WELCOME TO Olivia's Magic Jewelers

2

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Welcome to Olivia’s Magic Jewelers Volume 2

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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 2
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Olivia Carter
(Main Character)
Lottie
An excellent employee
working at Olivia's Magic Jewelers.
She's level-headed, aloof, and matter-of-fact,
but she cares a lot about Olivia.
Her name was Lottie. She'd started
working at the shop four months ago.
She tended to have a cool expression
and was a bit aloof, like a cat in
some ways, but she was smart,
hardworking, and good at what she did.
Lottie quickly put on an apron,
then got out a feather duster
and rags to start cleaning the shop.
WELCOME TO
Olivia's Magic
Jewelers
2


Elliot Dicks
The two took the opportunity at the next stop to step out of the car and buy tea and cake from a stall. Once back on board, Olivia had her cake and tea as she looked out the window at the blue sky and early summer scenery.
“Olivia,” came Elliot’s voice after a while. “We’re nearly there.” She lifted her head from his shoulder. He’d come to sit beside her at some point. She looked out the window and saw Daregas lit with the orange glow of the setting sun.

Recap of Volume One

ONE day, the artificer Olivia found that her engagement had been broken off by her fiancé, Henry. What's more, her adoptive sister Catherine claimed all Olivia's designs were in fact hers—leading to her family kicking her out of her house and home.

After losing everything, Olivia gripped a letter from her deceased father tightly in her hands and set off alone for the capital. There, she met her father's friend Gordon and began working at his shop.

Olivia managed to make a name for herself in the capital after winning gold in the ever-so-difficult Magic Item Design Awards and filing a patent for a new crafting technique she developed. The recognition she received for these accomplishments and her hardworking personality led to her opening her very own shop in the capital: Olivia's Magic Jewelers.

She met many friends in the capital as well, such as Elliot and Sally, and life was going smoothly, even if she was pretty busy.

But back in her hometown, her adoptive family was up to no good…

Prologue: A Letter After Two Years

IT was a dismal afternoon with a drizzle of cold rain.

Olivia, a young woman with blue eyes and navy hair, was still in her suit for work as she lay back on her bed in the dim room. Scattered across the bed next to her were an open envelope and two sheets of letter paper.

The first sheet contained these words written in characteristic letters:

And so, I am writing to inform you that we will be holding a ceremony for the union between your sister, Catherine, and Lord Henry. We have chosen you to act as a witness. You must attend.

After the ceremony, we must discuss your father's shop.

Sincerely,
Your father,

Baronet Carter

"Why did *this* have to come now? My life and work are only just settling into something good…" murmured Olivia as she stared with unfocused eyes at the dark ceiling.

Mixed with the drum of the rain, she heard what sounded like thunder in the distance.

Chapter 1: A Request from an Up-and-Coming Merchant

IT was a morning like any other.

Nearly two years had passed since Olivia had come to the capital, and she woke on that pleasantly warm spring morning to the sound of birdsong. She opened her eyes, still in a daze, and saw the gentle morning sunlight slipping in through the crack in the curtain.

"It's morning? I need to get up…"

She put on her slippers and a cream-colored robe as she got up to open the curtains.

"The weather's nice again today."

Outside the window, she saw the morning sun illuminating a street paved with white cobblestones. Three-story buildings lined both sides of the street, their first floors home to classy eateries and various shops. Most of the stores hadn't opened yet, but the street would soon be bustling with young women during the day.

Olivia stretched as far as she could as she looked at the aqua color that spread overhead into the springlike sky.

"Right, here's to another day to tackle!"

She crossed her room, which was a little cluttered with the half-read books on magic items left here and there, and entered the small bathroom. There, she quickly dressed herself in a white blouse and green skirt before moving to the small kitchen where she boiled a kettle of water and made some toast.

After loading her breakfast onto a tray, she sat down at a small round table in a pleasant sunbeam next to the window and rubbed her hands together happily. "Looks good!"

That morning, she had a thick slice of toasted square bread with ham and cheese, dried fruit and nuts sprinkled on top of yogurt, and a cup of black tea. The aroma of toasted ham and cheese tickled her nose.

She took a bite of her toast, and a breath of admiration escaped her. The rich cheese was wonderful with the crispy toast, and the ham added a salty accent. Her yogurt was just as good; sweet fruit with tart yogurt, along with nuts for crunch, played out an indescribable harmony in her mouth.

"This is incredible. It's so good!"

The fresh breeze coming from the window caressed her cheek as she chewed happily.

After a brief period of enjoying her breakfast, she cleared her empty tray and began to get ready for work. She closed the window before crossing to her wardrobe, which held a row of blazers of similar color and style, and picked one that suited her mood for the day—wine-red.

"All right," she said as she appraised herself in the mirror. Turning to a box on a shelf that contained keepsakes from her parents, she whispered, "I'll be back later." She smiled and waved at the box, then opened the door.

She stepped across the small landing and quickly descended the narrow stairs, her feet tapping on each step. The door at the bottom opened into her workshop, dim since the white curtains were drawn. It was next to the shop. In the center of the room was a large worktable with all her scales, rulers, designs, and books for making magic jewelry on one side.

Olivia opened the curtains to let in the sunlight before opening the door into the shop.

No matter how many times I see it, I still think it's wonderful.

Before her was an elegant shop with a subdued atmosphere, hers: Olivia's Magic Jewelers.

It was filled with modern furniture and decorations that seemed of the highest quality, and the magic jewelry she'd designed and crafted herself glittered in the showcase counter.

It's been eight months since I opened the shop, and I still can't believe it's mine.

As her eyes wandered around the shop interior, she heard the clunk of a key unlocking the front door. The door opened to let in fresh air, along with a petite young woman with a bob of somewhat frizzy dark gray hair and large, catlike, angled eyes. She wore a navy dress with a flared skirt similar to a maid's.

When she saw Olivia, she bowed and greeted, "Good morning, miss."

"Good morning. You're early again today."

Her name was Lottie. She'd started working at the shop four months ago. Olivia's good friend Elliot had introduced the two. Apparently, she'd worked as a maid for a viscount and was also learning accounting. The viscount had moved out of the capital, however, and so Lottie had been looking for another job.

Before he left, the viscount provided a glowing recommendation for Lottie, and the fact that she was good at reading, writing, and math made Olivia hire her on the spot. Ever since, Lottie had been taking care of a broad variety of things, from minding the shop and cleaning to dealing with customers and managing Olivia's ledgers. She tended to have a cool expression and was a bit aloof, like a cat in some ways, but she was smart, hardworking, and good at what she did.

Lottie quickly put on an apron, then got out a feather duster and rags to start cleaning the shop. Olivia went back to her workshop to the pleasant fluttering sound of the feather duster and double-checked which customers she had booked in for the day.

It was some time after they'd finished cleaning and going over the reservations that the doorbell rang.

"Just a moment," called Lottie as she reached for the door.

Time to open for the day.

Olivia combed her hair into place with her fingers and straightened the bow on her chest before patting her cheeks to pump herself up.

Lottie opened the door, and in stepped a smiling man and woman, both dressed nicely.

"Welcome to Olivia's Magic Jewelers."

Shortly after inviting the well-dressed man and woman in, Olivia sat across from the clients on the leather sofas in the shop as Lottie set white teacups on the table.

"Some tea for you," she stated.

"Thank you. I am quite thirsty, actually," replied Mr. Gibson, smiling as he sipped the tea. He was a cheery man in his late twenties wearing a stylish suit. "This is quite the chic shop you have here. Though I should have expected as much from somewhere Ms. Sally recommended. Oh, are those curtains silk from the north? Of Marcos make, I would guess."

Olivia's eyes widened. "You're exactly right. And you even know which workshop made them…"

"Oh, well, when you work in trade, you pick up that much at least."

Beside the man was a demure woman in a classy pale pink dress, Mrs. Gibson. She politely thanked Lottie for the tea.

They seemed like a real loving couple.

"Sally mentioned you were interested in having a wedding ring redesigned?" asked Olivia.

"That's right," answered Mr. Gibson. "This year will be our tenth anniversary. I thought it would be a good opportunity. This is the ring."

As he spoke, his wife took a small cloth-covered box from her cute purse. Inside was an old-fashioned, chunky ring with several dents and scratches and a small blue stone inlaid, no larger than a grain of wheat.

I wasn't expecting this.

Olivia was surprised. She'd heard Mr. Gibson was the head of a mid-sized trading company, which made her assume they'd show her a high-end ring, but this ring was surprisingly simple.

Mr. Gibson scratched his head, looking embarrassed. "It's a rather pathetic thing, isn't it?" Apparently, he decided he wanted to marry Mrs. Gibson when he was eighteen, but he didn't have much money at the time. "I'd only started a small trading company. Things were very tight. At the best of times, we were operating solely on

loans, which I used to pay off other loans. Even a ring like this was stretching my limits." His shoulders slumped as he muttered about how he'd put his wife through nothing but hard times, but she smiled sadly at him.

"You say that, but there have been plenty of good times as well," she consoled.

"You're too kind." He looked at her with gratitude in his eyes, then turned back to Olivia. "She might be too kind to say anything, but I've always regretted not being able to give her a better ring. That's why it felt almost like a message from the heavens when I heard at Ms. Sally's that you redesigned magic jewelry."

Seeing as the year marked ten years of marriage for them, he wanted to redesign the ring and regift a classier one to his wife. Immediately, he asked Sally if she could book them in with Olivia.

Olivia murmured in understanding as she gauged the two of them. She could tell by the way they talked that they cared deeply for each other and that Mr. Gibson treasured his wife.

They're a wonderful couple.

Since Mr. Gibson wanted to use the best possible magic stones, Lottie retrieved a flat, locked case from the back, revealing rows of large, glittering gemstones of all colors once opened.

Mr. Gibson gasped. "They're incredible! One look and I can tell how valuable they are."

"These are our highest quality magic stones," explained Olivia as the two fervently examined the gems.

"I like this one best," pointed out Mrs. Gibson.

"Then let's go with that," exclaimed her husband.

They'd selected a gem of ice blue, the same color as Mr. Gibson's eyes, that was about half the size of the nail on Olivia's little finger.

Mr. Gibson's eyes shone as he proclaimed, "I can't wait to see this adorning your finger!"

"…Yes, it really is incredible," replied Mrs. Gibson with a demure smile as her husband beamed with excitement.

After that, they discussed the various requirements and requests for the design, such as something with a sweet appearance

that wouldn't be a nuisance when worn during the day, yet could still be worn to parties.

In terms of the effect of the magic stone, Mrs. Gibson had lately become more bothered by fatigue in her eyes and shoulders, and so they decided on a fatigue recovery effect.

How expensive the new magic stone is makes me worry all the more about how to redesign the original ring.

They agreed that the ring would be ready in a month, and Olivia would send the design to them for approval before then. With the discussions all wrapped up, the two stood to leave.

Mr. Gibson rubbed his hands together in excitement. "Oh, I just can't wait!"

"Your hat's crooked, dear," chided Mrs. Gibson, quickly getting ready to step out while she gently calmed her enthusiastic husband.

"I'll take this for now," said Olivia as she carefully put the old ring back in its box with a smile at the couple.

Mrs. Gibson looked at Olivia and smiled. "Thank you for doing this."

Olivia smiled back and nodded. "You're welcome."

Once the happy couple left, Lottie noted, "They're a wonderful pair."

"Enough to make me jealous." Olivia wanted to make an incredible ring that would match Mr. Gibson's feelings.

💎 💎 💎

THAT evening, Olivia sat down at her worktable the moment Lottie went home. Sparkling beneath the orange glow of the magic lamp were the ice blue magic stone that the Gibsons chose and the original, simple ring.

What sort of ring should we go with…?

Mrs. Gibson seemed like a prim and kind woman, which meant it would undoubtedly be good to go with a ring as refined as she was.

I think a silver color for the metal, rather than gold. And she seemed to like flowers. I can work in a flower motif.

Olivia was so engaged with sketching out the ideas in her head and coloring them in with colored pencils that she forgot to eat dinner. The round moon she could see through the window of her workshop steadily rose higher in the sky.

Then, close to midnight, "That's it!" she cried.

Olivia cheerfully held up her sketchbook in both hands. The page showed a drawing of a charming ring that resembled a rose. Silver petals were arranged around a central pale aqua gem, with accents of small blue stones beside it.

"It turned out good," pondered Olivia as she examined her sketchbook with satisfaction.

In her own humble opinion, it might be the best design she'd made recently.

But after some time…

"Hm?"

Her brows knit together. There was a fog of uncertainty deep in her heart.

"It's not quite right…"

That was what she felt. She rubbed her chest, where that fog lingered. She'd never felt that way before.

What is *this feeling?*

She pulled the lamp closer to her and leaned in to stare at the design beneath the orange glow. The only sound in the dim room was the quiet *tik-tik* of the clock.

After some time, Olivia looked away from the sketch, rubbed the furrow in her brow, and sighed.

I have no idea what's wrong…

The flower petals had a good feel to them, the small blue stones were handled well, and the overall impression of the piece was appealing. It was such a good piece that Olivia doubted she could make a design better than that with her current skills. There was nothing off about it.

Maybe it's because it's late at night.

Sometimes she had a hard time focusing late at night and couldn't judge her designs properly. That must be it.

She got up and stretched, making her joints pop. Then she yawned and mumbled, "Well, let's take another look tomorrow," before heading up to her room above the shop on the second floor.

The design was very well done. Surely, she'd think it was good when she'd gotten some actual sleep and looked at it in the light.

But the next day proved that prediction wrong, as well as the day after that. She simply could not get rid of that fog inside her.

"Urgh… I don't know what to do…"

It was two weeks before she was due to deliver the ring to the Gibsons. The last customer of the day had left, and the windows showed hints of sunset beginning to appear.

Olivia sighed and slumped onto her worktable.

This fog isn't going away…

She'd tried changing this and that for the past two weeks to see if anything would work. She changed the shape of the ring, thinking the problem was with the design. She changed the color of the metal. She tried every pattern she could think of.

But nothing's working…

Despite all the different iterations, that feeling of persistent wrongness wasn't going away. After deciding she wasn't going to find the answer on her own, she showed the design to her fashion designer friend Sally as well as to the more experienced artificers at Gordon's Magic Appliances.

"It's amazing! I have no idea what the problem is!" cried Sally.

"I think it's really good. It's just the sort of thing women would like," reflected Gordon.

They all complimented the design.

And since she was so insistent, she eventually took the design to Mr. Gibson's trading company and showed it to him.

"Incredible!" he'd exclaimed, overwhelmed with emotion.

What do I do?

Olivia let out a heavy sigh. So many people were complimenting her design, but she still couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't quite right.

Maybe I'm the one there's something wrong with.

Lottie arrived with a cup of tea for Olivia. She must have been worried about her, since she was so at a loss.

"You don't look too well," Lottie observed. "Perhaps you should take a rest."

Olivia pulled herself back to the present. "Thank you," she said as she took a sip. The rich smell of warm tea calmed her.

"Miss, are you worried about something?" asked Lottie.

"I wouldn't say I'm worried. It's… I feel like something's off… What do you think?"

"Hm," Lottie pondered in thought with a catlike expression when Olivia showed her the design. "I think it's a very nice design. Didn't Mr. Gibson approve it already?"

"Yeah. He said both he and Mrs. Gibson loved it and they trust me to finish it off, even in terms of making changes to areas I'm bothered with."

Lottie thought for a moment. "I'm not an expert in the area, so I'm not sure I understand the finer details, but isn't it fine so long as the customer is happy?"

"Yeah…"

At that moment, the doorbell rang.

Lottie hurried to the window beside the door and peeked out, then turned to Olivia and announced, "It's Master Elliot."

"I wonder what's brought him here. Could you let him in?"

Lottie opened the door, and there stood Olivia's friend Elliot, a handsome young man in his usual outfit of a brown pinstripe suit, flat cap, and tinted glasses. He was holding a white box the size of a large dictionary.

Elliot doffed his cap with his unoccupied hand and smiled. "Hello. I have some nice baked goods today. Would you like some?"

"Baked goods!" Olivia's eyes shone. She'd just been thinking she wanted something sweet. She glanced at the round clock on the wall. It was five o'clock, closing time. "If you have some time, we could have a cup of tea together. You're welcome to join us too, Lottie."

"I'd like that," Elliot answered.

"I'd also like a cup of tea. Thank you," agreed Lottie.

The three of them closed the shop before relocating to the workshop. While Lottie prepared the tea, Olivia opened the box—her heart soaring—and she let out a squeal of joy when she saw what was inside. "They look so good!"

Inside the box were neat rows of perfectly baked treats of all types. Their sweet aroma wafted from the box and tickled her nose with the rich scent of browned butter.

The three picked out their choice delicacy before starting to eat over small dishes. Olivia let out a sigh of happiness the moment she bit into a well-formed financier. Every single aspect of it was terrific, from the buttery scent to the moist texture and elegant sweetness.

"It's excellent," she sighed.

"I'm glad," Elliot returned with a smile as he picked up a cocoa-colored cookie.

Lottie also seemed to enjoy the baked goods as she happily munched away on a madeleine.

When the baked goods were nearly finished, Elliot took a graceful sip of his tea and noted, "By the way, you look quite intense, Olivia. Is something wrong?"

Olivia looked at him. He was an incredible trader working for a large trading company. He dealt with so many different products that he might be able to tell what was wrong with her design.

"There is actually something I've been trying to work out," she admitted before explaining the situation. "Even though I think it's a great design, there seemed to be something off with it. Everyone I asked also said it was good, and even the client said they liked it, but that didn't get rid of this feeling that something was wrong."

Elliot nodded and thought for a moment. "May I see the design?"

"Of course." Olivia opened her sketchbook and handed it to him.

He looked at the sketch and considered it. "It does seem to be a wonderful design, but you still feel something is wrong?"

"I do. It's like there's this anxiety inside me, but I can't figure out what's causing it."

He nodded. “Maybe you should approach it from a different perspective.”

“A different perspective?”

“Yes. For example, what do you think will happen once you deliver the finished piece to the client?”

It was an unexpected question. Olivia folded her arms and imagined it. She’d focused this whole time on what the cause of this uncertainty was, but she never once considered what would happen once she delivered the piece.

What would happen…?

She cast her eyes down and racked her brain for a long moment, then slowly looked up. “That’s it. I don’t know why I think this will happen, but I don’t think this design will put a smile on Mrs. Gibson’s face.”

Olivia had always strived to be an artificer who put smiles on people’s faces, like her father had, but she couldn’t imagine this piece making Mrs. Gibson smile.

Elliot looked down at the sketchbook. “Perhaps this sense of something being off is coming from your own sensitivity.”

“My sensitivity?”

“Yes. Sort of like your intuition that shows you things only you can sense, something you’ve built up through your life and experience in your work.”

“Things only I can sense…?” Olivia looked away. She couldn’t put it into words, but she had a feeling he was as close to correct as was possible.

Elliot picked up the sketchbook and continued, “Personally, I think it’s a wonderful design. But if you don’t think it’s quite right, then I think you should think it over, supposing you have time.”

That made her think. She did have some time, though not much. Rather than start crafting something she wasn’t entirely satisfied with, she might as well do as he suggested and keep thinking about it until she really was out of time. If it still didn’t work out, she would move ahead with this design.

She looked at him with gratitude and relayed, “I’ve figured out what I’m going to do. Thank you.”

He smiled. “I’m glad I could be of service.”



THAT night, Olivia sat at the table beside the window in her room. Beneath the orange glow of the magic lamp on the table were items that could be called her roots: a clock and magic jewelry her parents left her, and the magic jewelry pieces she’d made so far.

She looked at them and whispered, “My own sensitivity…” and went late into the night thinking.

About a month had passed since she’d taken on the order from the Gibsons. The afternoon was brightly lit with white clouds floating in a blue sky that felt like summer.

The well-dressed Gibson couple arrived at the store, and Mr. Gibson said, “I really am looking forward to this.” He smiled broadly as he sat on the sofa, with Mrs. Gibson beside him, smiling softly.

Olivia took the tray Lottie brought and set it on the coffee table. There was a luxurious leather-bound jewelry box on the tray.

“Please look inside,” she stated.

“Don’t mind if I do,” replied Mr. Gibson, looking slightly nervous. He opened the lid and froze, blinking several times. “Uh, what is this about?”

There were two rings inside. One was a beautiful, elegant ring with petals crafted from metal and a large magic stone in the center. The other was the original ring with a small blue stone. It had been improved in a few small ways; the large, protruding setting had been taken off, and the small blue stone set directly into the band, but it was overall the same ring. Even the large knicks were still there.

While Mr. Gibson sat there frozen, Olivia removed the rings from the box using gloved hands and held them out to Mrs. Gibson, who looked shocked. “Put on your wedding ring first, then put on the new one,” instructed Olivia.

Mrs. Gibson took the rings and slipped them on, her hands shaking slightly, and let out a gasp of surprise. The two rings clicked together on her finger, becoming one.

“The design allows you to wear both together, or one or the other at any given time, giving you three different ways of wearing the set,” explained Olivia.

Mr. Gibson frowned. He looked dissatisfied, like he thought it was an interesting design, but that there was no point in having the original ring remade if they were two separate rings.

He opened his mouth to complain, but Mrs. Gibson clutched her hand with the rings to her chest and looked at Olivia with eyes brimming with gratitude. “Thank you so much. This is the best ring you could have possibly made.” She thanked Olivia over and over, tears in her eyes, but her husband looked taken aback.

“B-but, it’s…”

She looked at him with a smile as she wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. “I was so happy when you gave me this ring ten years ago. You worked temp jobs late into the night just so you could buy it for me.”

“You knew…” he let out, scratching his head.

“Of course I knew.” She smiled and softly stroked a nick on the ring. “Do you remember when I did this?”

“It…was pretty early on.”

“It was not long after you gave me the ring. I accidentally cut it with a knife while cooking.” Apparently, she’d been terrified he was going to be angry at her for damaging the ring he gave her so soon after she got it. “But you were more worried about me. The first thing you did was ask me if my hand was all right, then you said nothing else mattered so long as I was fine.” She smiled. “It was in that moment that I realized you were the person I could live the rest of my life with, caring for each other, supporting each other.” She stroked the ring lovingly. “That’s why I’m so thrilled that Miss Olivia redesigned the ring this way.”

“Sweetheart…” Mr. Gibson, filled with emotion and tears in his eyes, took his wife’s hand. Then he bowed his head to her in apology. “I’m sorry. I was so worked up about this, I decided everything without really listening to what you wanted. You couldn’t even say no.”

“Don’t be sorry. I was so happy you cared so much.”

A feeling of relief washed over Olivia as she listened to them.



I'm glad it worked out.

That night after Elliot had visited, Olivia had thought of her mother. She'd treasured the first small earrings Olivia had made and given to her, even though the design and magic effect weren't very good. Olivia had once offered to remake them because they were so bad, but her mother just smiled and said, "I love them the way they are. You worked so hard to make them."

It hit her when she remembered those words. Perhaps Mrs. Gibson felt the same way her mother had.

After adjusting the design in a few different ways, Olivia switched to a two-ring design, which involved modifying the original ring as little as possible. That's when the fog that had bothered her for so long went away.

That ring holds so many precious memories. It is utterly irreplaceable, and this is the best ring design for that.

Olivia looked at Mrs. Gibson and the tears in her eyes, and was so happy it had all worked out.

Twenty minutes later, Olivia and Lottie stepped out of the shop to see the Gibsons off.

Mrs. Gibson took Olivia's hand and gushed, "Thank you so much for the wonderful rings."

"I would like to thank you as well," added Mr. Gibson with a smile as he tipped his cap. "It's because of you I was able to give my wife such an incredible gift."

"I'm glad you both like it," replied Olivia with a smile and a bow. "Thank you for coming. I hope we'll see you again."



OLIVIA watched the carriage carrying the Gibsons pull away, then looked up into the sky. It had been sunny not that long ago, but clouds had come in at some point to cover the sky.

"I hope it doesn't rain," she murmured and went back into the shop.

Lottie came over to her carrying a box containing a mountain of paperwork and letters. "Since you've finished a job that's been

bothering you, I would appreciate it if you did some admin work."

"Right. Yeah. That needs doing." Olivia sighed. She didn't like admin work.

Lottie smiled pityingly and offered, "I'll help. Shall we split it up between the two of us?"

Olivia walked reluctantly to the workshop and began taking paperwork from the box, which she went through, signing or asking Lottie to handle as needed. Once things were in some semblance of order, Olivia sighed and took an envelope from the bottom of the box. She looked at it with confusion.

What's this?

The smudged writing said it was addressed to Olivia Carter of Gordon's Magic Appliances. She flipped it over, but there was no return address.

Who in the world could this be from?

With a frown, she slit open the envelope with a letter opener then froze in place when she saw who had signed the bottom of the letter: Baronet Daniel Carter.

What? That's…that's my father…

That was the name of her adoptive father, the man who'd chased her from her shop and home.

Olivia drew in a deep breath, trying to calm herself. She looked at Lottie, who was working on the ledger, and asked, "What is this letter?"

"It arrived at Gordon's Magic Appliances three days ago. They delivered it here for you."

"Uh-huh…" Olivia grimaced. She hadn't had any contact with her adoptive family for the past two years. How did they know where she'd worked?

It gives me the chills…

Her body shook from the odd feeling of dread she had.

"What's wrong?" asked Lottie, sounding concerned. "You don't look well."

"I'm fine. Just a little tired." Olivia looked at her with a stiff smile, which made Lottie stand and look at her with worry.

"I can handle the rest," she continued. "You should head to your room early today."

Olivia paused before answering, "Thank you."

She quickly put things away and left the workshop, the letter in hand. Her expression was grim as she climbed the stairs to her room on the second floor, her feet heavy. Olivia opened the door into the dim, silent room and sat on the bed looking out the window into a cloudy sky.

Looks like rain…

She took a deep breath and returned her attention to the envelope her father had sent her. There was nothing but that dread in her heart.

What could this possibly be about?

She wanted to pretend she'd never seen it, but she couldn't not read it, not after the people had delivered it from Gordon's Magic Appliances.

She steeled herself, unfolded the pages, and quickly ran her eyes across the words.

And so, I am writing to inform you that we will be holding a ceremony for the union between your sister, Catherine, and Lord Henry. We have chosen you to act as a witness. You must attend.

After the ceremony, we must discuss your father's shop.

Date: July 15th
Location: The Manor of Viscount Perigord

Sincerely,
Your father,

"…What the?"

She was dumbstruck. It was too shocking. She couldn't process it, but her mind raced in an attempt to.

What? This is…a wedding invitation? Isn't it? They're telling me to go to the wedding between my ex-fiancé, who was the one to break off our engagement, and my sister, who stole my designs? And as a witness? In two months?

It was so absurd that it made her feel like someone was shaking her brain.

Typically, it was perfectly normal to invite relatives to your wedding, and Catherine was her sister, even if only her adoptive sister. Being asked to act as a witness wasn't all that odd.

But that only applied if she wasn't getting married to Olivia's ex-fiancé. It was also standard to send invitations out a year before the wedding, but they'd only given her a shocking two months. That had to be on purpose to torment her.

"What in the world…?"

She frowned as she looked at the second sheet of paper, then her eyes grew wide.

"Viscount Perigord?"

The second sheet was an invitation stamped with the official noble seal of Henry's father and lord of Daregas, Viscount Perigord, along with handwriting she assumed belonged to him, essentially ordering her to attend.

"What does this mean? Why would the lord bother to do something like this?" she murmured in a daze as she listened to the start of the rain.

Far in the distance, she heard the sound of thunder.

Intermission 1: At Olivia's Childhood Home

THE same night Olivia received that letter, her adoptive family was enjoying a meal and drinks in Olivia's childhood home in a quiet residential district of the town of Daregas.

The dining room was decorated with gold candlesticks and art, and the dining table was loaded with bottles of expensive wine and platters holding mounds of the best sausages, hams, and fancy cheeses. They were all luxuries purchased with the money from the shop and the savings Olivia and her father had accumulated over many years.

In his gold jacket, Olivia's adoptive father, Baronet Carter, tilted his wine glass and cheerfully boasted, "This wine isn't half bad."

"It was a special vintage ordered directly from the vineyard," replied his wife.

"It is really very nice, Father," chimed his daughter, Catherine.

The two ladies of the house were wearing extravagant gowns and sipping the wine just as gleefully.

Baronet Carter cut off a thick slice of ham and asked, "My dearest Catherine, are preparations for the wedding going well?"

"They are, of course." Catherine put her empty hand to her cheek in a swooning gesture. "And Lord Henry is just wonderful. Today, he went on about how beautiful my hands are, nothing like Olivia's rough and worn hands."

"Well," said her mother, looking disgusted, "I'd rather you weren't compared to that horrid girl."

Baronet Carter frowned slightly and calmed her. "Don't say that. Olivia might not be the prettiest thing to look at, but she was a

golden goose."

Catherine looked uneasy. "I wonder if she'll come to the wedding…"

"She'll come," assured the baronet around a mouthful of thick ham, the corners of his mouth curled up in a smile. "We have her shop."

His wife snorted. "How pathetic, being so attached to such an old shop."

"Being old is what makes it valuable. Viscount Perigord wants to keep the shop afloat, too."

Catherine looked frightened at the mention of Viscount Perigord. "Um, Father, when will the viscount be returning?"

"He's as busy as always. His steward says he'll be able to be here three days before the wedding."

"I see…" Relief flooded her pretty features, and her father grinned.

"Don't worry! The shop problem will be resolved once Olivia comes back."

"Your father's right, Catherine. Don't worry about all the little things. You just make sure things are going well between you and Lord Henry."

"Thank you so much, Mother, Father."

The baronet cheerfully took a gulp of wine, and his wife smiled cruelly and mused, "I wonder how she'll dress for the wedding."

"Probably that boring navy suit. She has absolutely no sense of style," grumbled Catherine.

"I wonder if she'll bring a date."

"No man would give that girl a second look. She'll come alone," sneered Baronet Carter.

The family opened another bottle of expensive wine as they talked about Olivia. Catherine looked into the blood-red liquid with a gloating smile.

Her sister, who had lost everything—her home, her shop, her fiancé—was going to come to her wedding and see her at the peak of happiness. Catherine was beside herself with joy just imagining

the expression on Olivia's face when she saw her beautiful and happy.

She clutched her hands together in front of her chest in anticipation. "Oh, if only the wedding could come sooner."

"You really are looking forward to it, aren't you, Catherine?" asked her mother.

"Hahaha, well, I am too!" added her father.

That night, the three of them enjoyed themselves well into the early hours.

Chapter 2: A Helping Hand in a Pinch

SIGH…

It was the day after Olivia received the wedding invitation, an afternoon filled with mist-like rain.

Olivia was in her workshop, elbow on her worktable and head on her fist as her glazed eyes stared outside. Her mind was completely filled with thoughts about the invitation.

What should I do?

She'd worked hard these past two years to keep herself thinking as little as possible about what had happened in Daregas. It was better to look to the future and work hard, seeing as she was so deeply wounded by what had happened that just thinking about it was painful. Worrying herself over it wasn't going to change the past anyway.

Thankfully, she'd been so busy with life in the capital that she was able to preoccupy herself with work. After these two years, she sometimes thought back to those events, but the wounds marring her heart had nearly healed.

If she were being entirely honest, she wanted to throw the letter away—but she couldn't.

The problem is, he said we need to talk about the shop after the ceremony…

Olivia had been fairly optimistic that her father's shop would continue to exist. It received a steady income from repairing magic items, and Olivia didn't think her money-loving uncle would want to let something like that go. Part of her even thought he would treat the shop that had belonged to his departed brother with some care at least.

But he wrote that because he's thinking of doing something to the shop, isn't he?

Her brow furrowed. What in the world was he planning? She also wondered about the wedding invitation Viscount Perigord had bothered to send, marked with his seal.

Ugh… I don't know what to do…

As Olivia was sighing for the umpteenth time, the door opened, and Lottie came in. She walked to the bookshelf and took the ledger from a shelf. When she saw Olivia deep in thought, she slowly said, "Miss, I'm sorry for bothering you while you're so preoccupied, but you have cream around your mouth."

"Huh?" Olivia came back to her senses. Her hand flew to her cheek, and she felt a glob of cream. *Oh no. This must be from the cream bun I had at lunch.*

Olivia was flustered, but Lottie went on to calmly point out, "And you spilled tea on your clothes."

"Ah!"

She jerked her head down, and her eyes snapped open at the sight of a huge stain on her skirt. She got up to get a towel to dab it off before it set.

"Ow!" she gasped. She'd slammed her little toe against the leg of the worktable.

"Are you all right?" asked Lottie with concern as Olivia grimaced in pain. "What is going on with you? You were acting oddly yesterday, but you've taken that to a whole new level today."

"I-it's nothing. I was up late last night cleaning and didn't get much sleep. It's all good, though. I'm awake now." She forced a smile on her face as she scrubbed at the tea stain with a rag.

Lottie sighed. "I really don't think it is all good."

"What do you mean?"

"You have your shoes on the wrong feet."

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I'M *exhausted… I was a mess today…*

Olivia was at her worktable, sighing after the shop had finally shut for the day. She spent the whole day nearly knocking over inkwells or catching the trash can with her foot and sending it flying. She just about managed to deal with her customers fine, but everything else was a disaster.

I caused more damage than I expected…

She'd been prone to zoning out throughout the day as she thought about the letter, and she didn't get much sleep the night before either. There was still work that needed to be done, but she decided to tackle it the next day.

I can have leftovers for dinner, and I'll go to sleep early tonight.

As Olivia sat in her stupor, Lottie was shooting her concerned glances while she cleaned. She was able to finish right before her time to go home when the doorbell chimed. Olivia was confused; she knew she'd put the "Closed" sign on the door.

Maybe this customer is in a hurry?

Lottie hurried to the door and opened it. "Come in," she greeted, and Olivia's eyes grew wide at the sight of her guests.

"Huh? Why are you here?" she asked, looking at her three friends standing in the doorway, worry written on their faces.

In the center was the red-headed Sally in an elegant white dress. Next to her was the handsome Nicca in rugged clothes, a knight and Sally's fiancé. Standing slightly behind them was Elliot in his usual outfit of a brown pinstriped suit, flat cap, and tinted glasses.

Olivia was flabbergasted. The three of them had never shown up unannounced together before.

Sally let out a heavy sigh the moment she saw Olivia. "She was right, you do look terrible. Have you even been sleeping? What happened?"

Olivia blinked in confusion several times, then it hit her. She turned to Lottie and stared at her. "Lottie… Did you talk to Sally while you were out running errands?"

"Yes. I didn't think I was going to be able to help you on my own, so I asked Miss Sally for help," Lottie explained with a calm expression.

In a soothing tone, Sally added, "Lottie came to me because she was worried about you. I mean, her manager had her shoes on the wrong feet and was reading a newspaper upside down! Of course, she's going to be worried."

Olivia looked away guiltily. Thinking back to all her mistakes throughout the day, she realized Sally was right. It was no wonder Lottie had worried. She looked at Sally's face, which all but said they weren't going anywhere until Olivia told them what was going on, and gave a resigned sigh.

She didn't want to tell people about this petty family squabble, but it was also too big of a problem for her to carry all on her own—she needed someone to talk to.

"Wait here a second," she relented, then she went upstairs and grabbed her uncle's letter. She glumly handed it to Sally upon her return. "This is what caused me to be out of sorts. I think you'll understand once you read it."

"If you don't mind me prying," returned Sally as she opened the envelope and read the letter. Then her face turned bright red, and she shouted, "What the heck?! What is this?!"

Elliot and Nicca looked confused. They'd read the letter over Sally's shoulder, and to them, it looked like nothing more than a wedding invitation.

Since we've come this far, I should probably explain the whole thing to them…

And so, she began to tell the story of what happened to her, which she'd only ever told Sally before.

Olivia recounted how her adoptive father stole her home and shop after her father died; how her adoptive sister falsely accused her of stealing her designs before stealing her fiancé, who rejected her; and how she'd come to the capital from Daregas and relied on Gordon, her father's friend.

As she spoke, Nicca's expression grew angrier and angrier, and Elliot looked more and more severe.

Once Olivia was done, Sally said with a fierce expression, "Just ignore the invitation! Don't go!"

"I agree with Sally," added Nicca. "I've never heard of anyone being this rude."

"I do, too," Lottie spoke, matching Nicca's outrage. "Going is out of the question."

Olivia sighed. "I can't do that."

Elliot looked up with a calm expression as he reread the letter. "I think Olivia is concerned about this part: 'After the ceremony, we must discuss your father's shop.'"

Olivia nodded. "That's the shop my father left me. And look at the second letter."

"Oh yeah, there was another page," muttered Sally. She unfolded the letter from Viscount Perigord. Shock bloomed on her face. "But this…"

Olivia smiled weakly and shrugged. "It's a bit of an oversimplification of the situation, but it's basically an order from the lord of the region."

"That's practically tyrannical! That's an abuse of authority!" cried Sally.

"I agree, but this sort of thing happens all the time out in rural areas," Olivia spoke resignedly.

"But this is wrong! I've never heard of something like it!"

Nicca grimaced while Sally exploded in rage. "Things get complicated when nobles are involved," he grumbled.

"How so?!" she demanded, jumping to her feet, but Nicca pointed to the letter.

"I don't think someone with a viscount's status would use a letter with their seal just to make someone come to a wedding," he explained. "There's got to be some other goal in mind."

"Like what?"

"I don't know, but I doubt it's anything good for Olivia."

"Then that's all the more reason she shouldn't go! She can pretend she's sick or something!"

Olivia fell into thought as she listened to Sally, Nicca, and Lottie argue. She didn't want to go to the wedding or be involved with her adoptive family. But she didn't know what was going to happen to

her father's shop, not to mention that ignoring an invitation with a lord's seal could be seen as a sign of disrespect.

What should I do?

Sally, Nicca, and Lottie were all insisting she shouldn't go. She looked at the ground in thought. Elliot quietly watched her.

After some time, Olivia looked up and slowly said, "You know… I've been thinking for a while now that I can't keep going on like this."

"What do you mean?" asked Sally, confused.

"My parents died three years ago from an illness that was going around. When my uncle and his family showed up, adopted me, and took over the shop…everything was so painful. They took the things I treasured most, made me work, insulted me, bullied me, but…I couldn't do anything. I had no idea what they might do to me. They treated me unjustly before I could even heal from the grief of losing my parents. I felt utterly helpless.

"So, when my engagement got broken off and they fired me, I decided that was it—I couldn't take it anymore. I left and came to the capital because I didn't know what else to do. I did my best to work hard and focus on the future. It was painful to think about what happened in Daregas, and I told myself thinking about it wouldn't help anyway, so I did my best not to."

Olivia's gaze fell to the floor. "But somewhere in my heart, I could feel it. I could feel it was wrong to keep on pretending like this whole thing with my father's shop and my adoptive family never happened. I was avoiding reality, wasn't I?"

Sally opened her mouth to say something, but closed it again.

Olivia sighed as her friends listened in silence. "I really don't want to have anything to do with them. In fact, I don't want to think about them. But…I can't keep going on like this. Like nothing happened. I need to stand and face it at some point."

Maybe this was her chance. Perhaps this was fate telling her enough was enough—turn around and face this already.

Olivia looked up at her friends. "Abandoning my father's shop isn't an option for me. I can't disrespect an invitation from the lord of the land where that shop is. And so, that means I need to go to

that wedding with my head held high and talk to my family about what's going to happen."

It was going to be painful and likely a disappointment, but she needed to stop running. She would face this.

Sally gave her a worried look. "I don't think you should go. The more I hear, the more I think you shouldn't have anything to do with these people. But…I also kind of understand how you feel. You want to settle this once and for all."

"Yeah, I think so." Olivia nodded.

Nicca looked unhappy about the whole thing. "I also think it'd be better not to go. If you are going, though, don't go by yourself."

"He's right," Lottie concurred. "They sound like the sort of people who could try to pull something on you."

"It'll probably be fine, but it's always best to be cautious," Nicca added. "Do you have any family you could ask to go with you?"

Olivia thought for a moment. In terms of relatives she could rely on, there was really only her cousin, who lived quite far away, but she was a mother with a few young children. Olivia was sure she'd come if she asked, but it wasn't right to drag in someone so busy.

It's fine. I can give it a go on my own, she decided.

Elliot broke his thoughtful silence, "I'll go."

"Uh…what?" asked Olivia.

"I'll go with you, Olivia."

The unexpected offer took her aback.

Nicca looked at Elliot's sober expression and folded his arms. "Hm. I would feel better if you were there, but are you sure it's all right?"

"It's not a problem," Elliot responded decisively with a nod.

That's when Olivia unraveled. "Wait a second! I really appreciate the offer, but you'd have to take time off work."

"It's only a week, and we're two months away. It won't be an issue."

"But I don't want to burden you with this…"

Elliot looked straight at her. "Olivia. Please let me do this. It's not a burden. I want to go."

Nicca gave a low whistle, a look of amusement on his face. Sally patted Olivia's shoulder with an expression like she was soothing a small child and murmured, "Sweetie, if you're not going to rely on your friends at a time like this, when will you rely on them?"

"B-but…"

"No buts! 'Yes' is the correct answer. 'Yes.'"

Olivia was so overwhelmed by Sally's intensity that she found herself saying, "Yes."

Sally gave a big nod as if to say, "You promised," then looked around at everyone's faces with a courageous expression. "Right, now that that's decided, we need to talk about what we do next. We're going to support Olivia with everything we've got these next two months until she leaves! Lottie, I'm going to put you to work, too. Is that all right?"

"Of course." Lottie nodded, her expression serious.

Sally started counting on her fingers. "All right. The first thing we need to do is get clothes. If Olivia is going to be a witness for a wedding, she needs to look good. We'll get her something amazing that'll knock 'em speechless! Speechless, I tell you! Style is a woman's greatest weapon!"

While Sally was getting worked up, Lottie calmly interjected, "Perhaps it would be best to incorporate trends from the capital."

"You're absolutely right, Lottie," Sally agreed. "Her clothes will be from the capital, and so will her topics of conversation. We'll make that the second thing on our list of to-dos. Can I ask you to handle that, Elliot?"

"Of course." Elliot nodded firmly.

Olivia jumped in to say, "Wait, I can't ask that much from all of you."

Sally smiled and smacked Olivia's shoulder. "Olivia, dear, I understand how you feel, but we can't back down at this point. Just sit down and be quiet."

She was again overwhelmed by Sally's intensity and reluctantly took back what she'd said. Despite Olivia's continued agitation, Sally

continued to decide on next steps, including but not limited to asking Gordon for his opinion and scheduling a manicure for her.

Her state of distress hadn't cleared by the time Sally came up with her to-do list:

- Shop for clothes and makeup with Sally the next afternoon
- Go to popular plays and events with Elliot
- Talk to Gordon about what's happening
- Make sure Olivia gets to sleep and wakes up at a decent time every day, and make sure she drinks the beauty-enhancing tea Lottie makes for her
- Get Olivia's hair and nails done before she sets off

After that, Sally shooed a still confused Olivia up to her room ("You need to get plenty of sleep starting today!") and then they all went home for the night.



THE trio was walking down the gloomy street after having left Olivia's shop. Nicca walked beside a still-angry Sally, trying to calm her down, while Elliot strayed behind them in silent thought.

After they continued for some time, Elliot broke his silence and slowly asked, "Can we talk?"

Nicca and Sally turned to him and nodded.

"Sure, I don't mind," came Nicca.

"Fine by me," Sally said. "I actually wanted to talk too. Should we grab something to eat?"

The three entered a busy nearby pub and ordered a few things after a cursory glance at the menu after sitting down. They toasted over the drinks that arrived shortly after, before Elliot finally looked at Sally. "You knew about what had happened to Olivia."

"Yes. She told me maybe about six months ago. I'm actually surprised you didn't know."

"I've been trying not to get too deeply involved…" he murmured.

Nicca looked glum as he poked at his food with his fork. "Seriously, though. That family of hers. They sound horrible. That's her *uncle*."

"He is, but not by blood," countered Sally. "Olivia said either her dad or her uncle was adopted into the family, and they basically had nothing to do with each other while her father was alive, only the occasional visit here and there. Her father started the shop all on his own. Her uncle had absolutely nothing to do with it."

Elliot listened with a grim expression.

Nicca set his fork on the table and asked, "Elliot. Be honest with me. What did you think when she told us what happened?"

"I thought it was very odd. A lot of things simply don't add up."

"I thought so, too. Who is this Viscount Perigord anyway?"

"He comes from an old family that has ruled over the Daregas region for a long time. He's been incredibly successful lately, even if he's had to take others down in his path. I've heard he's been traveling around trying to receive the higher title of count."

Sally looked even more uneasy at that. "Gordon told me Olivia is an absolutely incredible artificer, the kind of talent you only see once in several decades. And they say magic items are easily put to political uses. Is there a chance he's after her?"

Elliot became quiet, his expression even more grave.

Nicca gave Sally's shoulder an encouraging pat. "Don't worry. Olivia's got her shop here and an ally in Gordon's Magic Appliances. They won't be able to pull something that easily."

Elliot thought as the two talked. Nicca was right; it would be hard to do anything to Olivia if they were playing fair and square, but he also didn't think a lord who would send that invitation was going to play by the rules. There was even a possibility he'd somehow force Olivia to marry another one of his sons while she was there. The thought of some unknown man standing beside Olivia made Elliot feel emotions he couldn't put to words.

The trio continued to discuss the situation over their meal before leaving the pub.

"See you later! We'll start with clothes and makeup tomorrow," Sally shouted after him.

"Bye, Elliot," hollered Nicca. "Let me know if anything comes up."

Elliot watched the two as they waved and disappeared into the crowd, then he walked the nighttime streets alone. As he felt the night air on his cheeks, he thought of Olivia's blue eyes.

These past two years, he'd watched her devote herself to her work. Before she had her own shop, she'd practice her skills until she was so exhausted she was unsteady on her feet. For the design competition, she worked extremely hard and refused to give up, ultimately achieving an incredible win and earning gold. Once she had her shop, she worked on her displays and studied the services of other shops to put her own on the right track. Olivia really had worked hard.

And the thought that the fruits of all her labor might be used to advance a greedy lord's station was just…abhorrent. It could not be allowed to happen.

Elliot clenched his fists as he walked. He'd told himself he could watch over her as a friend. He was prepared to do that, but it wasn't enough anymore. It felt like he couldn't protect her.

I need to steel my resolve.

He needed to give himself the determination to take that step forward, to face the hatred.

Suddenly, he came to a stop as his eyes narrowed on Olivia's shop. Elliot stood there for some time, then slowly disappeared into the darkness.

Chapter 3: Two Months Until the Wedding and a Relationship Starts to Change

IT was just after noon, the day after Olivia opened up to her friends about her past, with two months left to the wedding. She was in the workshop crafting a heart-shaped pendant for the daughter of a merchant family, who ordered it as a birthday present for her mother. The stone was a small green gem imbued with the anti-eye strain effects of eyebalm grass, as the mother had been experiencing eye fatigue recently.

Olivia placed the stone and dried eyebalm grass on her worktable, then grabbed a leather box from a drawer. From the box, she took a quill made of a white feather with a magic stone, a protractor, a ruler, and a compass. She ran her mana through the quill, then began drawing a magic circle on the silver-colored magic plate on the worktable.

The quiet workshop was filled with the smooth glides of her quill against the plate as she made long lines, and the quick scratching sound as she wrote letters and symbols.

Once the magic circle was finished, she sent a jolt of mana through it to check how it felt. Satisfied, she stood and held her hands over the stone and eyebalm grass she'd placed on the plate.

"Here we go," she murmured to herself to calm her emotions before gathering mana into her hands. "Activate magic circle."

The circle lit up as her mana poured into it.

"Levitate."

Her mana softly enveloped the stone and grass, raising them to eye height. She took a quick breath—this was where things really

got going—then closed her eyes.

"Extract effect. Imbue effect."

Olivia's mana instantly grew more concentrated and glowed brighter as it pulled a green mana flow from the floating grass and poured it into the magic stone.

With the work quickly done, Olivia had created a beautiful magic core of a deeper green than the magic stone was originally.

She lifted it gently between two fingers and held it up to the light from the window, making it sparkle.

Yeah, looks good.

After quickly setting it into the heart pendant she'd already crafted, she spun around and called to Lottie, who was organizing the things on the shelves. "Lottie, could you take a look at this?"

Lottie agreed and came over, where she leaned in and let out a gasp of admiration. "It's wonderful. The design isn't too flashy, and it still has a sort of sweet quality to it."

"Hee hee. Thank you. I just need to test the effect, and then it's finished." Olivia smiled, but then dropped her gaze and, with some embarrassment, began meekly, "About yesterday… Thank you for telling Sally."

Talking to her friends had helped her organize her thoughts about the situation, which allowed her to decide what to do. Thankfully, her friends were even going to support her. She'd never felt more relieved. And it was thanks to them that she had such a good night's sleep last night. How she felt today compared to yesterday was like the difference between night and day.

"If you hadn't said anything, I would've kept it all bottled-up inside and probably broken down," admitted Olivia.

"Oh, it was nothing. I should apologize for acting without talking to you first."

"You don't need to apologize. I'm grateful for what you did."

As they were talking, the doorbell rang.

That must be Sally.

Lottie opened the door, and, as expected, Sally strolled in wearing a pink suit and a smile.

"Hi, Olivia," she greeted. "How're you feeling?"

"Better, thank you. I slept like a baby last night, so I'm feeling pretty good."

A look of relief passed across Sally's features. "Right, show me your closet."

"Uh…what?" Olivia stood blinking. She didn't understand what Sally was getting at. They were supposed to be buying clothes for Olivia to wear to the wedding, so why did Sally want to see her closet?

Sally smiled at Olivia's confused expression. "You're going to need other sets of clothes for the trip, right? I want to get an idea of what sort of clothes you already have so we don't accidentally buy a duplicate of anything."

"Uh, I thought I could wear this when I'm traveling," answered Olivia, gesturing to the clothes she was wearing.

Sally rolled her eyes, like that was absolutely out of the question. "That's a suit for work, isn't it? That might be fine if you were traveling for work, but no woman's going to travel to a wedding wearing her work suit. Don't you agree, Lottie?"

"Yes. You're completely right," Lottie replied with an emphatic nod.

This unexpected turn of events left Olivia reeling. She'd planned to wear her regular clothes while she traveled and then change only for the actual ceremony, but her friends seemed to think that was a bad idea. She tried persuading them, saying no one would care anyway, and she would feel more comfortable in clothes she's familiar with, but to no avail.

"Fashion is a woman's greatest weapon!" cried Sally.

"Sally is absolutely right," agreed Lottie.

They would not budge.

With two against one, Olivia begrudgingly nodded in agreement.

"Fine… Let's go upstairs," she relented.



OLIVIA asked Lottie to mind the shop, then she and Sally went up to her living quarters on the second floor.

"You know, this is my first time in your home," Sally observed.

"And it's the first time I've had someone up here in a long time."

She hadn't had anyone up since Elliot had carried crates for her when she moved in.

"Come right in," Olivia welcomed as she unlocked the door.

Sally stepped inside and looked surprised as she took in the somewhat stark room. "It's pretty tidy in here. I'd figured the place would be cluttered up with magic items."

"Hey, I clean up," Olivia argued, feeling relieved. It was usually messier than this, but she'd spent the other night straightening up when she couldn't sleep. Grateful for that lucky break, she pointed to a large wardrobe in one corner of the room. "Anyway, my clothes are all in there."

"All right. Don't mind if I take a peek." Sally opened the doors of the wardrobe, scanned everything inside, and then looked annoyed as she huffed, "It's incredible how everything in here is basically the same. And mostly suits."

"I just…end up buying suits whenever I go shopping. They're a safe bet, and I can wear them for work…" It wasn't like she'd done anything wrong, but she found herself giving a discombobulated excuse for it. "Oh, but I definitely do wear the clothes I bought when I went shopping with you that one time."

"Those are winter clothes." Sally gave an exasperated smile, like she couldn't believe that was the only set of non-work clothing Olivia had. She wouldn't know what Olivia did have because they usually saw each other right after work. "Well, I guess that means so long as we don't buy your usual work clothes, we aren't going to have any overlap with your current wardrobe. I suppose that makes things easy."

The pair began discussing a budget and settled on a rough number before setting off. There was something about the city streets bathed in warm spring sun that felt like people were enjoying themselves.

As the two walked side by side down the white cobblestone path, Olivia asked, "Where are we going shopping?"

"A friend has a shop about a ten-minute walk from here. She's got a good selection and gives you a discount if you buy multiple items. And most importantly, she's got a great fashion sense."

After walking for a while, Sally stopped in front of a shop.

"Here we are," she exclaimed.

Olivia looked up at the shop. It felt very stylish with its pale blue walls and display window filled with all sorts of clothes in the most recent trends.

I would definitely not have the courage to go into this store on my own.

Olivia followed Sally inside, and a woman in glasses and a unique outfit came out from the back of the shop and called out, "Oh, hello, Sally. Is this young lady my client for today?"

"Yes, she is. This is Olivia. Olivia, this is the owner of the shop."

"Thank you for your help," Olivia spoke sheepishly, feeling nervous as she bowed her head.

The owner smiled. "You're in good hands."

She had Olivia and Sally sit in chairs along the wall before asking Olivia detailed questions: What kind of clothes do you like? Where will you be wearing these clothes? What season will you need them for?

Olivia was impressed and internally took notes on the types of questions the owner asked and how she asked them.

Once done, the owner began perusing several items. "Could you try this on for me to start with?"

It was a pink dress with a puffy skirt and a corsage of the same pink pinned to the daringly low-cut neckline.

Olivia flinched away. She knew fluffy skirts and cute corsages were in right now, but she didn't think they suited her. And pink? She would feel awkward just putting it on.

The owner smiled sweetly when she saw Olivia's expression. "Give it a try. If you don't like it, you don't have to buy it."

"B-but…"

"Oh, go on. Try it out. It's not like you have to pay to try it on," encouraged Sally with a smile.

Olivia gave a reluctant nod as the two women pressed her. "All right…"



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***I** am so beat…*

Two hours after stepping into the shop, Olivia sat slumped in her chair.

I've never tried on so many clothes in my life.

The wooden rack in front of her held a neat row of items that were potential options, and Sally and the shop's owner stood beside it in fierce debate.

"Olivia's so pale. Light colors would suit her better."

"I disagree. If everything about her is light in color, her face will get lost in the outfit. Something with strong colors would make her face stand out more in contrast."

As Olivia listened to them, she realized something.

I haven't been taking care of myself enough.

Before coming to the capital, she'd been worked to the bone so much she didn't have the energy to think about herself. Then, when she had come to the capital, she was too focused on work that she left her self-care by the wayside.

Olivia knew what trends were popular now since she used fashion trends as references when designing her magic jewelry, but she'd never applied that knowledge to herself. All her clothes were the sort of cautious options she could wear at work as well. Because of that, she had no idea what kind of clothes or makeup suited her.

I should use this opportunity to really think about it.

It wasn't often she actively thought about making herself fancy, but she would do it now.

After the debate ended, she purchased several items that the other two had recommended, leaving them with the shop owner so she could tailor the sizes to fit Olivia. Then, she departed the shop with Sally.

"Right, next is makeup. There's a beauty salon I want to introduce you to," Sally announced. She seemed to be having fun as she led Olivia to an adorable, memorable, high-end shop with a pale-peach-colored door.

Inside were rows of large mirrors and magnificent leather chairs. Everything you might need for your beauty routine, from makeup to hair products, was arranged artfully on the large shelves.

This is another really classy shop.

Olivia was impressed by how many fancy shops Sally knew of.

The owner of the shop was a somewhat older woman with an incredible smile. She spent two hours teaching Olivia in detail about how to choose makeup that looked good on her, how to care for her skin, what to do with her hair and eyebrows, and more.

Olivia bought a set of makeup that the woman recommended and stepped outside into the faint darkness of spring twilight.

"It's really getting into the evening, isn't it?" Olivia observed.

"It is. Time flies!" cried Sally.

Olivia bowed with gratitude toward Sally, who was saying she needed to get back and check on her shop. "Thank you so much for today. You were a huge help, and I learned so much."

"Oh, don't worry about it," said Sally. "I had fun, too." She smiled and waved goodbye as she left.

Olivia watched her walk away, then turned toward her shop, hugging a paper bag containing her makeup to her chest.

Maybe it was because it was already starting to get dark, but she didn't pass many people on the way.

I feel kind of burnt out. Perhaps it's because I'm not used to doing stuff like this. I should get to bed early tonight.

She continued along the cobblestone path and came to Lamilis Street, where her shop was. Olivia stopped to adjust her hold on her bags and was about to set off again when she saw a young man ahead whom she recognized.

Is that…Elliot?

That tall, slender figure with long arms and legs, surprisingly muscular shoulders, and a brown flat cap was undoubtedly Elliot. He must have felt Olivia looking at him because he turned around and stopped walking. With a smile and a wave, he called, "Good evening. Were you out shopping?"

"I was. Sally took me." She walked over to him and realized he was a bit tipsy. "Did you go out for some drinks?"

"Yes. I just left someone who made me join them for a few."

"A client?"

"No, my sword tutor."

Olivia froze and blinked several times at that unexpected response. "You study sword fighting?"

"Yes, though I haven't been in a while. He made me drink quite a lot as punishment for missing so many sessions." Elliot chuckled and explained his tutor was a heavyweight when it came to drinking, and Olivia looked at him with sympathy.

"Sounds like a bit of a trial. Did you go to a pub near here?"

Elliot smiled slightly at that. "No. It wasn't close to here at all, but I kind of wanted to pass by here."

With that, Olivia remembered something similar had happened about a year ago. She looked at him, confused, and asked, "By here, do you mean the pharmacy on the corner?"

"Perhaps," he murmured, then reached out and tugged her bags from her hands. "I'll carry these to your shop. Shall we?"

"Thank you."

They walked side by side beneath the light of the streetlamps.

She looked up at him with gratitude in her eyes and said, "I was so caught off guard yesterday, I didn't thank you properly. Thank you for offering to come with me to the wedding."

"It's nothing. I want to go," Elliot replied before suddenly falling quiet, as if he were in thought.

Olivia walked beside him in silence, wondering if he was tired from the drinking. Laughing children raced past them on the way home.

Eventually, they came to Olivia's shop.

"Thank you for your help," she said.

"Anytime. It was an unexpected blessing for me. Now I'm even more certain of what I must do."

"Uh, that's good, I guess?"

She wasn't certain if they were having the same conversation with each other or not.

After she went inside, he disappeared alone down the night streets.

The next day, Elliot sent her an invitation to a popular play he'd gotten tickets for, so she agreed to go with him on her next day off.



***I** feel kind of tense…*

It was a little past noon on the day she and Elliot were going to see a play that was all the rage in the capital at the moment. Olivia was standing in front of the full-length mirror in the shop.

In complete contrast to her usual suit, which was easy to move in, she was currently wearing a white blouse and a billowing moss-green skirt that Sally had picked out for her. She normally wore almost no makeup, but today she'd put on some light makeup, as the lady at the salon had taught her, and topped it off with a hat in the most fashionable shape.

She adjusted the position of the adorable (currently popular) corsage pinned to her chest and looked in the mirror.

According to Sally, who was Olivia's senior when it came to dressing up, "Fashion isn't a one-night thing. You have to practice! Make sure you dress up when you go out!"

And Olivia had done what she'd instructed. Done her best, anyway…

I look like a completely different person. And it's obvious I'm not used to wearing this sort of thing.

It was sort of like when a young man gets his first job and isn't at all used to wearing suits, like the clothes were wearing her, not the other way around.

Sally's right, I guess.

Considering how she felt now, she would feel seriously out of place if she dressed up for the first time at the wedding. It truly was better to get used to it in advance.

Daily training is important in all things. It's just like crafting items.

As she contemplated her look and adjusted her hat nervously, the doorbell rang, followed by a hello in a familiar voice.

It's Elliot.

As she went to the door, she thought about how Elliot had so far never seemed to care much about what she was wearing. She imagined he would tell her she looked nice out of politeness, and that would be all.

She was very wrong, however.

The moment he saw her in her fancy clothes, his eyes grew wide in shock, and he smiled with genuine happiness. "You put on your new clothes for me? You look wonderful."

What?

Olivia froze, her mind unable to process the surprisingly strong reaction from him.

Elliot smiled softly as he watched her. "Light colors suit you well. And that goes well with your eyes. You look very beautiful."

"Th-thank you," she stammered, her eyes darting back and forth. The flurry of compliments left her feeling like all the blood in her body had gathered in her face.

Elliot's eyes crinkled as he smiled and watched her turn away to hide her red face. Then he picked up the small purse Olivia had set nearby and held his hand out to her. "Our carriage is waiting. Shall we go?"



***I'M** finally feeling more relaxed.*

Shortly after they'd boarded the carriage, Olivia stared out the window and sighed.

He really surprised me…

Elliot had paid her a compliment. Even though he didn't usually say much about her appearance, what he said was highly flattering. She'd known him for more than two years, but this was the first time he'd ever commented on her appearance, especially to this degree.

What's going on?

There didn't seem to be anything different about his elegant features as he gazed out the window.

Olivia's field of vision shifted to watching the changing scenes out the window as their carriage transported them to the center of

the city. They passed by several huge buildings before stopping in front of a castle-like building with impressive pillars.

"Shall we?" Elliot disembarked the carriage first, offering her his hand.

She gripped his large hand and stepped down before nervously looking up the stairs to the entrance of the theater. She'd seen it several times from the outside but had never actually been inside before.

She thanked Elliot for helping her down and tried to pull her hand away, but he gently held it in place.

"Olivia, may I escort you inside?" he asked.

"Uh…" she uttered in shock; he'd never offered that before.

E-escort?

He'd helped her out of a carriage, but they always separated after and walked without touching. Elliot hadn't offered her his arm like this, and certainly never insisted she let him.

Wh-what do I do?

While Olivia was reeling, Elliot watched her with eyes that seemed to wonder if maybe she didn't want to. She couldn't possibly refuse when he was looking at her like that, so she nodded uncomfortably and muttered, "P-please do."

That somewhat high-pitched response made him smile, and he gripped her hand like it was a precious object.

She couldn't stop herself from flinching slightly when his large, warm hand held hers. The tension in her body would not leave, perhaps because she wasn't used to this kind of thing.

Elliot smiled. "Shall we go?"



OUTSIDE of the whole Elliot-offering-his-arm-to-her thing when they were entering the theater, her first play was an incredible experience.

Elliot gracefully guided her as she ogled everything around her, arriving at seats on the second tier with a good view of the stage. It

was a sort of individual room sectioned off from others in the audience with curtains.

This must have been expensive.

Olivia obviously started to worry, but Elliot pointed upward and whispered, "Those are the really expensive seats."

She looked up and saw a gentleman and a lady in vibrant outfits chatting happily in a sort of box room, the kind of place where high-ranking nobles sat.

The play itself was wonderful; particularly amazing were the vintage-style designs of the jewelry the actors wore. Olivia pulled out a sketchbook and was entirely focused on sketching them throughout the play.

Once the play ended, Elliot offered Olivia his arm again and walked her to the carriage as she excitedly chattered about the play, reiterating how incredible the jewelry designs had been. Elliot directed the carriage toward an elegant café with a classic feel, famous for its tarts.

S-something really is different about him!

He was still behaving oddly. Elliot had always been kind, but today he was even nicer and considerate of Olivia than usual. He offered her his arm every time they were walking, and she looked up once while eating her tart because she could feel his eyes on her.

Ah!

He was looking at her with such tenderness that she couldn't help but look away again. She already knew he sometimes smiled as he watched her eat, but it'd never concerned her more than making her wonder what he was so interested in looking at. This look, however, had such an intense *something* in it that it threw her off kilter.

Wh-what's going on?

She continued mulling in confusion as she ate an apple tart, followed by a banana tart, confused by this change in Elliot.

After some thought, she hit upon a possible explanation.

Maybe…he's really tired.

She knew that when she was tired and simply wanted to sleep, her level of engagement was kind of out of whack. Maybe he was

swamped lately and had to squeeze in time for her.

If that's the case, I feel terrible.

Once they were done eating, she looked at him with gratitude and expressed, "Thank you, Elliot. The play was really fascinating, and the tarts were delicious. But…" She looked away. "I'm worried you might be exhausted. You're not pushing yourself too hard, are you?"

He looked at her questioningly. "Why do you think that?"

"You seem different from normal."

"Different…in what way?" he asked softly.

She folded her arms and contemplated the question. "Um, just, weird? I guess?"

"Weird?" he repeated, caught off guard. He brought a hand to his forehead, then laughed like he couldn't hold it in. "I see. I suppose it's come to this."

Olivia was confused. She'd never seen him laugh that much.

As he laughed, he murmured, "I'd decided to start by not holding myself back, but it's all rather difficult."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. It's nothing."

He apologized to her and, after a moment of hesitation, slowly uttered, "May I ask you one thing? Have I made you uncomfortable today?"

It sounded like an offhand question, but there seemed to be some unease hidden within. Olivia sensed she needed to answer honestly, so she earnestly considered it.

Overall, he had been acting odd the whole day. He kept complimenting her and offering her his arm—it was like he was doting on her.

But I never felt like I didn't like it…

"You didn't make me uncomfortable," she admitted.

A relieved smile overtook his features. "Please don't worry about me. I'm not tired; I'm as healthy as can be. I simply don't yet know how best to do this."

"That's good," she replied with a nod, though she did wonder what "this" was.

Afterward, Elliot restarted their conversation as if nothing had happened, bringing up their usual topics of work and the city. Olivia felt relieved to see him talking as usual.

Looks like he's back to his regular self.

With him back to normal, Olivia thought they would leave the café and part ways as usual, but what actually happened was beyond her expectations.

Once they finished eating, they went for a stroll around town as they made their way back toward Olivia's shop, enjoying conversations about the play and the tarts they'd had before arriving at the entrance of Olivia's shop.

"Thank you for walking me home. I had a really nice time today."

"No, thank you. I also enjoyed myself."

That was part of the routine. Olivia bade her goodbye and turned to head into the shop, but Elliot stopped her.

"Olivia, wait a moment, please."

"What is it?"

She stopped and turned back toward him. This had never happened before.

He let out a small, sharp breath, looking somewhat nervous as he asked, "May I give you a proper goodbye?"

"Uh, a proper goodbye?" She cocked her head. Olivia had no idea what he meant, but if it was only a goodbye, then she might as well say yes.

She nodded, and he gave a relieved smile before gently taking her hand. Her attention now snapped down, Olivia watched as he slowly raised it toward his face.

Uh…?

She felt something soft press against the back of her hand, followed by a look of passion turned toward her from behind tinted glasses.

"Ah!" Olivia was at a loss. Her mind went blank.

Elliot looked at her with affection and stated, "I'll be in touch," before walking away as if he couldn't bear to leave her.

Olivia watched him leave in a daze, then gave a wordless shriek and pressed her hands to her cheeks as she ran up to her room on the second floor and flung herself into her bed. She wrapped her arms around her pillow to bury her face as she rolled back and forth.

"Wh-what was that?! There's *definitely* something weird about him!"

In the days that followed, Elliot's actions continued to leave Olivia blushing.



ON one afternoon, a week after she went to the play with Elliot, Olivia was walking to the center of the city beneath a clear blue sky as a pleasant breeze rustled the leaves of the trees along the streets. She looked up into the blindingly bright sky.

"It's nearly summer."

After spending some time along a broad thoroughfare lined with large, fancy shops, she came to a building proudly boasting the claim of being the second largest on the street. This was where Olivia started: Gordon's Magic Appliances.

She walked through the front door and was greeted by the voice of a demure woman with her light brown hair pulled into a fluffy side ponytail. "Welcome to Gordon's— Oh, Olivia, it's you!"

Rose worked in sales and was the only woman working in the shop; she still helped Olivia out from time to time.

She smiled happily. "It's been so long. How are you?"

"Good, thank you."

"Is Lottie doing a good job?"

"Yes, she's such a hard worker. She knows more about the books at this point than I do."

"She's a reliable one."

"According to her, it's because you did such a good job teaching her."

Rose smiled at that, saying, "Hold on one moment." She walked over to another employee nearby. They exchanged a few words,

then Rose turned back toward Olivia. “You’re going to see Gordon, right? I’ll walk you up.”

Olivia bid hello to the other workers they passed as Rose led her up to the second floor using the stairs in the back of the shop. They cut across the shop area and entered a narrow hallway.

When they reached the final door of the hallway, Rose stopped and knocked. “Gordon, Olivia’s here.”

“Come on in,” came a voice from inside.

Rose opened the door, and they entered the disordered office. Behind the desk with its mountain of paperwork sat Gordon, a caring middle-aged man with a good build and the store’s manager.

He jumped happily to his feet when he saw who walked in. “Good to see you, Olivia! Sorry about the other day. I was out on business.”

“No, it’s my fault for showing up unannounced. It wasn’t anything urgent anyway.”

He sat back down, and Olivia took a seat in the chair across from him. Rose brought them tea with a smile.

“I’ll give you two some privacy,” Rose announced as she left.

Gordon looked at Olivia and asked, “So, what did you want to talk about? Did something happen?”

Olivia straightened her back. For a moment, she wasn’t sure how she should broach the topic, but finally decided to go straight into it.

“A few things have happened. I have to go to Daregas in about a month and a half.”

Gordon’s smiling face changed to surprise. “Something going on?”

“Yes. My adoptive sister is getting married.”

“Uh-huh…” He stared blankly at her. “If I remember correctly, you said she was going to marry your ex-fiancé?”

“That’s right. They invited me for some reason.”

Taken aback, Gordon listened as Olivia explained the invitation she had received in a flat tone and what it entailed. Afterward, Gordon covered his face with one hand and let out a heavy sigh.

"I'm less angry than I am utterly astounded. This is insane." He took a swig of his tea as if to gain control of his emotions before looking at Olivia. "So, what are you going to do? You make it sound like you plan to go."

She nodded. "I think it's a good opportunity to settle things, once and for all."

"Settle things?"

"I want to find out if my adoptive father had any real right to everything."

Once Olivia had started really facing the things that had happened to her two years ago, she found herself with a question: Did he actually have the legal right to take her home and shop?

At the time, she was a naïve girl who'd never worked anywhere but at her father's shop, and it was right after her parents had died, so she was in no state to be giving anything serious thought. She only did as she was told, accepting it at face value. But after all her experiences in the capital, she couldn't help feeling there was something off about the situation.

She'd tried not to think about those events up until now because it was painful to, but she wanted to use this opportunity to investigate the matter.

Gordon nodded. "It is abnormal. So, what are you thinking of doing?"

"First, I want to hear what my adoptive father has to say, get him to show me the deeds, and then I'll figure out what to do from there."

"You're right that it's best to check out the situation first."

"Once I come back, could I get your input on it?"

"Of course. Looks like we're going to be busy."

"Yes, and…" Olivia's eyes fell to the teacup in her hands. "I'd like to visit Jack on the way there."

Jack had been an employee at her father's shop. He'd been there ever since Olivia was a little girl, and she loved him like family. He'd been there for her until the very end, even going to the town hall to figure out what was going on when her shop was taken.

But her adoptive father had accepted so many orders from nobles for dog collars and gate locks that Jack had to force himself to work beyond his limits to protect Olivia. It ruined his health in the end, and he had to move back to the countryside.

Olivia looked down at her hands. "I've sent him several letters and get-well wishes since moving to the capital, but he hasn't replied to any of them. I'm worried."

She assumed things were fine since she'd heard he had family in the country, but she truly wished she knew his well-being.

"I see," replied Gordon. "Jack was from a little village not that far outside Daregas, wasn't he?"

"Yes."

Worry etched its way onto Gordon's face. "I'm worried about this for the wedding too, but you're not planning on going alone, are you?"

"No," she answered, shaking her head. "My friend, Elliot, is going to come with me to both the wedding and Jack's village."

Gordon blinked. "Elliot? Is that the young man with tinted glasses I've seen walk you back to the store every once in a while?"

"That's him," she replied, remembering that Gordon had actually met Elliot a few times on the street outside the shop.

"Uh-huh," Gordon returned as he thought. "If I remember correctly, he's the third son of the Dicks merchant family?"

"Yes."

"How long have you known him?"

"I met him when I came to the capital, so a little over two years."

Gordon hmphed and thought some more, then stepped out into the hallway and called, "Could someone send Rose up to my office?" Once Rose came in and sat next to Olivia, he asked her with a serious look on his face, "What do you think of that young man with glasses who's walked Olivia back to the store a few times?"

Rose's long eyelashes fluttered as she blinked. "Um, you mean the tall, handsome young man? Elliot, was it?"

"That's the one. He's going to be traveling with Olivia to a wedding in Daregas."

Rose burst out laughing. "Gordon, you look like a father concerned for his daughter." Then after a moment of contemplation, she smiled and answered happily, "I think he's a good person. I've spoken to him a few times, and he seems like a nice, polite young man. I was a little curious about how high-class he seemed, but he was interesting and didn't seem the type to cheat. If Olivia were my little sister, I wouldn't be opposed to her dating him."

"W-wait a minute," interrupted Olivia, jumping in to cut off Rose. "It's not like that with Elliot and me. He's just a friend."

Gordon and Rose looked at her with exasperation.

"Do you think a man would go with a girl who was 'just a friend' to her hometown?" asked Gordon.

"And to a wedding. That's what it means to be someone's date to a wedding," Rose added.

Olivia tried to deny it was anything like that, but then she remembered how Elliot acted the day they went to the play, and she couldn't get the words out.

The two of them looked at her with warm eyes.

"Well," began Gordon, "I didn't get any bad impressions from him. I think he should be all right."

"I agree. Ooh, I can't wait to see what happens!"

Olivia looked down, her ears burning. After that, she practically ran away back home as they saw her off with affectionate looks.



A month had gone by since Olivia last visited Gordon, and the wedding was looming closer, with only two weeks left to prepare. One evening, Elliot dropped by her shop, and the two stood talking in the entrance right after he'd stepped inside.

"So, you have to travel for work?" she asked.

"Yes. Something urgent came up that I must deal with." He looked apologetic. The assignment had suddenly come in that day, and he would have to be away from the city for two weeks.

He assured her he would definitely be back before they needed to leave for the wedding, but she was worried. "Is everything all

right? It's not too much for you to handle?" she asked.

"It's not a problem. As I've said, I want to go to the wedding with you," he stated firmly with a smile. "And about that, while I'm away, I plan to purchase tickets for the horsecar to Daregas, book a hotel in town, and gather information on the village Jack lives in," he added lightly, as if it were something he was doing in passing, and therefore she shouldn't worry about it.

"Thank you. I don't know how to thank you enough," she responded with gratitude.

His eyes crinkled in a smile. "Your happiness is the greatest thanks I could ask for." He then took her hand and softly kissed the back of it. "Take care. I'll be in touch."

After Elliot left, Olivia pressed her hands to her blushing cheeks and sat in a chair in her workshop.

I don't even know how to take all this…

He'd taken her to all sorts of places the past month and a half: the circus, the opera, wonderful restaurants, and popular dessert cafés. They were all the sorts of places that Olivia might like that were also hot topics in the capital.

She was also very busy with work lately, taking on twice as much as usual to be able to take time off for the wedding. The only reason she got any sort of break from that was because Elliot invited her out.

He's also what has allowed me to keep going without getting too hung up on thinking about things.

Going to the wedding of her former fiancé to her adoptive sister as a witness meant she would have to see the family who had treated her as less than dirt. It would be no surprise if the thought of it sent her spiraling into a depression. Still, she felt so much better knowing Elliot was coming with her, and going to all these different, fun places let her focus on something else and not dwell on being sad. She was nothing but grateful for that, so utterly grateful.

But.

Elliot was clearly acting differently from before. He kept offering her his arm when they walked and was more considerate of her. And kissing her hand when they bade goodbye was only the start of the

long list of things he was doing now. One day, Olivia had turned bright red as he knelt to the ground to tie her shoe for her. It was so sweet of him.

Just remembering it made her blush.

The kiss on the hand she could wrap her head around; it was a symbol of respect. She saw noblemen do it to ladies sometimes as a simple greeting.

But the shoe tying? That was obviously not normal.

The first time they went to the theater, she couldn't get past her shock to really analyze anything, but after the second, third, fourth, and so on times, even she was starting to see it.

Considering what he did and how often he did it…they'd obviously gone beyond mere friends.

I guess Gordon and Rose were right. But…Elliot and I've always been just friends, right?

She sighed and slumped onto the worktable. The change in Elliot had left her heart in disarray.

"Miss, what's wrong?" asked Lottie as she made tea.

Olivia looked up at her, this reliable young woman, and realized she couldn't handle this by bottling it all up inside. She would only keep spinning it around in her mind. Lottie was so level-headed. Maybe she should ask her what she thought.

"Well…" started Olivia. She insisted Lottie couldn't tell anyone what she was about to say to her, then explained how Elliot had been acting lately.

Lottie nodded along as Olivia talked. Once Olivia was done, Lottie folded her arms before saying, "It does sound like you've gone past being only friends. Or, to be clearer, he's obviously treating you like a woman he has feelings for."

"I knew it…" murmured Olivia.

"I think that he's had feelings for you for much longer than that, though."

"What? Really?" Olivia's jaw dropped.

"Yes. To be completely honest, when he introduced me to you six months ago, I thought you two were already a couple."

Olivia's eyes nearly popped out. "What made you think that?"

"All he ever talked about was how he was worried about you."

"Worried?"

"Yes. He would say that even though you seem like you always have things under control, you can sometimes be a bit absent-minded and have a miraculously bad sense of direction. And if you're left alone, you'd drown yourself in work."

Olivia smiled awkwardly. She had mixed feelings; she sort of appreciated his concern, but also felt a little insulted.

"But when I asked him if you were his girlfriend, he told me you were his very dear friend."

Olivia nodded vigorously at that. "Exactly! He's always said we were friends, so that's what I thought too. But, lately, he hasn't called me a friend…"

That was another one of the changes: He'd stopped using the word friend for her completely.

"When you say 'lately', when exactly did that start?" Lottie asked.

"It probably started…after we agreed he'd be coming to the wedding with me."

Lottie nodded as if that made sense. "Perhaps seeing you in a difficult situation made him want to protect you. A housekeeper I used to work under once stated, 'Men are animals driven to protect a damsel in distress.'"

"Really?"

"Yes. But I think it's possible he's worried you'll run away if he jumps straight to telling you how he feels about you, so he's started with treating you as a woman he has feelings for so that you see him as a man rather than as a friend."

This astute observation left Olivia tongue-tied, feeling like Lottie was spot on.

Lottie opened her mouth slowly and stated, "I think what's most important in this situation is how you feel, miss. What are *your* feelings for him?"

Olivia gave that some thought. She obviously didn't dislike him. In fact, she quite liked and trusted him. They got along amazingly well and had great conversations. He had a lovely personality, was

kind, gentle, and handsome. But if someone asked her if she had the sort of romantic feelings for him she might have for a man, well, she honestly didn't know how she'd answer.

I've thought of us as friends this whole time. I guess I haven't looked at him as a potential romantic partner in a long time…

Lottie saw how uncertain Olivia was. "Not being able to answer is also an answer," she offered gently. "How about you see where things go for the time being? The housekeeper used to also say, 'When it comes to love, what will be, will be.'"

Olivia nodded gravely. That made a lot of sense, considering she had no experience with romance—it seemed the most natural way of looking at the situation.

"You're right," Olivia replied slowly. "I won't get anywhere just thinking about things. This housekeeper says a lot of good things."

"Yes, it was because her shelf was packed full of romance novels."

"Uh… And she was…?"

"Utterly single."

Olivia was speechless and a little uneasy about the source of her romance wisdom, but she decided to see how things panned out.

Soon after that, Olivia received a sudden order. It was such a difficult one that it left her with no time to think about romantic matters. She was so swamped, she barely even had time to sleep.

Once finished and Olivia had time to recover, it was nearly the day for her to leave for the wedding.

Chapter 4: Traveling by Horsecar Rail

THE wedding was two days away, and it was time to set out for Daregas. Olivia had finally finished her last job that morning and was now standing near the entrance to the horsecar rail station in the center of the city, carrying a somewhat large, red suitcase.

It's finally time…

She let out a little sigh to try to calm herself as she looked up into the early summer sky blanketed by dark clouds. It looked like it might start raining at any moment.

Sally, Nicca, and Lottie gathered to see her off, all looking worried.

"Be careful, Olivia," Sally cautioned. "And make sure you take your dress out of the suitcase the minute you get to the hotel and smooth the wrinkles out."

"Watch what you say. Don't commit yourself to anything," warned Nicca.

"Always watch your back. And don't worry about the shop. I'll look after it," assured Lottie.

"Thank you," Olivia said as she bowed to them. They really had done so much for her.

Sally cast her eyes over the people around them. "Where is Elliot anyway?"

"He sent me a letter saying he'd like to meet me in the waiting room on the east side of the station. It sounded like he was so busy he was only going to barely make it."

"Is your ticket all sorted out?"

"Yes. Elliot said he'd buy our tickets."

With that, Olivia went into the station while the three of them waved. She asked the porter waiting near the entrance to take her suitcase to the east waiting room. She followed behind him, glancing all around her. She felt deeply moved by the station, which she hadn't visited in such a long time.

It was a vast space with massive pillars and throngs of busy-looking people bustling between them while large, magnificent horses waited at the platforms.

It hasn't changed at all.

She looked up at the high ceiling and large pillars and thought back to the day two years ago when she first set foot in here. A smile crept onto her face at the memory of being so overwhelmed that she barely knew left from right.

I was definitely like some sort of country bumpkin.

The porter led her to a waiting room dotted with a few people waiting at the end of one of the platforms. Olivia thanked him and gave him a tip, then settled into a seat, her eyes on the platform but not really seeing.

She was reliving what happened to her two years ago, worrying about her father's shop she'd left behind.

I wonder how it's doing…

Her parents had loved greenery. They planted all sorts of things around the shop. The flower beds out front were always bursting with green, and inside the shop were several potted plants.

The artificer Olivia's uncle had hired to replace Olivia had been very good at caring for the plants, so things should be fine if she'd continued to do so, but…

Olivia's eyes were barely taking in the people hurrying by as thoughts of what happened in Daregas appeared one after another in her mind, like some word association game.

There was the end of her engagement with Henry, then she remembered when her adoptive family kicked her out of her home and workplace, making her frown. She knew she shouldn't be dwelling on this stuff, but her mind just kept focusing on the bad things.

My engagement with the lord's son was broken off, and then they kicked me out after accusing me of stealing Catherine's designs—my designs. I left town before I could deny the claims, so I imagine there are some pretty bad rumors about me going around… I feel like anyone I meet is going to have a million questions for me.

She sighed, her mood steadily darkening.

This is miserable…

She slumped her head onto her suitcase and sighed.

"I'm sorry I'm late," came a gentle voice from above.

That familiar voice brought a wave of relief across Olivia. She looked up to see Elliot carrying a large leather suitcase. He was in a light gray suit and wore his usual green-tinted glasses.

"I hope you weren't waiting too long," he expressed.

"No, not long at all. Thank you for coming."

She stood, and Elliot looked at her with eyes narrowed in concern. "You don't look very well. Are you feeling all right?"

"I'm fine. I think I'm a little overwhelmed by all the people."

"Then it might be better if we board the horsecar before everyone else. Shall we?" He lifted her suitcase as if it were nothing and slowly walked toward the horsecar. Olivia watched his broad shoulders as she walked behind him and let out a relieved sigh.

I'm so glad he's coming with me.

If she were alone, she'd think nothing but negative thoughts to the point they'd crush her. She looked up at him with gratitude, then cocked her head in confusion.

"Elliot… Something seems different about you today," she observed.

"Perhaps it's because I'm wearing a different color."

She took another look at his outfit. He normally wore a brown pinstriped suit, but today he was in something completely different. Elliot wore a high-quality suit in light gray and traded in his usual flat cap for one with a brim. Something about it felt even more high-class than usual.

"Your clothes are different from usual," she admitted.

"Because we're going to a wedding."

They weaved their way through the foot traffic until they were on their platform. Olivia looked at the horsecar and gasped. "What? But this is first class!"

Normal horsecars were made of sets of two carriages that carried twelve passengers each, for a total of twenty-four passengers. This train, however, had four cars, each its own individual private car—normally for nobles or the rich.

First class is practically twice as expensive, isn't it? Can I even afford this?

Seeming to sense her concern, Elliot lightly explained, "Don't worry. I'm paying for this. I booked it without asking you in advance, after all."

"I-I can't let you do that! You even took time off work to come with me. I'll pay," Olivia retorted stubbornly, like she wasn't going to budge on the matter at all.

Elliot nodded as if in agreement, "Then I'll accept payment for a standard ticket from you. I'll cover the difference."

"But—"

"Please let me maintain my pride as a gentleman. Besides, there are things I'd like to talk to you about on the way, such as what might happen at the wedding, and I don't want people overhearing."

"I…suppose. I do want to ask you something too." Olivia nodded reluctantly, admitting he was right about having a private room.

But I can't let him spoil me. I'll have to find a way to thank him properly when we get back.

Elliot stepped into the horsecar first and placed their luggage on the racks. "Please, come in," he called to her.

Olivia boarded the car, and her eyes widened.

Wow, this is even fancier than I was expecting.

Their private room could easily fit four people. The two benches facing each other were upholstered with fabric that looked of far higher quality than what was in the standard cars. Her back had started aching after her initial trip to the capital, but these seats looked like they'd provide a more comfortable travel experience.

Olivia thanked Elliot for stowing her suitcase and then sat on a bench diagonally across from him. She looked out the window and let out a small sigh.

It's nearly time.

She felt her insides squirm as thoughts of her father's shop, her adoptive family, and her former fiancé filled her head. Instinctively, she grimaced and rubbed her stomach.

Elliot's expression looked pained at the sight of her. Softly, he asked, "Olivia, would you mind if I sat next to you?"

"What? Oh, no, I don't mind," she replied with astonishment at the sudden request, but she scooted over, thinking maybe the view was better from that seat.

"Pardon me," he said as he sat beside her, then he gently took her hand.

Ah!

Olivia stiffened somewhat in surprise. He softly held her small hand in his and told her, "Everything will be all right. I'll be with you the whole time."

Those words, along with the warmth from his large hands, made the tension fade from her shoulders. Her heavy heart grew lighter.

She dropped her head onto his shoulder and stared out the window as she murmured, "Thank you, Elliot. I'm so glad you're coming with me. I would have been so afraid on my own."

He didn't say anything and gently squeezed her hand.

A bell began to clang, and the horsecar pulled away to the whinnies of the horses. The people and signals outside the window streamed by, growing faster and faster. Olivia watched in silence as she gently leaned against Elliot. After some time, the horsecar left the capital and entered a swath of farmland.

That's when she realized it. If she really thought about it, she was doing something incredibly embarrassing. Holding hands and leaning against him? That was like, like, they were l-lovers!

Oh my god!

She jumped to her feet and buried her face in her hands. Her cheeks were so hot, it was like she'd come down with a high fever.

After several long breaths in and out, she again sat diagonally across from Elliot with as normal an expression as she could muster.

"B-by the way, Elliot, you said you wanted to talk to me about something. What was it?" she stammered.

Elliot looked away, his shoulders shaking in laughter at the sight of Olivia trying as hard as she could to pretend nothing had happened. She glared daggers at him, and he apologized, then responded, "You go first. You mentioned you wanted to ask me something."

"Well, you're right," she uttered, clearing her throat. "I wanted to ask about you. We don't really talk about ourselves too much. I know barely anything about you. It's a bit weird not to know anything about my plus one."

"I suppose that's true," he murmured. After a moment's thought, he slowly answered, "Well, let me reintroduce myself then. My name is Elliot Dicks. I am the third son of the family who owns Dicks & Co., the trading company, but I am actually adopted. I am related to the Dicks family, but my blood family sent me to them to be an apprentice."

"What?!" Olivia shrieked, completely caught off guard at the unexpected news.

Children with promise from poor families were sometimes adopted into the households of richer relatives as servants or apprentices. Olivia never imagined that was the case with Elliot, though. He was so… noble-like.

Should I really have asked about this?

It wasn't that uncommon an occurrence, but that didn't mean she should know about it. A lot of these adopted children were treated poorly, like lowly individuals, since they came from a lower-ranked family. It was normal for people to keep their adopted status a secret. Olivia's father had been adopted similarly, and he'd avoided telling people.

And the fact that Elliot's real family sent him away into service meant he likely didn't have many good memories about the whole situation.

Elliot smiled at her worried expression. "I appreciate your concern, but there's no need. I'm glad things happened this way."

"Really?"

"Yes. My real family is quite odd. My father's favorite saying is, 'Men speak with their fists.'"

"Their *fists*?"

"Any disagreements were settled with a fight. I always had fresh wounds in those days."

Olivia was shocked that Elliot's family was like that; he was so gentle. "I assumed your parents would be rather tranquil people."

"My adopted parents are." Elliot further revealed he had an older brother and sister in his original family, and they were just as prone to violence. He looked off into the distance and continued, "We'd fight if someone got a bigger sweet, if it was someone's birthday… We'd basically have a fight every three days…"

"W-wow…"

"The Dicks family is far more down-to-earth in comparison. They can talk things through since no one is brandishing any fists."

Olivia couldn't help giggling. She had thought it odd that he was studying swordplay and how muscular and strong he was—she never imagined that was the reason why.

And he's way more like a noble than I am. I guess you can't judge a book by its cover.

"I'd like to not use the family name Dicks at the wedding," he added, drawing her out of her reverie.

Olivia blinked several times. "Really?"

"Yes. I want to introduce myself as Elliot of Dicks & Co. Non-nobles don't generally use their family names when introducing themselves anyway, so I don't think it should cause any problems."

"I suppose not, but why?"

"It's less my decision and more my family's policy," he answered as if it were no big deal.

"Hm." Olivia looked at him with confusion. It might have something to do with being adopted.

Maybe there are some extenuating circumstances with his family. I probably shouldn't press for details.

She nodded in agreement. “If anyone asks, that’s how I’ll introduce you.”

“Thank you.”

Now that she understood his situation, it was his turn to ask Olivia questions. She told him to feel free to ask anything, and he smiled in turn. “Thank you. I have two things I want to ask about. The first is your ex-fiancé.”

Olivia blinked in surprise. “Lord Henry?”

“Yes. I thought it’d be best if I learned about him.”

“I suppose,” Olivia pondered before explaining flatly, “Lord Henry is the fourth son of Viscount Perigord. He’s two years older than me, and said he helps his father with his duties.”

“I see. He sounds like your average son of a regional lord. How did your engagement with him come about?”

“Well, the proposal came from Lord Perigord when I was fifteen, something about wanting me to marry into the family because he saw a lot of promise in my design sense. My parents weren’t too enthusiastic about the proposal, but it didn’t really feel like they could refuse—it was an offer to marry the son of the local lord after all.”

“Meaning, it wasn’t a marriage for love?”

“Not at all. I didn’t meet him until after the marriage talks started. I didn’t have much choice, really.”

Something that resembled relief flitted across Elliot’s features. “My second question is about the orders Jack was working on.”

“His work? You mean about the shop?”

He nodded. “You mentioned before that his health deteriorated after being made to work on dog collars and gate locks for nobles. You also explained to me that there are very few people who can make a certain kind of lock. Were they those kind?”

“Yes, they were. Jack was an incredible artificer.”

Elliot fell silent. In that moment, he looked abnormally handsome.

There is definitely something different about him today. It might be only his clothes, but it’s like he’s practically glowing.

And then she realized she had no idea what color his eyes were. He was always wearing tinted glasses, so she'd never actually gotten a good look at them.

Just then, an announcement in the car stated they would shortly be arriving at the next station. Olivia looked at the clock in surprise and realized it'd already been an hour since they'd departed.

"Wow, time is flying," she blurted out.

"I'm as surprised as you are."

The two took the opportunity at the next stop to step out of the car to buy tea and cake at a stall. Once back on board, they decided to stop thinking about complicated things and instead have a leisurely trip the rest of the way. Olivia had her cake and tea as she looked out the window at the blue sky and early summer scenery.

At one point, she said, "Hey, Elliot, take off your glasses for a second."

"What? Why? I'd rather not. I'd feel awkward."

"Okay."

Not giving it another thought, they chatted, played card games, and generally had a pleasant time for the rest of the ride.

"Olivia," came Elliot's voice after a while. "We're nearly there."

She lifted her head from his shoulder. He'd come to sit beside her at some point. She looked out the window and saw Daregas lit with the orange glow of the setting sun.

Chapter 5: Her Hometown and Facing Reality

"HAAAH, I slept so well!"

It was the morning after they arrived in Daregas, and Olivia woke up in her second-floor room of a white-walled hotel surrounded by the greenery of trees just a short way outside the center of town.

She sat up and stretched, her blue eyes taking in the elegant, spacious room and the clothes hanging on the walls lit by the morning sun as it slipped through the cracks between the beige curtains.

Opening the curtains, she could see the new leaves on the trees swaying in the wind. She looked up into the brilliant blue morning sky and murmured, "This is such a nice place. I never knew Daregas had a hotel like this."

The evening prior, Olivia and Elliot had boarded a carriage right after disembarking the horsecar, which took them to a hotel a short distance out of the town center that he'd booked in advance.

After checking in, she felt a wave of relief wash over her.

I'm so glad we didn't bump into anyone I know.

It wasn't like she'd done anything wrong. She had every right to be here, but she couldn't help feeling uncomfortable knowing people had most likely spread negative rumors about her. It would be a real pain if she saw someone she knew and they grilled her with a million questions.

It'd be nice if I didn't have to leave the hotel at all today, but I don't think that will happen. I do have to eat dinner, and I imagine Elliot would like to have a stroll around town at least.

She was worrying herself, knowing it was unlikely she could avoid running into someone she knew.

Elliot seemed to guess her thoughts from her expression and suggested, "Why don't we have dinner at the restaurant in the hotel?" And then after dinner, "We've had a long day. Why don't we go to our rooms and get to sleep early tonight?"

Thanks to that, she didn't need to leave the hotel the first day, sleeping peacefully and soundly until morning.

Olivia washed her face in the sink in her room, then changed out of her pajamas into an aqua-colored dress with a flowy skirt and a hairpin with blue flowers.

She went over to the vanity to do her makeup, which was when she glanced out the window. Her eyes widened in shock, and she had to take a second look.

That's…Elliot, isn't it?

She was looking at a tall young man in a gray suit. He was standing under a somewhat large tree, a short distance from the hotel, having a heated conversation with a large man.

Olivia cocked her head.

Does Elliot know that man?

Elliot worked for Dicks & Co., a very large merchant company. Maybe they had a branch office in Daregas.

Olivia felt bad spying on him, so she tore her eyes from the window and turned toward the mirror to focus on applying her foundation and penciling in her eyebrows. By the time she went down to the cute, café-like restaurant on the first floor, Elliot was already sitting at a table waiting for her.

"Good morning," he greeted.

"Good morning. Were you waiting for me?"

"No, I only just arrived. How are you feeling?"

"Very good, thank you."

She sat in a seat across from him and debated whether to ask about what she'd seen, but had a feeling it'd be best not to.

She looked straight at him like nothing was wrong, and then froze, blinking.

Hm?

What she saw was Elliot with the same pleasant smile as always and the same green-tinted glasses.

But something looked different about him.

Is he…even more handsome now than when we were in the capital?

She stared at him, and he met her eyes.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Uh, nothing."

Feeling embarrassed for some reason, she tore her eyes away right as their breakfast was brought to the table. The morning meal consisted of steaming vegetable soup, an omelet, and freshly made bread slathered with creamy butter.

"Oh! This is like the perfect breakfast!" exclaimed Olivia, her eyes shining. Elliot looked on happily as they dug in.

"It's so good!"

The soup was loaded with vegetables and large chunks of bacon, combining to make an indescribably wonderful flavor. The rich, cheesy flavor of the beautifully golden omelet came together in harmony with the slightly salty taste of the ketchup. Even the toast was perfectly toasted—fluffy inside and crispy outside, making it the perfect pairing for the butter.

Oh my gosh, it's so good!

Olivia was filled with happiness as she filled up on breakfast, even asking for two more servings of toast in the process.

Once done, the waiter served them cups of black tea, and Elliot asked, "Is there anything you'd like to do today?"

Olivia set her teacup on the saucer and looked at Elliot, her expression serious. "There are two places I'd like to go."

"Where are those?"

"The first is my parents' graves."

She hadn't visited them in two years; surely, they were worried about her. Olivia wanted to put flowers on their graves and let them know she was living happily in the capital.

"The second place is my father's shop. I want to see how it's doing."

She was certain it would be completely different from when she was there, but she needed to see things for herself to prepare for her talk with her adoptive father.

Elliot nodded. "Well then, after this, I'll ask the concierge to order a carriage. Would you mind if I accompanied you?"

"I don't mind at all." She looked at him with gratitude in her eyes. "I need to thank you again. If you weren't here, I would have no idea how to handle all this."

He'd supported her ever since she decided to attend the wedding. Elliot cared for her while they were traveling by horsecar, and he continued to hold her up now that they were here. She could never thank him enough.

Olivia lowered her head in a bow, but as if it were nothing, he insisted, "Don't worry about it. I'm doing this because I want to."

"I can't not worry about it. I have to return the favor somehow once we get back to the capital."

Elliot smiled at her earnest expression. "I appreciate that. I'll have to think of something then."

"Please do."

They finished their breakfast as they continued a pleasant conversation, then returned to their rooms to prepare for their outing.



ONCE back in her room, Olivia started getting ready to go out. She touched up her makeup, picked up her wallet, handkerchief, and purse—which she always had with her that contained a protective magic item—then went back downstairs.

Elliot was talking to the concierge at the front desk. While he was asking for a carriage, he also requested that some drinks be prepared for them to take.

"Shall we?" he asked, and the two of them boarded the carriage waiting in front of the hotel.

They stopped on the way to buy a bouquet of white lilies, then continued to a small hill outside of town and the tree-enclosed

graveyard there. Under a blue sky dotted with white clouds, they stepped out of the carriage and made their way to the site. Olivia knelt before her parents' graves beneath large trees with beautiful new summer leaves.

"Mother, Father, I'm sorry I haven't visited in so long. I'm doing well."

With tears in her eyes, she told them everything that had happened over the past two years and how she'd opened a shop in the capital. Elliot stood a little way off behind her, watching in silence.

Once she had recounted what had happened, she bid goodbye and promised to visit again. Then she and Elliot boarded the carriage once more.

It pulled away, and, after some time, Elliot asked, "Was your father from an old family?"

"Hm? Why do you ask?"

"His headstone said Ralph A. Carter, I believe. Is the A his middle initial?"

Olivia giggled. "He was an odd man. In his will, he asked to have Ralph engraved on his tombstone. Mother called him Ralph. It was sort of her pet name for him. His real name starts with A."

"I see. They sound like they were a loving couple."

"They were. Even as their daughter, I was embarrassed watching them sometimes."

Elliot smiled as he listened to Olivia tell stories from long ago, and the carriage took them into town again. Around the time they were passing through the center of town, Olivia looked out the window and let out a heavy sigh.

Next is the shop. We're nearly there.

She looked nervous, and Elliot asked, "What sort of shop is it?"

"Just a little magic item shop. It specializes in lamps and magic jewelry. There were so many lamps hanging inside. And my parents loved plants, so there were all sorts of plant pots."

As she was talking, she realized that while she was scared, she was eager to see it as soon as possible.

But about ten minutes later, she found herself faced with an unbelievable sight.

"Wh-what in the world…?"

The shop was so rundown she couldn't even call to mind how it once looked. The flower beds out front that had been filled with flowers and greenery were now overrun with weeds. The formerly sparkling windows were now clouded, making it obvious the place hadn't been cleaned in ages.

Olivia peeked through the windows, so rusted they couldn't close fully, between a gap in the faded curtains, and saw a scattering of junk across the floor and shelves. The layer of dust covering it all was so thick she could even see it from the outside. The shop that had once been filled with green and light was nowhere to be found.

"Why? How?"

Elliot's expression was grim as he wrapped an arm around her shoulder, supporting her as she froze in place. He looked around and saw a bakery a little further down on the other side of the road.

"You mentioned once there was a woman at a bakery who was friendly to you, didn't you? Perhaps she knows something."

"Yeah… Yeah, you're right. I'll go ask."

Olivia came back to her senses and tottered toward the bakery. She knew her father's shop would have changed since she'd seen it, and she even expected they might have stopped any work outside making and repairing lamps.

But closed? I never thought that would happen…

It was obvious there was something strange going on. What in the world happened?

Elliot held the bakery door open for her. When she stepped inside, she was greeted by a familiar face.

"Welcome!" called the old woman. "I've got freshly baked bagels with cream cheese."

She was a friendly old woman wearing a red bandana around her head as she greeted them with warmth. She stopped and stared at Olivia for a long moment, then rushed out from behind the counter with a look of shock on her face.

“Olivia?! Is that you? What happened to you? I’ve been so worried!”

“It’s so good to see you!” Olivia threw her arms around the old woman, tears in her eyes.

“There, there,” soothed the woman, stroking her hair. “I’m so glad you’re all right. Everyone’s been worried about you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize, dear. You’re back, safe and sound. That’s what matters. Here, dry your tears. You’re done up so pretty, wouldn’t want you smudging your makeup with tears.”

Olivia took the handkerchief the woman offered and wiped away her tears.

As she did, Elliot asked, “Do you know what happened to Carter’s Magic Items?”

The old woman sighed. “Take a look. It hasn’t been properly opened since about six months, maybe a year after you disappeared, Olivia.”

According to her, the two employees disappeared, which was followed by more and more days the shop was closed.

“New artificers would come and quit, then a new one would come and quit. It’s been shut completely now for a few months. There’ve been some customers asking after you, Olivia. But, with the state of the place, they all gave up hope and left.”

“I see,” murmured Elliot, his eyes downcast.

Olivia pressed a hand over her aching heart. She’d been prepared to see the shop changed, but this she had never expected.

The old woman looked at her with a pained expression, then patted her back encouragingly. “Well, you’re here for the first time in a long time. Why don’t you have some nice bread? I have your favorite: salt rolls, fresh out of the oven. And what about you, Mr. Handsome?”

Elliot smiled. “That sounds lovely, thank you. Olivia, should I select a few things for us?”

Olivia nodded mutely.

Elliot listened to the old woman tell him what Olivia’s favorites were—bagels, salt rolls, strawberry Danishes, mini apple pies—and

bought those. He and Olivia thanked the woman, and she waved as they left, telling them to come again.

Elliot supported Olivia as she walked unsteadily out and said, "Shall we find somewhere to sit and talk? I have the tea that the hotel prepared for us. We could have a light lunch."

"Yeah… That sounds good. There's a park right outside town. Let's go there."

She could barely answer his question. It was so hard to get her mind in order after everything that had just happened.

They climbed into the carriage and spent twenty minutes or so swaying side to side as it drove before arriving at a large park on a little raised hill filled with beautiful, vibrant greenery. The carriage passed through the brick gate to swaths of beautiful flowers in bloom.

Elliot sounded surprised as he commented, "This is quite a large park."

"It is. I guess someone important from another country came here a long time ago. It's kept open to the public so the lord can brag about having a connection to that person."

Elliot smiled wryly at that not exactly flattering explanation. They asked the carriage to wait for them, then took a basket filled with their food with them into the park, walking deeper in as they viewed the beautiful flowers.

They entered a gazebo set on a slight hill, and Elliot exclaimed in surprise, "That's a lovely view. You can practically see all of Daregas."

"It's the best view in town."

They looked out over the town stretching beneath the blue sky with several clusters of clouds, and Olivia smiled softly. Her emotions felt somewhat calmer as she thought back to the pleasant times she had here with her parents.

She and Elliot sat side by side on one of the benches in the gazebo and began eating the bread and pastries as they looked out over the town.

"She really is a great baker. Her bread always hits the spot," sighed Olivia.

"I quite like this Danish."

"She didn't have any cookies today, but they are so good. And she has so many different types."

Once they finished eating, they poured the tea from the hotel into cups and sipped in the tranquil quietness.

At one point, Olivia murmured, "I knew this would happen. I knew it wouldn't go well."

"How so?"

"All the designs I'd sketched were what was popular at the time, but trends change every six months or so. After a year, what's popular would be completely different."

Olivia had imagined that if they'd stuck only to what was in her sketchbooks they stole from her, they'd only last for about a year. If they didn't adjust them after that point, they would be behind the trend.

"But the shop had plenty of return business," she continued. "Lots of places continue to use my father's lamps for a long time, so there was a lot of demand for repairs and maintenance. And then there were the orders my uncle brought in from nobles. I thought the shop would survive on that, even if it weren't exactly the same as before."

A magic item shop that already had customers had stable business. Even if they lost the magic jewelry side of the business, the shop should have been able to continue.

"I can't believe it ended up like this despite it all…" Olivia uttered dejectedly, her shoulders slumped.

She blamed herself. If only she'd worked harder, the shop wouldn't have ended up in that horrible, forlorn state.

Elliot gently put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her close. "You've worked hard enough. Any normal person would have quit long before they were fired."

"But…look what happened to it…" She hung her head, her hands over her face, and her shoulders trembling.

He watched with a gloomy expression. After letting out a small sigh, he said in a low voice, "Would you like me to get it back for you? Right now?"

"What?" The unexpected offer made her lift her head.

"I can, if you want me to."

There was a sharpness to his expression she'd never seen before. She looked down. Of course she wanted it back. She wanted to rush right into the shop and scrub it until it gleamed. Elliot worked for Dicks & Co., and they were huge—he could probably get it back easily.

But…this is something I need to fix myself.

Two and a half years ago, her shop was stolen from her before she even knew what was happening. There was nothing she could do other than let herself be swept along by the current of events, but there were things she could do now.

She let out a sharp breath and looked up at Elliot with gratitude. "Thank you. I appreciate the offer, but," she began and then smiled, "I want to try and sort this out myself. When it first happened, I didn't know what was going on. I couldn't fight back. But there has got to be something I can do now."

Elliot's expression softened. "You're right. That is the sort of person you are. But make sure you don't take on more than you can handle. And that you come to me for help if you need it," he replied. He gently stroked her hair as she leaned her head against him.

After some time, Olivia's blue eyes turned up to look at him. "Elliot, would you take off your glasses?" she let slip out accidentally.

He looked thrown off balance by the sudden request. After a brief look of hesitancy, he slowly pulled his glasses off with one hand.

Her breath caught in her throat.

She was looking into his eyes, as clear and bright as amethyst. There was a beauty and power there she had never been able to see because they were hidden behind his glasses. Her cheeks burned red, and she looked away.

He gently pulled her closer with the arm holding her shoulder.

"E-Elliot?" she asked, but he didn't say anything. He simply squeezed her shoulders with his arm.

How weird… I feel so…comfortable.

She felt the tension fade from her body.

They stayed like that for a while, looking out across the beautiful scenery. Eventually, they walked slowly back to the carriage.

Intermission 2: The Bakery Woman

ONE day, not long before noon, the old woman of the bakery rolled her shoulders to stretch out the fatigue.

Finally calmed down for a bit.

She allowed herself a small break now that her morning busy period was over. Then she glanced outside and sighed.

Someone else has come today, I see.

She was looking toward Carter's Magic Items across the road, a little way down. There was a man and a woman there, both very refined in appearance. They must have come from one of the big cities.

The woman sighed again, then picked up a pair of tongs and started fixing the lines of bread and treats on display.

It was odd how many customers came to Carter's these days. After seeing the shop, the next thing they usually did was come into her bakery and ask what happened to it.

I imagine those two will do the same.

With that in mind, she straightened up the rolls, and, as expected, the door opened, and the couple stepped in.

"Welcome!" she called to the couple. "I've got freshly baked bagels with cream cheese."

After her friendly greeting, she looked up and saw the young man, as he was the first to enter.

Oh my, he's quite the handsome young man.

He wore a light gray jacket and hat and had light blond hair. Even with his tinted glasses, it was clear he was good-looking. There was something elegant about him and his movements, which made her think he might be nobility.

He turned with consideration toward the young woman behind him with navy hair. She was decked out in a stylish outfit, the sort you rarely saw around here.

The old woman gasped the moment she saw her face. “Olivia?! Is that you? What happened to you? I’ve been so worried!” She found herself rushing over to the girl, who had tears in her eyes, as she threw her arms around the elderly baker.

“It’s so good to see you!”

The kind woman hugged her back with all her might. Tears sprang to her eyes as well at the reunion after so long, but her heart ached because it seemed like Olivia hadn’t known the state Carter’s Magic Items was in.

The young man then asked what happened to Carter’s, and the proprietor explained, “Just take a look. It hasn’t been properly opened since about six months, maybe a year after you disappeared, Olivia.”

Olivia grew paler and paler as she listened. The old woman had so many questions about why she had suddenly disappeared and what she’d been doing the past two years, but she kept them to herself. It was far more important to cheer Olivia up.

The lady patted her on the back encouragingly and said soothingly, “Well, you’re here for the first time in a long time. Why don’t you have some nice bread? I have your favorite: salt rolls, fresh out of the oven. And what about you, Mr. Handsome?”

The young man smiled. “That sounds lovely, thank you.” As he was picking out a few things, he quietly asked, “I’d heard Olivia’s adoptive father had been managing the shop. What happened to him?”

“He hasn’t been around at all. I haven’t seen him for more than six months.”

“And what about his daughter?”

“You mean that horrible little witch? She used to come every once in a while, but I haven’t seen hide nor hair of her lately. Last time I spoke to her, she said she was busy getting ready for her wedding and she couldn’t open the shop because of it.”

“I see.” The young man narrowed his eyes as if trying to hide his emotions.

The old woman took another look at him. He had a smile that made it difficult to read his emotions, but it seemed like he couldn’t help but feel worried for Olivia. Based on how considerate he was of her and how he spoke, Olivia was important to him.

This young man seems different from that idiot son of Lord Perigord.

The elderly baker had always disliked Henry because he acted pompously, just because he was a noble’s spawn. She was horribly concerned when she heard Olivia was engaged to him. It was an engagement with the son of the local lord; she imagined it would be nearly impossible for Olivia to refuse, but would she really be all right in such a union?

And it ended up as I expected.

Henry behaved terribly after Olivia’s parents died. Olivia was overcome with grief, and he ignored her, eventually even cheated on her with her sister and declared Olivia guilty of what were clearly trumped-up accusations, for which he ended their engagement. He was a despicable man and a despicable human being.

But this young man seems different. He’s polite and, most importantly, seems to cherish Olivia.

The old woman pretended to be suggesting certain items to him as she whispered, “Can I ask you one thing?”

“What is it?”

“Are you trustworthy?”

Olivia was a good girl. The woman gave the young man a threatening look that said he wasn’t worthy of her if he wasn’t trustworthy, and he chuckled. “Don’t worry. You can trust me.”

“You’re certain?”

He nodded gravely, and she felt a deep sense of relief grow in her heart. This young man seemed far more honest than that idiot son of the lord.

“Well, if that’s the case, then please look after her.”

“I will, I promise.”

After that, the young man bought all the things the old woman said Olivia liked, thanked her, and he and Olivia left the bakery. They walked slowly toward a carriage waiting not far away. He tenderly held Olivia as she walked unsteadily from the sheer shock of everything.

The baker let out a long sigh. She had a feeling Olivia would be all right if she had him by her side.

"But you know…there have been a lot of people asking about Carter's lately," she muttered to herself.

Just a few days earlier, a well-dressed man she'd never seen before asked about it, then not too long before that, an evil-looking man who claimed to be a servant of the local lord asked about it as well. She must have been asked about the shop five times in the past three months.

"I hope nothing bad is going on…" she murmured, then went into the back to bring out more fresh bread.

Chapter 6: The Wedding

THIS *should do it.*

It was the day of the wedding, a somewhat chilly, early summer morning, when clouds nearly hid the blue sky. Olivia had just finished putting on her makeup and was looking at herself in the mirror in her hotel room.



There were hints of blue in her lustrous gray gown, which she paired with silver shoes. It wasn't too gaudy, as she was to be a witness for the wedding, but it was the height of fashion.

The hotel had helped her find an expert hair stylist to create a cute updo for Olivia.

In all honesty, Olivia would have liked to put a lot of thought into what magic jewelry she wore as well, but it was good manners as a witness to keep her accessories simple, and it was frowned upon to wear too many. Instead, she chose a simple necklace imbued with an anti-poison and anti-sedative effect, which Elliot and Nicca had recommended. And, just in case, she put a magic item that would protect her from attacks in her purse.

Olivia gave a crooked smile as she put on her earring. Having anti-poison, anti-sedative, and protection magic items on her made her feel like she was going into enemy territory.

Well…I suppose that's accurate in a way.

She'd never heard of anyone being asked to be a witness at the wedding of their ex-fiancé. Olivia doubted they'd do anything to her directly, but people were going to look at her like she was some sort of circus attraction.

I am not feeling great about this…

She looked at her uneasy reflection in the mirror.

Once the wedding was over, she still had to have that talk with her uncle about the shop. That was the real fight for Olivia; she might as well stop thinking too much about the wedding.

You only need to get through the next few hours. And Elliot will be there. Everything will be fine.

As she was telling herself that, there was a knock on the door and a voice called, "Are you ready?"

Elliot!

"Coming," she called. She opened the door, and her jaw dropped when she saw the person on the other side.

Uh…who is this?

It was Elliot in a navy suit gleaming with a slight sheen. His platinum blond hair was neatly combed, and his intelligent amethyst

eyes looked at her from behind his green-tinted glasses. A gentle smile played on his lips.

Olivia stared so hard her gaze might bore a hole in his face. He looked away uneasily. "Don't stare so much," he uttered. "You're making me blush."

The elegant and sensual mannerism sent Olivia past embarrassment all the way to shock.

He looks so amazing, like the son of some incredible noble family.

She was so taken aback that she couldn't tear her eyes away, and Elliot's uneasy expression practically said he thought normally it was the man who had that kind of reaction. "Our carriage is waiting," he spoke again, urging Olivia to finish getting ready to go.

They boarded the carriage waiting for them in front of the hotel and sat across from each other. A short time after they set off, Elliot asked, "Have you calmed down somewhat?"

"A little." Then she asked something that had been on her mind since the day before. "Elliot, why do you always wear tinted glasses?"

"I thought they were fairly standard for traders."

"Well, yes, but you'd be far more popular with the ladies if they could see your eyes." The glasses did suit him, but he was even more handsome when you could see his eyes.

Elliot gave a wry smile. "Being popular with the ladies would do me no good at this point." Then he looked at Olivia, his amethyst eyes crinkling in a smile. "I failed to mention it earlier, but you look very beautiful. That dress, and everything in fact, looks great on you."

Olivia stammered a thank you, her ears burning as she turned to look to the side. "I-it's a wonderful dress, isn't it? Sally and the lady in the shop picked it out."

She felt a little awkward, maybe because she wasn't used to wearing this sort of fancy outfit.

After allowing her a few deep breaths to calm herself, Elliot hedged slowly, "About the wedding today…"

Suspecting this was going to be important, Olivia sat up straight and replied, "Yes?"

"Since this is a wedding for the lord's son and there will be many guests, I would normally assume the wedding itself will end without incident."

Olivia agreed. "I think so too. I imagine there'll be some little things, like my adoptive family will make some snide comments about me, but I doubt they'll cause a big scene or anything."

If anything were going to happen, it'd be during the talks she had with her uncle after the wedding. She had a lot of questions after she saw the state the shop was in yesterday.

Elliot grew stern as he continued, "Any normal person would never consider making a scene at a wedding. Common sense says nothing will happen, but…just in case…"

"Just in case?"

"Yes. There are all sorts of people in this world, and sometimes you can't predict what will happen. If it comes to that," he paused, looking into Olivia's eyes with a grim expression, "can I ask you to trust me?"

Olivia blinked in surprise. "Of course I trust you, Elliot."

He laughed. "You do? Well, that's good then."

She looked at him with confusion, not really understanding what he was saying. Just as she was about to ask him what he meant, the horses whinnied, and the carriage began to slow down.

Olivia looked out the window and saw a crowd of people in fancy clothes and an exquisite mansion.

We're here.

Elliot looked at her nervous expression and picked up the small box sitting on the seat next to him. "I'd like you to have this."

She took the box and opened it to reveal a beautiful corsage for pinning to her dress. "What is this for?"

"Think of it as a good luck charm. I'm your partner here, and I thought it was somewhat unfortunate we didn't have anything to show that. I asked Sally, and she told me a corsage would do."

He said it like it was no big deal, but she looked at the corsage and was struck by how stylish it was. The flowers looked almost as if

they were real; it was stunning and clearly an expensive item. She worried whether she should accept something like this, but also felt it wasn't right to decline the kind gesture at this stage.

"Thank you, it's wonderful," she replied. She pinned it to her chest, simply thanking him now but thinking how she needed to find a way to pay him back later.

"I'm glad you like it," Elliot returned with a happy smile. "Shall we go then?"



OLIVIA took Elliot's hand and stepped out of the carriage to find herself standing in front of the expansive entrance to Perigord Manor, an incredible mansion built of white stone that spoke of a long history. Several carriages were dropping off people in elegant outfits who stood in clusters, chatting.

I knew I'd recognize quite a few faces here.

She stood so she was hidden behind Elliot as a young man in what looked like a servant's uniform approached, holding what looked like the guest list.

I recognize him. We've probably met before.

The man bowed and politely asked, "May I ask your name, miss?"

"Olivia Carter," she responded.

"Oh!" He looked at her, his mouth hanging open.

"No matter how beautiful she may be, staring at a lady is poor manners, don't you agree?" Elliot reprimanded, smiling coldly.

"Of course, sir! My apologies. I just— She looks different from the last time we met…" He bowed several times in apology, then sucked in a deep breath and called, "Announcing Miss Olivia Carter!"

The entryway buzzed with excitement.

"Did he say *Olivia Carter*?"

"Didn't Lord Henry break off his engagement with her because she tormented her sister?"

"I heard she stole her designs, the wretch."

"The gall of her to show her face."

The guests whispered to each other and shot her glances. When they saw her standing with Elliot, the insults turned to shock.

"What, *that's* Olivia?"

"She looks so refined…"

"And that man with her, he's quite handsome!"

Elliot moved in front of Olivia to hide her from view and smiled toward the people whispering.

"Wooow!"

That gorgeous smile drew a squeal of delight from the ladies.

With all eyes on him, he elegantly offered his arm to Olivia like some prince stepped out of a fairy tale. "Shall we?"

"L-let's."

They slowly entered the building, his warm hand on hers as he escorted her. They walked down a red carpet flanked by art pieces, Elliot with his best smile on as Olivia whispered, "You surprised me. You're incredible."

"I didn't do anything," he responded without a moment's hesitation, and she was filled to bursting with gratitude. She was certain he'd done that so the people wouldn't be focused on her.

They passed through the hallway and entered a spacious ballroom with a high ceiling, decorated with flowers and streamers. There were already quite a few people in there chatting away happily.

As Olivia looked at the guests, a young woman in a green dress hurried over to her. "Olivia! Oh, good, you're all right!" Mira, Olivia's cousin on her mother's side, lived quite far away and was the only family member Olivia kept in touch with after moving to the capital.

"I'm sorry I worried you," Olivia replied. "But what about the children?"

"When I heard they made you come to the wedding, I had to be here. My mother's looking after the children." Mira then turned to look at Elliot, and a shocked expression flitted across her face before she gave a polite curtsey. "It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Mira. This is my husband, Jean Barton."

"The pleasure's mine. I'm Elliot of Dicks & Co."

Jean smiled and held out his hand. “You’re with Dicks & Co.? Wonderful to meet you. Your company is always a pleasure to work with.”

“It has been a beneficial relationship for us as well. If I’m not wrong, by Barton, you refer to the Barton family, which presides over the southern region famous for its grapes.”

“That’s right. Well informed, I see. As I’d expect from an employee of Dicks & Co.”

Elliot began chatting with Jean and a few other men with a smile.

Mira jabbed Olivia with her elbow and whispered in hushed tones, “What’s this? You surprised me by bringing such a wonderful man with you.”

“We met in the capital.”

“The capital always has the best. You don’t see a man like that too often.”

Olivia joined Mira, who was a social butterfly, in conversing with other young women about topics such as the current popular foods and plays in the capital.

One of the women looked at Olivia with admiration and said, “It’s amazing that you live in the capital. You know so much.”

“I’m having fun simply listening,” added another.

“And your makeup and dress are the height of fashion. Amazing!”

Olivia felt relieved. Her training these past two months seemed to be paying off, and she felt even more grateful for her friends.

Mira’s father, Olivia’s maternal uncle and a stern man just entering old age, approached the group and commented, “Olivia. You’re looking well.”

“Thank you, Uncle. It’s been too long,” she replied with a polite curtsey.

“I was worried when Mira contacted me to explain what happened, but it seems my concern was unnecessary.” He jabbed his thumb toward Elliot, who was in a group of men smiling and chatting. “That’s a good man. Insightful, knowledgeable. He had

even the most bothersome of the old men under control in moments."

"What's this, Father? You don't compliment men often," teased Mira, and he smiled.

"What? It's nothing but the truth. That Henry boy is nothing compared to this young man. I'm happy for you, Olivia."

Olivia smiled awkwardly. She didn't disagree, but her uncle was being very blunt about expressing his opinion.

She glanced in Elliot's direction. Their eyes met, and he smiled at her, causing Olivia to tear her eyes away.

After a few minutes of actively participating in the conversation with the older men, Elliot stepped out of the circle and approached Olivia. Beside her, he whispered in her ear, "How's it going?"

"I'm managing. What have you been talking about?"

"Airships. They're all anyone's talking about in the capital. Everyone here is curious too."

"I bet. I was talking about that play you and I went to see."

He smiled, his gentle amethyst eyes looking into her blue ones, and thoughts of everything that had happened so far appeared in her mind.

When they first met at the station in Daregas, Elliot had mistakenly called her "madam," to which she shouted at him, "I am not a madam!" Then, when she was overwhelmed by her first time in the capital, he called out to her and showed her the way. He helped her when she was lost, and they ate together. When she couldn't decide if she should open her shop or not, he encouraged her. When she was stuck at work, he helped, as if it were nothing, always supporting her. And when she faced a difficult situation, he was by her side.

He's been helping me this whole time.

As she looked up into his gentle eyes, she thought, *Maybe, maybe I do like him*.

And that's when a high-pitched cry echoed across the hall.

"Oh, dear sister! You came!"

She's here!

Olivia spun around and saw Catherine scowling. Henry was beside her with a look of shock.



"WHAT in the world?"

Catherine's eyes nearly popped out as she looked at her adopted sister.

The last time she'd seen Olivia two years ago, she was a worn-down girl wearing plain, unfashionable clothing. But now she was completely different—a refined woman wearing only the best and most on-trend.

What was more, beside her was a man so attractive and classy she'd never seen anyone like him. He was several times better than Henry.

People's whispers reached her in her shock.

"Miss Olivia is looking so lovely these days."

"I heard she's living in the capital. She knows about all the latest trends. I wish I were like her."

"And that Elliot, he's really something for someone so young. I even learned a thing or two from him."

"He's so handsome, like a prince. I'm so jealous of Olivia."

It was all unrestrained praise, and it made Catherine feel like she might explode from rage.

Nothing had gone well for Catherine this past year. Things started going wrong a year and a half ago when the magic jewelry they made based on Olivia's designs stopped selling. Customers who would usually buy something the moment they saw it now looked at the jewelry with confusion and left without making a purchase.

Catherine learned what caused it six months later when she had the design meeting with the Clockmakers Association, which commissioned Olivia for a design every year. She showed them a design she chose from the stolen sketchbooks, and the head of the Association responded with a grimace, "The current fashion is for round watches. I'm not sure we'll do well with a square watch design now."

She finally understood—the designs in Olivia's sketchbooks were already growing more and more behind the trend.

Her father, who had accompanied her to the meeting, quickly said, "My daughter isn't feeling well," and somehow convinced the Association to modify the design into a round watch face, but that wouldn't work next time.

The shop employees quit one after another, sick of the hot-tempered, bossy baronet and jewelry that wouldn't sell, forcing them to close the shop.

Catherine asked her mother for advice, to which she promptly answered, "Get Olivia to come back. There are ways to make her do what you want her to. Get her back and make her draw new designs for you."

"Oh, Mother, what a good idea. We are having the wedding soon. I'll make her come for that."

Catherine smirked. She'd heard from her father that Olivia was living in the capital, but with her dreary looks, she would be living a dismal life with no boyfriend. She'd summon Olivia to the wedding and humiliate her, all while flaunting her beauty and happiness.

"The beautiful younger sister and the dull older sister. She'll make the perfect contrast to me."

All the stress that had been piling up on Catherine melted away when she imagined that moment.

But what happened when she actually put her plan into action? Olivia was unrecognizably beautiful and with a man more wonderful than any Catherine had ever laid eyes on. Her dress, makeup, and everything about her were all clearly better than Catherine's.

It was unacceptable.

She glared at Olivia, chatting with Mira with a troll-like scowl.

"What's wrong, Catherine?" asked Henry from behind her.

She immediately put on a smile and turned to face him, only to find him staring at Olivia with a look of pure shock. There was surprise and regret in his eyes.

Agh!

Catherine felt like she'd been punched in the gut, followed by an intense rage, almost a bloodlust.

She curled the corners of her mouth up and hissed, "I found my sister. Should we go say hello?"

"Uh, yes…" Henry nodded, his eyes never leaving Olivia.

Catherine smiled darkly as she walked toward Olivia. She would destroy that woman's happiness. This was *her* party.



"OH, dear sister! You came!"

She's here!

Olivia saw the fake smile plastered on Catherine's face and froze. It was obvious she didn't have something good in mind.

Elliot stood firm beside Olivia and whispered in her ear, "Is that your sister?"

"Yes, it is."

She observed Catherine. Her eye-catching strawberry-blonde hair was gathered up on her head, and her makeup accented her sweet facial features. She wore a beautiful dress of pure white accented with delicate silver embroidery and a neckline that accentuated the size of her breasts, her visible cleavage giving her a sensual allure.

She's as beautiful as always.

Catherine sashayed toward Olivia with a smile that said she was aware of the men's stares and gave a friendly greeting to Olivia.

"I'm so glad you could make it, sister." Her eyes immediately left Olivia and settled on Elliot beside her. She smiled and held out her hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Catherine."

Olivia couldn't bear to watch. She was pained by the memory that came back of when Henry, her fiancé at the time, met Catherine and looked completely enchanted with her.

Elliot looked at Catherine. He smiled coldly at the sight of sly cunning and flirtation in her green eyes. He ignored her hand and bowed with a formal smile. "The pleasure is mine. My name is Elliot. Congratulations on your marriage."

Catherine's pleased expression immediately fell away, and Olivia's eyes went wide. Elliot's treatment of Catherine was bordering

on rude. He was like a completely different person from normal.

His eyes slid away from her as if he had no interest, and he gently murmured to Olivia, "I heard the gardens here are wonderful. Would you like to have a look at them with me until the ceremony begins?"

"Y-yes. Let's do that." She was surprised at his unexpected actions but agreed.

In an attempt to leave the situation as quickly as possible, Olivia took Elliot's proffered arm, and they turned toward the door leading to the garden.

Catherine's face turned bright red, and she screamed as if she'd completely lost control of herself. "Apologize to me, Olivia!"

The hysterical cry echoed across the hall, which instantly fell dead silent.

"Apologize! Apologize and make good what you did to me!"

At the sight of Catherine crying like the heroine of some tragedy, the guests grew excited at the prospect of something interesting happening.

Olivia was utterly frustrated as she looked at Catherine and her gloating smile.

Does she even know what she's doing?

She was going to ruin her own wedding and humiliate Henry's father and the host of the event, Viscount Perigord—this was completely foolish.

Even Olivia's uncle must have thought this was bad because he jumped out of the crowd and stuttered, "C-Catherine, today is a day of celebration. We'll have these family discussions later."

"Y-your father's right, dear. Please," chimed in Olivia's aunt, her face pale.

That was a relief. She might hate Catherine, but this was a celebration, and there were a lot of people not involved in their family affairs here. A scene wouldn't do anyone any good.

"No! This is *my* day!" shouted Catherine as she clung to Henry, who was frozen in shock. "Oh, Henry, darling. Olivia is trying to run away without apologizing. I'm sooo sad…"

Having her cling to him brought Henry back to his senses. He looked at Catherine's tears, readied himself, and valiantly cried, "Olivia, you must apologize here and now!"

"Oh, Henry!" Tears filled Catherine's eyes as she pressed her bosom against his arm.

Are they insane?

Olivia's eyes went unfocused. She'd always thought Henry was a bit of an idiot, but not this bad. Even Elliot looked fed up with them.

Henry planted himself in front of Catherine as if to protect her and roared, "Olivia! Apologize to Catherine!"

Elliot took a step forward to protect Olivia and looked at Henry with a cool gaze.

Mira gave Henry a fierce glare from nearby and laid into him. "What *exactly* do you think Olivia should be apologizing for?"

"O-Olivia stole Catherine's designs and claimed them as her own!" he shouted back, bewildered by Elliot and Mira's intensity.

Olivia had no choice, not after this turn of events. She quietly spoke, "Lord Henry. I told you many times before, I have not stolen any designs."

"Don't lie!"

"I'm not lying." Olivia looked coolly at Catherine. "If you can design magic jewelry, why is Carter's Magic Items in the state it is? I saw it yesterday. It's completely abandoned."

That made the onlookers burst into whispers.

"She is right about that. I heard Carter's has been closed for a long time."

"I ordered a necklace, but the design was so old-fashioned. It wasn't any good at all."

"The same thing happened to me. The design quality has really declined."

Catherine's eyes darted back and forth as she spat, "Th-that's because the artificers quit! I couldn't do anything about that!"

In a cold voice, Elliot interjected, "You don't seem to be aware that Olivia has her own shop in the capital."

"What…?" she gasped, taken aback.

In a flat tone, Elliot explained, "It's a magic jewelry shop famous in the capital, patronized by women well-informed of the most recent trends. And, of course, all the products were designed by Olivia herself."

"L-liar! Father said she was working at Gordon's Magic Appliances…" she shrieked.

The real emotions behind Elliot's smile were unreadable. "That's quite outdated information. Did you know she also took gold in the Magic Item Design Awards?"

"What?"

"Last year, Olivia won gold in the category for women's magic jewelry in the Magic Item Design Awards."

The crowd burst into a buzz.

"Gold in the Design Awards? Wouldn't that mean she's a top-class artificer? Is this true?"

In response to that skeptical question, one of the middle-aged men Elliot had been talking to spoke up, "I believe you can trust that young man. I was talking to him earlier. I imagine what he says is true."

"That's incredible!"

"Isn't Gordon's Magic Appliances the largest magic item shop in the capital?"

"Wait, Olivia? Olivia's shop? They don't mean Olivia's Magic Jewelers? Wow! It's so popular!"

The blood drained from Catherine's face in an instant.

Elliot shrugged. "As you can see, Olivia is a skilled enough artificer to have a shop of her own in the capital. Why would she ever need to steal your designs? I might understand if the situation were in fact reversed."

"Wh-what are you talking about?! *I'm* the one whose designs were stolen!" cried Catherine in a shrill voice, her face whiter than her dress.

Henry only just noticed the cool stares from the people around him, which sent his panicked eyes darting.

Olivia's aunt and uncle stood frozen too, pale as sheets. She looked at the four of them, on the verge of passing out, and sighed.

This is enough. I don't want to deal with them anymore.

Based on the reactions of the people around her, pretty much no one believed Olivia had stolen Catherine's designs anymore. This was enough. She decided to step out into the garden and return only once the situation had cooled down and the ceremony began. Once that was over, she would talk to them again.

But as she was thinking that, the deep voice of a man boomed out into the hall.

"This seems to be quite the scene."

Olivia turned back and saw an arrogant-looking middle-aged man of average height and build. It was Henry's father, Viscount Perigord.



THE sudden appearance of Viscount Perigord caused a silence to descend on the hall. A path parted through the crowd, and he strolled toward Olivia and Elliot in the center of the room.

"M-my lord!" cried Olivia's uncle, clearly in a panic, and Lord Perigord looked at him with contempt.

"From what I heard, it seems it was Catherine who stole Olivia's designs. Is this true?"

"N-not at all! Olivia is the thief!" Baronet Carter yelped in a desperate, strangled cry, his body trembling.

Lord Perigord looked at Olivia with emotionless eyes. "What do you have to say about the matter?"

Olivia lifted her chin and straightened her back, then stated clearly, "I did not steal Catherine's designs. I have no need to."

Lord Perigord stroked his mustache and nodded. "I have also had my doubts these past six months. How did Carter's Magic Items end up in that state? That can be explained easily if it was Catherine who stole the designs."

"Th-that's not true!" Catherine shrieked, looking desperate.

The viscount glared at her. "Then we simply need to have the two of you design something right here, right now. Could you do it?"

"I-I…"

"Speak up. Could you do it? Or could you not?"

"Urk." Catherine went pale and looked at the ground. Henry looked at her in disbelief.

Viscount Perigord let out an affected sigh and uttered, "To think, you deceived me, your lord, and my son Henry. I never imagined someone would dare."

Henry tried to say something, but he was frightened by a sharp look from his father and stayed quiet.

Lord Perigord then put on an expression of uncertainty. "And with this being the case, I'm unable to agree to Henry's marriage to Catherine."

"Wh-why?!" shouted Henry in complete shock. The viscount sighed.

"There is too large a difference in station between you and her, which was only made up for by Catherine's excellent design capabilities. Now that we know that is all a lie, I can't possibly approve your marriage."

"B-but!" he stammered, bug-eyed. Catherine crumpled to the floor with a pale face.

Lord Perigord shot them a look, then smiled. "However, if Olivia were the one to create those designs, then there would be no issue with her marrying Henry." He turned his smile toward the guests and called out, "We're all already gathered here. Shall we instead have a wedding between Henry and Olivia?"

No!

Olivia looked at Viscount Perigord as if she couldn't believe what she was hearing. She'd thought something was odd about this whole situation. Why would the viscount agree to something as foolish as inviting her, Henry's ex-fiancée, to the wedding? Noblemen didn't typically fancy inviting scandal.

He'd figured out Catherine was lying, so he brought me here to force me to marry Henry.

The sudden turn of events caught the guests off guard, and several people began whispering to each other with looks of shock.

But one man in splendid clothing shattered the atmosphere of bewilderment with a boisterous laugh. "Ahaha! What a wonderful

idea! Henry and Olivia were in love to begin with. This is just everything coming back to where it should be!”

“I agree. This is wonderful! True love has found a way to bring these two back together over time,” called out a woman’s voice, and it was followed by others voicing their agreement.

The servants who’d been waiting at the edges of the hall began clapping, which drew some of the guests in. More and more joined in, and the sound of applause grew louder. Some people were grimacing and refusing to clap, and some were even trying to stop the applause, like Mira.

But it was like a bird out of the cage. It was rumored that Viscount Perigord was going to receive the title of count next year, and no one would stand up and oppose him. Or, as much as possible, he didn’t invite anyone who might oppose him.

Olivia was dumbfounded. It was too much to take in. The applause grew steadily louder. There was nothing she could do except stand there.

Viscount Perigord looked at her, his chin raised and an arrogant smile on his face. The maids came out from the corner of the hall and quickly approached Olivia as if they were going to help her get ready for her wedding. They reached for her, trying to draw her away with them, but a quiet voice came from above.

“Don’t worry.”

She looked up and saw Elliot with a sort of smile she’d never seen on him before. He gently placed his hand on her back to reassure her, then stepped in front of her as if to defend her. The maids stepped back, uncertain, and the viscount looked at Elliot with scorn as if demanding that he explain what he was doing.

The applause petered off as people realized something was not right, and the hall fell back to silence as the crowd watched.

Elliot looked at Viscount Perigord with icy eyes and slowly said, “It’s been a long time, Lord Perigord. What an amusing show you’ve put on.”

Chapter 7: Flarance

ELLIOT…?

He stepped out unexpectedly, and Olivia looked at him with surprise. She couldn't believe what he was doing and wasn't able to get any words out.

He gave her a gentle smile as if to say everything was all right, then his expression changed to an unreadable smile as he looked steadily at Lord Perigord.

"It has been a long time, Lord Perigord. I'm glad to see you seem to be doing as well as ever," he projected.

An older butler shouted, a vein throbbing in his temple, "How dare you speak to His Lordship that way!"

Elliot cast the angry butler one disinterested glance as his lips curled up in a cold sneer. "It seems your servants lack education in etiquette. Oh, but," he said, like he'd only just remembered. He took off his glasses and brushed his hair up with the other hand. "My apologies. I suppose you might not recognize me with these on."

The viscount stared at Elliot with a furrowed brow, then gasped in realization. "Y-you! You're Lord Elliot Flarance!"



The hall burst into chatter.

"Did he just say *Flarance*?"

"As in Duke Flarance?"

Olivia's eyes grew wide.

Duke Flarance was one of the Four Great Dukes. Even Olivia, who knew next to nothing about the nobility, knew about House Flarance.

"M-my apologies, my lord! Please forgive me!" howled the butler, his face pale as he bowed.

Elliot didn't even look at the butler. He smiled and spoke to Lord Perigord, who was frozen in shock. "I believe the last time we met was at that ball in the royal castle last year."

"Th-that is correct. I must apologize. If I'd known you were coming, I would have prepared a retinue to greet you." Viscount Perigord gave a pandering smile and bowed lower than Olivia had ever seen him bow.

Elliot waved his hand elegantly as if to say it was nothing to worry about. "I'm only here today to accompany Olivia. There's no need for you to go out of your way for me."

Lord Perigord grimaced. "Pardon me for asking, but are you close with Miss Olivia?"

"Yes. Very," he replied with a beautiful smile on his handsome features.

"A-and if I might inquire, what exactly is the nature of your relationship?"

"Quite an insensitive thing to inquire about. Can you not tell?" Elliot placed his large hand around Olivia's waist and drew her close as if to protect her. She couldn't keep up with what was happening, but let him have his way. Elliot smiled when he saw the viscount's grimace. "But at any rate, that was a very amusing show you put on. Making your son marry the older sister, whom he'd broken off his engagement with after false accusations were made against her, only because you couldn't use the younger sister. Very amusing indeed."

Lord Perigord tried to explain himself, but Elliot was of such a higher rank that he was overwhelmed by it all. Elliot had complete

control of the room.

Elliot smiled and continued, "However, if this wasn't a show and was in fact true, I imagine Duke Justine might not be pleased. He is famously devoted to his family and hates such boorish behavior. He may even cite that disgraceful conduct as a reason to retract any offers of titles."

A look of rage appeared on the viscount's face, but it quickly disappeared and returned to his previous pleasing expression and glowing smile. "Hahaha! I'm glad you enjoyed it. Of course, it was a show."

"That's good. I'd come as a witness and was beginning to worry I'd made the trip for nothing. That wouldn't possibly be the case, would it?" Elliot's eyes were sharp, but the smile never left his face.

"Of course not." Lord Perigord nodded cheerfully, then smiled at the guests and called, "And that marks the end of the entertainment. Now we will continue to the ceremony of joining my son Henry in marriage to Miss Catherine."

Snapped back to their senses, everyone began breathing and blinking again. It was like time had stopped in its tracks and started to move again.

Viscount Perigord glared at his butler, who then snapped to attention and called, "Please continue to the garden for the ceremony."

The guests began to drift in that direction as if they'd just woken from a dream.

Elliot looked into Olivia's eyes with concern, his expression soft. "Are you all right?"

"Y-yeah." She nodded, barely able to get the word out.

"I'll explain everything later, I promise," he insisted. Olivia's mind was completely blank after the unbelievable series of events.

She knew she should thank him for helping her, but she still couldn't get the words out. His expression was pained as he looked at her, still in shock. He opened his mouth to say something, but the viscount came over with a huge smile plastered on his face, and Elliot closed it again.

"Lord Flarance, this way please!"

Viscount Perigord led her and Elliot into the garden, and the wedding began. The bride and groom entered, Catherine so pale she barely looked alive, and Henry with his head hanging and practically looking like he'd taken a beating. The priest had no idea what was going on and smiled as he guided the ceremony along.

Olivia's aunt and uncle sat in the seats reserved for family, their faces so pale they almost looked like someone had thrown a bucket of paint over them. Their trembling was visible even from a distance. The guests watched them all with bewilderment and curiosity as they whispered amongst themselves. It was like watching them lie on a bed of nails.

While all that was happening, Olivia simply sat there, her mind filled with the unbelievable events she'd witnessed.

Elliot is part of House Flarance…?

She desperately tried to make her brain process everything, but it was like it'd been paralyzed. The one thing she could barely wrap her head around was that there was no such person as Elliot Dicks. She also understood that Elliot was so high above her as the daughter of a baronet, like someone living in a castle in the clouds, that someone like him rarely ever spoke to someone like her.

Gah…

Her heart ached so much that she pressed her hand over her chest. It was taking everything she had to keep her expression neutral.

Once the ceremony was finished, she and Elliot signed the marriage paperwork as witnesses. Lord Perigord thanked Elliot excessively ("It's such an honor to have someone such as yourself act as a witness for my son's wedding."), but none of it made it into Olivia's head.

Once they were done signing, the ceremony was officially over, and the guests surged toward the dining hall in the main building. Olivia and Elliot were led to a particularly lavish table set up in the center of the resplendent hall. The food they were served was obviously more luxurious than what was served to the other guests, but to Olivia, it tasted like she was eating sand. She nearly managed

to maintain control of her expressions, but she imagined her face would twist into something horrible if she let go for even a second.

Elliot looked at her with concern. "Olivia, are you all right?"

She put everything she had into making a smile that showed she was. "I'm just so surprised I'm having a hard time processing everything. That's all."

"I see." He looked down with a pained expression. He tried several times to say something else to her, but he was too busy dealing with the stream of people coming over to greet him that they couldn't find a moment to have a real conversation.

Once the long, drawn-out meal finished, they were free to mingle. Mira came over with a worried expression and asked, "Are you doing all right, Olivia?"

"I'm managing. Did you want something?"

"I thought I'd ask if you wanted to come to the powder room with me. I'm sure it's going to be absolutely packed soon, so it's best to get in now while we can."

It was typical at gatherings like this to include a moment for the women to visit the powder room after they finished eating to touch up their makeup, while the men went to the salon to chat and wait for them.

Elliot nodded. "That's a good idea. I'll wait in the salon."

"See you in a few minutes," Mira replied.

"Be careful," he told Olivia as she stood. She could feel his eyes on her back as she and Mira went toward the powder room.

I can't do this. I can't think. I'm shaking.

The floor seemed to wobble beneath her, and she could barely keep her footing.

She'd thought nothing too abnormal would happen at the wedding, but she ended up arguing with Catherine, nearly married to Henry, and even learned that Elliot was the son of a duke—she couldn't keep up at all.

She focused on making it look like she was walking normally, and, trying to help, Mira tried to chat.

"That was a real surprise, wasn't it? I never imagined something like that would happen."

"Me neither."

Mira giggled. "But I feel so much better now that your name has been cleared of those fake accusations. I do feel a little bad for the bride and groom, but, you reap what you sow, I suppose. They've done all sorts of terrible things."

"Yeah…"

They arrived at the powder room, and Mira frowned. "It's this crowded already?"

It was already filled with women fixing their makeup in the mirrors on all four walls. They resigned themselves to waiting, but then a maid called to them, "There's another room in the back. Please, come through."

Several of the waiting women began to move, with Olivia and Mira following them into a room further in. This one was luxuriously decorated and partitioned into stalls with curtains over the entrances. It was a bit like a dressing room in a store.

The maid started showing the women to the different stalls. Olivia was led to the last one in the row, and as she was about to enter, the maid said, "I'll take your things. There's nowhere to place them inside."

"Oh, thank you."

Olivia didn't think anything of it as she took her makeup pouch from her purse and handed it to the maid. She then closed the curtain and sighed.

I'm exhausted… My mind is completely boggled…

She had been hit with so many unexpected things one after another that she didn't even know what to think about. The only thought in her head was, *"I want to go home."*

But she decided she might as well fix her makeup, so she sat at the vanity and looked at her pouch.

And that's when something struck her.

"Agh!"

Her vision rapidly went dark, and her body went limp.

That's when she realized the mistake she'd made. Her defensive magic item was in her purse, but regretting it now changed nothing.

She heard two men talking in low voices.

"It went well."

"Hurry up and get her out of here."

And then she lost consciousness.



"SHE'S taking a while…"

Not long after Olivia had been secretly stolen away, Mira was waiting in the hallway outside the powder room with a look of concern on her face.

I didn't miss her, did I?

Mira had been shown to a stall before Olivia. By the time she was done and out, Olivia was being led into the last stall in the row. Mira then waited in the hall the entire time, so there was no way she could have missed Olivia.

And the curtain on the last stall was closed the whole time. Maybe she's not feeling well?

Mira slipped back inside the powder room and went to stand in front of the curtain for that stall. In a low voice, she called, "Olivia?" but there was no response.

Thinking Olivia may have collapsed, Mira reached for the curtain and called, "Olivia, I'm opening the curtain."

She opened up to see the vanity with a makeup pouch she assumed was Olivia's, but no sign of Olivia herself.

Oh, this can't be!

"Olivia! If you can hear me, say something!" shouted Mira as loudly as she could. She didn't care if the others looked at her like she was crazy, but Olivia didn't respond. She went to each of the stalls and called out, but they all had someone else inside.

Mira dashed out into the hallway and asked a maid passing by if she'd seen Olivia, but the maid merely shook her head, looking bewildered.

Realizing Olivia was no longer there, Mira ran. She didn't care that she surprised people as she darted down the hall.

She burst into the salon where the men were sitting, chatting. She found Elliot, who was being monopolized by Lord Perigord, and shouted, “Olivia’s gone!”

A look of complete surprise appeared on the viscount’s face.

Registering the events, Elliot sat Mira down, who was agitated and gasping for breath. In a low voice, he asked, “What do you mean she’s gone?”

“I-I was waiting for her to come out of the powder room, but she never did. I grew concerned, so I searched the entire place and she’s nowhere!”

“Lord Perigord,” began Elliot, turning to the viscount. “May I have permission to search your manor?”

“O-of course. And I’ll have all my servants search as well.” Viscount Perigord called over the butler, who was waiting in the corner, and ordered him to start a search for Olivia. As he did, Elliot and Mira ran to the powder room.

“This is where she disappeared from?” he asked.

“Y-yes. She was in the stall at the end, the one with the open curtain. I’m certain I saw her go in there.”

Elliot stepped into the powder room as he called to the surprised-looking women, “I apologize, but I need to look for someone.” He looked into the last stall and found the makeup pouch. He’d seen it before. “I’m sure Olivia had a purse with her as well. Where did that go?”

“I don’t know. But I think she only had the makeup pouch with her when she went into the stall.”

Elliot looked grim.

Elliot, Mira and her family, the viscount, and all his servants joined forces to scour the manor for Olivia, but they found no sign of her.

Chapter 8: An Unexpected Reunion

"...via! Olivia! Come on, Olivia!"

She heard a voice in the distance, a man's voice she'd heard somewhere before. It drew her up from the dark unconsciousness.

Whose voice is that…?

Still in a daze, her eyes opened, and she saw a crack-riddled white ceiling above her.

Where am I…?

As she stared vaguely at the ceiling, the voice sounded relieved. "Oh, good. You scared me. They just brought you in here unconscious."

Her eyes slid slowly toward the voice's owner, then they jerked wide, and she shot up to a sitting position.

"Jack?!"

He was a little older than she remembered, but it was certainly Jack, the former employee of Carter's Magic Items. He'd disappeared suddenly, and Olivia's uncle had told her he'd collapsed from illness and moved back to the countryside. But if that were true…

Why is Jack here? And where is *here anyway?*

She looked around herself in confusion to see an old but fairly large room. There was a large worktable and a lot of the sort of equipment an artificer used, which meant this was a magic item workshop of some sort. There were a few other things: a table, a chest of drawers, and the couch she was lying on, which made it seem like someone might live here as well.

What is going on…? Where am I?

Jack looked at her confusion with concern and said, "I…don't know everything that happened, but they carried you in here about

ten minutes ago. I was shocked when I saw your face and realized it was you. And your hand was bleeding…"

Olivia looked at her hand and saw it was wrapped in a white bandage, a little blood staining the back of her hand. She thanked Jack for treating her injury. More and more of what had happened came back to her.

That's right, I was in the powder room, and it was like I was hit with an electric shock…

Her face turned pale—this was a kidnapping. There was no other explanation. She felt there was nothing good about this situation.

The reason they took my purse when I went into the powder room was to take my magic item that was inside.

Feeling panicked, she asked, "Jack, where are we?"

He looked away with a grimace. "This…is my prison."

"Your prison?"

His face contorted in pain. "I've been imprisoned here this whole time!"

"What?!" Olivia gasped, her eyes widened again as her blood ran cold and her heart beat faster. She forced her dried lips to move. "For, for how long?"

"For three years."

Three years? That would be ever since he stopped coming to the shop!

And then it hit her. The reason her uncle knew she'd worked at Gordon's Magic Appliances was that he'd read her letters to Jack without permission.

"B-but why are they keeping you here?"

"Well…"

He opened his mouth to explain, his expression one of suffering, but there was a sudden ruckus from outside, men's voices and hurried steps of several people drawing closer.

Is someone coming?

Olivia stiffened and watched as the door opened with an unpleasant squeal. Two men stomped in, Lord Perigord with a severe expression and Olivia's uncle looking pale.

She gaped at them. She hadn't been expecting those two.

The viscount?! Does that mean these two were in cahoots with each other?

Lord Perigord shot Olivia a sharp look, then glared menacingly at her uncle.

"You've really done it now, haven't you? I can't believe you'd do something so idiotic," he snapped.

"I-I'm sorry! But I was only going along with the original plan…"

"You fool! Can't you understand the situation has changed? Didn't you see Elliot and realize carrying out the plan now would lead to problems?!" roared the viscount, and Olivia's uncle shrank back.

"I'm sorry, my lord! I thought it was the right thing to do…" He got to the ground where he groveled and made excuses. Still on the ground, he looked at Olivia with rage. "This is all your fault! You had to go off to the capital!"

Olivia bit her lip and retorted, "You're the one who fired me and chased me away."

"Sh-shut your mouth, girl!" he shouted, but the viscount viciously kicked him aside.

"Be quiet, you waste of space!"

"Gah!" He slumped to the ground again, trembling.

Lord Perigord looked down at him with scorn, then at Jack, who was standing in front of Olivia to protect her. "Go to the other room," he commanded.

"B-but…"

"She's a valuable artificer. I won't treat her without care. If you won't remove yourself, I'll have you removed."

Jack glared with frustration at the viscount, then whispered to Olivia, "If anything happens, just yell," before disappearing beyond the door on the other side of the room.

Lord Perigord watched him leave, then looked down at Olivia with emotionless eyes. "Olivia. You're going to be working here now."

"What?"

"Did you not hear? You're going to be working here. For the rest of your life."

Her jaw dropped, and she felt like she'd been kicked in the gut. She couldn't get any words out.

He looked at her expression and gave a sadistic half smile. "The story is this: You slipped out of the wedding alone, left town, and disappeared. We searched high and low for you, but to no avail. Three years later, we confirmed you'd died."

She felt like she'd been hit on the head.

He can't be planning to make it out like I died?!

She stood and scrambled to string her words together. "Let me go! I have my shop!"

He chuckled. "What a foolish girl. If only you'd been a good girl and married Henry. This is what you get for seducing a son of House Flarance."

"I didn't seduce anyone!"

She looked at him with rage, but he shrugged as if belittling her. "Well, it's not as if the son of a duke would ever see the country bumpkin daughter of a baronet as a real potential partner. He was merely playing with you until he grew tired. Poor girl."

Olivia fell into pained silence. She didn't think the viscount was right—Elliot wasn't like that. But she couldn't find anything to say when Lord Perigord brought up the indisputable fact about the difference in status between her and Elliot.

"The best you can do now is work hard for me. You earn your keep here. The more you work, the better you're treated. The opposite is also true, of course."

He then looked coldly down at Olivia's uncle and ordered, "Let's go," before walking casually toward the exit.

That's when she heard it.

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

From somewhere inside the building came the sound of footsteps from several people, hard against the stone floor.

"M-my lord, there's trouble!" cried the viscount's pale butler as he and several sword-wielding guards rushed into the room.

“What is this ruckus about?” demanded the viscount with a scowl.

The butler gasped and shouted, “Kn-knights! A squad of royal knights has entered the manor!”

Lord Perigord was shocked by the news. “What is the meaning of this?!”

“I-I don’t know. They appeared out of nowhere and said they know there are illegal activities occurring here.”

“This is *his* doing,” hissed Viscount Perigord with an aggravated cluck of the tongue. He glared at Olivia’s uncle. “You really screwed things up.”

He then turned to the butler and barked, “Tell them I’ll be there shortly,” and was about to walk out past the butler in the doorway.

“Gah!”

With a grunt, the butler collapsed to the ground, followed by groans from the guards as they fell over.

Olivia looked up in surprise and saw cool rage on the handsome features of Elliot, standing there with a sword in one hand.



He wasn’t wearing his glasses or his necktie, and there was a scabbard belted at his waist over his rumpled suit.

A look of relief flashed over his face when he saw Olivia, but it quickly disappeared as he glared at the viscount. “I’ve finally found you, Lord Perigord,” he declared. “You’ve been up to some mischief, I see.”

Lord Perigord’s face contorted with shock and rage. His mouth flapped open and closed, though no words came out.

Elliot stepped into the room, not sparing even a glance for Olivia’s uncle, who huddled on the ground. His eyes were sharp as he stepped closer to Viscount Perigord, and—

“Grah!”

One of the defeated guards sprang up from the ground, tore his sword from its sheath, and roared with an expression like a demon as he attacked Elliot from behind.

L-look out!

Olivia didn’t even have time to cry out as the gleaming sword swung down.

CLANG!

Elliot blocked the blade from behind like it was child’s play.

“Dammit!”

The guard tried to regain his stance, but Elliot’s sword moved faster than the eye could see.

“Gah!”

The guard slammed against the wall, and men in knight uniforms who were arriving after Elliot quickly tackled him to the ground.

Elliot turned to face the viscount again and looked down at him with a completely emotionless expression. “You’ve made a fool of me. I knew you were a dangerous man who had no qualms choosing immoral methods, but I never thought you’d go this far.”

“Y-you don’t understand! The girl, she just did it herself, she…” Lord Perigord stammered nonsensical explanations as he stumbled backward.

Elliot took one step forward, his expression still devoid of emotion, then his eyes fell on the white bandage wrapped around

Olivia's hand. His eyes stayed there as he coldly forced out, "Would you mind explaining to me what you did to her, Lord Perigord?"

"Urk!"

"I asked you, what did you do to her?!"

Viscount Perigord trembled under Elliot's eyes, so cold they could freeze, and he slid down the wall he had his back against as if his legs had given out beneath him.

Realizing Elliot might turn his sword against the viscount if this continued, Olivia ran over to him and wrapped her arms around him. "It's all right, Elliot! I'm fine!"

He tore his eyes off Lord Perigord as if he'd snapped back to his senses. He then exchanged a few words with more knights who rushed in with clattering footsteps, then sheathed his sword and took off his jacket.

"Let me see you, Olivia," he bade as he wrapped his jacket around her and politely sat her in a chair in the corner of the room. He knelt before her, concern in his eyes. "First, can I see your hand?"

His expression was serious as he gently unwrapped the white bandage, but that turned to agony when he saw the laceration beneath. After letting out a short breath, he asked, "Are you hurt anywhere else?"

"I-I don't think so."

With a look of relief, he gently drew her into a hug. "Thank God. I am so sorry you had to go through something so terrifying."

Being enveloped in his warmth made the tension drain from her shoulders, and it finally dawned on her that she'd been saved.

While this was going on, the knights were binding Olivia's uncle, who was trembling on the floor, and Lord Perigord, who was still sitting against the wall, and then secured Jack from the other room.

One of the knights turned to Elliot and saluted before reporting, "Everyone has been secured. We're continuing our search of the manor."

"Understood." Elliot sighed, then whispered in Olivia's ear, "I want to stay with you, but my position means I can't leave here.

Could I have you go back to the hotel first without me? I'll apologize again when I get back and explain everything."

Olivia was bewildered, but she nodded obediently.

He apologized again with a pained expression, then turned to a small, somewhat old knight who looked rather friendly.

"Make sure her wound is treated, then escort her back to her hotel, the Rose Hotel, a little south of the center of town. And treat her with the utmost courtesy."

"Yes, my lord."

The knight stepped forward and gave Olivia a polite bow. "If you'd follow me, miss."

"R-right, of course."

Elliot watched her with concern as she left. She followed the knight as he walked slowly down the hallway, and she saw a row of pale-faced servants bound and sitting along the wall.

Her brow furrowed in confusion. What in the world was going on? From the wedding to this, so much had happened that she had no idea what was what.

She asked the knight where they were since she still didn't know, and he told her this was a second manor owned by Lord Perigord.

"It's an old building, a short distance from town. I believe someone called it Elm Hall."

Olivia looked out a window. She'd never heard of such a place. The entire building looked to be surrounded by high walls, and she could see towering trees on the far side of that. It gave her the impression that a lot of work had been done to ensure this building wasn't found.

The knight came to a stop outside a room near the manor's entrance and called into the open door. "I have an injured lady with me. I'd like her treated so no scar remains."

A young man in white clothes bustled out, then had Olivia sit on a sofa behind a partition, where he began asking her where she was hurt before placing her hand into a box-shaped magic item used for healing.

"Please wait here. It will take a little time for this to finish. If you need anything, just shout," explained the man.

"All right."

He then disappeared to the other side of the partition, leaving Olivia sitting on the sofa and examining the box.

This is a pretty nice magic item.

Healing items put a significant strain on the user's body, making them incredibly difficult to craft. The one she was looking at was highly effective, better than anything she'd ever seen before.

This was obviously made by quite a skilled artificer. You could buy a house with it. Should they really be using something like this on someone like me?

She looked out the window beside her into the garden and saw muscular men in uniforms hurrying about.

The man in white seemed pretty busy too. He was constantly getting called out of the room by people, and he'd sometimes come back in carrying things.

I have no idea what happened, but it appears to be a pretty big deal.

After the man in white had been called out of the room for another time, a young man's voice cut through, "Is the doctor in?" That was followed by the sound of footsteps as someone entered.

Olivia peeked out through a gap in the partition and saw two young knights in uniforms. They stood in the center of the room and started talking in hushed tones to each other.

"He's not here. Probably off with the injured."

"We did tell them. Guess we could look here for it and take it with us."

Then the two started rummaging through the boxes at the side of the room.

I guess they came to get something?

As she was thinking that, one of them said, "You know, though, this was a great catch. Exactly what you'd expect from Elliot Flarance, I guess."

They're talking about Elliot?

She couldn't help eavesdropping as the other man replied, "It was incredible, but what else would you expect?"

"I guess. He did use that random girl as bait." There was contempt in his voice as he continued, "I heard the girl he used was the adopted sister of the bride or something. I guess there was no better bait available."

What…?

Olivia stiffened.

Adopted sister of the bride? He can't mean me, can he?

She froze, her eyes unblinking as they kept talking.

"They're saying Duke Flarence's son made the decision himself to get close to this girl so he could use her as bait and settle this once and for all. Pretty bold, huh?"

"Well, everyone knows House Flarance doesn't mind getting its hands dirty."

"She got kidnapped in the end. I wonder if she's all right."

"They rescued her, didn't they?"

"Yeah, but still."

The shock ran through her entire body like she'd been struck in the head, and her heart pounded so much she thought it might break.

Right then, the man in white hurried back into the room, helped the knights find whatever they were looking for, and sent them on their way. He then knocked on the partition and checked the wound on Olivia's hand.

"Looks healed," he commented. "But your complexion doesn't look very good. Are you injured anywhere else?"

"No, I'm all right. I think I've just been through a lot."

He looked pityingly at her dazed state. "That you have. Right, wait here a second. I'll get the captain."

"All right," she answered absentmindedly.

She was still in a daze when the old knight arrived. He was courteous as he loaded her into a carriage, and they traveled to the hotel. Once there, he told her, "I'll be posting guards shortly. Please don't leave the hotel," and then he left.

Olivia requested a key for her room from the front desk, then tottered up the stairs.

Once in her room, she put her back to the door and slid slowly to the ground. She groaned with one hand over her face.

"What…were they talking about…?"

It couldn't be true. Elliot wasn't that kind of person. He wouldn't do that. So she thought, but she kept thinking of all the questions and suspicions she'd had about him all this time.

Wasn't it an incredible coincidence that she would bump into a person she met at Daregas Station again and they'd become friends? Or was it not a coincidence at all, and he was actually trying to get close to someone who had a relationship with Lord Perigord?

Why did he come with her to the wedding? Was it to take advantage of the situation?

Who was that man he was talking to outside yesterday morning? Were they having a meeting about this?

But it couldn't be. He wasn't that kind of person.

She did believe that, but her emotions were in disarray from the word "bait" and what Lord Perigord had said about the son of a duke not seeing a girl like her as a serious option, on top of the fact that Elliot had hidden his status, job, and even name from her for more than two years.

Her mind was in turmoil. She covered her face with her hands.

Too much had happened at once. Everything with her adoptive family, Lord Perigord, Jack, and even Elliot. Her mind was a mess.

Elliot had asked her to wait in the hotel because he would explain everything. He asked her to trust him, and she believed there were some background circumstances that could explain things.

But she couldn't think right now. She didn't have the capacity to process it and was at her limit.

I'm going home.

She rose unsteadily to her feet. She thought about nothing as she packed and checked out.

At the front desk, she left a letter that read, *"I'm sorry. I went back to the capital. Thank you for saving me. I'll pay you back*

sometime," along with his jacket and the corsage he gave her.

She then shuffled out toward the station, boarded a horsecar, and returned to the capital alone.

Chapter 9: The Full Account

OLIVIA slept for a whole day after returning to the capital. She had originally planned on taking that time to rest anyway, and she was dead tired, but that didn't mean her sleep was restful. All night, she had nightmares where she couldn't differentiate between reality and dream, making her jerk awake, soaked in sweat, only to settle back in bed to repeat the process.

The second day after her return, she finally got up and was visited by a man in a dark blue uniform who appeared to be some sort of government employee. He wanted to hear about what happened in Daregas.

Thinking back to the events was painful, but she felt she had a duty to do so. She changed into her usual work clothes, then boarded the carriage that came for her a few hours later, which took her to a large stone building with a sign over the gate that stated, "Royal Knight Headquarters."

A knight led her down a long, broad hallway to what looked like a reception room with sofas and tables. Two stern-looking men, most likely government officials, were sitting there waiting for her, and they began interviewing her.

They asked about how she ended up engaged to Henry, how her uncle took her home and shop, how Jack went missing, the orders from nobles her uncle brought to the shop, Lord Perigord, and how she was kidnapped from the wedding. The unpleasant memories made her grimace, but she continued answering with a flat tone—it needed to be done.

Once they were done questioning her, one of the men asked, "Is there anything you've forgotten to mention or anything you'd like to ask?"

To which Olivia asked, “Um, is Jack all right?”

The last time she saw him, the knights had secured him. He looked unwell and in pain.

The man nodded. “He’s unharmed. His health did take a slight turn from what I heard, and so he’ll need rest for the time being.”

“Oh.” That was a relief. Then she asked, “What…actually happened in Daregas?”

The two men exchanged a look, then both nodded.

“Considering you were one of the victims, we did intend to tell you roughly what happened. Can we ask you not to repeat this to others?”

Olivia nodded, then one of the men slowly explained.

“Have you heard of bank card fraud?”

That made her think back to just before she came to the capital, when the bank had told her something about that. “Yes, I have heard of it.”

“That makes explaining things easier. This fraud was largely conducted by Lord Perigord.”

Olivia gasped, speechless as she listened to the pair explain how Lord Perigord had snuck the techniques necessary for bank card fraud from another country, then forced Jack, whom he’d imprisoned, to forge the cards.

“You also mentioned earlier that your uncle ordered Jack to make ‘dog collars’ for nobles, yes?”

“That’s right.”

“Lord Perigord was involved with a number of illegal activities. We’ve come to understand that those collars were, in fact, used for enslaved people in the slave trade. Jack realized and refused to make them. That’s when they imprisoned him.”

She was utterly taken aback at the appalling truth, but she did realize something. “Is… Is that why my uncle took over Carter’s Magic Items?”

“Yes. That, too, seemed to be an order from the viscount. His acquisition of your assets was, in fact, illegal. It would have been impossible if he hadn’t had the backing of the influential lord of the region.”

That reminded Olivia of how Jack had gone to the town hall several times to argue against that, only to be turned away at the door. If what these men said was true, that was also Lord Perigord's doing.

"Why would Lord Perigord do something like that?" she asked.

"He's refused to talk about his motives, but some have claimed it was because he wanted to receive a higher title."

The man explained that Lord Perigord was a very ambitious man and had procured the necessary funds to obtain a higher title through illegal means.

"He needed skilled artificers to conduct his criminal activities, but neither you nor your father accepted jobs from questionable sources. That's why he approached your uncle. He seemed easy to use, and your uncle's financial situation was difficult. He accepted without a second thought."

"I…see…"

"In the beginning, they were planning on using Carter's Magic Items, a trustworthy magic item shop, as a front to hide their forging and illegal crafting. However, they no longer needed the shop once they imprisoned the famous artificer Jack and made him work for them."

Olivia looked at the floor. Her heart was in turmoil, knowing Jack had been suffering for so long. The man explained that Olivia's aunt and uncle had also been involved in illegal activities and were being questioned thoroughly.

"What about Catherine and Lord Henry?" she asked.

"We're in the process of investigating them."

It appeared those two weren't aware of the details of the crimes, but they did benefit from the illegally obtained money. Catherine was also suspected of theft of intellectual property.

"We're looking into the details regarding her theft of your designs. We should have the results of that investigation shortly."

After the knights were done investigating Olivia's aunt and uncle's involvement in the criminal conspiracy, they would move on to investigating their takeover of the shop. Once the men had finished telling her everything, they led her out of the room to the

exit, and she boarded the carriage alone beneath the evening sky. Once the carriage pulled away, she curled up on the seat, her head in her hands.

I don't understand anything that's happening. I feel like my brain's been deflated.

So much had happened in such a short time that she couldn't comprehend it. She lived her life as any other normal person, working hard and making do. How in the world did she end up smack dab in the middle of this storm? Both her emotions and her mind were in complete disarray.

Normally I'd turn to Sally or Lottie for help, but… She wanted to talk to them, but she wasn't sure if she should. *I think it's probably a secret that Elliot is from House Flarance…*

Nicca probably knew. They went to the same school when they were kids, and after all, they were in the same knight squad.

But based on everything Sally and Lottie had said, they didn't know the truth. Olivia had a feeling she shouldn't go to them when they didn't know.

She sighed and looked out the carriage window at the city streets illuminated by the setting sun, and she thought of Elliot.

Even with everything going on, I want to see him. I really do like him, don't I?

She sighed over and over.

Once back at the shop, she decided she should let Lottie know of her return since she was passing through anyway. But when she opened the door, she found Sally sitting there with a concerned look on her face.

"Oh, Olivia! Thank God you're all right!"

She got to her feet, a look of relief on her face. Olivia stood blinking.

How does she know I'm back in the capital?

Lottie, who was standing nearby, must have guessed Olivia's question because she answered, "I saw you board a carriage outside the shop earlier, and so I informed Miss Sally you were back."

Olivia smiled awkwardly. That was quick-witted Lottie for you.

Sally's eyes narrowed in worry. "Olivia, you're white as a sheet. What happened?"

"Well…a lot, actually," she muttered, looking down.

Sally's eyes sharpened. "You're going to have to tell us about it."



THE three closed the shop once more and moved into the twilit workshop.

Turning on the magic lamp, Olivia watched Lottie make tea as she slowly began the story. She wasn't certain if she should be telling them, but this was too heavy a burden for her to bear alone—she wanted to talk to someone.

Olivia recounted how Lord Perigord tried to force her to marry Henry at the wedding, but she refused and was kidnapped. Elliot had arrived with a squad of knights to save her, but she had overheard the knights talking about how Elliot had used her as bait to bring an end to the situation. She also described how the shock made her leave Elliot behind and return to the capital alone.

She kept certain parts to herself—such as her learning Elliot was from House Flarance and what the government officials told her to keep quiet about—and told Sally and Lottie there were some things she couldn't explain because of extenuating circumstances.

Sally listened to the story, her eyebrows knit together, while Lottie listened in complete silence after she set the teacups on the table.

Once Olivia finished the story, Sally squeezed Olivia's hand with a pained expression of disbelief over how something so terrible could happen. "That must have been so hard. You've been through so much. I nearly cried just listening." Then she glowered and slammed the table. "Elliot, that jerk! I won't forgive him for this! How dare he?!"

While she was raging, Lottie nodded, a look of agony on her face. "I've never heard anything so horrible. I'm glad you came through it all right."

Tears gathered in Olivia's eyes. She could feel the ache in her heart beginning to heal. Olivia went on to tell them bits and pieces of what happened at the wedding, while the two of them listened attentively.

Once it was all over, Lottie was silent in thought for a moment, then muttered, "It's a bit odd, though… Master Elliot isn't simply overprotective of you, he's *extremely* overprotective. And yet, he'd use you as bait?"

Olivia nodded—she still couldn't make herself believe it.

Sally murmured thoughtfully, "I agree. The more I hear, the weirder it all seems. Nicca has told me about several operations that involved using a woman as bait, but they were always an undercover knight. I can't imagine they'd use a normal person like you."

"That makes sense to me," Lottie concurred. "If it's not someone with at least some ability to defend themselves, they may not be able to escape when they need to."

"Exactly. I also don't think it's like Elliot to use you as bait."

Olivia dropped her gaze to the floor.

When I think about it rationally, I agree with them. There are a lot of weird things about this.

Elliot had helped her so much over the past two years. When she was down, he cheered her up; when she needed to accomplish something, he helped. There was no deceit or scheme behind that.

Other than the fact that he'd hidden his status and job, he'd been entirely honest with her.

I wasn't thinking straight after all those surprising events. I should have listened to what he had to say.

She let out a long sigh. Honestly, she'd been afraid to hear what he would say. If he really had seen her as bait, she would have been so shocked that she couldn't possibly have recovered from it. But there would be a lot of things she'd never know if she never let him tell her.

Sally and Lottie looked at her with concern, but she returned their gaze with gratitude and said, "Thank you. I've calmed down after telling you two about it. I'm kind of scared, but I'm going to talk to Elliot about this when he gets back."

"Yeah, I think that's the right move," Sally agreed. "And I'll ask Nicca what he thinks."

Lottie nodded in agreement.

Sally and Lottie then suggested they go out for a bit, the three of them, so they headed to a restaurant that served some of Olivia's favorites in a girls' night out and celebration for Olivia surviving everything she went through.

They returned to the shop and had tea along with the lovely pastries they picked up, and chatted late into the night.



THE next day, Olivia woke to the sound of birdsong.

I actually feel like I slept decently last night…

She sat up in bed and stretched, thankful for her friends who'd cheered her up the day before.

Olivia slowly got up, opened the curtains, then went to the sink and looked in the mirror.

"I've lost a lot of weight," she muttered with a wry smile, then had a quick breakfast before going downstairs.

Lottie was in the shop cleaning and kept asking if she was all right, suggesting it might be best to rest for the day, but Olivia told her that working would take her mind off things and dove into some paperwork. She wrote a letter to her cousin Mira thanking her and apologizing for disappearing.

Once evening came, Olivia thanked Lottie for her work that day and let her go home a little early, then sat in a chair in the workshop.

Somehow managed to get through the day…

She'd been worried she was still so shocked she wouldn't be able to work at all, but she was surprisingly capable today. Work helped keep her from dwelling on things, it seemed.

If I keep going like this, I should be able to manage tomorrow as well.

That was a relief.

Right as she was thinking that, the doorbell rang.

Is that a customer picking something up?

She peeked out the window and saw a boy standing there holding a wrapped box.

A delivery?

Olivia opened the door, and the boy looked at her with a smile. "Olivia Carter? I have a delivery for you from Master Elliot of Dicks & Co."

Her breath caught in her throat. She signed for the package, but her hand was shaking.

The boy thanked her and was about to leave, but she stopped him and asked where Elliot was. In a casual tone, he replied, "I guess he's got a lot going on right now. He won't be back for a while."

Once he left, Olivia went inside and locked the door, then shut herself in the workshop where she opened the package with trembling hands.

"Oh!"

Many familiar and wonderful-looking cookies filled the box.

These are from the old lady's bakery in Daregas…

She remembered telling Elliot they were very good. Tears gathered in her eyes as she took them out and found a thick envelope beneath. She opened it to a letter several pages long, filled with Elliot's neat handwriting.

Dear Olivia,

I received the letter you left at the hotel's front desk. I'm so very sorry you had to go through what you did.

He then went on to apologize in earnest for failing to protect her at the wedding and for hiding his status and job, explaining how he couldn't go into detail about the latter in the letter, only that it was his family's policy for him to hold several titles.

Oh, I see…

In general, a noble only held one title, but maybe it was possible for someone from a duke's house to have several. That meant that it wasn't a lie when Elliot told her he was a trader for

Dicks & Co., and the story he told her on the horsecar about his aggressive real family would have been about House Flarance.

Maybe he was trying to tell me absolutely everything he possibly could.

The letter also explained more about what happened at the wedding.

For about three years now, I have been investigating instances of bank card fraud. When I met you at Daregas Station, I was actually on my way back from one such investigation.

Elliot hadn't been able to find any clues for a long time, and the investigation hit a dead end, but they recently learned the criminal organization behind the fraud was also involved in the slave trade. Once he realized it was likely they were using the same artificer to forge the bank cards and make the slave collars, he started asking about Jack from Olivia's old shop.

Something nagged at me when you told me Jack had been making collars and gate locks for nobles before he went missing. It wouldn't be all that odd for slave collars to resemble dog collars, and there are similarities in the techniques used in forged bank cards and gate keycards.

He then went to Jack's hometown to investigate and discovered Jack had disappeared. Elliot planned to continue his investigations in Daregas after the wedding. However, Olivia went missing as well, just as the wedding was ending.

I went to the salon and was waiting for you, but then Mira ran in as white as a sheet and told me you'd disappeared. Mira, her family, and I split up and searched the manor, but you were nowhere to be found, and no one had seen you.

That's when he received a report from his squad keeping an eye on the perimeter that they'd seen a suspicious carriage rush out of the manor and enter a property on the outskirts of town. Thinking Olivia had likely been taken away, he jumped to investigate.

The situation is wider-reaching than I suspected. Considering my position, I don't think I'll be able to leave Daregas for another week, and there are other things I need to take care of when I return to the capital.

I promise you that I will explain everything when that's over. Please, wait for me.

I am so very sorry.

Sincerely,
Elliot

Olivia was relieved. This told her that he hadn't used her as bait. But now what she didn't understand was what those two knights were talking about when they mentioned a girl had been used as bait. What in the world was that?

"Maybe I should ask Nicca…"

He was a knight, maybe he would have an idea of what was going on.

She cradled the letter in her hands as she went back to her room, placed it beside her pillow, and went to sleep.

Chapter 10: The Chase

"OH, come on, Elliot! It's been a whole month! What in the world is he thinking?"

Olivia was in the mature-yet-cute office with pink wallpaper in the back of Sally's Bridal Boutique, listening to Sally shouting with her face bright red.

"If Nicca were here, I'd send him out and make him drag Elliot back by the scruff of his neck, but he chose this one time to get sent on an expedition!"

Olivia chuckled awkwardly at Sally's temper, but she too was surprised by this turn of events. Elliot had asked her to wait for him, but she hadn't expected to wait more than a month.



SEVERAL days after Olivia told Sally and Lottie what had happened, Nicca came alone to visit her in his knight's uniform.

"Sally told me what happened," he began, his expression grim. "Can I ask you some questions?"

Olivia asked Lottie to give them some privacy, and she and Nicca went into the workshop, sitting across from each other at the worktable. He asked her about what the two young knights had talked about while she was getting her hand treated.

His expression was sour once she told him. "The Royal Knights would never use you as bait—their honor wouldn't allow it. What those two knights said was complete nonsense."

According to Nicca, those two knights weren't associated with Elliot in any way, not even within the same squad. They were sent to Daregas as reinforcements, most likely.

"People tend to become jealous of Elliot easily because of his status and how skilled he is," explained Nicca.

Olivia asked about Nicca's relationship with Elliot, and he explained they were classmates at the Knights Academy.

"We sort of just hit it off, despite having such different ranks, and we're still friends."

He then told Olivia to let him handle the situation with the young knights.

After seeing him off, she sighed.

I know I was thrown off balance, but it wasn't right of me to come back to the capital without hearing Elliot's side of things.

So much had happened that day of the wedding. Catherine had made a scene, Olivia was nearly married off to Henry, she was kidnapped, found an imprisoned Jack, and then was saved by Elliot.

But I should have at least listened to his explanation…

She'd never been good at handling situations when she was caught off guard. She always panicked and did something extreme, like this time, where she just snapped and went straight to the horsecar station.

I need to keep my calm better…

She sighed and looked into the sky. It was showing signs of autumn.

Based on the letter Olivia received, she thought Elliot might come back in about two weeks. This time, when she saw him, she would make sure to have a calm conversation with him. And he'd paid a lot of money for her—she needed to pay him back.

Though I'm not really sure if he'd accept money…

Now that she knew he was from a duke's family, she wasn't sure how things would go if she told him she wanted to split all the expenses. But it didn't matter who he was; money was money. It was the right thing for her to do. She would have to do her best to get him to accept. She also wanted to do something for him as a thank you, but she wasn't sure what would be best.

But two weeks passed, then three, and Elliot still hadn't returned. He sent deliveries of Olivia's favorite treats several times, but he himself didn't come.

One point after more than a month had passed, Sally asked her what had happened with that whole business with Elliot. Olivia simply told her she was still waiting, but he hadn't come, which was when she flew into a rage.

"What in the world is he thinking?!"

Which brings us back to Sally's office.



OLIVIA calmed Sally down, but she still insisted, "Once he gets back, make him buy you something expensive!"

"I'll consider it."

After that conversation, Olivia left Sally's boutique. The sun was already relatively low in the sky, casting long, angled shadows across the cobblestone roads.

Her unfocused eyes took in those shadows as she murmured, "He must be swamped…"

She assumed he was quite high ranking in the Knights based on how Nicca talked about him, how things were when he saved her, and the fact that he was a duke's son. She'd also heard this incident was quite a big deal. He was likely so busy with work that he was barely finding time to sleep.

I bet he can't find time to come back.

On one hand, she was disappointed he didn't return. On the other, she was actually a little relieved.

I'll see him, hear what he has to say, and thank him. That much is fine. The problem is what happens after that…

The best possible outcome would be if they could make it like none of this ever happened, and they went back to being friends. She found their cozy friendship very comfortable.

But…that's not going to happen, is it?

She smiled sadly as she walked along the twilight streets. Olivia didn't have the confidence in herself that she could only be his friend now that she'd become aware of her feelings for him, and she had a feeling it was the same for him.

But even if we do like each other, we have no chance…

The difference in status between a duke's son and a baronet's daughter was massive. In the fairy tales, there were always stories about a prince falling in love with a commoner girl and the two living happily ever after together, but that was in the stories. Reality didn't allow that sort of thing.

It was particularly true for high-ranking nobles that the people around them would have a strong opposition to them courting or marrying someone whose status was too different from their own. She'd heard people would talk badly about them behind their backs for being such a fool. It was obviously not good for Elliot to be with her.

Even if she could do something about her status…

I could never be a noble lady.

Olivia loved her work as an artificer. She loved designing, she loved putting smiles on her customers' faces, and she'd worked so hard to get here. Taking the crafting skills and knowledge passed down to her by her father and continuing her work was her calling.

Quitting that work was not an option.

Her shoulders slumped.

Which means I'm not suited to be with him.

A suitable partner for him would be a high-ranking noblewoman from a good family. That was the exact opposite of herself, someone basically the same as any old commoner working in the city.

Honestly, it might be best if we never see each other again.

She had to see Elliot once because she had to talk to him, thank him, and pay him back. But then they shouldn't see each other again. That was definitely for the best.

She let out a heavy sigh.

I can't believe the moment I realize how I feel about him, I start thinking we should never see each other again…

With a heavy heart, she trudged back to her shop. She saw there were no deliveries for her other than the mail to the shop, then sighed again.

Olivia opened the door and stepped inside, calling out, "I'm back," to Lottie. Then she gasped.

"Ah!"

There she saw the back of a tall young man in a brown pinstripe suit talking to Lottie.

At the sound of the door opening, Elliot slowly turned toward her, his blond hair swaying slightly. It'd grown longer since she'd last seen him.

He saw Olivia frozen in the doorway and smiled. "Olivia!"

She looked into his crinkled amethyst eyes behind silver-tinted glasses and felt all the blood in her body rush to her head. With eyes wide, she stumbled backward.

Wh-what do I do? Oh gosh, this is so embarrassing!

It was embarrassing to be looked at—it was embarrassing being embarrassed. She couldn't bear it.

"Lottie! Keep him here!" she shouted, then she dashed out of the shop like a rabbit.

As she ran, she thought she could hear him and Lottie talking.

"Olivia? What? Lottie, let go of me, please."

"I'm sorry. I have to keep you here for a moment."

But Olivia didn't care. She just ran through the crowded evening streets, desperately keeping her feet moving, but felt like cradling her head in her hands.

Oh my gosh, what in the world am I doing?

She'd felt so awkward the moment she saw him that her mind blanked. Part of it was because he looked so handsome, what with those silver glasses instead of his green ones, and she felt like she would die when he said her name.

And before she knew it, she was running.

I'm doing something extreme again… He really startled me…

She really regretted her actions, but at the same time, she knew if she couldn't handle something, that was all there was to it.

There's no way we can have a real conversation meeting under these circumstances.

It would definitely be best if she saw him again after she'd calmed down. Surely she'd feel better once her feelings for him had faded somewhat.

I'll write him a letter once I get back.

She would apologize for today, then tell him she couldn't see him for a while.

I feel a bit bad, but he didn't show his face for a whole month too. We both did things. Things will be better if we wait like six months.

Having decided what she would do, she came to a stop, her shoulders heaving. She raised her head, reminding herself that she at least needed to think about how she would pay him back and thank him.

And her eyes went wide at the sight of the city streets before her.

Uh, where am I?

Before she knew it, she'd run somewhere she didn't recognize.

Oh, what do I do? Am I lost again?

She wandered about at wit's end, but didn't see a single thing she recognized. Right as she was thinking it would probably be best to spend the money and take a carriage, she looked ahead and felt relief wash over her.

There was a wide canal ahead of her, lit by the evening sun. That ran through the southern side of the city, and she saw a bridge she recognized, giving her a general idea of where she was.

I can't believe I was so focused on running that I came all the way here.

Feeling better, she walked toward the canal. The waters were utterly still in the sunset, save for the occasional ripple sent through the surface by a gust of wind. The tall streetlamps set at intervals along the path running beside the canal were already starting to come on.

What a nice view. I haven't looked at this in so long.

She took the steps down to the canal-side path, like it was drawing her in, then she went to sit on a bench for a short rest.

"Olivia!" called a familiar voice from behind.

She spun around and saw Elliot at the top of the stairs, chest heaving.

Ah!

She jumped to her feet and nearly dashed off again out of reflex.

"Please, wait!" he called, sounding panicked. "I'm sorry for chasing you, I really am, but I thought we had to start over. I had this feeling that if we didn't talk today, I wouldn't get to see you again for a long time."

That's some good intuition—that was precisely what was going to happen. Olivia looked away, still in position to run off.

"I'm sorry for making you wait so long, and I know I have no right to ask anything of you, but please, will you listen to what I have to say?"

She looked into his pleading eyes and sighed.

If she were being honest, she wanted to wait until she'd calmed down more, but she also felt it was wrong to refuse. They were here. She would ready herself for this.

"All right…" she relented.

"Thank you," he said with relief. "I'll come there."

She watched him slowly descend the stairs, then looked down and let out a tense breath. He was in front of her now. She steeled herself and looked up at him.

"Oh my gosh!" she cried, her jaw dropping. "E-Elliot, what happened?! You're injured all over!"

As the wind rustled his bangs, she could see a huge bruise beneath. Looking more closely, she saw more bruises along the side of his face and other smaller injuries. His rolled-up sleeves revealed the same state on his arms and hands, and there was even a bandage wrapped around his right arm.

"I suppose they're still pretty visible…" he grumbled, looking away in discomfort. "Some…things happened."

He suggested they sit. Still taken aback, Olivia settled onto the bench, then Elliot joined her, leaving some space between them.

He turned to face her and bowed his head low. "First, let me apologize again. I am so sorry you had to go through that in Daregas."

"I'm sorry I didn't thank you for saving me." Olivia bowed back.

"How much do you know about what happened?"

"The official told me most of it, and you wrote more in your letter. I think I understand what happened. But what I want to know is why you're covered in injuries? What happened? Does it have to do with why it took you so long to come back?"

Elliot looked away guiltily under her concerned gaze. "I suppose I should start there," he murmured, then continued slowly as he looked out over the canal in the sunset. "After returning from Daregas, I went to House Flarance and told my family that I intend to court Miss Olivia Carter, daughter of Baronet Ralph Carter."

"You what?!"

Her eyes peeled open; she never imagined he'd say that.

What? Huh? Court*? He told his family that?*

"And, like I told you before, the Flarances can be rather violent. As per usual, my father stated that I would have to defeat him if I wanted my way. Then we fought."

"You fought?"

"Yes. We fought, and I won. He is very experienced, but just as he can't win against the sands of time, he couldn't defeat me in the end. Though it took time, and it was close."

Olivia was taken aback. She had no idea what to say. It took everything she had solely to make a sound of acknowledgement.

"But then my oldest brother stepped up and claimed that, as the next duke, he wouldn't approve unless I defeated him. I…don't actually think he was opposed. I think he just wanted to fight."

"Right…"

"That fight was tough. Unlike my father, my brother still has his endurance, and he's somewhat more skilled at sword fighting than I am. I had to do something he didn't expect in the end."

"Which was?"

"Abandon all defense. That did allow me to win, but I suffered quite horrible bruising and injuries because of that." He rubbed the bruise on his cheek. He'd been in no condition for people to see him, so he spent the next several days doing everything he could to make the bruising subside.

Olivia was taken aback.

You could use magic items to heal wounds, but only a few times a month because they put stress on the body. His other wounds must have been worse, meaning he couldn't use items for the more superficial bruises and cuts; they needed to be left to heal on their own.

"That's why it took you so long…" she concluded.

"I'm sorry. I just thought it would be irresponsible of me to see you before settling matters," he muttered with a sigh.

A cool wind carrying a hint of autumn rustled his blond hair.

With a look of resolution on his handsome features, he knelt before Olivia, a solemn look in his eyes as he looked at her and said, "Olivia, I've loved you since the first time we went to a café together. Do you think it would be possible to see me not as a friend but as a man and allow me to court you?"

She couldn't breathe. All sound disappeared, and she was struck with a feeling like they were the only two people in the entire world. All she felt was joy bubbling up from deep inside her.

But she looked away, her expression pained. "But…I'm just the daughter of a baronet. People will mock you if we're courting."

He smiled. "If they do, I only need to make them stop."

"And I can't quit being an artificer." She hung her head in dejection.

"I'm aware. I've always respected you for your devotion and hard work." He gently took her hand in his. She raised her head and looked into his solemn eyes. "I love everything about you, including the fact that you're the daughter of a baronet and an artificer. I want to protect you and everything important to you."

Tears blurred her vision, and warmth spread throughout her chest. She smiled despite the tears and fumbled out, "I have a terrible sense of direction. I get lost really easily, like today."

"I know."

"And I eat a lot."

"It's one of the things I like about you." He smiled softly.

A cool gust of wind blew between the two of them, sending Olivia's hair dancing, and Elliot jumped to his feet.

"It's cold out. We don't want you getting a cold. Let's head back."

Olivia nodded and stood, then after a moment of silence, with her ears bright red, she quietly whispered, "I don't know what I should say in a situation like this, but… I… I love you too."

"I couldn't ask for any better response," he replied, smiling with joy.

He gently held his large, warm hand out toward her, and, feeling a little sheepish, she softly placed her hand on top of his.



Stars began to twinkle in the deep violet sky above, and the sound of the bell tolling the hour was carried far and wide by the wind.



THE following month, the newspaper headlines read:

"Bank Card Forger Caught"

"Former Viscount Perigord Found Guilty"

The articles explained how the viscount and his collaborators imprisoned an artificer in order to forge fake bank cards. Upon further investigation, it was discovered he was also engaged in other illegal activities, such as the slave trade, and an intense investigation was underway to determine if there were any other crimes.

As the bank card fraud and slave trade also occurred in a neighboring country, some newspapers speculated that the government of the other country may have been involved, but it remained nothing but speculation.

Several months after that, a trial was held in the capital for former Viscount Perigord and his collaborators, along with Olivia's adoptive family.

Lord Perigord employed a skilled lawyer who did everything possible to defend him, but to no avail. He was found guilty, bringing an end to the 200-year history of House Perigord.

He, along with former Baronet Carter, was put to death for the severe crime of imprisoning an artificer.

While Catherine and Baronet Carter's wife weren't engaged in the criminal activity with the baronet, they were found guilty of stealing magic item designs and illegally using funds not belonging to them and were therefore exiled.

Henry and what remained of his family were sent to the untamed borderlands.

During the investigation, it was determined that Olivia's adoption by former Baronet Carter was not legal. In the process of the trial, Olivia's exact relationship to the former baronet came under

scrutiny, and it was determined that, as they were not in fact related by blood, the two of them had no relationship whatsoever.

The two young knights who claimed Olivia had been used as bait were also investigated. They testified that there was someone in the shadows trying to spread that fabricated story. It was concluded that they were sent from their normal station in the capital to cause a disruption.

When asked why they would spread such a rumor that had no supporting evidence, they admitted, “We were jealous of Elliot Flarance and his work in the capital, so we tried to tarnish his reputation.”

In response, they were told, “You are in a position in which you are meant to protect and lead, yet you spread libelous, unfounded rumors out of nothing more than shameful jealousy, and caused harm in the process. You lack the chivalry of knights, making you far from suitable for your position.”

They were suspended from duties, forced to pay a fine, and demoted to guard-in-training, the lowest rank in the Royal Knights, so they would have to work their way up again.

Those court rulings marked the end of the unprecedented events.

Epilogue: A New Start

OLIVIA was walking with Elliot through town on a spring day, the sky had a gauze of misty clouds scattered across the bright blue. She was wearing a blue dress, he in his gray jacket, and the streets were bursting with the vibrant colors of flowers.

"It's back? It's really, really back?" she insisted.

"Of course it is."

It was several months after the events in Daregas, and the two were on their way to Carter's Magic Items. The trial resulted in the return of her family home and the shop, as they had been illegally taken from her.

Today, she and Elliot had come to see her rightful house and store now that she had them back. She pressed a hand to her chest to steady her pounding heart as they walked along the gently sloping street.

The shop came into view, and her feet came to a stop.

It's neat and clean…

When she last saw it, the flower beds had been overrun with weeds, and the shop itself was in such bad condition she could barely stand to look at it. But now the flower beds were empty and filled with fresh, soft soil.

Someone must have cleaned it up.

Tears welled in her eyes as she came to a stop in front of her old business. She looked up, the sign Carter's Magic Items blurring in her vision.

"It's really back…"

She looked up at Elliot, and he returned her gaze with a smile. "It is. It's your shop."

He urged her on, and she nervously stuck the key in the lock. The lock opened with a familiar *clunk,* and the door slowly swung open.

She took in the dim interior of her childhood, her eyes going wide.

"It's clean in here too!"

"The knights trampled all over here for the investigation, so I asked some people to tidy it up," answered Elliot.

It was completely different from the dusty and junk-covered state she'd seen before. The floor had been carefully swept and mopped, and the shelves and counter had been dusted. Even the polished windows sparkled from between the gaps of the curtains.

She stood frozen from sheer overwhelming emotion, and Elliot softly said, "I'm going to take a look around outside."

"All right. Thank you."

She was grateful that he was being considerate and giving her a moment alone. Her feet carried her through the interior as she took in a long, deep breath.

Ah… It smells like wood from my memories. It really is back.

Her vision was still blurred from tears as she opened the curtains and windows to let in the warm sunlight and a breeze carrying the scent of spring.

Cheerful birdsong filtered in from outside, and Olivia gently ran her hand along the wood workstation beside her.

Father used this so much.

And this was the case for storing magic stones. We'd line them up here to have the customers choose from. And there were all sorts of potted plants over here.

She stood in the center of the room, closed her eyes, and remembered.

Father was standing there. He said, "Happy birthday!" and made beautiful butterflies fly out of a magic stone…

She held back the tears threatening to spill down her cheeks at the ache in her heart from missing them as she ran her hand along the furniture, looked up at the ceiling, and cast her eyes about the shop.

Elliot returned from outside and watched her, his eyes crinkling in a smile. Once she'd given the location a once-over, he asked, "What are you going to do with the shop now?"

She looked down in thought. "First, I want to get it back to what it used to be. Hang lamps, get all sorts of potted plants…"

Elliot nodded along.

"And then, I'll have to see how Jack is doing first, but we were talking about trying to have it open a few days a month to begin with. I thought I could bring some magic jewelry to put on display, and Gordon offered his help. I think we can manage something."

She didn't honestly know how well it would go, but she wanted to turn it back into a place that put smiles on customers' faces, just like it was before.

"If there's anyone who can do it, it's you, Olivia," he offered with a smile, letting her know he would help as well.

They stood and looked at each other in the warm spring sun that streamed in through the openings between the white curtains as they rustled with the spring breeze.

Olivia bashfully turned away and said, "Um, we should get going. I'd like to properly introduce you to the lady at the bakery."

"I would be honored. And I'm looking forward to some nice bread."



After Elliot helped her close up the shop, she murmured, “I’ll be back soon,” then slowly walked away.

At House Flarance

A few days after Elliot confessed his feelings for Olivia on the bank of the canal, a man just past middle age, with a large poultice on his cheek and a grim expression on his face, was sitting in a solemn office decorated with historical swords and axes. He was doing paperwork inside Flarance Manor, a massive complex in the Flarance domain that bordered the capital.

That man's name was James Flarance. He was the head of House Flarance and Elliot's father.

House Flarance was an old family and had long taken on diplomatic duties. Duke Flarance spent the majority of his time out of the country, returning only a few times a year to check on his domain, which was managed by his eldest son.

He sat in the quiet office, steadily working through the stack of paperwork on his desk. The sky outside the window had a light veil of clouds, and the faint rustle of trees being blown in the cool autumn wind could be heard coming from the expansive, manicured gardens.

Once he'd finished looking through the stack of papers, he rubbed the furrow between his brow with frustration. There was a knock on the door followed by a man's voice.

"Father, it's me. I've brought those papers we discussed."

"Come in."

The door opened, and in stepped Arthur, an incredibly handsome, masculine young man with long blond hair and purple eyes. He was Elliot's brother and next in line to be duke.

Arthur shut the door and gave a wry smile when he looked at his father sitting behind the desk. "I see your bruises haven't yet healed."

"No, they haven't," replied James gruffly, grimacing as he brought a hand to the poultice on his cheek. "That Elliot. He really went all out."

His eldest son chuckled. "And you took on more than you can handle. The wound in your side hadn't healed fully, had it?"

James scowled. “It was a battle over a man’s pride. I couldn’t very well refuse due to an injury.”

Arthur shrugged. “I suppose not. What will happen now?”

“You mean with this Olivia girl that Elliot was talking about?”

“Yes. Do you really intend to approve their courtship?”

James grimaced. “Well… That pairing wouldn’t normally be possible. She’s the daughter of a baronet, barely more than a commoner.”

“That’s right. Which makes me wonder why you said the matter would be settled with a duel.”

James looked away in shame. “House Flarance has always settled things through duels, and Elliot is on the intelligent side of things. I didn’t think he could possibly win against me, even with my injury. Besides, you lost as well, did you not?”

Arthur rubbed the bandage peeking out from his sleeve and smiled awkwardly. “Well, I didn’t think he would abandon all defense and come at me with an all-or-nothing counterattack. Which…goes to show exactly how serious he is about this girl.”

“That it does.”

The two sighed.

“What does Mother say about this?” asked Arthur.

“That I need to sort this mess out as I’m the one who lost.”

“She must have been quite angry…”

“You could say that…” James sighed, then reached out. “Give those papers here. They’re about the girl, yes?”

“Yes. I’ve discovered something quite interesting.” Arthur passed over the stack of about ten sheets, and James quickly scanned them.

“Hm… She does seem hardworking. Gold in the Design Awards and a patent. She must be blessed with talent.”

“Yes. I couldn’t find anything negative about her. It seems she believed Elliot was a trader in Dicks & Co. It was only just recently that she learned he belonged to a duke’s house.”

“What was her involvement with the Daregas incident?”

“Investigations show she isn’t related by blood to the baronet in question, meaning she was likely an unconnected victim.”

"Hm." James nodded as he flipped through the pages. At the last page, he looked thoughtful as he murmured, "Huh… Araldo Carter was her father?"

"Yes. He had been going by the name Ralph Carter more recently."

"And his daughter has also been invited to join the Royal Magic Research Institute?"

"Yes, though I haven't finished uncovering the details as they've kept it under wraps. It appears to have something to do with her patent, however."

"Hm," James hummed as he folded his arms in thought.

Arthur waited quietly.

After a moment, James slowly said, "I see… It would be best not to say anything for the time being. Watch and see what happens. I believe the two young lovers will be faced with quite the trial."

"I thought so as well. There's a high likelihood it could break their relationship."

"We'll see how it plays out."

"Agreed. Those who can't overcome trials have no future together."

James stood and moved over to the window to look outside, where multicolored autumn trees swayed to strong winds beneath a heavy sky.

Side Story: Elliot Puts It All on the Line

IT was the end of Olivia's first year in the capital, and she was in a heavy navy coat with Elliot in his usual flat cap, tinted glasses, and a brown coat and scarf as they walked around the center of the city.

"The weather's nice today," she commented.

"It is. It hasn't been this sunny in a while," he returned.

They walked beneath a blue winter sky toward a new café in town. Normally, the pair would have taken a carriage, but the weather was so nice today that they decided to enjoy the stroll. The sidewalks were bustling with people, partially because it was close to the new year.

"Looks like even the capital gets busy during the new year," observed Olivia.

"It does. And there are a lot of events going on."

"It's such a busy time, but it is fun."

As they walked, they came upon a large open square packed tightly with rows of stalls.

"Oh, they have stalls here?"

"It's typical of the end of the year. There are several markets like this throughout the capital, but this is one of the larger ones, I believe."

The square was crammed full of people enjoying food and drink, and Olivia spotted a tent further in with an eye-catching red flag. "Do you mind if we go over there to check that out?"

"I don't mind at all. The red flag…that would mark the games area, wouldn't it?"

"I think it might."

They entered the square and weaved through the crowd toward the red flag, coming upon a joyful area of booths with

colorful signs. The sound of children laughing filled the booths, which featured games such as ring toss, ball roll, face the cookie, lotteries, and more.

Looking curious, Elliot commented, “So this is what it’s like.”

“You didn’t know?”

“I’d seen it from afar, but I’ve never actually come and taken a proper look.”

“Huh,” Olivia replied, then she pointed at the booths. “Simple explanation is that you play these games, and if you get a high score, you get a prize. I bet the prizes are in the central tent. Let’s go see what they are.”

The two cut through the crowd of people having fun toward the prize tent with the red flag. It was quite large and had a big shelf set up inside lined with dolls, toys, sweets, cute painted dishes, goddess statuettes, and all other manner of items, large and small.

“There are all sorts of things,” Elliot noted in wonder.

“Yeah. The kids love this sort of thing since they can definitely get something if they try hard enough.” She looked at the sign outside the tent, and her eyes went wide.

Prize List
(by tier)
1st: A two-night stay in Flarance (horsecar tickets included)
2nd: Moving teddy bear
3rd: Six-month supply of bread from the Rose Bakery
4th: Fluffy towel set
…
14th: One cookie
15th: One piece of candy
16th: One piece of small candy

Olivia gasped.

"What is it?" asked Elliot.

She grabbed the sleeve of his coat and pulled him with her into the tent, where she pointed toward the top shelf. "Look! The fluffy pink thing on the second-tier prize shelf!"

"Uh…the teddy bear? What about it?"

"The teddy bear! It's a moving teddy bear. They're all the rage in other countries!"

It was a pale pink teddy bear with cute, round eyes, large enough that an adult could wrap their arms around. Next to it was a sign that stated in big letters, "Moving bear! Popular abroad!"

Elliot narrowed his eyes and looked at the bear. "So that's it?"

"You know them?"

"Only rumors. Apparently, they were invented by a genius artificer from another country."

"Yes, that's them! I heard they dance and sing when you clap your hands!"

These children's toys had only very recently started being imported into the country. The people at Gordon's Magic Appliances were also interested in them and tried to acquire some, but there was such a back order that it was a six-month wait to get one.

"I never thought they'd have one as a prize at a carnival!" exclaimed Olivia.

She really, *really* wanted it.

Luckily, she was very dexterous and good at these sorts of games. It might be tough for her to get 1st tier, but she could probably manage 2nd.

She turned to face Elliot. "Elliot, I know we were planning on going to the café, but would you mind if we postponed that a bit? I want to try and win that," she asked, pointing to the pink bear with a look of determination.

Amused, Elliot nodded and replied, "I don't mind at all."



THE first thing Olivia tried was ring toss, a game that involved throwing a ring onto one of several rods set upright at a distance from the player. She figured she had a chance at this one since she'd played it a lot as a kid.

There was a group of boys in their early teens at the booth, watching as one tossed rings with a look of concentration on his face.

"Welcome, want to have a go?" asked the young man working the booth as they approached.

"Yes, one adult, please," Olivia answered. She paid, then once the boy was done playing, she stood on the mark with a courageous expression on her face.

It must not have been common for a young woman to try this game out because the boys stood to watch and cheer her on. "Good luck, miss!"

"Here we go!" Olivia let out a breath, then slowly began tossing rings.

One after another, they landed on the rods, and the boys shouted excitedly.

"Dang, she's good!"

"You got this! Yeah!"

Olivia grinned.

Looking good. That teddy bear is mine!

But things didn't end so well.

"Oh no…" she grumbled, falling to her knees in dejection after her go.

It had started off incredibly, but her aim slowly declined as she played on, and the last ring flew completely off its mark.

Olivia was feeling down, but the boys tried cheering her up.

"Come on, cheer up!"

"Yeah, you did great! You got 7th tier."

The booth operator cocked his head and asked, "You're disappointed with 7th tier? That means you were aiming for something specific?"

"Yeah. The second-tier teddy bear prize."

"Ah, that one." The operator nodded. "That one's pretty popular. Quite a few people are going after it."

Her head jerked up. She had no time to be wallowing in despair.

Once she'd snapped herself out of it, she looked up at Elliot. "There's another game I think I might be able to do. Do you mind if I try?"

"Go right ahead."

She then went on to the ball scoop tent where she joined a group of children having a go at it, but…

"Wow, lady, you're amazing! You got 5th tier!"

"Thanks…"

She still couldn't make it to the 2nd tier.

Olivia and Elliot then went to try out drawing lotteries from the lucky box, which was fun and exciting, but they both ended up with only the 14th tier.

About forty minutes after Olivia started playing games, she had another go at ball scoop, but still only finished with 5th tier.

She went and sat on a bench, dejected.

Urgh… It's not going well at all…

Even when she gave her best game, ball scoop, absolutely everything she had, she could only get up to 5th. She looked around to see if there was anything else she might be good at, but couldn't find anything she thought she could do better than ball scoop.

Well…I guess getting 2nd tier was never going to be easy.

Any normal person would have quit then, but Olivia really, *really* wanted that teddy bear.

It would be so much fun to try to analyze it with everyone in the shop! We'd debate how it worked, whether it was this or that, and a technique that changes how the bear moves based on the number of claps could be applicable to magic jewelry too…

She began racking her brain to come up with an idea on how to pull this off.

Maybe I should give the ball scoop another go? Or maybe try a new game, see if there are any new possibilities?

She sat there, her arms crossed as she hummed and hawed, then Elliot came over from a stall with hot drinks.

"Sorry for the wait. Here you go."

"Thank you." She took a sip from the cup, and the sweet warmth of the hot chocolate spread through her. "It's good. I was just thinking I could do with a sweet drink like this."

"I'm glad I could help."

He looked relieved that Olivia's grim expression had been completely replaced with a smile.

After looking down at his hands in thought for a moment, he slowly said, "Actually…there's something I'd like to try. Would you mind accompanying me?"

"You're going to play a game?"

"Yes. I found something I might be good at."

"Oh! That's exciting!" she exclaimed joyfully. She had been worried she was the only one having fun. Nothing would make her happier than if he were enjoying himself as well. "So, what are you going to try?"

"Darts."

"Darts?" She blinked in surprise.

I wasn't expecting that.

Darts, as a game, had a reputation for being favored by knights and soldiers, essentially by fighting men who used weapons. It didn't seem to fit Elliot, who was gentle and more intellectual-seeming than physical.

And I heard that darts at carnivals are harder than normal darts.

Since it was a game that young men used to compete with each other, they made it more difficult so that they wouldn't wipe out the entire prize pool.

But it's best to try out something you want to play.

Once they finished their hot chocolate, they went to a booth further in that had a slightly different air about it compared to the others. It was rather deep with a numbered target set up at the back. Athletic-looking men crowded around the booth with one broad-shouldered, muscular young man in the center, throwing darts with a look of intense concentration.

It was pretty different from all the other stalls, which mostly had children.

There's nothing cute about this. Kind of scary, actually.

She was feeling hesitant since she rarely went into places with this sort of rough-and-tumble atmosphere.

They stopped at the side of the crowd where Elliot pulled his scarf up so it covered his mouth, pulled his cap down to his eyes, and pushed up his tinted glasses.

"Wait here," he told Olivia, then he approached the stall operator and promptly returned to Olivia's side. "I'm the sixth person in line. Number 251."

"There're a lot of people trying this out."

"Apparently, darts are popular among knights and soldiers. They play it during their breaks to relax. I imagine part of it is also about putting their skills to the test here."

"You think so?"

"It's more difficult than usual. The target is farther away than normal darts."

While they talked, a fit young man began throwing darts. The difficulty was apparent because he kept swearing and complaining that the target was too far. He had a hard time getting his darts in the center of the target, ending with only two of his ten throws in the center.

Three more young men tried after him, but they all had similar results.

Huh, so this is what darts are like.

Olivia watched them with curiosity. It was her first time really seeing it played, but it seemed far more difficult than something like ring toss.

The fifth person in line was a small yet well-built middle-aged man. He had the composure of a veteran and landed five of his darts in the center of the target.

"That's 5th tier!" shouted the man running the stall as he rang a bell.

Everyone watching burst into cheers.

"Incredible!"

"Way to go, old man!"

Apparently, they deemed him worthy of their respect because of his high score. Once he was done with his game, the crowd briefly closed in on him to pat him on the back.

"Amazing!"

"Respectably done!"

After the buzz calmed down, the operator called, "Number 251!"

It was finally Elliot's turn.

Elliot quickly raised his hand in acknowledgment, then took off his coat. He was in his usual pinstriped suit, but then he pulled down his cap, pushed up his glasses, and wrapped his scarf again tightly around his mouth.

"I'll hold your coat," Olivia offered.

"Thank you."

He went to the operator to collect his darts. The crowd shouted, "Good luck!" to him as he stepped on the circle marking the

throwing spot. He let out a short breath, set his feet shoulder-width apart, and raised a dart. The crowd went silent, probably out of consideration because they didn't want to disturb the player.

Olivia found herself clutching her hands to her chest. It wasn't like she was the one playing, but her heart was still hammering from nerves.

Good luck, Elliot!

The crowd watched with bated breath as Elliot let loose a dart with a single fluid motion.

THWACK!

The dart landed nearly in the center of the target. The men in the crowd let out cries of excitement.

"Wow!"

"He's good! In the center, right off the bat!"

Elliot didn't seem to take notice of their compliments at all. He remained unruffled as he threw his second dart. There was another pleasant *thwack* as the dart landed right in the center.

"Amazing! That's dead center, isn't it?!"

"This guy's good!"

The third dart got near the center as well, and the crowd grew more frenzied as they let out cheers of excitement.

Olivia hugged Elliot's coat to herself, a look of surprise on her face. She never imagined he'd be *this* good.

You've got this, Elliot!

Elliot remained composed amongst the cheers as he continued throwing darts.

In the end, he got nine darts in the centermost section, with five of those dead center—it was an incredible performance.

DING-DING-DING!

The man running the stall clanged the bell above his head as he shouted, "We've got a first-tier winner here!"

The crowd erupted into a cheer as they rushed in on Elliot. He quickly walked to the operator of the stall to avoid them and took his first-tier prize slip. After a quiet exchange with the operator, Elliot slipped something into his hand, and he nodded in understanding.

Then he rang the bell again and called, “This kind young man has paid for the next ten goes at darts! First come, first served!”

The men who had been trying to swarm Elliot changed direction to crowd the operator. Elliot took advantage of the small reprieve and quickly walked back over to Olivia.

“Let’s go,” he bade.

“A-all right.”

He took back his coat and apologized as he grabbed Olivia’s hand and hurried them away from there.

Maybe he doesn’t like being in crowds like that?

As he pulled her along with his large and surprisingly rough hand, she shouted, “That was amazing!”

Once they came to the prize tent in the center, the lady at the tent looked at Elliot’s prize slip with shock and declared, “Oh my! We haven’t seen a 1st tier in three years!”

“Three years?” asked Olivia.

“That’s right. This is just between you and me, but we don’t often see tiers one, two, or three,” she whispered.

Olivia gave a stiff smile.

That would explain why the prizes are still here.

The woman went to get the prize for 1st tier, but Elliot softly whispered, “I wanted to ask about that. Could I perhaps exchange this for the second-tier prize?”

“What?” came the operator.

“What?” asked Olivia, her eyes wide.

In a tone of disbelief, the woman said, “But 1st tier is an all-expenses-paid vacation…”

“Yes, I know,” answered Elliot.

“You know? Then you know it’s to Flarance? Where the wine’s great and the food’s even better?” She smacked Elliot’s shoulder like he was saying the most idiotic thing possible, but then she looked at Olivia—who was equally as confused—and realization dawned on her. “Oh, you want to give her a present?”

“That’s right.”

“You could also go on the trip with her, couldn’t you?”

"We're not at that point yet," replied Elliot with a cool expression, and the woman burst into laughter.

"Is that so? Well then, guess we have no choice."

Feeling flustered, Olivia tried to stop him. "Elliot, wait! Are you sure?"

"I want you to have it, if you'd like it, of course."

"Well, yes, I would, but…you got 1st tier…"

"I don't mind at all. I visit Flarance regularly for work."

The woman looked amused as she listened to their conversation and retrieved the teddy bear from the shelf, then put it in a large bag and handed it to Olivia. "Here's your second-tier prize: a moving teddy bear. Better take care of it."

"B-but…"

"No buts! Take it! Let the man put on a good face."

She looked up at Elliot in her bewilderment, and he smiled and nodded. "Thank you," she replied as she took the bear. Then she bowed to Elliot. "Thank you. I'm so happy. Just, are you really sure this is all right?"

"Yes, I am. That's why I risked it all."

She wondered what he'd risked at all as she thanked him again and hugged the bear to her. She was so happy.

Elliot smiled at her joy. "All right. Shall we go to the café as we'd originally planned?"

After having wonderful food in the café, the two arrived by carriage at Gordon's Magic Appliances beneath a sky that was starting to show signs of sunset.

Elliot jumped lightly out, then offered his hand to help Olivia down. Once on the pavement, he held out his hand again for a handshake. "I had fun today. Thank you," he told her. "I look forward to seeing you in the new year as well."

"No, thank you. And happy new year."

She gently squeezed his large, warm hand.

He took the teddy bear from the carriage and handed it to her, which she hugged to herself.

"Thank you so much for the teddy bear," she replied. "I'll treasure it."



It was about a year and a half later that Olivia finally understood several things about that day, such as why Elliot was so good at darts and what he meant when he said he'd risked something, but that's for another story.

Side Story: Olivia Tries Her Hand at Homemade Wine

IT was near the end of autumn, and Olivia was sipping tea in a café with a slight retro style about it when she looked at Elliot sitting across from her and said, "I wonder if there's any way to get some fresh grapes. I know they're not in season, but I *really* want some."

He looked at her questioningly. "I imagine I could acquire some if I tried. What would you like them for?"

"I want to make wine."

"Wine?"

"Yes. I just got a temperature-regulating box from Gordon's."

About a week earlier, Olivia had visited Gordon's Magic Appliances. Once she was done with her errand, she popped in to see her former boss, Harrison, in his workroom to say hello. He was with one of the other experienced artificers, Laraconia, and they were hard at work on making some box-shaped contraption.

"Hello, Mr. Harrison, Mr. Laraconia," she called out.

The two smiled when they saw her.

"Ah, Olivia, nice to see you!"

"It's been a while. How have you been?"

"I'm well, thank you. By the way…what are you two making?"

"A temperature-regulating box."

"A what?"

According to Harrison, a noble requested a magic item that would keep cooked food warm.

Olivia looked around at all the boxes. "You've made quite a few."

Laraconia sighed. “It’s hard to get it to stay at the temperature you set. We’ve made several prototypes, but it’s not going well.”

The inside needed to be kept at 140º, according to the customer, which was very difficult.

Laraconia pointed to one of the larger boxes beside Olivia and explained, “That one’ll keep the temperature between 75 and 85, but it won’t get anywhere near 140.”

“That sounds difficult,” Olivia noted as she looked at the box with curiosity. Between 75 and 85? She knew something that might be perfect for it. “Could I borrow this?” she asked.

“Go ahead. It’s a failure anyway. Feel free to do whatever you want with it.”

Elliot looked interested as he listened to her story. “I’m assuming, based on where this story is going, you plan to use this temperature-regulating box for making wine?”

“Exactly.”

There was a vineyard near Olivia’s hometown of Daregas, and the shop shelves were crammed full of grapes in the fall.

“My mother was a very good cook, and she’d make a lot of things herself. One of those was wine.” Freshly made wine was wonderful, but there were many times it failed. “Daregas is further north than we are now, and it’s fairly cold by the time the grapes are ready for harvest. Wine doesn’t taste as nice when it’s made in the cold.”

As far as Olivia knew, wine turned out the best if it was fermented between 75 and 85 degrees. Which meant she could still make wine when it was cold out if she had that regulating box.

Elliot looked intrigued. “Homemade wine? That sounds interesting. All right, I’ll try to get you some grapes.”

“Thank you!”

They agreed to make the wine together if he did manage to purchase some, and then left the café.



ONE afternoon, a week later, when Olivia's shop was closed for the day, she and Elliot were in the kitchen behind her workshop. It was generally a tidy place since Lottie primarily used it to make tea, but today it held large bottles, bowls, and spatulas.

Elliot carried the large box he'd brought with him into the kitchen and set it on the counter. "Here are the grapes."

"Don't mind if I do," exclaimed Olivia as she opened the box. Her eyes shone when she looked inside. "Wow! These look better than I expected!"

The box was chock-full of grapes of a deep purple color. They were on the small side but smelled very sweet. Elliot had a friend with a vineyard, and they gave him some of their excess.

"They're delicious!" Olivia let out in surprise. "They'll make great wine!"

The two of them put on aprons and stood in front of the counter. Olivia cleared her throat and, sounding like she was giving a lecture, said, "First, we give the grapes a quick rinse, then we remove them from the stems."

"Yes, professor," replied Elliot with amusement. He rolled up his sleeves and transferred the grapes from the box to a washbasin.

After he rinsed them, they began pulling the grapes from the stems and putting them in a glass jar that was so big Olivia would have to wrap her arms around it to pick it up. The grapes steadily formed a mound of shining purple in the jar.

Once they were all in the jar, Olivia took on a stern tone as she continued, "Next, we smash all the grapes in the jar with a spatula."

"Yes, professor." Elliot smiled cheerfully as he picked up a spatula and began crushing the grapes. "Professor, how thoroughly should I smash them?"

"That's a good question, Elliot. Squash them until the juice comes out. And, you know, I thought this before, but you really are strong."

"You honor me with your compliments," he replied as they joked and continued working.

Once the grapes were smashed mainly to a pulp, Olivia thought for a moment.

How much sugar should we put in?

When her mother made wine, she'd put in only a small amount.

Basically, to adjust the sweetness a little, right?

She thought about how her mother's wine tended to be dry and asked Elliot, "Do you prefer dry or sweet wine?" to which he answered that he liked them both.

If he likes both, then let's go sweet.

She loved sweet wine, what with her big sweet tooth.

After some thought, she decided to put in three times the amount of sugar her mother used to.

This should make a really nice, sweet wine.

She poured the sugar and yeast in with the crushed grapes, and Elliot stirred them together. As the last step, they put a loose-fitted lid on the bottle and then stuck it in the temperature-regulating box that they'd set up in the back of the kitchen.

"Should be done in about a week. Let's have drinks together then!" concluded Olivia.

"I can't wait," replied Elliot with a smile.

The two then left for an early dinner together, chatting about what sort of wine they'd end up with and how it was sure to be good.

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ONE evening the next week, on a day the shop was closed and after Lottie had gone home, Olivia was cleaning up the workshop in the lamplight when the doorbell rang.

She opened the door and found Elliot with a somewhat large bag.

"Good evening, Olivia," he greeted.

"Good evening. Come on in."

Olivia led him into the kitchen and opened the door to the regulating box.

"Is the liquid portion the wine?" he asked.

"It is. We strain, then it's ready to drink."

Olivia stretched a clean cheesecloth across a large pot, then pushed an indent in it. Elliot poured the liquid from the jar of crushed grapes into the pot, and the rich aroma of grapes filled the kitchen as the purple liquid filled the pot.

Elliot looked surprised. "I wasn't expecting it to smell so much like wine."

"I think it turned out well. Let's have a taste."

"This is what I've been looking forward to."

They got ready for their wine-tasting session. Elliot pulled snacks out of the bag he brought—including ham, cheese, bread, roast meats, and other items that pair well with wine—while Olivia got the wine glasses and some desserts ready.

They sat at the edge of the worktable and clinked their glasses together with smiles before taking their first sips.

Eliot was surprised. "This is actually real wine. It's very smooth, the sort of thing you might accidentally drink too much of if you're not careful. Will you be all right drinking this, Olivia?"

"I'll be fine. I used to have far more than this with my family."

She took another sip, and she was in love. The aroma of grapes wafting from the wine was richer than the wine she bought from stores, and it made her very happy.

I think this might have more alcohol in it than the wine Mother made, though.

But she had used the same ingredients, so the alcohol content should be basically the same. She speared some ham and cheese with a fork to eat as she and Elliot chatted and drank.

About an hour later, Olivia was completely drunk and face down on the worktable.

"My head is throbbing…" she groaned.

Elliot sounded a little panicked as he asked, "Are you all right? Hang in there. This is my fault… I had no idea you were the type who didn't seem that drunk until you were this drunk…"

"I want lemon water…"

"Wait here a little bit. I'll go buy some."

Olivia heard Elliot hurry outside, and she wondered how she'd gotten this drunk.

It's weird… I haven't drunk anywhere near how much I usually do…

He returned and had her drink the lemon water and take some medicine to help sober her up, then she just about managed to return to her room with his assistance.

The next day, her head was pounding, and she stayed in bed until past noon. Elliot came by to check on her because he was worried and brought her more water and medicine. She was feeling quite down while he took care of her.

How did this happen?

She thought back to what she did as she rubbed her aching temples.

The reason she got so drunk was not due to the amount she drank, but to the high alcohol content of the wine. In her desire to have sweet wine, she added too much sugar, which resulted in a wine with an abnormally high alcohol content.

You can probably imagine how she regretted her decision when she learned this later, and decided, "Greed is no good."



Notes:

1. Yeast produces alcohol by breaking down sugar, meaning the higher the sugar content, the higher the alcohol content.
2. In Japan, it is illegal to make alcohol at home with more than 1% alcohol content.

Afterword

HELLO, this is Rinrin Yuki.

Thank you for picking up this book.

I hope you enjoyed this volume, where Olivia got back her house and store that were stolen from her, and she and Elliot shared their feelings for each other.

When I first published this online at *Shousetsuka ni Narou*, many people were surprised by Elliot's true identity and the bank card fraud incident. I imagine many of you reading the print version were surprised as well.

Personally, my favorite moments were when Lottie slowed down Elliot and the side story where he played darts.

My online readers had a lot of requests as well, one of which was to see more about the Flarance family, who settle things with their fists, so I added in the story with Elliot's father and brother, which came together nicely in the end, I would say.

In other news, there's going to be a third volume.

Timeline-wise, it's going to be set a short time after Olivia got the shop back and will begin with her receiving an invitation from the Royal Magic Research Institute. At the same time, she's busy reestablishing her father's shop with help from Elliot and her friends.

What does the invitation say? And who was Olivia's father?

And what will happen with the romance between her and Elliot, considering their difference in rank?

I'm hard at work writing the next volume, so I hope you look forward to reading that along with the manga version, which is making progress.

Lastly, I would like to use this space to thank Suzaku, the illustrator, for the incredible illustrations and fantastic depiction of Olivia's father's shop in the cover art, as well as give a thank you to my lead editor and everyone else involved in making this book.

See you again in volume three.

Rinrin Yuki
Spring 2024



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