however, was grinning broadly. "Well, well. This is the first good laugh I've had in a long time. I never imagined someone would do something like that."

Olivia was starting to feel awkward. She looked at them somewhat resentfully. What she'd done didn't deserve to be laughed at that much.

But after some time, Laraconia's expression turned serious, and he murmured, "You know, this is actually incredible, isn't it?"

"It is," concurred Harrison. "Do you think applying this technique could even make flight possible?"

"It's not entirely out of the question," picked up Gordon. "The current sticking point is that the large magic stone necessary puts too much weight in one spot. With this, you could distribute the weight across a vessel while maintaining the mana levels."

"It would need testing, but it could work if this can be made practical."

"Indeed!"

Olivia stared at her ring as the three burst into a lively discussion, feeling relieved that at least her piece seemed all right.

After that, the three advised her to immediately file a patent for her new technique as it was extremely likely to become a revolutionary technology.

The next day, Olivia submitted her piece to the competition under the name Olivia Lysley. Gordon pointed out it could turn into a problem if her uncle heard about it, so she submitted it using her mother's maiden name.



IT was a clear, chilly winter afternoon nine months after Olivia came to the capital, the blue sky of the new year brilliant and bright.

"Today feels a little warmer."

"It does, somewhat. It is sunny today."

Olivia was with Elliot, walking through town. She was in a heavy coat with a scarf wound around her neck, and he was in a similarly warm overcoat as well. The streets were lively, perhaps due to the large number of shops open for the first day of the new year.

Amidst the calls of barkers drawing customers into their stores, Olivia looked up at Elliot with gratitude and exclaimed, "Thank you for inviting me. I'd given up on going since I'd have to go alone."

"I'm glad you got to then. I'm looking forward to it too."

They were headed to a large church in the old town to take part in their country's custom of making New Year's requests. Olivia would typically have gone with her family, so she thought she wouldn't be able to go this year. But Elliot invited her, allowing her to go for the first time in a long while.

As they walked, Olivia asked, “You didn’t go with your family, Elliot?”

“No, they’re all too busy. And, actually, this is my first time going to church at the New Year.”

“Your first time!” Her eyes grew in shock. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-five.”

“Twenty-five! You’re only five years older than me? I thought you were much older.”

Elliot smiled at her genuine surprise. “I’ll take that to mean I look like a mature, grown man.”

The two joked as they enjoyed their walk. After some time, they saw a characteristic orange conical roof rise before them.

Olivia’s eyebrows rose. “That’s a big church.”

“Apparently, it’s the second largest, after the central church.”

According to Elliot, the central church right in the middle of the city was filled with nobles at this time, which was why he chose the second-largest church instead.

Open-air stalls filled the square in front of the church, along with a buzzing crowd. Olivia’s eyes crinkled with a smile at the sight of the customary New Year hubbub. It brought back a lot of nostalgic emotions.

The two cut across the bustling square and entered through the tall door. They donated at the door, then washed their hands in water ladled from a large, decorative jug ready for visitors to use.

They entered the austere hall with a high ceiling and rows of stained-glass windows to find a line of about twenty people.

Olivia let out a small sigh. “Oh, good. It’s not too packed.”

“I thought it looked fairly crowded. Is that not the case?”

“Sometimes, there are so many people that the line goes out the door.”

“Huh.” Elliot looked ahead with curiosity.

Olivia found this a little amusing since their roles were usually reversed in situations like this. Then she whispered, “Do you see the four stones lined up there in that open area? You touch one and make your New Year’s request. The red is for love and marriage,

blue for education, yellow for fortune and wealth, and black is for career."

"Yes, I see now. That part is well-known. The red stone does seem popular with the ladies."

Once it was their turn, Elliot chose the black stone, and Olivia chose the yellow one. They whispered their request before stepping away from their respective stones at nearly the same time, and the man standing nearby who looked like a member of the clergy showed them to the exit from the hall.

As they walked along the narrow hallway that led outside, Olivia asked, "You chose the stone for career. What did you ask for?"

"I have a problem that's remained unresolved for a very long time. I prayed that it would be solved this year. You chose the stone for fortune and money?"

"Yes. The results of the Magic Item Design Awards are going to be announced soon. Though, this was just to make me feel better since I'm sure they've already made their decision."

Elliot looked surprised. "They really haven't announced them yet? You didn't mention the Awards, so I was starting to think they hadn't."

"No. About two weeks ago, I heard they still had the final round of judging, but there's been no word since. I guess judging is taking a long time since there were so many submissions this time."

"Oh." After a moment, Elliot smiled. "Well, I imagine people will be more interested in your patent anyway. I've heard rumors that the Royal Magic Research Institute is all worked up. I think they may ask you to join them."

Olivia smiled bashfully. "Gordon said the same. Apparently, it's a huge honor for that to happen. But I think I'll say no."

"Really?" Elliot looked surprised.

Olivia grinned bigger. "I became an artificer to put smiles on my customers' faces. That's what I want to work on."

After that, the two decided to peruse the stalls on the church grounds. Elliot's head turned this way and that as he took in the new sights before pointing to one stall. "I've never seen anything like those skewers of red meat they're grilling over there."

"Oh, those are famous for being at churches at the New Year. They're chili skewers, very spicy, but they warm you up. Do you like spicy food?"

"Relatively, yes. Do you?"

"I love spicy food."

He turned toward the stall. "Then let's try some."

"All right. I'll go buy us some drinks," Olivia shouted as she headed off.

They met up after buying their chili skewers and tea and sat on an open bench.

"This is spicier than I expected," noted Elliot.

"Yeah. It'd be really spicy if you didn't have something to drink."

The two nibbled their chili skewers as they watched the busy stalls and people having fun. They meandered aimlessly around the stalls and tried other foods only available at the New Year and partaking in the games available. Elliot surprised Olivia with his darts skills, and Olivia made Elliot burst into laughter with her superhuman prowess at the ball scoop game. They thoroughly enjoyed everything "New Years" about the day.

Once signs of evening began to show in the sky, the two left the church and took a carriage to Gordon's Magic Appliances. Elliot jumped lightly down before helping Olivia disembark. Once she was standing on firm ground, he held out a hand with a smile.

"I had fun today," he told her. "Thank you. To another good year of helping each other."

Olivia smiled and gently squeezed his surprisingly large and sturdy hand. "No, thank you. To another good year."

Elliot then boarded the carriage and headed into town. Olivia opened the door to the shop and went inside.



A few days before Olivia and Elliot went to the church, the final round of judging for the women's magic jewelry category of the

Magic Item Design Awards was held in a large meeting room with a plush red carpet inside the Artificers Guild.

"Our seventh piece is a fatigue-reduction brooch crafted by Artificer Rylia of Burming's Magic Items."

Six people were sitting around the large mahogany table, which included the Guild Master, Assistant Guild Master, and two women and men each in dresses and suits that immediately marked them as members of the nobility.

The clerk set a box in front of the six people and explained, "This is the seventh piece." She gently lifted the brooch out of the box using gloved hands. It was a large, diamond-shaped brooch with intricately cut edges.

As she placed it on a velvet cloth, one of the noblewomen smiled. "I know I said that pendant from earlier was nice, but this is incredible as well."

"It really is," commented the Assistant Guild Master. "There are many attractive designs this year."

"The piece that took gold last year incorporated a style that had recently become popular. It seems many have learned from that," continued one of the noblemen with a satisfied nod.

"It is important to work trends into your pieces. I feel that has greatly increased the average level this year."

"I agree. However, while all the pieces are wonderful, the designs are all very similar. I feel as if they're somewhat lacking in originality."

"That is true. There are no standout pieces like there were last year. It will be difficult to select gold from these."

The nobles nodded in agreement and murmured amongst themselves that they may not award gold at all this year.

The clerk turned on her heel to bring the next piece when there was a knock on the door. It opened, and a guild employee led in a tall young man wearing a stylish navy suit, his platinum-blond hair neatly combed back.

The nobles jumped to their feet.

"Oh, my," exclaimed one. "I didn't think we'd have the pleasure of seeing you here."

The young man smiled politely. “Please, sit. I happened to be stopping by the Guild when I heard you were in the middle of judging. I was a little curious and hoped I might be able to watch for a short time. I won’t be long. Please, continue and pay me no mind.”

He leaned against the wall near the door and gestured for them not to worry about him. The nobles nodded in understanding, retook their seats, and continued discussing the entries. A similar conversation ran for the following two pieces.

“The final piece is an anti-poison ring by Artificer Olivia Lysley of Gordon’s Magic Appliances.”

When the six judges saw the piece, they let out gasps of astonishment.

“What a lovely design!” proclaimed one noblewoman. “It’s almost like a piece of jewelry a flower sprite might wear.”

“This incorporates a floral motif, which is a different sort of trend. This is very nice and very original,” gasped the other noblewoman.

While the two of them were singing the praises of the beautiful ring formed into flowers, the noblemen looked less convinced.

“It is the most beautiful of the pieces we’ve seen so far, and the most unique. It’s a breakthrough design. However, the size of those stones… It would have barely any effect at all, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes, that is a problem. The efficacy is decided by the stone’s size, is it not?”

The Guild Master cleared his throat. “Actually, this piece uses a new technique developed by Ms. Lysley. It has complete anti-poison protection, the same as the other pieces.”

“What?! Is that even possible?”

“It is. I’ve confirmed its efficacy.”

With this, the nobles burst into excited discussion at having finally found a submission of interest.

The young man with violet eyes watched with his arms crossed, a small smile on his lips.

“Well then, are we all in agreement that Ms. Lysley’s piece will be awarded the gold?” the Guild Master spoke in a raised voice.

“Yes, *this* is a gold-worthy piece.”

"Agreed. It's incredible."

"I hope she offers similar pieces for sale soon. I would absolutely buy one!"

The young man quietly left the room as he listened to them. He walked down the carpeted hallway, smiling as he whispered, "Congratulations," with a look of satisfaction as he left the Guild.



ONE evening, a few days after the new year and as the cold had begun to subside, Olivia was helping Harrison develop new magic products in his workroom.

"Mr. Harrison, what if we try putting a command line in here?"

"If we do that, we'd best imbue a different formula over here."

"Ah. Well, then, if we add it in here…"

The two of them were staring at a magic circle drawn on a piece of paper on the desk, like they often did, going back and forth when the door burst open.



Olivia and Harrison both jumped and turned toward the sound, where they saw Gordon, his shoulders heaving like he'd run a marathon. In his hand were crumpled pieces of white paper.

"Ah, Gordon?!" cried Olivia, her eyes wide at the sight of the man she owed so much to in a state she'd never seen before.

He grinned and shoved the papers toward her. "Olivia, you got gold!"

"What?!"

"I just got word from the Guild. You won gold!"

Olivia took the paper from Gordon, who was tearing up with joy, her own eyes still round. With shaking hands, she opened the paper.

"The submission, Anti-Poison Ring, by Artificer Olivia Lysley of Gordon's Magic Appliances, has been selected for the gold prize. Signed, Baran Heath of the Artificers Guild."

The second piece of paper explained she was awarded gold for its original, cutting-edge design, high efficacy, and development of a new technique along with its potential use.

"You did it, Olivia!" shouted Gordon.

"Incredible! Your hard work paid off!" proclaimed Harrison.

Gordon thumped her back as she stared at the paper in a daze, all sorts of thoughts running through her head, from the hard times to the fun moments.

She found herself pressing her fingers to her eyes to hold back the tears. Harrison looked at her warmly.

Gordon grinned and yelled, "All right! Today, we celebrate! I'm getting everyone together, and we're going to the bar!"



"IT'S freezing…"

That night, Olivia was climbing the fire escape on the side of the already closed shop to the fifth floor where the dorms were, guided by the light of the streetlamps.

Sigh. That was fun.

Gordon had thrown a celebration party for her. Everyone from the shop was there, as happy as if they'd won the award themselves, and it made for an enjoyable night.

I'm so blessed to have such good mentors.

She arrived at the fifth floor at the top and rummaged through her bag for the key to open the door. Once inside, she turned on the magic lamp hung on the wall and walked down the dim hall to her room.

Hm?

Once she got to her room, she saw a large bag hanging from the doorknob. Inside was a white box tied with a red ribbon and a note that stated, "This was delivered today." Someone must have accepted the delivery and brought it up here for her.

Grateful, she took the bag inside and turned on the magic heater. She closed the curtains and took off her outer layer, then took the box out of the bag and set it on her table.

This is a fancy box, and the ribbon is thick. It must have been expensive.

A subtle, pleasant aroma wafted from the glossy paper box. She undid the ribbon and opened the box, her eyes growing large at the sight.

Oh my gosh!

Inside was a bouquet of adorable flowers, the sort of thing you could immediately put out as decoration, along with a letter. The primary flowers in the bouquet were blue irises, and there was a card explaining that they represented congratulations and hope.

The letter read, *"Congratulations on winning gold. Let's get special pancakes as a celebration. Your good friend, Elliot."*

Olivia giggled after reading the letter. He was quick to hear the news, as always. She placed the bouquet on the shelf beside the window, a smile playing at her lips as she whispered, "Thank you, Elliot. I can't wait for some special pancakes."

Outside her window were the beautiful stars sparkling like diamonds.

Intermission 2: The Cog Begins to Come Loose

"WHAT is *happening*? It's not selling at all!"

"What is going on?!"

About nine months had passed since Olivia left Daregas. There were fewer items on display at Carter's Magic Items, making it feel empty, while Catherine and her father, Baronet Carter, were red-faced and screaming like crazy.

In front of them was a display case of magic jewelry. Typically, items would be selling out, leaving prominent gaps in the display, but basically everything was still there that day.

The worker they were yelling at let out a heavy sigh. "I don't know," she answered.

"What do you *mean* you don't know? It's your sales technique, isn't it?!"

"I haven't changed my process at all, but things aren't selling like they were about a month ago, even if I recommend them." The worker looked at Catherine. "Could you make a new design? I think the problem may be that our current products no longer align with our customers' tastes."

"What?! That's impossible! And I only just gave you four new designs!"

The worker looked at her cooly. "I couldn't make those. They were too difficult, which I believe I told you. I would appreciate it if you redrew them in a simpler shape while you're here. It should be easy enough. They are *your* designs, aren't they?"

"I-I…" Catherine's eyes darted back and forth, and the Baronet let out a sigh.

"Catherine's designs are perfect as-is. The problem is obviously with how you're doing things. Find a way. If you can't manage within the next month, I may have to consider reducing your salary."

A few hours after the pair left, the light outside had completely faded, and the other worker who did maintenance came in with a weary expression. He thudded into a chair and collapsed back against the backrest. "I'm burning out," he exhaled. "I can't keep being this busy at the rates they pay me."

The woman murmured in agreement as she poured a warm cup of tea from the tea kettle. They hadn't received overtime pay in nearly six months.

As the man leaned forward, he lowered his voice. "You know, I heard Olivia's in the capital."

"What?" The woman's eyes snapped open.

"Look at this," he continued, handing her a catalog of new items from the Artificers Guild.

She opened it to the page marked with a piece of white paper and saw in bold text: **"Gold-place winner in the women's magic jewelry category: Olivia Lysley of Gordon's Magic Appliances."**

Below was a drawing of the design. The woman gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. "This design is Olivia's?"

"Yep, I think it is. I looked into it today. Olivia's mother, her maiden name was Lysley."

"That means…"

"Olivia's currently working at Gordon's Magic Appliances in the capital."

She looked crestfallen. "And that the Baronet lied to us."

"Yep," he replied with a glum expression.

The two of them were initially artificers from another town. The man had been enticed by the name of Carter's Magic Items since its products were famous for their skilled craftsmanship. The woman admired Olivia for her incredible designs and for being one of the few female artificers out there. That's why the two began working there.

When they'd first started, Olivia had been so kind as she taught them the job, and they both improved in leaps and bounds. They were grateful for her and so glad to be working under Olivia.

But about three months after they were hired, Olivia suddenly disappeared. Immediately after, they heard a ridiculous rumor that she'd been fired for stealing her adoptive sister's designs.

The two demanded answers from the Baronet. With sweat beading on his brow, he explained, "I don't know anything about these rumors. Olivia is recovering from an illness."

According to him, her health had deteriorated, and she'd gone to live with her mother's family in another town until she recovered.

While they'd only worked with Olivia for a short time, they owed her a lot. They talked it out and decided to work hard and keep the shop running until she came back to pay her back for everything she'd done.

But things only got worse from there.

It was nothing but a bad experience. They didn't receive overtime anymore, and the Baronet laid into them all the time. Now, on top of all that, they'd discovered this story about Olivia's recovery was a complete lie, and she was actually working in the capital.

They didn't think Olivia, who had such a strong sense of responsibility, would just up and abandon the shop. It had to have been the Baronet and this daughter—they did something.

With a sour expression, the man proclaimed, "I was working as hard as I did until she came back because I respect Olivia as an artificer, and I owe her. I have no obligation to stay here anymore."

"Same. Now that I know he lied about Olivia, I don't need to be here. I am done listening to that lying Catherine."

They discussed it more and agreed that, no matter what the owner said, they would resign from the shop in a month and leave town.

Chapter 6: A Question Comes After a Year

"OLIVIA, you have any interest in running your own shop?"

She blinked over and over as the paperwork in her hands spilled to the floor.

"You dropped that," Gordon pointed out, gesturing to the paperwork on the lamplit floor from his seat at his desk.

Her eyes moved mechanically to the floor, then back to Gordon with an expression of disbelief. "Um. I'm sorry. Could you repeat that?"

"I said, you have any interest in running your own shop?"

It seemed she hadn't misheard him.

Before sorting through that issue, she gathered up the papers from the floor and thought back to what had happened that day. It had been an utterly average day.

Today was so normal. Was there any advance notice about something this huge?



THE day had begun like any other.

She woke in her room in the dorm and stretched herself long in the morning sun slanting through the window.

"I slept so well. Here's to another day of hard work!"

After a hot shower, she had a simple breakfast of bread and coffee. She put on her usual wine-red blazer and green flared skirt before heading down to her personal workroom on the third floor.

She'd been given her own space after winning gold in the competition since they decided it was proof she'd graduated from

being an apprentice. It was about the same size as Harrison's and Laraconia's rooms and dotted with magic jewelry cases.

Olivia went straight to her desk and worked through the morning on the orders for women's magic jewelry she'd received.

She then had lunch with Rose.

In the afternoon, she was in the magic jewelry showroom on the second floor, explaining rings at the counter to a young couple who'd booked a consultation with her.

"This is our popular Flower Series, and next to it is our Heart Series," she'd explained.

The woman in a springlike dress of light yellow-green looked at the rings as if enchanted. "Oh, my! They're so lovely! There's nothing like this in any other shop. Are these all your designs?"

"Yes, they are. I'm in charge of these series."

"Amazing… And what elaborate detail on the crown."

"Thank you. This is an ivy pattern. You can choose your stone, but the one in this ring at the moment is imbued with a fatigue reduction effect. Would you like to try it on?"

The woman's eyes shone. "May I?"

"Of course." Olivia lifted the ring from the showcase with a white-gloved hand and placed it on a black tray, which she offered to the woman.

The woman gently slipped the ring on her right ring finger, her eyes crinkled with enchantment as she looked at it. "It's so beautiful… And delicate. I don't think it'll get in the way even if I wear it all the time. What sort of stones are available?"

Olivia took a small display box lined with black velvet from the shelf behind her. Inside were small gems in a variety of colors.

"These would suit a ring well, I believe," she offered.

"Oh! There's so many." The woman turned to her partner. "Look, this one is the same color as your eyes!"

"You're right. And this one matches yours," he observed.

Olivia smiled at the happy couple looking over the gems and explained each one in turn.

One hour later, the woman was at the entrance on the first floor, all smiles as she squeezed Olivia's hand. "Thank you so much!

Coming here to see you was the right decision!”

The man smiled gently and tilted his hat to Olivia. “I’d like to thank you as well. Now I have a wonderful gift for her.”

Olivia smiled back. “No, thank you. It’s encouraging to receive such compliments. I hope you visit Gordon’s Magic Appliances again sometime.”

She watched the two board a carriage and then hurried up to the second floor. Glancing at the clock, she unlocked a set of drawers and took out several boxes, which she opened to check the contents carefully. Olivia then gently slid the boxes into a satchel with an anti-theft property, put on the bracelet paired with the bag, put on a hat, and walked quickly back down to the first floor.

“I’m going to Sally’s Bridal Boutique,” she told the worker behind the counter at the entrance.

“All right,” he replied. “I’ve called a carriage for you.”

“Thank you. I’ll be back this evening.”

Olivia stepped out of the shop and climbed into the carriage waiting out front. Once inside, she sighed.

I think I might just make it on time.

She watched the sights pass outside the window as the carriage rolled down the main thoroughfare. They turned onto a mid-sized road lined with trees the color of young leaves, then continued for a little over ten minutes.

“We’ve arrived,” called the driver.

“Thank you.”

The driver helped her out of the carriage, and she was standing in front of a shop named Sally’s Bridal Boutique, which faced the busy street.

Olivia looked up at the white sign with its calligraphic script and a silhouette drawing of a loving couple. In the show window were beautiful wedding dresses dripping with lace.

She opened the door decorated with a rose wreath and stepped inside a lovely shop that felt like a kingdom from a fairytale filled with pure-white dresses and fancy accessories on display shelves.

Behind the counter was a young woman in a sleek uniform. She smiled at Olivia when she saw her. “Hello, Olivia. Are you here to see

Sally?”

“I am, for a delivery.”

“Please wait here a moment.” The woman showed Olivia to a sofa with a pattern of tiny flowers.

Olivia’s eyes roved the shop. It was as incredible as always. From further in, Olivia could hear the bubbly voices of couples.

“This aqua dress is cute too. Which do you like better, the white or the aqua?”

“They both look great on you.”

“Oh, come on! You have to choose one. This is what I’ll wear for our one-and-only wedding!”

The woman didn’t sound upset despite her complaints, and Olivia had to clamp her hand over her mouth because she nearly burst out laughing.

Olivia was smiling as she listened to the conversation when the young worker from before returned.

“Sally’s ready to see you. This way, please.”

She led Olivia down a narrow hallway to a larger, cute-but-mature office with pink wallpaper and rows of dress forms wearing half-made dresses. A red-haired woman in a white suit sat by the window.

She smiled and stood when she saw Olivia. “Olivia, you made it!”

Her name was Sally Lilium. She was a fashion designer specializing in bridal fashion and was so good at what she did that she had her own shop despite being so young. Olivia met her through Elliot because Sally was engaged to one of Elliot’s friends.

The brisk, fascinating woman six years older than Olivia had spoken with passion when they first met.

“Men often give their fiancées magic jewelry, but the magic jewelry popular now is sharp or jagged or even plain old ugly—not the sort of thing you can use regularly! I believe the ideal bridal jewelry is something beautiful that the woman can wear every day and enjoy until she’s an old lady!”

The conversation left a strong impression on Olivia. She’d never spoken to someone whose ideals aligned so perfectly with the

direction she wanted to go in. The two were in complete agreement.

"When I saw your magic jewelry, Olivia, I was awed. That, *that* was exactly what I was looking for. I just *have* to have you as a contract artificer with my shop!"

Olivia was entirely on board with Sally's excitement. "It would be a pleasure to work with you!"

She became a contract artificer with Sally's shop, meaning she took on commissions for her. And now they were here.

"Olivia, you made it! Take a seat," exclaimed Sally with a grin.

"Thank you." Olivia sat in the classy chair in front of the desk and took out several small boxes from the anti-theft satchel on her lap. "Today, I have the pieces for Lady Kathleen and Mr. Gardeen."

"Oh! I've been waiting on the edge of my seat. May I look?"

"Of course." Olivia gave her the boxes. Sally looked inside and was captivated.

"It's amazing. The curves of this ring—it's *art*. It goes so well with the dress, too, and you could even wear it when you're just going out."

Olivia chuckled. "Thank you. It was the result of much hard work."

Sally signed the delivery receipt, then carefully placed the jewelry boxes in the safe.

After that, the two sipped on tea and shared information.

"The recent floral trend seems to have settled itself as a staple of fashion. I think the big thing this year is going to be hearts," noted Sally.

"I have seen more people choosing heart shapes in their magic jewelry lately."

"Which means the popular color is likely to be red or pink!"

They never ran out of topics, jumping from current trends to the wedding industry to market rates for magic stones.

Once the sun began to lower and the sky showed signs of evening, Sally announced, "Well, I'll see you again in three days!"

"Yes. See you then."

Sally walked Olivia out, where she boarded a carriage to take her home. Olivia looked out at the rose-tinted sky, thinking the only

other thing she had to do was turn in some paperwork to Gordon.

The day had been a bit busy, but it had also been perfectly normal—until that evening.

"Olivia, you have any interest in running your own shop?"

The shock from Gordon's question caused her to drop the papers she'd been holding.

"You dropped that," Gordon stated, pointing to the paperwork on the lamplit floor from his seat at his desk.

Her eyes moved mechanically to the floor, then back to Gordon with an expression of disbelief. "Um. I'm sorry. Could you repeat that?"

"I said, you have any interest in running your own shop?"

Olivia's eyes couldn't possibly have grown any wider.

"I think your eyes are about to pop out of your head," joked Gordon with amusement.

It was so unexpected that Olivia found herself demanding explanations from him. "W-wait just a moment. Shop? My own *shop*? Here in the capital?"

"Yep."

Olivia pondered in silence. It was tough to operate a shop in the capital. There were a lot of people, but also much competition. She'd seen new shops open and close shortly after several times.

My own shop? In the capital?

Gordon smiled softly at Olivia's confusion. "It'd be treated as a sort of sister shop of mine. It's about having different stores for different products, though maybe I'm getting ahead of myself talking about the specifics."

"For different products?"

Gordon folded his arms and leaned back in his chair. "Who do you think is the primary client base of this shop?"

"Wealthy men and their families."

"Exactly. That's why the selection of items and even store layout are set up to be what a man would like."

Olivia nodded. The shop's decorations and furnishings were all geared to what that target audience would like.

"But we've seen a dramatic increase of another client base in our shop," continued Gordon.

"Young women?"

"Correct. They are customers coming here specifically for the magic jewelry you've designed, and, based on my calculations, your magic jewelry still has potential for growth. The problem is, you're going to hit a ceiling sooner rather than later if you keep selling from here."

Olivia mulled that thought over. She wasn't sure about this ceiling he mentioned, but she was aware young women might not feel comfortable coming into this shop when they were alone.

"So, a sister shop?"

"Yep. Going separate can help us both increase our sales. And I've found a good location for you." Apparently, one of the artificers he knew closed his shop in the capital to move back to the country. "The old man's done a lot for me, and he asked me to handle his old property. I don't have the heart to sell the place, so I thought I'd like to make use of it as another item shop."

"Where is it?"

"Lamilis Street."

That was a hot spot for young women, filled with pretty classy shops. Not to mention, it was incredibly safe as well because there was a guard post there. You could say it was the perfect place for selling magic jewelry to women.

"And I'd just like to get you a shop here," Gordon murmured, though it was so quiet as to be nearly inaudible. "What do you think? Doesn't sound too bad, huh? Will you give it a go?"

Olivia let out a pent-up breath under Gordon's intense gaze. It didn't sound bad, no, but it was such a big deal that she couldn't decide immediately. She wanted to really think it over.

"Let me…think about it."

Gordon grinned. "Sure thing. Take your time."



THAT night, already changed for bed, Olivia sat in a chair by her window as she looked outside.

"My own shop…"

Gordon's Magic Appliances had a system of helping long-term employees set up a sort of franchise shop. It already operated several branches and sister stores both within and outside the capital. The system was beneficial to both sides as it allowed for bulk purchasing of stock as well as increased product variety.

Olivia had visited one of the sister stores in the capital that specialized in repairs. It seemed like they were operating however they pleased, so it didn't look like there were any particular restrictions, and Gordon's shop even provided the initial investment.

She couldn't think of a single negative. It was honestly a shockingly good proposition.

The one thing that was sticking in Olivia's mind was what Gordon mentioned at the end: *"And I'd just like to get you a shop here."*

She acted like she hadn't heard it, but she was confident that's what he said. Olivia wondered if Gordon was still worried about how her father's shop had been taken over.

But it's not Gordon's fault. I wasn't strong enough.

Nevertheless, Gordon was a man of responsibility. He might not ever admit it, but Olivia thought he might regret the fact that he couldn't do anything about what had happened to her.

Honestly, Olivia had been thinking she wanted to keep working at Gordon's Magic Appliances. But Gordon was right. It was very likely that, sooner or later, they'd have to break apart.

Olivia also wanted to live up to Gordon's expectations of her because she owed him so much, and part of her also wanted to try making a shop as wonderful as Sally's. She was a little worried about selling enough, but she thought she might be able to scrape by with the quality of her magic jewelry.

The factors and situation made "opening her own shop" the winning option, but she still couldn't make herself commit.

It's all a mess in my head…

She sighed and looked down out the window, watching the people walk across the lamplit cobblestones as she thought about why she couldn't sort it out, knowing what it was and sighing several times.

After some time, though, she noticed something.

Hey, is that Elliot?

She squinted at the familiar-looking person who'd appeared within sight, that same flat cap and tinted glasses visible in the illuminated street.

He must have noticed her staring because he suddenly looked up.

It is Elliot!

Olivia leaned out the window and waved vigorously. Elliot stopped and slowly waved back.

It's been so long. I want to talk to him.

She shouted, "Wait there!" out the window and quickly changed. Pulling on a blouse, navy skirt, and a light jacket, Olivia descended the fire escape to where Elliot's tall figure stood in his coat and scarf, his handsome features visible beneath the soft lamplight even behind his tinted glasses.

Seeing him then, Olivia couldn't help thinking how refined a person he was. She ran over to him and looked up happily. "Long time no see," she greeted.

Elliot smiled softly. "What has it been, two months?"

Olivia had been so busy that she hadn't realized that much time had gone by. "What are you doing around here?"

"Simply out for a walk after finishing work. And I wanted to see your face," he answered, though the last part was so quiet she didn't hear. Olivia was about to ask him to say that again, but he smiled and proposed, "Wouldn't you prefer to sit and chat than stand around? We could head to a park nearby. I'll walk you back too."

"A night stroll sounds nice. I was just needing something to shake me out of a rut anyway."

They walked side by side down the night street. Olivia huddled against the cool breeze; the nights were still chilly, even though it

was spring. Elliot pulled his charcoal gray scarf from his neck and handed it to her.

"Here," he offered.

"Thank you, but won't you be cold?"

"I'll be fine. I was actually feeling a little warm." He wound the scarf around her bare neck. It still held his warmth and smelled faintly of cologne.

It is warm. This is nice material.

She thanked him and touched the scarf as she decided she'd buy herself a good scarf for next winter.

They arrived at the park, bought warm drinks from a stall, and sat on a bench.

"How have you been?" asked Elliot.

"Busy. Things are going well with Sally."

"It seems like it. Do you remember her fiancé?"

"Yes. Nicca, your friend, right?"

"He's been complaining that she is so absorbed in her work that she doesn't even notice him."

Olivia laughed as she remembered the quiet man at Sally's beck and call. She and Elliot had so much to talk about: their own work, magic items, and Sally.

Then, out of nowhere, Elliot asked, "You don't seem yourself. Did something happen?"

"You can tell?"

"I've known you for nearly a year." He smiled gently.

She cast her eyes down, warming her hands on the no longer piping hot drink. "Something surprising happened today."

"May I ask what it was?"

"Well…" Olivia explained how Gordon had asked her if she wanted her own shop. "It would be a sister shop, and it'd be located on Lamilis Street in the building that Gordon's friend used to own."

"Hm." Elliot considered it. "It sounds like an amazing idea to me. The sort of incredible opportunity that doesn't come around often."

"Yeah," she muttered. She thought so too, she really did. But she couldn't decide anything because of the mess inside her head.

Elliot looked into her face as she fell silent. "I see," he murmured. "That's the face of someone uncertain. Is there something holding you back?"

She hung her head, not answering. He was on the mark; there was something.

It's my father's shop. I can't get it out of my head.

The thing enveloping her heart and weighing it down, causing this uncertainty, was what had happened a year ago in Daregas. Olivia had worked so hard not to think about it this past year. She'd decided to stop torturing herself by thinking back to something she couldn't do anything about, to forget it and face forward.

Thankfully, the events in Daregas had naturally receded to the background because she'd been studying large magic items, making her submission for the Magic Item Design Awards, and otherwise just being busy.

But now that they were talking about opening a shop in the capital, all she could think about was her father's shop in her hometown.

Was this really the right decision? Did she really want to live in the capital forever? Was she all right not going back to Daregas? Who would tend her parents' graves?

Her head was filled to bursting with all the thoughts she'd tried so hard to push away, and she couldn't wrestle control of herself.

After some time, Olivia finally admitted, "I can't go into the details, but it has to do with my family and my hometown."

"I see," said Elliot with a nod. "You're from Daregas, aren't you? Are you…thinking of going back?"

Olivia weakly shook her head. "I can't," she replied quietly. "But I think part of me wants to."

Elliot looked at her with concern. Then, after a moment of thought, he asked, "If you were to return to Daregas, when would that be?"

"Well… Not for a while, I don't think."

He thought for a little longer. "I, of course, don't know what happened with your family. But, if it were me, I think I wouldn't worry about them and seize the opportunity in front of me. It would

be a waste to let this pass you by if you're worried about something that may happen in a year, two years, or even further in the future."

Olivia looked down at the cup she was holding. *He's right. It would be a waste.*

She did want to return, *someday*. Part of her also wanted to do something about her father's shop.

But not now.

Now was for looking to the future and giving her all to becoming a better artificer.

That's right. When I first came here, I decided to face forward, right?

Olivia gave herself an inward chuckle of annoyance. She'd gotten all mixed up because those memories had come back to her out of nowhere. Olivia didn't know what was going to happen in the distant future, but she did know she wanted to work hard to keep her eyes on where she was going.

She gulped down the rest of her drink and looked up at Elliot with gratitude. "Thank you. It looks like I was all sorts of confused."

"Have you sorted it out now?"

"I have, thanks to you. I was worrying myself over things I shouldn't have been thinking about right now."

"I'm glad you've found your way," he responded with a smile and stood. "I imagine you need to be up early tomorrow. Shall I walk you back?"

"Yeah, you're right." She also stood with a smile. The fog clouding her judgment had parted, and she felt like a weight had lifted. "Oh, where were you working today, Elliot?"

"Near the Royal Library."

Olivia's eyes went round. "But that's pretty far from here."

It would take nearly two hours to walk here from there, but Elliot smiled. "It's nothing. Besides, I think I made the right decision coming for a walk. I got to see your smiling face," he replied, though the last part was so quiet again that she didn't catch it.

They returned to Gordon's shop, and Olivia unwound Elliot's scarf from her neck.

"Thank you," she expressed. "It was very warm."

"You're welcome." He took the scarf and quickly slung it around his neck, then, as if remembering, told her, "By the way, I recommend you submit your business application as soon as possible. If you have any trouble, just let me know, and I'll help." Then he smiled at Olivia's apparent confusion and said, "Good night, Olivia. Pleasant dreams."

"Uh, yeah. Good night. See you later."

She watched him fade into the city scene, then climbed up the fire escape to the fifth floor, where she picked up the lamp to light her way to her room.

"What did he mean by that last thing?" she wondered as she changed back into her pajamas. "Oh, well. It's probably nothing."

Feeling renewed, she fell straight to sleep.



THE next evening, Olivia visited Gordon in his office, which was dyed orange from the setting sun.

"I would like to have my own shop!" she proclaimed with a resolute bow.

"Good!" cried Gordon with a smile. He quickly cleared his desk and stood. "It's getting late today. How about we go talk it out over dinner? I'll take you to a nice restaurant!"

Olivia smiled, feeling grateful. "Are you sure? I hear you have questionable taste."

"What now?! That's it! Now I'll have to take you to the best place I can to prove you wrong. You just wait!"

They went to one of Gordon's favorite pubs, which, while not the most refined in appearance, served incredible food. They discussed all sorts of matters as they drank.

"You don't have to hurry to get the shop ready since we own it. How about you aim to open in about a year?" offered Gordon.

"I would feel more at ease knowing I have a year to get ready."

"Sounds good. Set up the kind of shop you can't find anywhere else!"

"I will!"

And, with it decided to open the shop in a year, Gordon stated, “All right. Let’s go submit the business application when we find time.”

At his words, Olivia remembered Elliot telling her it would be better to get it in quickly. “Let’s get it in soon,” she suggested.

The next day, the two went to the Artificers Guild to submit a business application for the new shop.

Chapter 7: And So, She Opens Her Shop in the Capital

IT was the day after Gordon and Olivia had submitted the business application for the new shop to the Artificers Guild. The rain had let up in the afternoon, and Olivia was back at Sally's Bridal Boutique.

"How lovely! I feel like a noble lady!"

A young woman was in the cute dressing room, enchanted by her reflection in the mirror. She wore a gown overflowing with delicate lace and a white veil on her head, along with a sparkling ring on her finger with a blue gemstone.

"It looks wonderful on you. Is the size all right?" asked Sally. She was wearing a cream-colored suit. Another woman in a uniform, her assistant, was smiling as she checked the length of the skirt and sleeves.

"It fits perfectly! Arthur's going to love it too!"

The woman spun happily in front of the mirror, and her eyes stopped on the glittering ring on her finger; she looked enchanted. "This ring really is beautiful. It's wonderful; it even matches the dress!"

"They look really good together," agreed Sally with a smile. "And the design means it won't get in your way. I hope you continue to wear it even after the wedding."

"That's what's so great about it! I can't wait to go out with it on!"

Olivia was in the corner watching the woman, and the corners of her mouth turned up. She felt delighted to see someone that excited.

The woman's mother and grandmother were on a sofa diagonally in front of Olivia, smiling as they watched and spoke together in hushed tones.

"Girls these days have it much better. Your father gave me the most wonderful ring at our wedding, but I only wore it that day. I haven't even looked at it once in the past fifty years," the grandmother recalled.

"I kept mine safe so I could give it to my daughter if I had one, but when I tried to, she said she didn't want something so old-fashioned! I was devastated."

Olivia giggled inwardly as she listened to them. That made her think of the time her mother showed her the ring her father gave her and told her to take it when she got married.

As the two older women talked, the bride spun around and glared at them. "Would you two actually look and tell me what you think? Today is about me!" Then she turned to Olivia and smiled. "Thank you *so* much for the ring! I'm going to visit your shop sometime!"

Happy that the woman did really seem to like the ring, Olivia smiled and bowed. "Thank you. I look forward to seeing you."



ONCE the three women had left, Olivia joined Sally in her pink office and spoke over some tea. Sally's eyes grew in excitement when Olivia shared her plans to open her new business.

"Wow! Your own shop?!"

"Yeah. It'll be a sister store, a separate sales location to Gordon's Magic Appliances focusing specifically on women's magic jewelry."

Sally clasped her hands together happily. "Congratulations! That's incredible! It might just be the first shop in the capital dedicated to women's magic jewelry."

"It looks like it will be. Gordon's raring to use that as a selling point."

As happy as if it were her own accomplishment, Sally cheerfully added, “Well, then, you’ll need a detailed business plan, won’t you?! Do you have any leads on the location?”

“Gordon’s friend had a shop on Lamilis Street; it’s now vacant, and we’re going to refit it.”

“That’s perfect! And near me.”

“Yeah…”



Compared to Sally's bubbly reaction, Olivia's expression was somewhat chilled.

Sally cocked her head. "What's wrong?"

"It's just…things have gotten difficult."

"How so?"

Olivia let out a heavy sigh. "It looks like I'm going to have to open the shop in three months."

"What? What?! Three months?!" Sally's eyes rounded, and she shot to her feet. "Wait! Why in three months? You need *at least* six months; my shop took nearly a year to set up! Three months is rushing things, seriously rushing things!"

Olivia cast her eyes down. "Apparently, the King is planning to slow down the opening of new shops in the capital. Any shop opening after three months from now will be subject to an intense screening process."

When Olivia decided she'd open the shop the other day, they went to submit the business application to the Guild. The worker there informed them in hushed tones of the situation, which would be announced next month.

"According to the Guild, applications like mine, where the shop is a branch store, could be refused because they'll decide that the main store could easily handle that business. Both Gordon and I are in a panic."

As she explained, Olivia thought back to her night stroll with Elliot.

"By the way, I recommend you submit your business application as soon as possible. If you have any trouble, just let me know, and I'll help."

He must have known. I'm so glad he told me.

"Then I guess you have to hurry," murmured Sally as she sat back down with a concerned look at Olivia. "Are you going to be all right, though? If you're doing a refit, you need to grab some builders, like, now!"

"Gordon's been working really hard on it and already requested the builder who works with his shop regularly. He already has an

idea and feel of the store, which helps, and I'm scheduled to have a meeting with him this week."

"You might be able to scrape by in time, then." Sally looked relieved, but that changed to confusion as she looked at Olivia. "If that's the case, then why do you look so down? Was there another problem?"

"Gordon told me I should make a signature product, and I've been trying to figure it out."

Sally nodded in understanding. "You definitely do need a product that's sure to sell, but I imagine the magic jewelry you design should move plenty easily."

"According to Gordon, he'll still want to stock some of my jewelry in his location, so I need something with a wow factor that you can only get in the shop on Lamilis Street."

Sally folded her arms in thought. "I can see that. You do need something that screams, 'You can only get me here!' Do you have a general direction at least?"

Olivia's eyes fell to her knees. "I don't have anything concrete yet, but I want to make products that put smiles on women's faces." That was Olivia's drive, and it would be the core of the new shop as well. No matter what she made, she didn't want to move away from that mindset. "I also want to make something no one else has, something completely *me*."

However, she felt that three months was not enough time to develop a product that could be her flagship item. If she had to, she wanted it to be something incredible, something you couldn't get anywhere else—something that represented her shop.

Sally smiled at Olivia's determined expression. "There we go, that's the spirit! I can't wait to see what you come up with!"

"Thank you. I'm going to give it my all!"



THE following day, a fresh breeze rustled the curtains in Olivia's room as she bustled busily about getting ready to leave. She had on a white blouse and a navy skirt that was a little more casual than

what she usually wore. Standing in front of the mirror, she pulled on a navy hat and tinted sunglasses to finish her disguise.

Yeah, that's good. I wouldn't even recognize myself.

The day before, after returning from Sally's, Olivia stopped by the Artificers Guild.

"Could I have the names and locations of all the magic item shops in the capital specializing in magic jewelry?" asked Olivia.

She kept saying she wanted a signature product you couldn't find anywhere else, but she didn't actually know what other shops had as their signature product—therefore, it made sense to go looking.

"Just a moment," replied the bespectacled clerk. She flipped through a heavy registry book and jotted down the list of names before handing the piece of paper to Olivia. "These are all the magic jewelry shops in the capital."

Olivia took the paper and looked it over. "There are four?"

"Yes. Two are men's only, and the other two offer both men's and women's jewelry."

Olivia thanked the clerk and left. Based on the list, the four shops were scattered around the capital in all directions. Considering Olivia's penchant for getting lost, making it to all of them seemed a challenging task.

But then, a helping hand came from an unexpected place.

"I can accompany you if you're going tomorrow," offered Rose since she was so familiar with the capital.

The pair visited Gordon's office and requested permission to work outside the shop for the day, which was how they ended up conducting their market research day and the need for a disguise.

Olivia spun in front of her mirror. She'd changed her appearance so the artificers of the other shops didn't recognize her, but it was odd how she looked like a completely different person with a hat and tinted glasses. She was in high spirits, perhaps because she was doing something she usually didn't.

Hee-hee, I'm kinda looking forward to this now.

There was still some time before meeting with Rose, but she couldn't sit still. Instead, she left her room, locked the door, and

skipped down the stairs in a rhythm.

Once on the second floor, she peeked into the magic jewelry showroom. There wasn't anyone in as the store wasn't open yet, and the morning light filtered softly into the shop. Olivia quietly entered and stood in the center, where she spun around, looking at everything around her. She saw display cases, polished essentially every day, and shelving on the walls, neatly organized for ease of use.

I can't believe that in three months, I'm going to be leaving this place to work in another shop.

As that thought flitted through her mind, she heard the sharp click of narrow heels coming up the stairs behind her. She turned and saw Rose in a white hat and aqua-colored dress with a white purse in hand.

She smiled softly. "Good morning, Olivia. I thought you might be here when I heard footsteps on the second floor."

"Good morning. I came down early. I was feeling restless."

Rose gave a ladylike chuckle. "Well, it is a little early, but shall we discuss today's plans?"

"Yes, let's." Olivia reached into her bag for the map of the capital she had prepared last night and unfolded it on the counter. "According to the worker at the Guild, there are four shops in the capital specializing in magic jewelry. I've marked them with circles."

Rose murmured in thought as she followed along between the circles on the map with a manicured finger. "They're quite spread out. The clientele and shop atmosphere will be fairly different because of that too."

Olivia nodded. She was certain they'd be able to see all sorts of different signature items.

The two continued discussing the best route and settled on starting from the shop furthest out of the center of the city and working their way in. They went downstairs and stepped out of the shop into bright sunlight and a pleasant spring breeze.

"Let's go to the horsebus stop," suggested Rose.

They walked down the bustling street to the horsebus stop, then waited for a few minutes beneath the blue sky before an eight-

person horse-drawn carriage with a sign saying "City Center<->South" pulled up.

Olivia peered inside and saw one man sitting there. "Good, there're open seats. Let's get on."

"All right."

They paid the driver, climbed in, and sat together by the window. Their conversation wandered from topic to topic as Olivia inattentively watched the sights pass by outside. The bus crossed a large stone bridge over the river running through the capital, which was when Olivia noticed that the buildings tended to be shorter.

"This is probably the area we want," pointed out Rose. She requested the driver to stop, and the two disembarked on a fairly wide street flanked by two-story buildings.

Olivia pulled the map from her purse, which Rose opened.

"Hm. If we go straight this way, we should see it on our right," Rose explained. She set off with the map in one hand, and Olivia followed shortly behind, her head turning this way and that as she took in her surroundings.

It was a crowded street, bursting with life and lined with eateries, clothing shops, and general goods stores that felt friendly and inviting.

The mood is really different from the main thoroughfare with all its famous shops. I think we'll see some completely different items here.

They walked on, anticipation building in her chest.

After some time, Rose stopped and announced, "Found it." She pointed to a shop further along. "That's it."

It was a cute little magic item store. The sign above the door read "Dicke Magic Jewelry."

I like the feel of this place.

With that thought, Olivia followed Rose across the threshold into the store where a surprisingly large showroom opened in front of her, filled with display cases and counters.

There were several customers inside, listening to employees in brown uniforms.

Olivia peered into a nearby display counter.

The jewelry on display is on the lower end in terms of cost bracket. I wonder if they have many unique pieces.

They wandered along with eyes peeled when a bubbly worker with orange hair approached them with a smile. "Welcome! Are you looking for anything in particular?"

"We are. We heard you have a famous signature item. We were hoping to see it," explained Rose with a quick glance at Olivia to check she was saying their rehearsed script correctly.

"This way, please!" answered the worker, and she showed them to a display case on a raised area in the center. "These earrings with blue stones are our signature item!"

"What sort of stone is that?" asked Olivia.

"Sky shine stone! The owner was born in a neighboring country and acquired the stones through his connections there. They're incredibly rare, and you can only get them here!"

Olivia slipped her tinted glasses low and looked closely at the earrings. The worker was right about the stone; Olivia had never seen it before.

They asked a few more questions, then told the worker they'd think about the earrings and left.

As they walked to the horsebus stop down the road, Rose questioned, "What did you think?"

"Well…" began Olivia, thinking. "I think it was a very good signature item. The fact that they're the only place you can buy them in the capital is a strong selling point."

"And there are quite a few people who like rare magic stones."

"I also liked the calm atmosphere inside."

"Me too. I liked that shop."

They exchanged opinions as they waited at the stop, then boarded the bus and headed toward the northern part of the city.

In complete contrast to the previous shop, this one was glittering with gold and located on a huge street lined with tall buildings. The door and window frames were painted gold, and there was a mannequin in the display window covered head to toe in magic jewelry.

Rose looked up at the shop's sign and murmured with curiosity, "This is quite flashy."

"It is. It feels like the epitome of a high-end shop."

Rose led them into the store, where the first thing they saw was a shining wall of gold. The gilded shop was quite large inside, filled with rows of display counters decorated with gold in addition to the gold shelves along the walls.

Wow. Everything is shiny and gold.

While the two stood there, overwhelmed, a woman with large gold earrings approached them. "Welcome. Can I help you find anything?"

"Yes, actually. The talk of the town is that your signature item is incredible, so we came to see it," Rose told her.

The woman smiled. "Oh, how flattering! Of course, this way, please."

She led them to a display case on a dais and smiled as she reached inside with bright red tipped fingers. "This is our signature item: a gold ring."

It was a chunky ring that looked like a snake wrapped around a skull with a large crimson stone set right in the middle.

Olivia nearly gasped in surprise. She'd never seen such a unique ring.

The woman smiled and held the ring out to Rose. "Please, try it on."

Rose grimaced ever so slightly as she slipped it on her finger. "It is incredible, but maybe a bit too much of a statement for me to pull off."

"That's not true at all," countered the woman. "It looks great on you. You look very stylish."

Olivia chuckled secretly to herself at the expected sales pitch. Rose looked apologetic as she responded, "I'm sorry. I just think it's out of my budget…"

They were at the point where they were trying to use the lack of money as a reason to leave, but the smiling woman wouldn't let them. She doubled down. "This piece is so popular you might not have another chance to buy it even if you do decide to later."

Olivia felt put off by the saleswoman's overbearing attitude. Rose gave a strained smile and turned her down with another, "I'm sorry."

With a look of disappointment, the woman showed them out. Once outside, the two of them let out sighs.

"That was something else," let out Rose.

"I was shocked. Her persistence…"

Rose looked at Olivia's expression of surprise and chuckled. "It was interesting, however. I've never seen a piece of magic jewelry quite like it."

"Me neither. It left a *huge* impression, that's for sure."

After that, they took a lunch break at a café before heading to the two remaining shops in the afternoon.



BY the time the clouds had been dyed rose from the setting sun and a cool evening breeze blew through town, Olivia and Rose were walking down the main thoroughfare back to Gordon's shop, having visited all four of the magic jewelry stores.

Rose watched people hurry by on their way home for the day and commented, "There were all sorts of different signature items."

"There really were. It was interesting," Olivia agreed.

The last two signature items they saw in the afternoon were a high-end ring with a massive magic stone and a bracelet that used a rare magic stone. They were both interesting and incredibly unique; they hadn't seen anything like them before.

It was like, rather than focusing on the practicality of the pieces, the shops valued something that stood out enough to almost become a symbol of the shop.

Olivia considered what she'd seen as she gazed at her shadow stretching out along the white cobblestone. It would be simpler if she had something like that, a piece that caught attention and represented the shop, but could she make something like that in the end?

Rose asked, "Have you had any ideas?"

"Well…I was actually thinking of practical pieces like necklaces and rings that were easy to wear, but I'm starting to think something with a wow factor to draw people in would be better."

"Perhaps." Rose nodded. "There were many pieces that really stood out in those shops."

"Yeah. That's why I think I'll look through my design sketchbooks and have a good think about it."

They arrived at the store, where Olivia bobbed her head in a bow. "Thank you for your help today," she said. "I learned a lot."

Rose smiled softly. "I had fun too. Thank you for letting me tag along. And good luck."

That night, Olivia was in her workroom on the third floor of the shop. Beneath the light of the magic lamp were ten well-used sketchbooks jam-packed with designs she'd thought up. She picked up one of the sketchbooks and flipped through the pages, stopping to put pieces of paper in to mark designs that seemed promising.

Starting that day, the lights were on in her workroom late into the night.



IT was a warm, humid spring afternoon filled with the gentle drum of rainfall a week after Olivia went researching with Rose.

"Hey, Olivia! Are you in?" came a voice along with a knock at the door of her workroom. The next moment, the door burst open, and in came Laraconia.

"This is about your request, isn't it?" asked Olivia. "It's ready." She smiled awkwardly and stood. He was as unreserved as always. She unlocked a drawer and carefully lifted out a velvet box. "Here it is," she said, holding it out. "Please check it's what you wanted."

Laraconia opened the box with anticipation and then burst into a broad grin when he saw the elegant flower necklace inside. "It's great! This'll pacify the wife for a good while. Thank you!" His gaze then fell on the design sketches scattered across her worktable, and his eyes widened slightly. "Those all designs for magic jewelry? That's a lot."

"Yeah. But I still haven't been able to come up with what I need…" groaned Olivia with a weary expression, and Laraconia smiled cheerily.

"I heard. You're trying to think of your new shop's signature item, yeah?"

"Yes, I am. I've been racking my brain, but I haven't had any ideas that have made me go, 'Now this is it!'"

"Sounds rough." Laraconia gently flipped some pages and looked at them. Then he asked, "Could you not use the piece you won gold with in the Design Awards? I think that'd make an amazing signature item."

Olivia sighed. "Gordon suggested it too, but it's too expensive."

Laraconia grinned. "Yeah. That one piece could buy you a nice little house on the outskirts of town."

"Exactly. And if that was my signature product, I'm afraid it would make people think my shop was very high-end."

Laraconia thought for a moment. "Is that so bad? It's not necessarily a bad path to take your shop down, making it a high-end one. That's how it is in the magic jewelry business, anyway."

Olivia cast her eyes down. "It's not bad, necessarily. But I'd like to make a shop that makes people happy regardless of whether or not they're rich."

She would certainly make money if the shop catered to noble clientele. They could pay sums that commoners could never compare with. But it was those everyday women, tired from their daily jobs, who needed magic jewelry the most. Olivia wanted those people to enjoy her pieces.

Laraconia laughed. "Hah, good for you! That's very like you." Then he dropped a pouch of candies on the worktable. "Sorry for the interruption, and good luck!" And he left with a wave.

"Thank you," Olivia called, watching him go. She turned back to her worktable and became engrossed in drafting new designs.

And not that day nor the next was she able to think of a design that made her go, "This is it!"

"RIGHT. So, you're not having any luck coming up with designs, and you feel completely stuck, and that's why you came to me?"

"Yes. I have no idea what to do."

It was two weeks after Olivia and Rose had conducted their market research, and Olivia was resting her cheek listlessly on the desk in Sally's pink office with dark circles of astonishing size beneath her eyes. She sighed, not moving from her odd position, and Sally smiled with pity.

"Well…" started Sally as she picked up the design sketches Olivia had brought. "They are all incredible, perfectly capable of being a signature product in any other shop. But if you told me one of these was *your* signature item…it wouldn't feel quite right."

"I know." Olivia nodded weakly.

She'd been working so hard. Olivia tried brooches, something she didn't normally design. Then she thought, what if she tried changing tack and made a version of cufflinks reworked for women, instead of for men as they usually were. She tried all sorts of things, but none of them felt right.

Sigh. What do I do?

Olivia was feeling her deadline looming. At this rate, she'd have no choice but to go with the incredibly expensive piece she won the gold award with.

"So, that's why I wanted to ask you something, Sally," Olivia continued.

"Me?" Sally's eyes widened, her long eyelashes fluttering as she blinked several times.

Olivia readjusted her seat and stated, "Yeah. I'd like to hear about your signature item."

The dresses Sally designed were so incredible. Olivia had no doubt they drew people in, but she didn't feel like she'd seen any one single signature item in Sally's store. So, what was it?

Sally looked down in thought. "Well…I guess, in my case, it's less a signature item and more a signature concept."

"A signature concept?"

"Yes. My shop's concept is to be a place where anyone can become a princess." Sally smiled. "Have you ever gone to any other

bridal boutiques?"

"Not in the capital, but I have been a couple of times to ones in Daregas."

"What were they like?"

"Big open spaces with lots of people all trying on dresses."

"Yes, that's what they're often like." Sally put her elbow on the desk and rested her chin on top of her hand. "But I want to make every single woman feel like a princess when it comes time for their wedding. Most other shops are focused on efficiency. What princess would ever change out of dresses in a room filled with lots of people? That's why I went with individual rooms. They can try on wonderful dresses in lovely rooms as much as they like and get showered with compliments. Without that, they couldn't become princesses."

Olivia looked around the room. It had white furniture and pink wallpaper with tiny flowers.

Now that she mentions it, everything fits the fairytale feel, from the wreath hanging on the door to the changing rooms to the tiny decorations everywhere. It was all to make a shop where women could become princesses.

And that's when it hit her.

That's it! A signature item doesn't actually have to be an item*!*

Sally's mouth turned up at the sight of Olivia having seemingly come up with something.

Olivia looked at her reliable friend with gratitude. "Thank you. I think I know what to do now. I'll head back and try to sort things out one last time."

Sally smiled bigger. "You're welcome! Come back again if you're still having trouble!"

That night, Olivia was at her lamplit desk in her room in the dorm, images of the shops she went to see, the customers, Sally and what she told her, and her father's shop all swirling in her mind.

She stared at the magic lamp and murmured, "What sort of shop do I want to make in the end?"

That day, and the several that followed, she stayed up late into the night thinking.



A little before evening, a few days after Olivia found a clue to her direction at Sally's shop, she visited Gordon's office once work had settled a little.

"I've decided what I'm going to do about my signature item!" she exclaimed. "I'd like you to see."

"Ah!" he cried with excitement as he took the paper with sketches from her. He stared at it, blinking. "What…is this?"

On the paper were over ten designs for various rings, necklaces, pendants, and more.

Gordon cocked his head and continued, "They're all wonderful designs, but which is your signature item?"

There was no rule that stated you had to have only one signature item, but this was definitely excessive.

Olivia's chest puffed up with pride. "They all are!"

"Uh. They all are?"

Olivia smiled when Gordon's jaw dropped. "My 'signature item' is going to be reworking old magic jewelry!"

When Olivia was at Sally's shop, she was reminded of the two women she had overheard and their conversation:

"*Girls these days have it much better. Your father gave me the most wonderful ring at our wedding, but I only wore it that day. I haven't even looked at it once in the past fifty years*."

"*I kept mine safe so I could give it to my daughter if I had one, but when I tried to, she said she didn't want something so old-fashioned! I was devastated*."

And that made Olivia think: if she could rework treasured old magic jewelry filled with memories, then people would love to wear them, and they could be passed down from mother to daughter, bringing joy forever.





"Huh," pondered Gordon, his eyes crinkling in a smile. "Interesting. It's a fresh idea. Not something I or the others could have ever come up with. But you'll be making less than if you craft and sell new items."

Olivia nodded. "I know. That's why I plan to use it to fill up otherwise slow periods, put limits on the number I do at a time, and only modify in a way that won't put too much pressure on my profits."

Gordon grinned. "Well, if you've got it all worked out, then we'll just have to try it and see!" He then leaned down to the safe under his desk and took out a worn, gold-colored key with a dull gleam. "This is the key to your new shop. It's yours starting today. You can go check it out again."

"Thank you!" She took the key and bowed, feeling nervous but also a profound weight on her shoulders, before walking briskly out.

Sometime after she left, Gordon let out a small sigh and stood. He looked out the window into the sky as he remembered his good friend's smile. It was exactly like Olivia's. As he watched the clouds drift by, he whispered, "You'd be happy, Ralph. Olivia's grown into an artificer more incredible than you ever imagined."



OLIVIA stopped by her workroom after leaving Gordon's office and then left the shop.

Evening was already making a show outside, dyeing the small sliver of sky visible between the buildings the color of roses.

That was quick. It's already evening.

She looked up at the sky as she walked down the cobblestone pavement on her way to Lamilis Street.

It was a popular road among young women, lined with cafés and clothing shops. Even this close to evening, there were still plenty of women enjoying a stroll along the street.

Olivia came to a stop in front of a shop on the corner with small windows.

This is it.

She took the key out of her bag and opened the door, the edges of the paint just beginning to peel.

Ding-ding.

The clear sound of a bell chime echoed through the shop, though no one was there.

Olivia stepped softly inside and closed the door.

The dim shop was empty, and the bubbly noise from outside disappeared like it'd only been a dream. The place smelled of dust, likely because it'd been unoccupied for so long.

Why do I feel like this? Like…a little nostalgic, but my heart is racing…

It was an odd sensation, like catching the scent of damp soil in spring. It made her smile.

She slowly turned her head to survey the shop, then let out a small sigh.

It still doesn't feel real that this is my *shop.*

In a few days, the builders were coming to fit shelving and a counter. Maybe once that was done, it would finally feel real, like her very own shop. Perhaps that, or she could start thinking of it as her shop once she put up the sign.

"I need to think of a name…"

A week later, this sign was hung on the wooden door:

Olivia's Magic Jewelers

Opening Soon



IT was a summer afternoon, and the sky shone brilliantly.

There were only two weeks left until the opening of Olivia's shop. She was in the doorway of her shop in the middle of Lamilis Street, wearing trousers for ease of movement and having an energetic conversation with the friendly foreman of the builders over a diagram of the shop's interior.

"I think it'd be nice to have three shelving units over here, like on the left side," Olivia was saying.

"If we do three, that'll leave this space empty. That all right?"

"It should be fine. I was thinking of putting a little decorative table there."

Several builders were at work inside the shop, the sounds of hammering and sawing emitting from the door.

The foreman turned to the builders and called, "'Bout time to take a break!" which was when someone bid Olivia hello.

She looked and saw the friendly greeting had come from a woman in a beige dress carrying a parasol. "Rose!"

Rose smiled at the sight of Olivia's happy expression. "I've come with Gordon's reply."

Olivia thanked her as she took the letter, then turned to the foreman and remarked, "I'm going to step out for a bit."

"Sure. Take your time, as long as you're back by evening."

"Thank you. Let's go, Rose."

The foreman gave them a friendly wave, and the two walked a short way down the road to a small café where they ordered a late lunch.

Rose looked at Olivia with concern. "You're not pushing yourself, are you? Though, I suppose you don't have much choice since you only have two weeks left."

Olivia had been going nonstop the past month. There were all the processes and paperwork she'd never had to deal with before, learning how finances worked in terms of her connection with the

main shop, meetings about building work on the shop, and picking out furniture, all on top of her usual work. She had barely any time to sleep and was at best managing to scrape by with help from Gordon and Rose, who were teaching her about the paperwork and procedures.

"You'll be living on the second floor of the shop, right? Have you had a chance to sort that all out?" asked Rose.

"Yes," Olivia assured with a nod, her eyes shining at the sight of the Napolitan spaghetti the server had brought out. "I bought some basic furniture and had it delivered to the second floor. It's enough for me to live in."

Currently, it was difficult to find reliable employees, so Olivia wasn't going to try and rush to find someone before the shop opened. Instead, Rose was being dispatched to help for a little while so Olivia could take her time hiring someone.

Rose gracefully speared her penne pasta with her fork and told her, "I'll come help the day before you open. You'll have a hard time with all the deliveries and putting out pieces for display."

"But haven't you requested that day off?"

Rose laughed like Olivia was being silly. "Oh, don't worry about that. I'll just change it to another day."

"Really, I'll be fine. Magic jewelry isn't heavy, and I won't have all that much in the beginning." Rose had helped Olivia out so much, even canceling her days off on several occasions to help. She couldn't bring herself to ask Rose for more. "Please, take your day off," she exclaimed brightly as she stuffed pasta into her bulging cheeks.

Rose looked concerned but sighed and said, "All right. I'll take my day off. But make sure you let me know if you can't handle everything on your own."

Olivia set her fork beside her empty plate with satisfaction, then nodded firmly. "I will! I'll be fine, I'm sure."



IT was a summer morning with a brisk, refreshing breeze blowing. After the rain throughout the night came to a stop, the wind felt uplifting.

It was also the day before Olivia's shop opened.

She looked around the shop and let out an impressed sigh.

It's turned into an amazing shop.

In front of her was a store far more incredible than she ever imagined. The wallpaper was a calm blue color, and the furniture was modern and classy. It felt like the sort of tearoom a noble lady might frequent.

Olivia still couldn't believe it was *her* shop. She glanced sideways toward the corner and the three smallish wooden crates. Inside were magic jewelry pieces made at Gordon's shop, as well as decorations and stands for display.

There was also supposed to be one other large box coming that had the bare minimum she needed to survive: her clothes, daily necessities, and the like. For the rest, she was going to slowly move over when she had time.

Right, let's get this taken care of.

After about an hour, she managed to empty one of the crates. She started on the second one, thinking she'd have plenty of time at the rate she was going.

But that's when the brand-new doorbell rang.

"Hello?" called Olivia.

"Olivia, it's me!"

"Oh!"

Olivia set down what she was working on and hurried over to open the door with its anti-crime magic stone to see her good friend, Sally, along with the heavyset form of her fiancé and knight, Nicca, both holding a basket of flowers. Sally smiled and shoved a basket filled with what looked like an arrangement of sweet peas toward Olivia.

"Congratulations on the new shop!" she proclaimed.

"Thank you! What beautiful flowers!"

"Congrats," offered Nicca. "I'll carry this one in." He lifted the basket of orange and red gerberas.

"Come in," Olivia ushered them inside.

Sally's eyes widened when she stepped in. "This is *great*! It's amazing!"

Olivia smiled bashfully as she placed Sally's basket of flowers in a prominent location. "Thanks. I based it on a few different cafés."

"So, you sit here and look at the jewelry?"

"Yes. I'm planning on having the pieces in glass cases, which we then bring over to the customers."

"And it'll be by reservation only?"

"Generally, yes."

"That's nice!" Sally smiled and stood, then stopped in front of a full-length mirror. "And here you can see your whole look."

"Yep. Then, if the customer's concerned about color coordination, they can pair the jewelry with the different cloth swatches there." There was a shelf next to the mirror with more than ten large pieces of fabric.

Sally picked up the red one and draped it over herself. "What a great idea! Then you know how it looks with different colors." She neatly folded the fabric and set it back in the pile, then spoke with excitement, "People will definitely come here! Spending time listening to the artificer as you choose your jewelry…it's incredible!"

After that, the two chatted cheerfully as Olivia showed Sally around the shop, the two nearly forgetting Nicca was even there.

"Oh, that's right!" exclaimed Sally after a while as if she only remembered. "We came here to help you. Is there anything to do?"

"I'm good at the heavy lifting and whatnot," Nicca replied with a nod as he looked at a painting on the wall.

"I appreciate it," Olivia responded as she looked again at Sally's clothes. She was wearing a cute, fashionable dress and carrying a fancy parasol. Nicca was also looking rather stylish. Olivia couldn't help feeling they were on some sort of date.

I can't possibly make them help when they're in the middle of a date.

So, she smiled and said instead, "Thank you, really, but it's all right. I just need to finish putting out a few little things, then clean up my tools."

"Really? You sure you'll be all right on your own?" asked Sally.

"I'm sure. I only need to put out what's in those two crates."

Sally turned around and looked at the two small crates. Her expression looked like she accepted they might be in the way if they lingered around.

"Well, I guess we'll head out then," she relented. "I'll swing by again tomorrow."

And with that, the two left.

Olivia waved as she saw them off, and then she went back to decorating and setting up displays in the shop. She struggled with the exact arrangement but made progress in putting the rings and earrings into the display cases.

She finished the second crate and was about to tackle the third one.

Ding-dong.

The doorbell rang again, followed by a man's voice. "Ms. Olivia? I have a delivery from Gordon's Magic Appliances for you."

She peeked through the curtains and saw a man holding a large wooden crate.

That's probably the things I sent.

She opened the door, and the man set the crate at her feet before passing her a piece of paper and a pen. "Please sign here to confirm you received the delivery. And, uh, where would you like me to set it?"

"Over there, please." Olivia pointed to an open space in the corner of the shop.

The man hoisted the crate up with a huff and carried it over.

Olivia looked at him with confusion. She was sure there were only clothes and a few daily necessities in there. How could it be so heavy?

Once the man left, she opened the crate, and her eyes flew open in surprise.

Ah! What? Is this from Mr. Harrison?

Inside was a collection of magic items and equipment, the same that had been in Harrison's room, including a small magic heater along with a fire-resistant mat. These items were things

Olivia had taken a liking to while at Gordon's, and it looked like Harrison had sent her brand-new ones.

Oh, thank you, Mr. Harrison.

She stared into the crate with tears forming. How lucky was she to have someone who had taken such good care of her while she was at Gordon's shop and was now doing this for her? She'd have to thank him the next time she visited.

With that, she got back to cleaning up the shop.

Ding-dong.

The doorbell rang a third time.

"Ms. Olivia? I have a delivery from Gordon's Magic Appliances!"

This time, it has to be my things.

She peeked through the curtains again and saw a man with a crate even larger than the last one. Either it was something she'd completely forgotten about, or it was another present from someone.

She opened the door, and the smiling delivery man had her sign a paper again.

"This delivery is from Mr. Gordon. Where should I drop it?"

"Um…in that corner over there."

"Sure thing!"

In addition to the large crate he was carrying, he returned to his wagon parked nearby and pulled out another four, which he stacked onto the first in the corner.

That wasn't the end of the deliveries.

Before Olivia knew it, the corner of her shop had been swallowed by a mountain of crates.

I was not expecting this…

Olivia sighed as she stood in front of the stack.

All of them had come from Gordon's Magic Appliances. She guessed all the artificers there had thought of her and sent all sorts of things. Which meant it was safe to assume there was quite a lot in each one.

Olivia was happy. So very happy.

And yet…how in the world am I going to put all this away by tomorrow morning?

She stood in front of the boxes, at her wits' end, and was undoubtedly in for an all-nighter. Could she even finish it in one night?

Ding-dong.

And the doorbell rang again.

With a sigh, she called, "Yes?" She opened the door with a glum look, assuming it was another delivery.

And there she found Elliot holding a beautiful bouquet of sunflowers and a large white paper box. He took his brown flat cap off with one hand as a smile grew on his attractive features.

"Hello, Olivia. Congratulations on the new shop. I brought gifts."

"Oh! Thank you!" Olivia smiled, relieved he wasn't another man with a delivery. "What beautiful flowers. And what's in the box?"

"Pies from that café I mentioned before. I thought they would be the perfect treat since it's about time for a snack."

Her eyes sparkled. Of course, Elliot would bring something so wonderful. He knew her well. It was then she realized she hadn't eaten anything since morning.

Elliot's eyes crinkled in amusement at the sight of Olivia more enraptured with the aroma coming from the box than the perfume of the flowers. "You really don't put on any pretenses. By the way, is there anything I can help with?"

"What?" Olivia froze. "Did you…come to help?"

"Yes. That was the intention," he replied smoothly, and then Olivia clamped her hands on him. "Uh, Olivia?"

He blinked in surprise as Olivia looked up at him with tears.

"Thank you! I will owe you big time!"

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***ELLIOT** is stronger than I expected.*

They'd been in the workshop in the back of the shop for a little over ten minutes, and Olivia was feeling impressed as she poured tea into the cups on the worktable. She was watching Elliot, the sleeves of his neatly ironed shirt rolled up, as he easily lifted a box

she would have struggled with. He looked slimly built under his clothes, but now that she could see his sturdy shoulders and prominent arm muscles, she realized he was rather fit.

Maybe traders have to do more manual labor than I thought.

The boxes disappeared as she watched.

"I've finished moving them," Elliot announced.

"Thank you. You're a lifesaver," she said, then the two sat across each other at the worktable and drank their tea.

Olivia opened the paper box with anticipation, and the sight made her heart leap. "Wow!"



The box held rows of small, round pies about the size of a child's fist. On top of them was a variety of chocolate, nuts, thinly sliced apple, and more.

She sighed, enchanted. "They're all so beautifully made; you can tell the baker worked incredibly hard on them. And the aroma! It's almost like I've been transported to an apple orchard!"

"You really do become quite eloquent when it comes to food." Elliot looked away, a hand over his mouth like he was trying hard not to smile.

They each picked out a pie and began eating. Olivia chewed with joy as she looked at Elliot with gratitude.

"Thank you so much. Really," she expressed. "These are delicious. And thank you for moving the boxes. I could not have managed on my own. You're pretty strong."

"It was nothing. And thank you for the tea." He looked somewhat bashful and quickly looked over his shoulder through the open door to the front end of the shop. "It's turned into a wonderful shop."

"It has. I was surprised."

Elliot looked at the brand-new blue sign on the worktable that was going to be hung at the entrance. "You went with Olivia's Magic Jewelers, I see."

"Yep. I thought about a lot of different options but decided I wanted to use the name my parents gave me."

"That's very nice. I think it's a great name."

"Thank you." Olivia smiled, her cheeks red. At one point, she was considering flower names or names of constellations but eventually settled on this. She was embarrassed at first, putting her own name on it, but now she was glad she chose to leave her mark with something her parents left her.

Elliot looked at her with soft eyes, then said with admiration in his voice, "When I first met you a year ago, I never would have imagined you'd have your own shop in this short a time."

"Me neither." Olivia nodded fervently. There were still times she thought she was dreaming.

Elliot smiled. “You might have some hard times after this, but please come to me if you ever need anything. I’ll help.”

“Thank you. But you have already given me a lot of advice and important information. I’d feel bad if you helped me even more,” Olivia replied meekly.

Elliot smiled in exasperation. “You really are bad at relying on others. I don’t want you saying that. We’re friends.”

“But—”

“No buts. Friends help each other out when they need it. Please. Rely on me if you need to.”

Olivia was grateful for Elliot.

I am so blessed to have a friend who would offer that.

It was a stroke of good luck that made her bump into him that day when she came to the capital.

“All right, Elliot,” she relented. “I really do have a good friend.”

“Me too, Olivia.” He smiled, though there was something plaintive in his downcast gaze. Then he stood and declared, “Right, I’ll help you unpack.”

“Really? You’re a huge help!”

“Which crate should I open first?”

“Um, well…”

After that, the two worked late into the night. They took a break for dinner but continued talking as they cleaned up the shop.

They just about managed to finish before the clock struck midnight.

Epilogue: Welcome to Olivia's Magic Jewelers

IT was a clear morning with a blue sky that seemed to go on forever.

Olivia stood in the middle of her brand-new shop and looked around her. She saw a calm blue wallpaper, high-end modern furniture, and elegant jewelry.

Inside the display counter by one wall were pieces she'd designed, sparkling in the morning sun, while a small sign on the wall with a gold border read "We remake your magic jewelry!"

It…really is my shop, isn't it?

The realization bubbled up within her, bringing tears to her eyes.

Rose came out from the workshop in the back and brought her out of her reverie, "It's about time, Olivia."

"Yes, it is."

Olivia gently opened the lace curtains on the window facing the street and saw two young women under a parasol waiting outside. She presumed they were her first scheduled customers. They looked excited as they chatted.

Her first customers.

She was filled with emotion as the clock tower on the church chimed the hour.

Ding-dong.

The doorbell rang as well, as if the women couldn't keep their excitement at bay any longer.

All right. Today is the start of something new.

Olivia took a deep breath and opened the door with a smile.

“Hello, and welcome to Olivia’s Magic Jewelers.”

A Convoluted Plot

IT was about a year and a half after Olivia moved to the capital.

At a popular local bakery, just a little outside the center of Daregas, the old proprietress was sweeping the floor.

I'm exhausted again today. Let's get this cleaning done and head home.

She quickly finished her duties and began locking up shop to head home.

"Excuse me," came a voice from behind.

The old lady turned around and saw three young women standing there. They were all wearing fancy, expensive clothing.

One of the women hesitantly asked, "I'm sorry to bother you. Would you happen to know when the magic item shop over there is open?"

She pointed to Carter's Magic Items, which was on the opposite corner from the bakery. The door was shut tight, and the inside was dark and still.

The bakery owner let out a pained sigh. "Ah. It's been closed all the time for a while now. Rumor has it the daughter of the owner has no time for the shop because she's getting married."

"Oh, Olivia's getting married?"

"No, not Olivia. Her adoptive sister, I think it was."

"Oh…"

The young woman looked crestfallen. She'd bought earrings designed by Olivia and loved them so much she'd brought her friends to the shop.

"Thank you," she replied.

"Not at all. I'm sorry I couldn't be more help."

The three women thanked the old lady, who waved as they left. Once they were out of sight, the old lady sighed. "For goodness' sake… I do wonder what happened to her…"

About two and a half years before, the owner of Carter's Magic Items passed away, followed shortly by his wife. His daughter, Olivia,

was an artificer. Despite being so young, she kept the shop afloat with help from a long-time employee, Jack.

But two months later, the younger brother of Olivia's father came—a rather pompous man—and the atmosphere in the shop turned into something fierce. Olivia stopped smiling, and Jack looked exhausted all the time.

It hurt the old lady's heart to see so plainly that things were not going well. She often took little gifts over to the shop and asked if they were all right. Olivia told her that her uncle had brought in so many jobs from nobles that they had no time to rest.

After that, Jack retired because he was so overworked all the time. A few months after that, Olivia suddenly disappeared, and rumor spread that she'd been stealing her sister's designs.

This made the old lady explode with rage. "For goodness' sake! That can't possibly be true!"

Olivia was so earnest and hardworking. There was no way she would do something like that. On top of it all, her engagement with the son of the local lord, Henry, was called off.

"The poor dear. She must be so hurt."

The old lady wanted to console Olivia, but she had no idea where she was.

In her place at the shop came Olivia's adoptive sister, Catherine, or some such. The old lady asked her where Olivia went and was met with a sour look that didn't match such a sweet face.

"Olivia's not coming back! They're my designs!"

But the girl only came to the shop regularly in the first six months or so. Customer traffic slowed, and the shop was closed more often than not—until recently when the old lady hadn't seen it open at all.

She looked at Carter's Magic Items with concern. The shop was starting to show signs of neglect.

"I hope Olivia is off somewhere getting by all right…"



AROUND that time, Olivia's former fiancé, Henry, was with Catherine, drinking tea in a café on the main street of Daregas.

As Viscount Perigord insisted, they'd waited a year after the end of Henry's engagement with Olivia before they became engaged themselves. The invitations for their wedding had already gone out, and they were in the middle of preparing for the ceremony. Usually, this would be a busy yet joyful period, but Henry's complexion didn't look gleeful.

"Catherine, when are you going to reopen Carter's Magic Items?" asked Henry with a gloomy expression.

Catherine gave him an apologetic look. "I'm sorry. I just haven't been able to find the time to go to the shop, what with getting ready for the wedding and my studies."

"Couldn't you manage just once a week? My father has been asking when exactly the store will reopen."

She grimaced at the mention of the Viscount.

Henry peered at her with a look of concern. "Catherine, has something been bothering you? You always went on about how much you loved sketching designs, but you haven't done much at all lately."

She used to always have a small sketchbook with her when she walked around and would occasionally draw something. Henry hadn't ever seen her with a sketchbook recently, let alone draw anything.

Catherine hung her head for a while, then turned her misty green eyes to him. "Actually…there is something. I haven't been able to focus on my designs at all."

Henry was shocked. She was always smiling, so he had no idea Catherine dealt with such concerns. "What is it?" he asked.

"It's…my sister," she whispered, her voice close to fading away entirely.

He frowned. "Olivia isn't in town anymore. You don't have to worry about her bullying you."

"That's not the problem. Even with how things ended up…I still want her at our wedding."

His eyes grew round at the unexpected statement. “Are you serious?”

“I am. I just feel bad for her if things stay the way they are.”

“Well…I suppose I can see that. But it’s her fault it ended up this way.”

“I know. But even if it’s not by blood, we’re still sisters, and I’m worried about her.”

She pressed the corners of her eyes to hold back tears, and Henry couldn’t help thinking how kind she was. It must have been hurting Catherine’s heart this entire time. He had heard you needed creative thinking to come up with designs. Surely, ideas wouldn’t come if something was worrying her.

I would rather not see that dreadful Olivia, but I have no choice —it’s for Catherine.

Henry nodded, his expression sour. “I understand. As reluctant as I am to do this, I’ll ask my father. I know he has had Olivia on his mind as well; I doubt he’ll refuse.”

“Oh, thank you!”

Catherine’s expression burst into a radiant smile as she clasped his hand. Feeling in a better mood with her holding his hand, he mentally congratulated himself. What a kind man he was to not only forgive that horrible woman but go so far as to invite her to his wedding.

That’s why he hadn’t noticed Catherine’s mouth, which had twisted in a far crueler sneer than ever before.

To Be Continued…

Side Story: Olivia Learns Her Coffee-Drinking Lesson

IT was a winter day with a cold wind blowing, just under a year after Olivia had moved to the capital.

Olivia and Elliot were walking along the road, huddling in their coats beneath the heavily cloud-laden sky alongside the bare trees.

"The wind is so cold again today. When will spring get here?" complained Olivia.

"If it's anything like past years, it should start warming up at the beginning of next month," Elliot replied.

They entered a café facing out to the street that had a somewhat old-fashioned motif. Relieved at the warmth inside, Olivia pulled off her coat, and the server sat them at a table by the wall, where she and Elliot sat facing each other.

Elliot picked up the tasteful but old-looking menu set on the table and opened it. The café was famous for its cakes topped with fruit and whipped cream, and the menu had a list bursting with different fruit offerings.

"They have several different flavors," observed Elliot.

"They do. I don't know if I can decide."

Elliot watched her with amusement as she chose carefully, her eyes shining.

In the end, she ordered, "One slice of strawberry, one orange, one kiwi, and a pot of hot black tea, please."

"I'll have a slice of lemon and a pot of hot coffee. Thank you."

As usual, the server looked concerned over Olivia's order. "The pieces of cake are quite large. Are you sure you'd like three?"

Once she'd confirmed her order, Olivia looked at the young man sitting across from her. He looked like he might nearly laugh.

"You always have coffee. You must like it," she commented.

"I like the smell. And you always have black tea. Do you not like coffee?"

"It's not my favorite." The conversation made her remember when she was young, and her mother would heat the dark liquid in a pot for her father. It was bitter, with odd undertones and a film of oil on top, yet somehow grainy too. She never did like it.

Elliot nodded in understanding as she recounted her experience. "Perhaps you might like the coffee from this café then."

"Is it different somehow?"

"It's a different brewing method. Would you like to try a sip?"

Well, if he insisted. Olivia requested another cup from the woman who had brought their tea and coffee over and poured a little bit of Elliot's coffee before hesitantly bringing it to her lips.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"It's…like a completely different drink from the coffee I know." She looked at the dark liquid in her cup, a little surprised. "It doesn't have the odd undertones, and it's not as bitter as I thought it would be. It's quite good."

According to Elliot, this café used a brewing method that had become popular recently. Before then, the most common method was the same as what Olivia's family did: boiling roughly crushed beans in a pot, then drinking the liquid at the top of the mixture. This café, however, ground the beans to nearly a powder and filtered the water through it using a paper filter.

"The paper absorbs those odd flavors and the oil, clarifying the flavor," explained Elliot.

It was a very clean flavor. She took another sip, and it went down easily since it didn't have the oily and grainy feel from her childhood.

"This is a nice sort of bitter," she observed. "It makes me want to drink some in the morning while I have a cinnamon roll."

Elliot smiled. "Well, then let me give you a gift."

"What?"

"I have an appliance that allows me to enjoy coffee even at home. I've wanted to give you something in return for the tea you gave me. This will do nicely."

If he was going to insist, then she could only look at him with gratitude. "Thank you. I can't wait."



IT was a clear afternoon three days after her outing with Elliot. Olivia was busy in her workroom at Gordon's Magic Appliances when a knock came on the door.

She looked and saw Rose's light-brown hair swaying, a smile on her lips. "Olivia, you have a delivery."

Rose handed over a heavy package, large enough that Olivia had to use both arms to take it. It was neatly wrapped in sturdy white paper with "Elliot Dicks" noted as the sender.

Is this the coffee set he was talking about the other day?

Rose helped her carefully unwrap the package and open the box. Inside was an appliance she'd never seen before, a wooden box the size of two dictionaries stacked together, and an envelope.

Rose peered into the box with curiosity. "What is it?"

"I think it's a coffee brewing appliance. It's nearly time for a tea break. Do you want to try some coffee with me?"

"Can I?"

"Of course. This sort of thing is more fun with two people anyway."

"Oh, thank you. I'll go get some treats then."

Rose came back with a cute packet of cookies, and the two read the user manual in the envelope before trying to brew some coffee.

Rose boiled some water in a kettle and prepared the cups. As she did, Olivia measured the coffee beans and put them in a small box with a handle. She turned the handle, emitting a grinding sound and transforming the beans into a powder. Olivia tipped the coffee powder into a cone-shaped glass lined with paper—that was the

“dripper,” apparently—which she then placed on top of the glass pot. Rose then slowly poured the hot water over it.

“It says to start with a small amount of water to wet it. Like this, I wonder?” ventured Rose.

“I think that looks good.”

After that, they divided the dark, steaming, aromatic liquid between two cups. The pair sat across from each other at the table and brought the cups to their lips with excitement.

Rose looked surprised. “It’s so refreshing and nice. It’s quite different from the coffee I’ve had before.”

“I guess the paper absorbs the oil and odd flavors,” Olivia replied, passing on the knowledge she’d gained from Elliot, her cheeks full of cookies. Then, she glanced at the large wooden box that came along with the coffee dripper. “I guess putting that into your coffee makes it nicer. Should we try it?”

“What is it exactly?”

They opened the box and found six bottles a little smaller than their fists, each with a powder ranging in color from white to brown.

“The manual says these three are sugar, and these three are powdered milk,” read Olivia.

“I’ve never seen powdered milk before.”

“The brown one is from cows in the south, the ivory is from cows in the north, and the white one is buffalo milk. The sugar is also different colors based on where it was produced.”

“Seems pretty incredible.”

“What do you want to try? I guess you can have just one, or it can be nice to combine milk with sugar.”

“Hmm… I think I’ll try the milk from the southern cows.”

“I’m going to try this brown sugar.”

They dissolved some in their coffee and excitedly took another sip as they looked at each other with wide eyes.

“Oh my,” Rose expressed. “That’s so nice. It made it very smooth.”

“Mine tastes like chocolate now. It’s wonderful.”

They then paired their drinks with cookies, swapped cups, and thoroughly enjoyed their coffee.

"That was wonderful," Rose said. "Thank you for sharing."

"And thank you for the cookies. Feel free to come again."

And with that, they ended their teatime feeling fully content.



THAT night, Olivia was in her warm room, warmed by a magic heater and lit by a magic lamp. She was in a warm nightgown, grinding coffee beans and thinking she'd put herself in a good mood before bed with an aromatic cup of coffee.

She poured the hot water through the paper-lined dripper to brew her coffee, which she then poured into a cup. Olivia brought it to her lips and sighed with contentment.

"It's so good. It's even nice on the stronger side."

She then took one of the small glass bottles of powdered milk from the box up on a shelf.

"I'm curious about this one. I wonder what it tastes like."

Using a spoon, she scooped it out and stirred it into her coffee, its rich scent filling the room.

A sip put a look of rapture on her face.

"Mm. It's like a refreshing, mature flavor."

After that, she tried all sorts of combinations of milk and sugar, trying one after another. The coffee in the pot ran out during her experimentation, so she boiled a fresh pot of water to brew more.

It was late into the night, and the street beneath her window had grown quiet when she finished drinking her coffee with plenty of milk and sugar and let out a sigh of contentment.

"Oh, that was good."

She stretched and stood, thinking it was about time to be getting to bed, then placed the box back up on the shelf. That's when the envelope fell from the shelf. Out of it slid a card she hadn't seen earlier.

"What's this?"

She flipped it over and saw Elliot's neat handwriting. It stated, *"I hope you enjoy it. But do be careful about drinking too much late at night as you may not be able to sleep."*

She froze in place, the card in her hand.

"How much is 'too much'…?"

She poked her belly uneasily and heard it slosh about. That was clearly too much.

But she shook her head vigorously and voiced aloud, "It'll be fine. Just a drink won't keep me from sleeping. There's no way."

After cleaning up, she climbed into bed.

However…

"I can't sleep."

Typically, she would have drifted to sleep within five minutes, but there were absolutely no signs of sleep taking place that day after half an hour had passed.

She'd heard counting sheep was good for when you couldn't sleep. Perhaps she'd try that.

"Eight hundred and twenty-five…"

Sleep was still nowhere to be seen by the time she'd counted to 1,000, and morning came when she finally started to doze a little.

"I guess that goes to show everything is best in moderation…"

Her shoulders slumped. She was feeling the exact opposite of the joy she had felt last night.

After spending that day utterly exhausted, she swore two things to herself. "No drinking coffee at night" and "All things in moderation."

Afterword

HELLO, it's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Yuki Rinrin.

Thank you for picking up this book. Since this is the afterword, I suppose I'll talk about what I modeled the setting of this book on.

Ten years ago, now, I traveled to London. There are so many great spots in London, from Buckingham Palace to the British Museum, but the thing I was most looking forward to was the Sherlock Holmes Museum.

I am a *huge* Sherlock Holmes fan. I was so excited that I was going to go there.

The morning of my visit, I hopped on the Underground to the station nearest to the museum. I walked down London's streets under a sunny spring sky for about five minutes and arrived at the museum. Filled with excitement, I entered the museum as the first visitor of the day.

Inside were so many things that surprised and moved me, but the thing that left the biggest impression on me was the recreation of the period. It was a perfect recreation of the feel of 18th century Victorian England, which is the period in which Sherlock Holmes was set. It felt like I'd dropped by the home of someone I knew who lived at that time.

One item in particular that I remember leaving a mark on me was a blue gemstone related to one of the stories. That's why, when I was thinking of writing a story about a girl who crafts magic jewelry, the first thing that popped into my head was that room and the blue gem. I thought it would be really interesting if I wrote a story about a protagonist living in a world like that.

After that, I thought back to the museum and London's streets and used that as a reference while I wrote. In the process, I reread the entirety of the Sherlock Holmes collection, got sucked into an anime also called Sherlock Holmes, and generally just stopped several times along my journey of writing this. Still, I got there eventually and turned it into this book.

Okay, so, now that Olivia got her own shop in volume one, she's going to find herself facing a trial in volume two: Her former fiancé, Henry, and her adoptive sister, Catherine, are getting married and, for some reason, Viscount Perigord sent Olivia an invitation to their wedding.

What is she going to do with the invitation? What is Elliot going to do when he sees her in a tough spot? What in the world are Catherine and the Viscount even thinking?

At the time I'm writing this afterword, I'm also busy writing volume two. I hope to get it finished in the near future and that you'll check it out when I do.

And to wrap up, I'd like to use this opportunity to say thank you to Suzaku for the incredible illustrations and thank you to everyone else involved in making this book possible.

See you in volume two.

Rinrin Yuki
Fall 2023



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