

時雨沢恵一

KEIICHI SIGSAWA

イラスト：黒星紅白

ILLUSTRATION：KOHAKU KUROBOSHI

ラリー・ヘップバーンSMA

# メグとゼロンV



 電撃文庫

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ILLUSTRATION : KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI

# メグとゼロンV

ラリー・ヘップバーンの罠





### ナタリア・スタインベック (ナジーヤ、またはナータ)

三一九〇年、第六の月八日生まれの十五歳。上級学校三年生。  
有名音楽家の両親を持つ。オーケストラ部にも所属し、楽器演奏が得意



### セロン・マクスウェル

三一九〇年、第三の月三日生まれの十五歳。  
上級学校三年生。  
ロクシエ・ヌク連隊(ロクシエ)の  
首都特別地域にある第四上級学校生徒。  
実家が遠いために家住まい。



### ラリー・ヘッパイン

三一九〇年、  
第五の月十二日生まれの十五歳。  
上級学校三年生。  
歴史ある軍人の家系に生まれ、  
自らも軍人を目指し鍛錬中。  
セロンの大親友。



### シトラウスキー・メグミカ(メク)

三三九九年、第二の月十四日生まれの十六歳。  
上級学校三年生。  
ベゼルイルトア王国連合スーパードール出身で  
シトラウスキーが名字。  
ロクシエの引越しと転校で学年遅れている。  
コーラス部にも所属。



### ジニー・ジョーンズ

三一九〇年、  
第三の月十七日生まれの十五歳。  
上級学校三年生。  
ロクシエを二を争う大富豪の  
家の生まれ。新聞部の部長。



### ニコラス・ブラウニング(リック)

三一九〇年、第四の月四日生まれの十五歳。  
上級学校三年生。  
中性的な容姿の持ち主。セロンとは顔見知り。



**Seron Maxwell**

Born on the 3rd day of the third month of the year 3290. 15 years old. A third-year student at the 4th Capital Secondary School in the Capital District of the Roxcheanuk Confederation. His hometown is far from school, so he lives in the dorms.

**Strauski Megmica**

Born on the 14th day of the second month of the year 3289. 16 years old. A third-year student. She is from the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa. 'Strauski' is her family name. Because she started school a year after moving to Roxche, she is a year older than her classmates. Megmica is a member of the chorus club.

**Larry Hepburn**

Born on the 12th day of the fifth month of the year 3290. 15 years old. A third-year student. He is from military family with a very long history, and trains daily to become a soldier himself. Larry is Seron's best friend.

**Natalia Steinbeck**

Born on the 8th day of the sixth month of the year 3290. 15 years old. A third-year student. Her parents are famous musicians. Natalia is part of the orchestra club, and is skilled with musical instruments.

**Nicholas Browning**

Born on the 4th day of the fourth month of the year 3290. 15 years old. A third-year student. He has an androgynous appearance and is not part of any clubs. Nicholas and Seron are previously acquainted.

**Jenny Jones**

Born on the 17th day of the first month of the year 3290. 15 years old. A third-year student. She is the daughter of one of the richest people in Roxche. Jenny is the president of the newspaper club.

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## Prologue: During Summer Break

“So we won’t be able to have another group event for the rest of the summer, Treasurer Seron Maxwell?”

<More or less, President Jenny Jones.>

“Tch. And we still have 25 whole days left before the term starts. Too bad, I wanted to teach you guys some more things. But I guess I can’t push you guys too hard since my family’s the one that canceled the newspaper club camp.”

<I don’t blame your parents. Who wouldn’t want their kids to come home after they got involved in a murder case? Mr. Kurtz was just doing his job when he told them.>

“It’s not like I’m blaming him. Oh, and Mr. Hartnett contacted me about the case. Both Hampleton and Mrs. Lawrence are in hospitals designated by the Confederation Police. They’re not sure if either of them are fit to stand trial yet.”

<I see...>

“There’s nothing else we can do at this point. Just leave it to the adults. Anyway, since we won’t be meeting up until the fall term, tell everyone to think up story ideas. I want our new newspapers up on the walls as soon as possible, so I need everyone to contribute.”

<About that. It’s all right if we just come up with lies?>

“Seron. Are you suggesting we sully the sanctity of the press?”

<Are you joking, Jenny? I can’t really figure it out over the telephone.>

“Easier than trying to figure *you* out. Anyway, we can discuss more at the club office when classes start again. Call the others and tell them we have no more plans for the summer, and that they’re to gather at the club office on the first day back. We need to print that first issue, take photographs, submit stuff to competitions and lots of other things. We have a busy fall ahead.”

<All right.>

“Oh? I’m surprised you accepted so easily.”

<Contacting people is the treasurer’s job, isn’t it? I mean, not that I’ve even touched a budget sheet or anything yet.>

“That’s not what I was talking about—”

<Hm?>

“Never mind. Just let everyone know, okay?”

\* \* \*

“Hello! This is Larry Hepburn, on fire as usual! I seriously stink of gunpowder ‘cause I was out doing marksmanship practice with Dad and Cato. How’re you doing, Seron?”

<I’m all right, thanks. Reading lots, relaxing and stuff. I’m calling on newspaper club business today.>

“Ah! You got word from Jenfie?”

<Yeah. I’ll get to the point. Our schedules don’t match, so we won’t have any more club activities for the rest of the summer.>

“Hm. Figures. Lia was saying something about a family vacation too.”

<Our next meeting date is the first day of the fall term. We have to meet at the club office after classes.>

“Meet at the clubroom after classes on the first day of school’. Got that. You’re moving back to the dorms before that though, right? I’m going to drop by school after our military sciences training camp, so let’s meet up for lunch. And...don’t tell anyone, but please help me with my homework!”

<All right. I’ll do what I can. I’ll be back at the dorms about four days before classes start, in the morning. Just like every other year. I have to call the others now, so I’m going to have to hang up.>

“Right. But you sure you’re gonna be all right, buddy?”

<Hm? With what?>

“You’re gonna have to call Megmica again. You haven’t called her yet, right?”

<Oh. ... Yeah, I’m going to be okay. I talked with her a lot back at the camp, you know.>

“Atta boy! I’m proud of you, Seron!”

<And I’ve seen her with her hair down, too.>

“Huh? Oh, right. You did.”

<So even if she’s wearing her hair down at home, I can talk to her without getting nervous. And if one of her parents picks up, I can just tell them, ‘my name is Seron Maxwell, and I’ve seen your daughter with her hair down’. They’ll pass the receiver right to her, I know it.>

“...Seron, you got a minute? We need to talk.”

\* \* \*

“Hello. Strauski residence.”

<...>

“Hello?”

<Oh, er, excuse me. My name is Seron Maxwell, a fourth-year student at the 4th Capital Secondary School. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.>

“Ohh, you’re one of Sis’s school buddies! Hiya!”

<...‘H-hiya’? By any chance, are you Megmica’s brother?>

“Uh-huh! I’m Strauski Kurt, 12 years old! Nice to meetcha! We have another little brother too. His name’s Johan and he’s 10.”

<It’s nice to meet you, Kurt. I’m Seron Maxwell. Your Roxchean’s very good. I’m impressed.>

“Cause I went to primary school in Roxche for two years, duh. But I’m not good at polite stuff yet. The teacher tells me off too.”

<I see. Thanks for picking up. It’ll be a lot easier on me.>

“A lot easier for what?”

<Er...just talking to myself. I wanted to talk to your sister—Megmica—about school. Is she home right now? Or is she out on an errand?>

“‘Errand’? Oh, you mean is she out? Yeah. She’s at the department store with Mom and Johan to buy clothes. I’m watching the house. But they’re gonna bring back some of those deep-fried crisps for me. I love ‘em!”

<I see. And yeah, the crisps are good sometimes, but they smell a bit strong and they're really greasy.>

“Y’know, you can’t get that stuff in Sou Be-Il, ever! Crisps like that don’t exist! Me and Johan cried cause it was so good, when we first tried it! All the Westerners in the Capital District say, ‘it’s so good!’, ‘it’s delicious!’ and eat it all the time!”

<Really?>

“Yeah! If they don’t like it, they’re a fake person pretending to be from the West! Even Dad says we’d make a fortune if we sold it to Sou Be-Il! But you only eat it sometimes, Big Bro?”

<Yeah. I live in the dorms and eat all my meals there, so I don’t get the chance to go out for food. Right now I’m back home, though. I live in a city called Weld, far from the Capital District. Those deep-fried crisps aren’t as popular here, so I don’t get to eat them often.>

“Wow! You live far away? Cool! Can I come over sometime?”

<Hm. Weld is really far. You have to take a train overnight. But sometimes I invite my friends over, so maybe you could come with them.>

“Cool! I’m gonna bring Sis too!”

<...>

“S’wrong?”

<N-nothing. It’s nothing. Yeah. You do that.>

“Awesome! Oh, you said you wanted to tell her something, right? But she’s out right now.”

<Could you take a message?>

“‘Take’ a message? Er...oh, that means I have to listen and then tell her the message later, right? I got it.”

<Yeah. Tell her the newspaper club won’t be doing any activities over the summer, and that she should come to the club office after class on the first day back.>

“No newspaper club stuff for the summer, and meet on the first day of school. Got that. I wrote it down!”

<Perfect. I’m counting on you, Kurt.>

“Leave it to me! Does Sis know your number, Big Bro?”

<I think she does, but could you take it down, just in case?>

## **Chapter 1: The Start of the Fall Term**

### **The 13th day of the ninth month, the year 3305 of the World Calendar.**

There was a blue planet with a very large moon.

90 percent of the planet was covered in water, and the poles were covered in ice.

There was an oval, potato-shaped continent in the northern hemisphere of that planet.

The southern part of the continent was a brown desert. But as the latitude increased, the land exploded in a splash of green.

There was a massive mountain range in the middle of the continent, beginning at the desert. The mountains, capped with snow even in the middle of summer, ended abruptly about halfway up the continent. The two rivers on either side of the mountain range converged there, creating the massive Lutoni River that flowed straight north and into the sea.

There were two nations on the continent, one on either side.

In the east was the Roxcheanuk Confederation, also known as Roxche. It was made up of 16 member states and territories.

In the west were the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa, also known as Sou Be-II. It was made up of the kingdoms of Bezel and Iltoa, along with a handful of small subordinate countries.

For eons, the people of the East and West had warred against one another with the Lutoni River between them.

In more contemporary times, each side of the continent forged alliances, and Roxche and Sou Be-II were formed almost simultaneously. What followed was a cold war, one massive war, and many smaller conflicts.

But about 20 years ago, the cold war was ended by a certain incident.

The threat of another Great War was beginning to fade.

The capital of Roxche was the Special Capital District, a region independent of any member state within the confederation.

It was on the northeastern end of Roxche, very far from the East-West border but also a fair distance from the sea.

The Special Capital District was a circular area about 30 kilometers in diameter. It had been built when Roxche was first formed.

The city center was home to the presidential residence, the Confederation Assembly Hall, civic centers, and courthouses. Outside the center was a business district crowded with department stores and hotels. Further outside was a residential district full of apartment buildings.

And on the outskirts of the Capital District, in the 9:30 direction, was the 4th Capital Secondary School.

The 600 meter-square campus was surrounded by apartment buildings, and housed class buildings, the grounds, gymnasiums, and the dormitory building, among others.

The dorms were on the edge of the campus. It was a symmetrical building divided by gender on either side of the lobby in the center.

Unlike the drab grey concrete of the apartments over the wall from the school, the majestic stone design of the dormitory was a perfect match for the rest of the campus.

It was early in the morning, in the lobby on the first floor lined with phone booths.

“It’s been a while, buddy! How’re you doing?”

“Great, Larry. I had an awesome summer.”

Seron and Larry greeted each other with smiles.

Seron Maxwell was 15 years old and a third-year student. He was of average height and had a slender build. He had slightly long black hair and light grey eyes the color of clouds.

Seron was dressed in street clothes. Beige pants with a navy long-sleeved shirt, along with laceless shoes. On his left wrist was a simple watch, which he wore every day.

Larry Hepburn was also 15 years old. He was shorter than Seron but muscular and fit. His blond hair was cropped short, and he had bright blue eyes.

“You’re looking braver than usual, Larry.”

Larry was wearing a military uniform.

He wore a Confederation Army-issue dark-and-light green summer combat uniform. Strapped to the belt around his waist was a magazine belt for rifle rounds and a water bottle tucked inside a cloth pouch. On his feet were a pair of laceless black boots that had been polished to a shine.

Larry also carried a large rucksack laden with a rolled-up sleeping bag, a folding spade, and a metal helmet.

“Cool, eh?” Larry grinned, pushing up his hat. “They haven’t even started issuing this new camo gear yet. Anyway, the military sciences training camp is over!”

“How was it?”

“Incredible! This time we had an officer from the department of strategy as an instructor telling us how we can deceive the enemy and take them off-guard. It was great! He said the louder the diversion, the more effective it is. But at the same time you have to keep in mind what the enemy might be thinking, to make sure you’re not the one falling for a trap. We also learned that you have to move with the sun at your back when you’re conducting an ambush and—”

Larry was as energetic as ever, with the same old grin on his face.

“Anyway, that’s enough about the camp. ...Sorry I gotta bring it up so soon, but please help me with my homework, Seron!”

His face quickly took on a desperate hue.

\* \* \*

Seron’s room was on the third floor of the boys’ dorms.

The 4th Capital Secondary School gave each dormitory student their own room out of consideration for their privacy, but the rooms were small and cramped to compensate.

Each room was furnished with a wooden bed, a desk, a closet, and a dresser. All the plumbing was concentrated at the center of each floor, so the kitchens and bathrooms were communal.

The clear blue sky outside the window seemed to declare the start of autumn. It was warm for the season, however. They could leave the windows open and still be comfortable in summer clothes. The light green curtains fluttered gently in the breeze.

“Aw, man...year in, year out, all this homework drives me insane...”

Larry had taken off his uniform jacket, and was in a T-shirt with the word ‘ARMY’ printed on the front. He sat at Seron’s desk with his own notebook and printouts spread open.

Seron sat on his bed behind him and explained all the questions Larry had given up on.

Taking a brief tea break partway through, Larry plowed through his homework until sweat dotted his brow.

“Done...mission accomplished...”

It was a little past noon by the time he finally finished.

“Tell my family...I fell bravely in battle...” he gasped, collapsing onto the desk.

“Good job, Larry,” Seron said, “would you prefer to stay dead a little longer, or do you want to head to the cafeteria?”

“Food!” Larry leapt up.

Larry and Seron, both in T-shirts and shorts, entered the dormitory cafeteria.

The dormitory cafeteria was the size of a hotel banquet hall, and was usually reserved for breakfasts, dinners, and weekend meals for dormitory students. However, non-dormitory students could also use the cafeteria if they were using the dorms for school-approved activities.

A few students were already there. Some were in uniform, and others were not.

The former were students who had come to school for club activities. The main cafeteria was closed, so they had to use the dormitory cafeteria. The latter were mostly dormitory students like Seron.

Only one of the counters was open that day. Seron ordered cream of mushroom soup with chicken with a side of bread. Larry did so as well, and also ordered a fish burger for two servings for food.

Larry was a big eater, but because he exercised every day, he did not gain much weight. He also scooped up a heaping helping of vegetables at the salad bar.

Afterwards, Larry wrote down his student number on the record sheet so he would be billed later.

Seron and Larry sat away from the other students, prayed, and started on their food.

“It’s my turn to help you out, Seron. Let’s start our strategy meeting,” Larry said, chewing slowly.

“A strategy meeting? What for?” Seron asked, not a hint of emotion rising to his face. Larry looked around to make sure no one was around before replying.

“For helping you get closer to Megmica in the fall term.”

“Oh.”

“It’s too bad the camp was canceled early, but you made some progress this summer. A *lot* of progress, considering where you started,” Larry said with a smile, looking into Seron’s expressionless face. Seron replied, still expressionless.

“It was the greatest summer in the history of Roxche.”

Larry blinked.

“That’s some sense of scale, buddy. I guess this summer was basically like your own personal Mural discovery. Anyway, this is where things are really gonna get started. How do we get you and Megmica together this autumn?”

“Hm...”

Seron had frozen, deep in thought.

“You can keep eating, Seron. Just hear me out. We know Megmica’s gonna be coming to school every day this term. That obviously means you’ll have a lot more chances to meet her. And the more you meet her, the closer you’ll get. That’s how it works.”

Seron slowly scooped up a large mushroom from his soup.

“But...it’ll be hard to take the same classes as her.”

Larry had to agree.

In secondary school, most students could make their own timetables. Other than the mandatory classes, they had free rein to choose their electives. This meant that everyone’s curriculum was different.

Students had to choose the classes they wanted to take and submit their choices in the term before. And because there were so many students and classes, it was unlikely they would end up in the same class by chance.

“But! But! Starting this term, you can see her every day! You know why, right?”

Seron swallowed the mushroom and replied,

“The newspaper club.”

“Exactly. You’ll get to see Megmica every day once class starts in two days. Talk to her about a bunch of things, show off your good side. And when you find the right moment, take a deep breath and ask her out.”

“What if she turns me down?” Seron asked immediately. Larry was taken aback.

“Don’t be so pessimistic.”

“B-but—”

Seron was expressionless yet clearly anxious. Larry cut him off.

“Never mind. I guess there’s no real rush. Let’s just keep the asking out part as a final resort. Like for if her family suddenly has to move back to Sou Be-II next month or something.”

“R-right.”

“You can see her every day now, so we can go with a simple strategy: spend as much time with her as possible and take your time getting to know her. Sound good to you?”

“Yeah. Great.”

Though it was a conservative conclusion, they arrived at one nonetheless and finished their lunches to boot. Larry picked up his cup of tea and changed the subject. “You said you moved back in two days ago? What’d you do yesterday? Was Jenny at school by any chance?”

“No, I haven’t spoken to her since the telephone call. Yesterday I went shopping at the department store in the morning and spent the afternoon at the Roxee Museum of Art. It was my fifth time going there, but I think I finally managed to look at all the exhibits,” Seron replied casually. Larry cut in.

“Alone?”

“Huh? Yeah. Of course.”

Larry fell into deep thought.

Why couldn't Seron have called Meg and asked her to go with him? She lived in the Capital District, after all. Seron could have called Natalia or Jenny or Nick to help him out. Larry agonized over Seron's timidity, but he did not go so far as to question him over it.

"M-makes sense. The museum's massive, I mean. Last time I went was on a class trip in primary school. I remember yelling about how the weapons exhibit had stuff just like my house, but the curator glared at me so I had to shut up."

"Too bad. You were telling the truth, too," Seron said sympathetically.

Seron had visited the Hepburn manor in the past. The Hepburns were a military family boasting a 400-year-plus history. Their halls were lined with swords and suits of armor passed down through the generations.

"The ones at home are all dented and stuff, though. I feel bad for my ancestors, but that's part of family tradition too," Larry said with a grin.

Larry was not the only one who horsed around with the family's weapons. His brother, their father and uncles, their grandfather, and all the men of the Hepburn family—and some of the women—trained or played around with the weapons and armor, denting and damaging them over the generations.

After lunch, Seron and Larry picked up their trays and headed for the counter.

"Thanks for helping me out with homework, buddy. I'm gonna head over to the military academy armory and drop off my gear and head back home. I'd invite you for dinner, but we're having relatives over for a conference at my place. Sorry."

"No worries. I'll see you when classes start."

They placed their trays on the return counter and left the cafeteria.

At that moment—

"E-excuse me!"

A girl came up to them.

Two girls had been waiting for them at the doors. Both were in uniform, and seemed to be a little younger than Seron and Larry.

The one who had spoken was the taller of the two, with curly brown hair and light green eyes, along with a pair of glasses. And her eyes were fixed intently on Seron.

The other girl was petite. She was only a little taller than Jenny Jones, with short black hair and light brown eyes. Unlike her clearly-determined friend, she looked at Seron even more blankly than the way he looked at the girl.

"What is it?"

Seron knew exactly what the girl wanted, but he responded as calmly as ever. Larry also understood what the girl wanted, from her desperate and passionate gaze.

"Er...SC Maxwell! M-my name is Margaret Whistler! I'm a second-year! I've liked you ever since I first saw you! I'm sorry this is so sudden, but I happened to see you today and I just couldn't hold back any more! Will you please go out with me?"

The bespectacled girl's fists were clenched tightly. She was pouring out her heart. Seron did not avert his eyes all throughout the confession. For some time, Larry and the dark-haired girl looked on.

Finally, Seron spoke.

"Thank you, but—"



And he gently followed Larry's directions on how to turn someone down without hurting their feelings. He had done so many times in the past.

Seron had several set responses ready for when someone asked him out in person, or when someone left a love letter in his locker. Each time, he made sure to avoid any word that could possibly be misinterpreted, emphasizing that he was not interested.

The bespectacled girl seemed sad for a moment, but she listened to Seron until the end and relaxed.

Perhaps she already knew that Seron had a track record of rejecting confessions; perhaps she knew it was hopeless from the very beginning; perhaps she considered the attempt more meaningful than the outcome; or perhaps all were true.

"I understand. Thank you so much!" she said with a bow, looking refreshed.

Larry waited for the lull in the conversation before butting in cheerfully.

"That was pretty cool, both of you. I've never had a crush on anyone and no one's asked me out as long as I've been here, so it was kinda moving to watch!"

A faint smile rose to the bespectacled girl's face.

"Thank you. I'm so sorry for bothering you, SC Maxwell. And...er..."

"Larry Hepburn. I'm a friend of Seron."

"I'm so sorry for bothering you. If you don't mind, could you please keep this a—"

"I know. I won't tell a soul."

"Thank you."

The girl thanked them one more time before walking away. The black-haired girl followed expressionlessly.

Two seconds later.

"Perfect."

Neither Larry nor Seron, nor the bespectacled girl noticed the sliver of a smile on the black-haired girl's face.

\* \* \*

### **The 15th day of the ninth month.**

The fall term of the year 3305 began.

Countless cars and students swarmed to the school, which had previously been occupied only by students doing club activities and dormitory residents. The roundabout outside the gates and the school hallways were packed.

It wasn't as chaotic as the start of a new year, when first-years were bound to get lost, but the students were nonetheless streaming through the buildings.

Their uniforms consisted of green pants, a button-up shirt with the school emblem over the right breast, and a necktie.

Wearing his uniform for the first time in two months, Seron neither panicked nor hurried as he headed for the class he had selected. He had wanted to sign up for Bezelese, but he had decided too late and his options clashed with his timetable.

“Oh well.”

And, as he had expected, he did not see Strauski Megmica in any of his morning or afternoon classes. He did not see anyone else from the newspaper club, either.

“AHH! I’m so glad I picked this class! This term is going to be great!”

A girl in one of his classes was almost in tears at the sight of him.

“I remember that guy from last term. The one Meg told me about,” a certain girl with a very long name muttered to herself in another one of his classes.

The first day of classes ended with introductions and a quick look through their textbooks and curriculum.

Seron’s afternoon classes ended early, so he headed to another building. His bag was light because he did not have any of his textbooks yet.

On the vast school grounds were buildings both old and new. Seron headed to one of the older ones, on the first floor of which was the newspaper club’s office.

Seron knocked on the door. He waited for a moment, but there was no response. The handle would not budge, either.

Seron took out a key from his bag and unlocked the door.

Beyond was the most lavish club office on campus.

The office was about half the size of a classroom. In the corner was a kitchenette with a sink and a hot plate, and a dish rack.

In the center of the office were two three-seater sofas and an imposing coffee table set. Beside them were work desks and chairs.

Against the wall stood a floor-length locker. It was used to store bags and equipment. Against another wall was a display case and a telephone.

The office had another room further inside, built by erecting a wall that bisected the room. It was the club’s very own darkroom.

Seron entered. There was no one inside.

Seron put his bag on the sofa and opened the window. Fresh air wafted in through the lace curtains, slowly replacing the faint odor of developing solution.

Seron sat in the middle of one of the sofas and waited. Soon, a girl opened the door.

“Aw, man. Could’ve sworn I got out first today. You win, Seron.”

Though she did not specify what Seron had won, the tall, bespectacled girl—Natalia Steinbeck—swept into the room.

Natalia was a third-year like Seron. Her parents were an internationally famous musician couple. She played the violin in the orchestra club and did double duty with the newspaper club as well.

Natalia was tall for a girl, and her long hair was tied up neatly. She wore black thin-rimmed glasses and had dark eyes. She wore stockings with her skirt.

Today she was carrying a school-issue bag and had a guitar case on her back. Natalia waved as she strode in.

“Yo, Champ! How’s it going?”

“Pretty good. It’s been a while, Nat,” Seron replied. Everyone but her childhood friend Larry called her ‘Nat’.

Natalia took off her guitar case and gingerly set it on the coffee table. Then she took out the guitar.

“Had to come back here over the summer for this baby ‘cause we weren’t using the office for a while.”

“Right.”

Natalia took a seat on the sofa across from Seron, but on one of the side seats. She leaned back and began to play some chords.

“So tell me~ is the tea ready yet~?” she sang, almost as though performing in a musical.

“Shall I brew some?” Seron asked stoically. Natalia grinned.

“Nah, I’m kidding. I’ll make Larry do it once everyone gets here.”

“That’s cruel of you.”

“It’s my fault we didn’t have any club activities over the summer, huh. Sorry, Seron. I had fun, though,” Natalia said, not sounding sorry in the least.

“It’s nothing to be sorry about,” Seron replied. “Where did your family go, anyway?”

Natalia strummed another chord.

“Ikstooooovaaaaa~!”

“Ikstova? Ah, the Kingdom of Iks. They changed their name, didn’t they.”

Ikstova was a mountain kingdom at the westernmost edge of Roxche, nestled in the Central Mountain Range.

“That’s quite far. Almost as far as Sou Be-Il.”

“Sure was a long trip~ so wanna know more~?”

Natalia briefly recounted her trip to Seron.

She explained how she had been suddenly taken by her parents on a performance trip to the Kingdom of Iks, taking the sleeper train and a bus. How the cheese in Ikstova was so good she stuffed herself silly. How she was invited to the palace in the capital city, Kunst, and watched her parents perform for Queen Francesca and Sir Benedict. How she performed alongside her parents at the reception. How a documentary crew had joined the reception, and how she might receive a brief close-up in a documentary film detailing the sights of the Kingdom of Iks.

“That’s a big deal, isn’t it?”

“Sure, but I’m already a celeb. Want me to sign your shirt? It’ll sell for a lot in a few years.”

“Later, sure.”

“Later~? Then I will~ I’ll sign it later~.” Natalia began singing again, filling the office with music.

“I wondered for a moment if I’d come to the music room by accident. You’re both quite early today.”

A boy stepped into the office.

“Afternoon, Nick.”

“Been a while~ Nick~ Still a beauty, I see~!”

Seron greeted him normally, and Natalia in song. Nicholas Browning was as beautiful as ever, his uniform still the only way to tell that he was male. He had a slender build and fair skin

with brown, back-length hair and narrow green eyes. There was a cream-colored cardigan over his uniform shirt.

Carrying his bag, Nick took a seat next to Seron.

“It’s been a while, Seron. Nat. How were your summers?”

“Pretty good~!”

“Great. And you?”

“Lovely, as usual,” Nick replied with a smile. “By the way, it seems I do not share any classes with any of the club members. What about you two?”

“Same,” Seron said, shaking his head. Natalia responded with a strum of the guitar.

“I just happen~ to have a class with~ the pigtailed girl from the West~ Miss Strauski~!”

“Which one?” “Oh, which class?”

“Family Studies 403: Sewing’~” Natalia replied in song. The boys sighed.

“I...can’t take that class.”

“Nor can I. Which classes are you taking this term, Seron?”

“‘Roxchean 410: Modern Literature’, ‘Social Studies 305: Contemporary Roxchean History’, ‘Physical Education 301—’”

“Sorry I’m late!” Larry cut Seron off, striding in. Like Seron, he was wearing his uniform this time. Larry was also carrying his bag.

“Hey Larry.” “It has been a while, Larry,” Seron and Nick greeted him.

“Try to open the door~ more quietly~ Larry boy~ do you hear me~?” Natalia sang grimly, playing an arpeggio with her fingertips. Larry grimaced.

“Wh-what are you *doing*, Lia?”

“Can’t you tell~?”

Larry sighed. “Seron. Nick. If she’s getting on your nerves, just say so.” He put down his bag and took a seat—

“Hold it. Brew up some tea, Larry. Punishment for coming in last.”

“Unless two of our club members suddenly turned invisible, I’m pretty sure there are only four of us in here. Or are they in the darkroom?” Larry asked. Natalia narrowed her eyes with an elegant smile.

“You got me. I suppose once Megmica and the chief get here I can just *order* them to make us tea.”

“...Fine, I’ll do it.”

Larry grabbed the kettle and the teapot from the dish rack and took them to the sink.

He washed his hands and filled the kettle with water, then placed it on the hot plate. And as he waited for the water to boil, he expertly prepared the platter, teacups, and tea bag.

“I must say I am quite impressed, Larry,” Nick commented.

“Hm? You gotta know how to do this kind of stuff in the military. Making tea for your superiors is part of the job.”

Once the water came to a boil, Larry warmed up the teapot and teacups with the water, then steeped the large tea bag in the teapot. Then he looked up at the wall clock to check how long he had to wait.

The tea was finally ready.

“Everyone’s here.”

“I am here now!”

Two girls joined the group.

One was a petite girl—the club president, Jenny Jones. She had short red hair and big brown eyes. Naturally, she was in uniform. She carried her school-issue bag on her back and had a large leather camera bag slung across her shoulder.

The other was Strauski Megmica, a girl with long black hair tied into pigtails. She was from Sou Be-Il, and had lived in Roxche for over two years. She had dark eyes and fairer skin than anyone else in the room.

For the first time in nearly a month, Seron saw Meg’s smile.

Silently and blankly, he fell into deep thought and reminiscence.

“Hey there! Good afternoon, chief~! And you, Megmica~!”

“You two seem to be well.”

“Perfect timing. The tea’s just about ready.”

Natalia, Nick, and Larry greeted them. Seron also chimed in with a brief hello.

Jenny strode over to her desk and carefully set down her heavy camera bag. She began to empty it out, taking out a camera and the lenses.

Meg stood beside the sofas and bowed lightly.

“The school has again started. This is a new term. Please let me do my best from now on, everyone.”

*‘That’s my line. Please please please let me do my best for you forever and always,’* Seron replied in his head. At that moment—

“All right, all right. Take a seat!”

“Eep!”

Natalia pulled Meg onto the girls’ sofa.

Larry carefully brought over the teacups and poured tea for everyone.

“There.”

And he called Jenny over as she tidied up her gear.

Six students sat on the sofas. Each had their own teacup. As usual, Larry’s was the expensive one adorned with pink flowers.

“Any words to start off the new term, chief?” Natalia suggested. Jenny rose to the occasion.

“Ahem. Thanks for coming, everybody! We’re now starting off the new term. I just officially registered our club with the school, so we should get permission to operate any day now!”

“Do we even need to register?” Larry wondered quietly. Jenny ignored him and continued.

“Today is the beginning of our legend! The legend of the newspaper club! As your president, I couldn’t have asked for more! I’ll be bossing you around like crazy starting tomorrow, so do your best! That is all.”

The club members sipped their tea.

“...I have something to tell you, Jenny. I fear you may not like what you hear,” Nick said, his tone dropping. “I will not be able to visit the office for some time.”

“Wh-what...? Why?” Jenny shot him a glare. Nick continued solemnly.

“I believe Nat and Megmica will be absent for the same reason.”

Larry, who was usually the last to pick up on such implications, understood as well.

“You’re right!”

“The fall performance. There’s only a month left, isn’t there,” Seron said.

“That is right! Ms. Krantz contacted to us. I, who am in the chorus club, am at practice nearly every day after school starting from tomorrow!”

“The orchestra club too. I’m spending the next month with my violin tucked under my face. Farewell, sweet guitar~!”

“Seriously?” Jenny groaned. “So Seron and Larry are the only ones who can do anything for the next month?”

Everyone agreed in silence.

“I don’t believe this!”

Jenny was furious. The others could not say anything; they simply met her gaze.

“Calm down. More tea?” Larry offered.

Jenny held out her empty cup and ordered, “Yes! And a serving of something newsworthy, blondie!”

“Like what?”

“How am I supposed to know? Something interesting. Something that’ll bring all the students flocking to our papers when we post them on the walls. Something that’ll get our papers stolen.”

“Easy for you to say,” Larry said, putting down the teapot and falling into thought.

“Hmm...”

That was when an idea came to him. Larry’s eyes flew wide open and he slammed his fist against his open palm.

“I got it! I can guarantee it’ll be popular! And I seriously want to try looking into this one. It’ll be perfect for our first issue!”

All eyes were on Larry. Jenny silently urged him to continue, sipping her tea.

Larry Hepburn stood up straight with his head held high.

“We’ll run a special! The headline’ll be ‘The Secrets of Jenfie’s Mysterious Past’! We’ll print the picture of her from three years ago with a recent one and put it on the front page!”

Aha! The others gasped in agreement. But the president—

“DENIED!”

## Chapter 2: The Love Letter

### **The 19th day of the ninth month.**

It was after school on the fifth day of class.

“Too bad.”

Only half the newspaper club was gathered in the office. Jenny, Seron, and Larry (who had been the one to sigh). The remaining three were at the drama club rehearsal in the gymnasium.

A fierce rainstorm was raging outside.

The rain had begun in the afternoon, and had grown stronger and stronger until the droplets and fog obscured even buildings next door and the ground seemed to quake. The sky was dark, and the lights in the office were on.

Seron sat in the office sofa, doing what he would have done in the library if he weren't here—reading through a new textbook he had ordered to prepare for class.

Larry was lying on the sofa opposite him.

Jenny sat pouting at her desk, polishing her large single-lens reflex camera and a spare lens.

“Say Jenny. Do we really have to push out a new issue this month? It doesn't seem possible,” Larry asked, turning his head.

“What?! Then what do you suggest we *do* for the next month? This stinks. I finally got a club together, but what's the point if they never show up? I don't want to have to give two of the same lessons on developing photos.” Jenny groaned.

“But they told you ahead of time. Since they're probably busy tomorrow too, why don't we try working on this month's issue, just the three of us? You've been working at it alone for a while, so you can't complain about getting two new helpers. C'mon, Jenfie.”

“Don't call me that! I've said my goodbyes to my past!”

“All right, all right. Anyway, what exactly goes into making a newspaper? Just some articles and photos?”

“Yeah. But the photos have to clearly show what we're trying to communicate, and the sentences have to be easy to read.”

“That's easy to understand. So what about printing?”

“We can't do it here, so we outsource it to a printing house. We can get it printed in a day once all the manuscripts and photos are in, since we only make about 30 copies.”

“Right. Then the hardest part will be to post all the newspapers without the teachers' notice, guerilla-style.”

“Alone, yeah. But it won't be hard as long as we have enough people. Which is why it's such a bummer that people aren't showing up. When will we ever get things done? ... We're finished for today. The rain's not helping our case. Go home, people.”

Jenny waved them out. Seron quietly closed his book.

“All right,” Larry said, pulling himself up with his gut.

Jenny picked up the telephone and called her driver and bodyguard, Edward Kurtz. He was an affable man who had befriended the rest of the newspaper club during the newspaper club camp that summer.

“Looks like I’m bussing home today,” Larry said, gathering their teacups and taking them to the sink. He quickly washed the teapot and the cups, then wiped them down and put them on the rack. Then he washed the dishcloth and hung it up to dry.

The office was littered with valuables like cameras, binoculars, and Natalia’s guitar. Jenny, Seron, and Larry made sure to lock up and left with their bags and umbrellas.

“See you,” Jenny said coolly and left down the hall.

“Sheesh. I’d better get on going too, Seron. Must be nice living in the dorms on days like this.”

“I think so too. But it means you might never leave campus all term long.”

They had only taken a few steps forward when Larry suddenly stopped.

“Shoot! I gotta drop by my locker. Gotta grab my math textbook or I won’t be able to do my homework.”

“I’ll come with you. It’s a bit of a detour but I won’t get rained on if I go to the dorms through the buildings,” said Seron.

“Thanks, man.”

They turned around and went down the hall, in the opposite direction as the exit.

The rain was hammering down on the roof. They passed through another building and entered the main building.

At the center of the main building were the student lockers. Hundreds of them lined the walls in the long, empty area. It almost looked like a graveyard.

Larry and Seron went up to the one labeled ‘Larry Hepburn, 3rd year’.

Larry quickly pulled open the door and looked inside. He did not notice the envelope fluttering out the wide-open door.

“Huh?”

Seron, however, did.

As soon as he found the textbook, Larry shut the locker and turned, kicking the envelope in the process. It flew about three meters down the dry hallway floor.

Seron jogged over and picked it up.

“What’s up, Seron? Dropped something?”

Seron showed Larry the envelope.

It was a perfectly plain, ordinary envelope sealed with glue. Written on it were the words ‘To Larry Hepburn’ in small letters.

“It fell out of your locker.”

“Out of *my* locker?” Larry repeated quizzically and accepted the envelope.

His name was indeed written on it.

“I didn’t notice. Thanks, Seron. I’d have just left it on the floor if you weren’t here.”

“Whoever sent this must have stuck it in your door. But they didn’t write their name.”

As if on cue, Larry made to open the envelope, but Seron stopped him.

“No, Larry. Don’t open it until you get home. Tuck it in your math textbook and read it in your room.”

“Why?”

It was a reversal of the situation in the cafeteria the other day. This time, Seron was the one advising the confused Larry.

“Maybe it’s a personal letter.”

“Huh. Okay. Sure.”

Larry tucked the envelope into his math textbook and put the textbook in his bag.

\* \* \*

The next day.

It was the 20th day of the ninth month, after school on the sixth day of the term.

The rain had let up completely. A beautiful blue sky spread over the Capital District.

“Nice weather today.”

Once afternoon classes were finished, Seron walked past the stone-paved pathway in the central gardens and headed for the club office with the occasional sunward glance. He had arrived first yet again, and was just about to take out his key.

“Seron! Seron! Seron! Seron! This is bad!”

Larry interrupted him, calling his name as he ran down the hall. That he was sprinting was unusual enough, but there was something even more desperate in his eyes.

Seron turned, his eyes narrowing.

Finally, Larry came to a stop next to him. Seron slowly took out his key and unlocked the office.

“What’s wrong, Larry? Is the planet gonna explode if I unlock the door?” he asked, thinking back to Jenny’s joke from the summer.

“No, just open up the door quick! We’ll talk inside.”

“Right.”

They stepped inside. Naturally, no one was in. Larry quickly gestured Seron to the sofa. They sat face-to-face.

“Perfect timing, buddy. We need to talk—before the others get here!”

“Sure. But there’s no rush. Jenny’s classroom’s really far away, and the others are busy.”

“Yeah, but still.”

Larry paused then, and looked around to make sure no one was within earshot. And he lowered his voice.

“About the letter from yesterday...”

The serious look on Larry’s face said it all. Seron also lowered his voice.

“So it really was a love letter.”

“I knew you’d understand, buddy! Seriously, a love letter? For *me*?”

“You make it sound like a bad thing.”

“No, but this is *me* I’m talking about! The musclehead who hasn’t received a single confession in the past two and a half years at this school! I checked over and over again to see if this was a case of mistaken identity. I even went to the faculty office to check if there were any other Larry Hepburns in the school!” Larry raved. He seemed half-ecstatic and half-flabbergasted. “You gotta help me, Seron. I really don’t wanna let the others know—*especially*

not Lia. She'll never let me live it down!" Larry pleaded, looking up at the ceiling and closing his eyes.

"What's this about now?"

"About the love letter I got—" Larry replied reflexively, before realizing his mistake.

The question had come, not from Seron, but the door.

And the question was not in Seron's voice, but—

"Now this sounds interesting. I want details."

—The tall girl walking in through the doors. Her eyes glinted.

"L-Lia..."

Larry realized that he had just made the biggest mistake of his life. He went as pale as a sheet.

"Yes, I'm Natalia. Now about this love letter... must be the end times if *you* managed to get one in your locker."

Natalia, on the other hand, was brimming with amusement.

"What is this conversation? Will Larry learn to write a love letter from Seron?"

"A love letter, you say? I suppose I haven't misheard the term 'blood-letter'?"

"President's orders: I want details now. Looks like my teacher picked the perfect day to end class early."

Nick, Meg, and Jenny followed Natalia inside, one after another. Before Larry knew it, the entire newspaper club was assembled.

"Wh-why is everyone here today?" he stammered.

"Cause we're club members and this is our office," Natalia replied.

\* \* \*

The newspaper club took their seats on the sofas. Cups of tea were set before them.

"Time to spill your guts, Larry Hepburn," said Jenny. All eyes fell on Larry, who sat at the end of one of the sofas.

The club office felt like a court of law, or a questioning room. Seron gave his friend a sympathetic sidelong glance.

"This is personal," Larry protested.

"But you asked Seron for help. What's wrong with a few more sets of ears?" Natalia shot him down. "Don't worry about it. We're all grown-ups here. We're not gonna tell anyone. It'll be a club secret."

Larry looked around. Natalia seemed to be enjoying herself, and Meg was beaming. Jenny listened intently with eyes glinting, and Nick was smiling elegantly.

"Darn it...fine." Larry finally relented. "Someone left this letter in my locker yesterday."

He took out the letter from his bag, but did not hand it to anyone. He seemed to be ready to take it away the moment anyone made a move.

Natalia noted Larry's name on the envelope and asked a grave question.

"You can be honest with us, Larry. How many razorblades did you find inside?"

"What the heck, Lia! None!"

"That's funny."

“The only thing that’s funny is your head, Lia.”

Seron, who had been approached first by Larry, spoke.

“What did the letter say? You don’t have to tell us all the details.”

“Right. So it’s from this girl in second year—”

“A *girl!*!”

“Easy there, Lia. Just shut up for a sec. It says...well... ‘I saw you in the hallway on the first day of fall term and fell in love at first sight. Please go out with me’. But she says she’s never dated anyone before, so she’s not comfortable with meeting alone outside campus. So she wants to eat lunch together, and meet up after school and...g-get to know each other...and talk... and stuff like that!”

Larry cut off, unable to hide his embarrassment. And he put the letter back in his bag, too embarrassed to bring it up again.

“How lovely,” Nick commented, as though it were someone else’s business.

Meg agreed. “That girl, she had worked so hard to write that letter to you. She has squeezed her courage like a dishrag! It is very proud!”

“And how are you supposed to respond?” Jenny asked matter-of-factly, “it’s in the letter, right?”

“Huh? Er, yeah. How’d you know?”

“How would anyone *not* know? So? Spill it.”

“She wants to get the answer in person, so she asked me to come to the tree on the grounds behind the school after class on the first day after the weekend...”

The others’ eyes lit up. “Yeah, I know,” Larry said.

“The tree behind the school, with its perfect confession success rate. Perhaps you will be the star of its second legend. Or perhaps your receiving the letter means the confession has already taken place. What do you think, Larry?” Nick asked, making a point of looking out the window. Larry’s response was immediate.

“I dunno.”

A beat.

“That’s why I was trying to ask Seron for advice.”

“Oh my goodness. Why to Seron?” Meg asked naively. Everyone froze, unable to respond. Silence filled the office.

Knowing the conversation would go nowhere unless someone answered, Jenny spoke up.

“Because Seron’s so popular with girls. He’s got plenty of experience turning them down.”

“Oh my goodness! How amazing.”

Seron froze yet again. He fell into deep thought. He thought. And he thought some more.

“Anyway! Somebody—I don’t care who—please answer me. What should I do?” Larry asked.

“Go meet her.”

“I think that you should meet with her.”

“You should meet her.”

Natalia, Meg, and Nick replied, one after another.

“That sounds like the best course of action,” said Jenny, “meet the girl and talk to her. Everything else comes later.”

“Yeah. You’re right... But you think she’s serious?” Larry wondered, “I’ve never gotten a love letter before in my life. I mean, it’d be nice to be popular with girls like Seron—er, like other people. But...”

“You think this might be a prank?”

“Don’t glare at me, Jenny. I’m just saying it might be. For example, someone might be waiting in the distance to take photos of me sauntering up there with this big doofy grin on my face—”

Larry stopped, his face taking on the look of a funeral-goer.

“I’m praying so hard that the newspaper club isn’t trying to prank me. You’re not, are you?”

“Sounds like it’d be a blast, but unfortunately, no,” Natalia replied.

“A *blast*?! *Unfortunately*?!”

“We have practice after school on the first day back. No time to peep on anybody. Today too. We have to head to the drama club pretty soon.”

“Setting that possibility aside,” said Seron, “who was the sender? Someone you know?”

“No. You know what? What the heck. I’ve come this far, so I might as well tell you the rest. Every heard of a second-year named Stella Whitfield?”

“No.”

“Don’t think I’ve ever done a story on her.”

“I do not know this girl.”

“Me neither. She’s not in the orchestra, at least.”

“Nor the drama club. Quite the mysterious star we have on our hands.”

The others shook their heads.

“What do you mean that she is a star?” asked Meg. Nick gave her a smile.

“‘Stella’ means ‘star’ in an ancient language.”

“Oh my goodness! It is very romantic! I learned something very good now!” Meg screamed, her dark eyes sparkling like stars.

*‘I knew that too! I should have said so! I bet that’s what Seron’s thinking right now,’* Larry thought, but did not say.

“It is a cool thing to have a star as a name. There is a star name called ‘Cana’ in Bezelese. There are many Bezelese words to mean ‘star’, but the only name word is ‘Cana’!”

The others were impressed. Natalia nodded.

“So Sou Be-Il isn’t that different after all.”

“I’ve heard the name ‘Whitfield’ before,” said Seron, “I wonder where?”

Nick was the first to reply.

“Of course, Seron. The name is on your left wrist.”

“Huh?”

All eyes fell on Seron’s left wrist.

A black leather strap and a thin silver case with a simple face and three ticking hands. It was a luxury wristwatch Seron’s mother had bought him when he first started secondary school. It was his favorite—and only—wristwatch.

As of the year 3305, quartz clocks existed but were still the size of refrigerators.

Wristwatches were traditionally mechanical and composed of many tiny gears connected to a spiral spring. They were also very expensive. A regular watch cost about as much as a motorcycle, and the higher-end models could cost as much as a car.

Even at the 4th Capital Secondary School—with its wealthy student body—only about a third of the boys wore a watch on a daily basis. The proportion was even smaller among the girls. Larry and Nick had worn their watches to the newspaper club camp, but not to school that day.

Seron, the only one in the office with a wristwatch, scrutinized his watch and discovered the words ‘Whitfield-Farkas’ in a neat, tiny font at the bottom of the face. The second hand ticked and tocked over the words.

“I see now,” said Seron.

“It’s just like you to never notice even when it was on your wrist the whole time,” Larry chuckled, “Whitfield is really famous in the industry, you know.”

“Didn’t know that.” “I did not know that either.” Natalia and Meg chimed in.

“Then allow me to give you a brief explanation on Whitfield, the famed watchmaker,” Nick said without missing a beat, “Whitfield Watchmakers is based in the Republic of Farkas. Their products are highly precise and sturdy to boot, earning them the title ‘most practical wristwatches in Roxche’. Whitfield was founded about 60 years ago, which puts it behind the 200-year veterans of the Roxche clockmaking industry, but Whitfield is notable for its stable management. The company has been in the family for generations. The founder’s sons almost split the company in two at one point, however. A prime example of a family feud.”

“Figures you’d know that stuff, Nick.”

“And I would not be incorrect in assuming you did as well, Larry?”

“Uh-huh. But you can explain. I’m not as good as you.”

“Then allow me to continue. The family feud is quite irrelevant, so I will skip the matter. Whitfield is famous for their ‘Whitfield Watchmaking Academy’, where future watchmakers are trained in the craft. The academy is infamously strict and graduation rates are low, but all graduates are automatically guaranteed a position at Whitfield. Direct employment is notoriously difficult, so most hopefuls begin by training at the academy. Another point of entry would be the annual Whitfield Competition, which awards the most promising new watchmaker of the year. Entrants are judged on the merits of their submitted models, regardless of age. Winners are guaranteed a position at Whitfield, no matter who they may be. An employee at a rival company, or to exaggerate, even a 10-year old could find employment so long as they were sufficiently talented. It is a method of employment for those confident in their own skills. I believe the results of this year’s competition will be announced soon. That is all I have to say.”

The others nodded, impressed. Larry chimed in.

“I’ve been kinda wanting a Whitfield watch myself, for training. Most watches wouldn’t last a training session, with how much my arms end up in mud and bump into things.”

“Then the Whitfield waterproof model is the one for you, Larry. A sturdy, accurate and automatic model that can ‘withstand any battlefield impact’, or so the advertisement says. Why not purchase one?”

“As if it were that easy. It’s a sweet watch, but I could buy a motorbike with that much money.”

“Ah, so you’ve checked.”

“Yeah, you got me. I once flipped through every Whitfield catalogue I could find cause I wanted one so much.”

“And you gave in?”

“How could I not?”

“Hey!” Natalia cut in, “That’s enough guy talk. You’re getting off-topic here. Are you actually girls? What’s next, going to the bathroom together?”

“Sorry, Lia.”

“Excuse me.”

All eyes were on Natalia. She brought the conversation back on track.

“So this ‘Stella’ is probably a daughter of the Whitfield family. Makes sense. The school’s at the edge of the capital and Farkas is just west of us. You just hit paydirt, Larry!”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, Lia.”

“What is the paydirt? Is it a very good soil?”

“You don’t need to know this stuff, Megmica.”

“It means that Larry has come across great fortune. The potential to marry into a very rich family. I’m quite jealous of you, Larry. I wish the two of you happiness.”

“Hey, that last part was uncalled for. Especially with that grin!”

“Heh heh...so the first headliner of the term’s gonna be a romance. I’m gonna give it everything I have.”

“Oh no you don’t, Jenny!”

Larry was exhausting himself. Seron spoke.

“You’re going to have to meet her.”

“Yeah, I guess I should. I’m not the most articulate guy, though,” Larry sighed, and sipped from his usual flower-print teacup.

“Are you gonna go out with her?” asked Jenny. Larry put down his cup and put his hand on his head.

“I dunno. I mean, I always thought it’d be cool to be popular, but I have no idea what dating someone is supposed to be like. You’re supposed to go out with someone you like, but I don’t even know if I’ll like her or not.”

“Perhaps you will know once you meet her. And if she happens to be your type, you could start off there,” Nick suggested.

“Yeah, but what if it’s the opposite? If she’s not my type? Do I just tell her that and turn her down? Is that all?”

“That’s all,” Jenny responded, “And if she’s really not your type, tell it to her straight. There’s nothing more cruel than going out with someone you don’t even like.”

Jenny was looking very serious. Larry fell into thought.

Then,

“All right. I’ll do that. Thanks for all your advice, guys,” he finally said with a smile.

“Oh, now a love will begin in front of my eyes,” Meg said, beaming, “my heart is beating very fast! It is a great thing to love and confess someone! I hope that everyone will confess very much from now on!”

Seron silently looked into the distance.



\* \* \*

### **The 23rd day of the ninth month.**

It was the ninth day of the new term, with two days off in between. The sky was clear and the wind was calm.

The student cafeteria at the 4th Capital Secondary School took up a large area inside the main building, along with a tiled area in the central gardens.

On clear days, table and chairs were placed on the tiles outside. Students who enjoyed the outdoors or disliked crowded areas tended to frequent the garden.

Those who brought their own lunches could use the cafeteria as well, but not many did because it was easier for them to simply eat in their classrooms.

Seron was sitting alone at a table for two in the gardens. He had just started on his lunch when Larry called out to him.

“Hey there!”

Larry was carrying his tray, as energetic as ever. He set it down and sat across from Seron.

“Hey Larry. You look nervous,” Seron said immediately. Larry blinked.

“Oh. Is it written on my face? Am I shaking?”

“No, but—”

Seron pointed at Larry’s tray. He had ordered the same thing as Seron; a single serving of fish soup and pasta with salad.

“You’re only eating half your usual.”

“Ha ha ha! Yeah. I’m definitely nervous.”

Larry prayed before his meal. Then he and Seron dug in at the same time.

“Well,” Larry said between bites, “I’m still not convinced this isn’t a nasty prank. If it is, I can just give the prankster a nasty arm twist, but if it’s for real...”

“Hm.”

“...You know, I’m really curious to see what kind of girl would say she likes me. Wonder what she’s like. I can’t wait for class to end.”

“Then make sure you go see her.”

“I know. Jenny once said love is a battle, right?”

“Yeah. When we took SC Sophia’s request.”

“Then I gotta get out there and give it my all. It’s in the family motto—‘Knights of Hepburn ne’er shall turn’!”

Seron smiled.

“Yeah. Good luck, Larry.”

“Thanks. By the way, not being able to turn isn’t the same thing as not being allowed to run away.”

“The motto sounds cooler without the explanation.”

“I don’t mind. Looking cool isn’t really my thing.”

\* \* \*

After school.

Larry Hepburn was walking across the grounds behind the school, face set and eyes determined.

He could see students heading home in the distance. But the grounds behind the school were not popular with the students, and therefore silent.

Larry finally reached the tree. He took a look around, and when he saw no one was there, he leaned against the trunk to avoid the sunlight.

“Hm...”

And he waited for a girl who might never arrive.

First he checked to see if anyone had set a trap for him. With his eyesight he could even see the newspaper club office, but no one was clinging to the window with binoculars over their eyes.

In the gymnasium in the distance, the orchestra club began to play.

“Lia’s not gonna get in the way, at least...” Larry muttered to himself, and waited.

Time passed. It had been long enough for a hot cup of tea to go cold. Larry pushed away from the trunk so he could take a seat.

“Er...I’m sorry I’m late.”

A soft voice.

“Ah!”

Larry turned quickly. All he saw was the tree trunk.

“Wait, what?”

For a moment he had thought the tree was talking to him, but he leaned over and saw a girl standing behind it.

She stood with her back to the sun. The girl was clad in uniform, and was petite. She was only a little taller than Jenny Jones, with short black hair and light brown eyes.

Her face was inscrutable like a doll. It was hard to tell if she was happy or sad or nervous. She had pretty features but didn’t stand out, which was a perfect fit for her quiet bearing.

Larry said nothing, but smiled. His cheeks went pink.

The girl also said nothing. Her mask-like face simply looked at Larry’s.

Ten seconds passed, and then some.

“Hm...?” Larry Hepburn mumbled. He furrowed his brow and his eyes narrowed.

“Is something the matter?”

The girl seemed nervous. Larry shook his head.

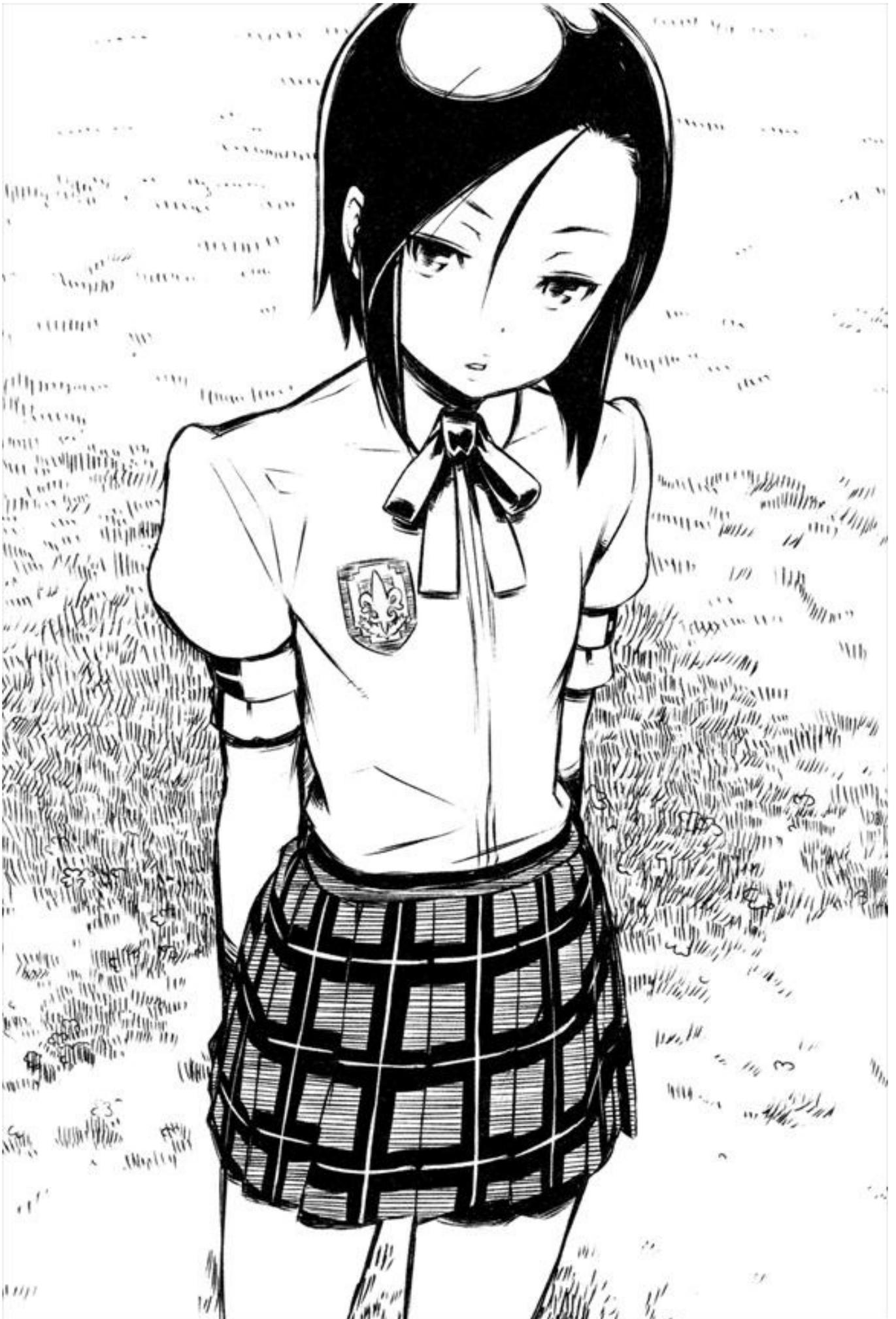
“Oh! Sorry! Just zoning out for a bit. Talking to myself. So, er...are you Stella Whitfield?”

“Yes. Please call me Stella, SC Hepburn.”

Though she was standing right in front of him, it was almost impossible to hear her voice. Her tone was muted and the blanks between her words were almost audible.

“I read your letter,” Larry said, and paused.

Stella did not say a word. She simply waited for Larry with a blank expression.



“Er...about the stuff you wrote. Did you really mean it?”

A moment later, Larry frowned. *‘I shouldn’t have said that.’*

“Yes,” Stella said briefly.

“I...I see! That’s good to hear! Yeah.”

“Yes...”

“Sorry, I was just a little surprised.”

“It’s...all right.”

“Er...right. So. Well...”

Stella was so reticent that Larry had to think hard about how he should continue the conversation before he finally settled on a typical question.

“Have we met before?”

“Yes. After summer break, outside the dormitory cafeteria...”

“Hm? Ah! I remember!” Larry cried, loud enough to startle anyone.

But Stella did not even blink. She stood as still as the tree next to them.

“You were with the girl who asked Seron out!”

Stella moved her chin up and down by about three centimeters. In other words, she nodded almost imperceptibly.

“When I saw you...I thought you were really attractive.”

“I-I see... Thanks. ...You said you only wanted to meet at school, right?”

“Yes. I’ve never...dated before. I’m not comfortable with being alone...outside of campus,” Stella replied firmly. Larry gave her the best smile he could muster.

“All right!”

“Huh?”

“It’s cool that you can honestly stick to your guns like that! It’s really brave of you! I wish somebody I knew could be more like you!”

“Huh? Oh...right.”

“W-wait, I was just saying that to myself. Anyway, I like you, Stella!”

“Th-thank you...”

“Then let’s hang out whenever we have time! You only want to meet on campus, right?”

“Yes...thank you so much.”

Larry looked at Stella, then at the newspaper club office.

There was no one at the window.

Looking into Stella’s blank face, Larry nodded.

“Pleasure to meet you!”

### **Chapter 3: Stella**

“...And that’s what happened. I forgot to ask her about her family, but she was cute so I guess that’s why I decided I’d go out with her. We’re gonna see each other at school. Having lunch together at the cafeteria starting tomorrow,” Larry explained in the office.

Opposite the coffee table sat Seron and Jenny. It had not been long since the confession under the tree.

“Wow...”

Unusually enough, Seron was wearing his surprise and happiness on his face. Jenny was nodding gravely.

“Hm. All right. You have permission to continue...for now.”

“What are you, my mother?”

“The more you spend time with her, the more you’ll learn about her—both the good and bad. Same goes for her too. You can decide if you want to get serious after that. Although she might break up with you first. Then that’s just another life experience under your belt.”

“What, you seriously expect this to end before it’s even started?”

“Well, do your best. I won’t even smack you for skipping club. We’re missing half our members, what’s another absence?”

“I’m surprised, Jenny. I thought you’d make me come to club every day anyway.”

“You should prioritize her for the time being. You’re a man. Be good to her.”

“...Jenny.”

“What?”

Larry thought for a moment. Then,

“Nah. Thanks for your support,” he finally said.

“I don’t need your gratitude,” Jenny blew him off.

“And while I’m at it, there was something I wanted your help with.”

“Yeah?”

“Could you look into stuff about Stella Whitfield? I want some information about her,” Larry said.

“What?” “Huh?”

Jenny and Seron blinked. Seron spoke first. “You want us to investigate her?”

Then Jenny. “You’re gonna spend a lot of time with her. Ask her yourself.”

“W-well, yeah. But I wanted to know about other stuff too.”

“Like?” Jenny asked, tilting her head.

“Like...her reputation on campus, or about the kind of people she hangs out with? Stuff I couldn’t ask her myself, you know. I wish I could explain better.”

Jenny looked a little offended.

“Are you a detective? Are you planning to marry her next month or something? Look, it’s rude to dig up dirt on a girl. You’re the one who said we shouldn’t cover this story.”

“I know, I know. But...”

“But?”

“Well, I just...because.”

“This is ridicu-” Jenny started, but Seron cut her off.

“All right, Larry. We’ll try and get as much information as we can.”

“Huh?” “Thanks, man!”

Jenny gave Seron a quizzical look. Larry gave him a grateful one.

“What gives, Seron?” Jenny demanded.

“I just want to know a bit more about my best friend’s girlfriend. And I think it’ll be good practice for newspaper club activities further down the line.”

When Seron brought up the newspaper club, Jenny could not refuse. She gave a disdainful harrumph but relented. “Fine, whatever. I’m not gonna stop you.”

But Seron was not about to let her off the hook.

“I can’t do this alone. I need everyone else’s help—especially yours, Jenny.”

“What?”

“You’re the only one who can utilize all the newspaper club’s fans. And you’re the only one with an information network.”

Larry’s jaw dropped at Seron’s earnest plea, but he quickly joined him in pleading with Jenny.

“I’m begging you, chief!”

Jenny was taken aback by Larry’s attitude. She grew serious as well.

“What’s gotten into you? I mean, it’s not like I have anything better to do, but still.”

“You mean it?”

“Thanks, Jenny.”

“But I’m warning you! If you start digging up dirt on her, you’ll see things about her you never wanted to see. Ignorance is sometimes bliss. Are you ready to meet all that head-on, Larry Hepburn?”

“Yeah! Knights of Hepburn ne’er shall turn! It’s the family motto,” Larry declared.

“In other words, you’re allowed to walk backwards out of battle?” Jenny said snidely.

“Sure! But we also have a motto that goes, ‘victory belongs to the people, but the greatest smile belongs to the knight’. In other words, to me!”

“No worries about anything, huh. Where do you get that confidence?”

“Dunno. Doesn’t matter!”

“...One of these days, I’m gonna run an investigative piece on how the Hepburn family’s lasted 400 years.”

\* \* \*

“And that’s what happened. Larry can give you the details about the confession. Right now, I want you guys to get whatever info you can get on Stella Whitfield.”

“He’s fallen far, that Larry. Where did his parents go wrong? Now I really feel like joining his fun.”

“Your words are not fitting front to back, Natalia. But if I can help, I wish to help Larry. It is sure that Larry wishes to know many things about her.”

It was the 24th, the day after Stella’s confession. The sky was clear.

Jenny and Natalia, and Meg—who was in the same class—met up in the halls of the main building between classes. Jenny conveyed Larry’s request to Natalia and Meg.

They split up quickly, as they had to move on to their next classes.

About an hour later.

Larry walked past the very spot.

He was the subject of many curious gazes.

At his left side was Stella.

Stella had her right arm linked tightly around his left, clinging so close they almost looked like one person. Her bag hung from her shoulder and there was a large package in her left hand.

“What the heck?” “Is that Larry Hepburn?” “Larry’s with a cute girl? No way!” “Tch! Show-off.” “Go to hell, casanova!” “How indecent.” “Isn’t this a crime?” “Maybe somebody should rescue the girl...” “Should I call a teacher?”

Larry had good ears. He could hear every last word of gossip.

“Er...hey, Stella?”

Larry’s posture was upright, but his voice betrayed his nervousness.

Stella looked up at him blankly. “Yes...?” she replied in a near-inaudible voice.

Larry froze briefly when he locked gazes with Stella, so close to his face, but he finally managed to speak.

“D-don’t you think it’s a bit hard to walk around like this?”

“I’m all right.”

“Oh...okay. I see.”

Larry gave up—in more ways than one—and faced forward once more. And he walked down the hall, practically joined at the hip with Stella. They had been stuck together since he had met her in front of a classroom.

They entered the cafeteria, the eyes of every student on them.

“So what do you wanna get?”

“I...brought our lunch.” Stella slightly lifted up the large package in her left hand.

Then she finally disentangled herself from him and strode forward, to a table near the orders counter exit—in other words, the most visible table in the cafeteria.

“Can we sit here?”

“S-sure...”

When Larry took a seat, Stella quickly brought over two cups of tea and opened up her lunch.

Inside was a triple-decker lunchbox.

“I made it myself.”

“Th-thanks. Can I open it?”

“Let me...”

Stella trailed off and opened the lid. The first level was packed with assorted vegetable sandwiches. The second, with grilled chicken and boiled vegetables. The third, with cherries, grapes, and other fruits.

“Whoa! This is amazing,” Larry gasped, forgetting the other students’ gazes for a moment. The food looked almost professional in quality. “You made all this, Stella?”

“Yes...I’m...a good cook.”

“It looks really good! Let’s dig in!”

“Yes...”

Larry’s enthusiasm drew yet more gazes as he and Stella wiped their hands with the hand towels she had brought.

“Let’s start with the sandwiches—”

The moment Larry reached out, however, Stella picked up a sandwich.

“Here.”

And she held it out towards his mouth.

Larry’s eyes turned to dinner plates. He could feel the murderous glares of the other students.

“Pull it together, Larry! Be a man!” he whispered to himself, and took a bite.

He chewed the mouthful of sandwich. “Mhm!” And swallowed, then grinned.

“It’s great! This is really good, Stella! Your cooking definitely has my seal of approval!”

“Thank...you.”

They were the very picture of a happy couple.

“Curse you, blondie!” “That is *disgusting!*” “Damn it, even the third-year has a girlfriend!” “It’s practically a honeymoon.” “There’s a special place in hell for people like you, Hepburn.” “Go somewhere else! There’s plenty of places on campus where you don’t show off to the entire school!” “Maybe I really should get a teacher...”

Larry and Stella were warmly nestled in a storm of murderous outrage.

“It’s really good. I can feed myself though, Stella. May I?”

“Y-yes. Go ahead.”

“C’mon, you should eat too!”

“Yes...”

Larry wolfed down his food, while Stella nibbled away blankly.

It was hard to not notice them in the cafeteria.

A pair of sixth-year boys passed by, and once the couple was out of earshot—

“They’re seriously dating? Bet the guy’s blackmailing her into the relationship or something.”

“Yeah. Or maybe the girl lost a bet. Either way, she’s too good for him.”

As they passed, their voices fell on the ears of—

“Ha! Sounds about right.” “I suppose we should let them talk for now.”

An amused Natalia and a smiling Nick. They were sitting at a table for four along with Seron and Meg, at a distance from Larry.

“It is a very good atmosphere. I have always admired the campus dating,” Meg remarked wistfully.

Seron, who sat next to her—Seron, who was eating with Meg in the campus cafeteria for the first time—went even more silent.

Their table was laden with Meg and Nick’s lunch boxes and Natalia and Seron’s trays, and four cups of tea.

Seron had ordered roast beef sandwich with a bowl of minestrone soup. Natalia had ordered the same, along with seafood pizza. There was almost no room left on the table.

Trying to keep their stack of belongings from tipping over, and keeping an eye on the nearly-conjoined Larry and Stella, they ate lunch and discussed the issue at hand.

“Has anyone gathered any information on the target?” Nick asked. Natalia was first to answer.

“Nope. Ah, I’m gonna try the pizza first.”

“What about you, Seron?”

Seron shook his head. “I couldn’t just go around asking randomly.”

“Of course. And you, Megmica?”

“I have not gathered information too. I will ask the chorus club’s senior-classmen after class.”

“I see. As for myself, I have acquired one piece of information.”

“Yeah?” Natalia urged him.

“It seems our target is indeed connected to ‘Seron’s wrist’.”

Aha. The others nodded. Seron glanced at the Whitfield watch on his left wrist.

“A senior-classman I met this morning happened to be wearing the same model, so I slipped in a compliment. The model is of course excellent, but I spoke to the senior-classman because he happens to be an expert on the topic. He boasted about his model for a time, then told me that the target attends this very school. The name seemed to have tipped him off.”

The others were impressed.

“So that’s all we have for now, huh. Hope the chief turns up something,” said Natalia.

Seron looked at Larry.

Larry and Stella were still at their table, talking about something over their lunch.

“I think we should get to know each other a little better,” Larry suggested as soon as they began to eat.

“Oh...yes,” Stella agreed feebly. Larry asked her how much she knew about him.

“Not much. I...just fell for you at the cafeteria.”

“Then I guess I’ll tell you a bit about myself.”

Larry began to tell her things like his birthday, his hobbies and interests, and his dream of becoming a great military man, along with things about his family.

Afterwards—

“I see...thank you.”

“It’s nothing to be grateful about. What about you, Stella? Tell me about yourself.”

Stella looked at Larry’s smile and shook her head.

“It’s...probably not interesting.”

“C’mon, that’s not true.”

“I don’t have hobbies...I study all the time...people call me gloomy.”

“Don’t pay attention to those people! You’ve got plenty of time to figure out a hobby,” Larry declared. The other students were still giving him disapproving looks. “By the way, Stella. What does your family do? There’s a watchmaker with the same name so I’m guessing you’re related to them?”

“...Er...yes. My great-grandfather is the founder...and my grandfather runs the company now. My father is a watchmaker too...”

“I knew it!”

“So...I have bodyguards with me all the time outside.”

“I see. Makes sense. My folks did the same thing with me when I was little. That’s why you only wanted to meet on campus, right?”

“What about you, SC Hepburn? Did you guess just from my name?” Stella asked, sounding unusually firm.

“Partly, but I wasn’t 100% sure until I saw *that*.”

Stella’s gaze quickly flitted to her slender left wrist.

Wrapped around her wrist was a small women’s wristwatch. It had a white leather strap with a tiny silver case and a pink face.

“It’s a women’s wristwatch from Whitfield, and an expensive one, right? I remember seeing it in the catalogue. From the price tag, I guessed you must be part of the family. Could I have a look at it?” Larry said, effortlessly taking a chance to check the watch itself.

“No!” Stella cried suddenly, grabbing her wrist with her right hand.

“Er...”

Larry flinched. Stella quickly took off her watch and wrapped it up in a handkerchief before placing it in her bag. Then she looked weakly at Larry.

“I..I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about. Yeah.”

“This watch...is really special to me. It’s a one-of-a-kind...so I shouldn’t show it off to people...”

“Makes sense. You’re from a watchmaker family. No worries!”

“Thank you. SC Hepburn...do you like wristwatches?”

“Yeah. I love anything that’s mechanical! And by the way, it’s kinda awkward when you keep calling me SC Hepburn. Call me Larry. Or SC Larry is fine, if that’s easier.”

“I couldn’t...you’re still a senior-classman...” Stella said, shaking her head. Larry chuckled awkwardly.

“Y-yeah. I guess it doesn’t really matter. Yeah!”

How many times had they repeated such exchanges?

“Speaking of watches, I’m hoping to get one from Whitfield someday. Something sturdy and waterproof I can wear even during training.”

“I see...”

“Oh, but don’t worry! I’m not gonna ask you to get me one. I’m gonna save up my own money! Do you like watches too, Stella?”

Stella looked up, and gave the most honest and convincing nod she had given all day.

And for the first time, she smiled very faintly before Larry.

“I love them.”

Larry trembled slightly, his cheeks going pink.

“It’s like there’s a tiny universe inside every watch.”

“A-a universe?”

“Yes. Just like the way planets are anchored to a star even if they’re far apart. I like how force travels through the gears in the little case. How the cogs fit together perfectly, spinning together forever...”

Larry watched as Stella's gaze grew further and further, until his flushed cheeks were back to normal.

"Together forever, huh," he mumbled to himself.

"Wonder what they're talking about," wondered Natalia.

"It is certainly the romantic talking! She is very exuberant!" exclaimed Meg.

"It seems more to me that she is off in her own world. Lost in her own thoughts, not particularly concerned with Larry," commented Nick.

Finally, Seron spoke.

"It looks to me like Larry's got something on his mind."

"Oh? And why might that be?" Nick asked, turning.

"Just a hunch," Seron replied.

They had already finished eating. Because they felt guilty about taking up an entire table in the busy cafeteria, they decided to get up.

Agreeing to meet up after class if they could, Seron and Natalia picked up their trays to put them back, and Nick and Meg said goodbye.

Seron and Natalia happened to be walking by when Larry and Stella finished their lunch and began putting away her lunchbox. They disappeared into the central gardens together.

"So he somehow managed not to get dumped on day one," Natalia remarked, sounding almost disappointed.

\* \* \*

That day, after class.

Seron sat alone in the club office, perusing a Whitfield catalogue.

'Catalogue' was almost a misnomer, as it had a separate book cover and was packed with color photographs.

Naturally, it was not the kind of catalogue handed out for free at retailers. It was from a luxury wristwatch dealer, which Karen Maxwell had contacted at Seron's request.

"*Did you want a new watch, honey? I could get one mailed to you if you want,*" his mother had said over the phone, but Seron declined and told her he was perfectly fine with the one he had.

The watches in the catalogue were, without exception, extraordinary. So were the prices written below.

Seron found his own watch listed in the catalogue, and learned its price for the first time in three years. He gave his mother a silent word of thanks.

"*If you ever run out of money in the Capital District, you can sell the watch and get by for a while,*" she had advised as she gave him the watch.

"Now I get it," Seron mumbled with a nod.

He flipped through several more pages and found himself in the couples' watches section.

Featured prominently on the page were a man and a woman, wearing matching wristwatches. Below were the words 'A Romantic Gift for that Perfect Betrothal Oath', and 'Life Companions'.

Seron fell into thought. He fell very deep into thought.

For a time he lost himself in his delusions, until someone opened the door.

“Hey Seron.”

It was the hero of the cafeteria.

“Larry? ...Everything all right?”

“Huh? Do I not look all right?”

“No, I was expecting you to be with Stella.”

“Oh. I saw her off just now. She gets picked up after school so we can't hang out right now. She can't even do club activities. Want some tea?”

“Sure. Thanks.”

As usual, Larry got to work on brewing tea. In the meantime Seron gave him the only new piece of information they had, the one Nick had managed to find.

“Oh. I checked with Stella at lunchtime too. Her grandfather runs the company. It looks like she's had a really sheltered upbringing.”

“So we don't really have any new information.”

“We're just gonna have to hope Jenny's turned up something,” Larry said, walking back to the sofas with teapot in hand. Jenny, who had been conspicuously missing at lunchtime, had probably combed the campus in search of information.

“Thanks,” Seron said as he received his tea. He did not ask any questions about Larry's lunchtime date.

Once Larry poured his own cup of tea, he spotted the catalogue on the table.

“Whoa, it's the Whitfield catalogue, right? And this month's, too! Is this yours, Seron? Mind if I take a look?”

“Sure. I asked Mother for it, just for reference. It came in the mail this morning.”

Larry flipped through the pages excitedly. He quickly opened it up to a certain page and spread it over the table, pointing at a particular watch.

“If you ask me, this'd be my pick! The waterproof 100-meter diving watch! It's automatic, shows the date, and you can time stuff with the bezel too. They supply this model to the military. And boy, I get why it's subsidized!”

Seron scanned the page. “A 24-hour clock and dual time function too. Not bad. With the rotating bezel you could technically have three timezones, actually.”

“Your place is inside the same timezone as the capital, eh?”

“Yeah, just narrowly. This'd definitely be useful for long-distance trips, though. It won't be long until we can cover long distances in a flash on a commercial aeroplane. But I'm not too tempted to get a new watch just yet.”

Larry continued to peruse the catalogue. “Hey, look. They have a company history section at the end. ...Yep. Nothing about the family feud.”

“I'm not surprised. Nick gave us some information, but I wonder about the details,” Seron wondered. Larry answered him.

“It's pretty obvious. The founder died, and his two sons had a row over management direction. One won and the other lost.”

“And Stella's grandfather would be the winner.”

“Yeah. The other one must’ve been real sore—apparently he even changed his family name and started a new watch company. But—”

“It didn’t work out?”

“No. The brother who lost wasn’t a watchmaker, so he prioritized business over quality. He never managed to make something impressive. So he gave up and started another business, which was apparently a big success. Don’t know what it was, but if nothing else he must have been a really good businessman.”

“I see. Interesting.”

“I hear the two families still despise each other. If they run into each other at a business forum or conference or something, the air turns to ice.”

“That’s understandable. Running a company must be hard work,” Seron commented.

At that moment, the president returned.

“Phew. I’m back, boys. The others didn’t show, huh.”

“Welcome back, chief. It’s a little cold now, but we’ve got some tea.”

Jenny locked the door behind her, took a seat, and picked up her teacup.

“You first,” she said.

Larry reported everything that had happened in the cafeteria, and Seron the fact that Stella was indeed from the Whitfield watchmaker family.

“Hm. So it looks like I managed to get more than you,” Jenny said.

“I expected nothing less. Big haul?”

“You bet. But just to warn you,” Jenny said, lowering her voice, “it’s not nice.”

Larry pouted. Seron said nothing.

“The others aren’t here, but I might as well tell you. First off, Larry. That lovey-dovey lunch you had with Stella is the talk of the campus. It’s even reached the faculty office.”

“WHAT?! Are you kidding me?” Larry burst out.

Seron grimaced. “The students, I’m not surprised. Larry and Stella were eating in full view of everyone. But why the faculty office?”

“That’s the strange part.”

“Yeah?”

“I went to the faculty office in person to check, just in case. And I overheard some of the teachers chatting in the lounge by the door.”

“What were they saying?”

“That third-year Larry Hepburn and second-year Stella Whitfield were in a wholesome relationship, dating with marriage in mind.”

“Whaaaaaat?” Larry’s jaw dropped. Tea spilled from the teacup in his hand.

“Calm down. Anyway, I figured marriage was a little early for you, so I asked the teachers who they heard that from.”

“And?” “What did they say?” Seron and Larry asked simultaneously.

“A second-year girl who’s friends with Stella. Apparently she said so after afternoon classes today. Stella’s friends asked her how things were going with you, Larry, and I hear Stella just said so outright. That you’re dating with marriage in mind. Although that second part sounds pretty fishy.”

“Hm.”

Seron put a thoughtful hand on his chin.

“Stella would never say something like that! Those girls are gossiping too much,” Larry complained, raising his hands in the air.

“Well, what does it matter? That was the good news, by the way.”

“Hm?” “What?”

The realization struck them at once. Larry and Seron frowned.

“By that, you mean—” “—that there’s worse coming?”

“Yeah,” Jenny said with a nod, “there’s this rumor that’s been going around the second-year girls for a while. A rumor about Stella.”

“What kind of rumor?” “What kind of rumor?”

“It’s actually been around since about a year ago, when Stella was about halfway through her first year. Apparently there was this senior-classman boy who’d follow her around *everywhere*.”

Seron said nothing.

“Seriously? That better not be me,” Larry said indignantly.

“Are you an idiot? I said this rumor’s been around for a year.”

“Oh. Right. Sorry, Jenny.”

“The senior-classman and Stella Whitfield were spotted around campus, always in secluded places like behind staircases or inside gymnasium storerooms. Stella was reportedly looking troubled, and they had been spotted more often this year. It’s not spreading like wildfire, but a lot of the second-year girls know about it. But!” Jenny paused emphatically, “It’s still just a rumor. All we know is that they were seen together often, and we have no evidence to suggest he’s hurting her or even threatening her. Someone asked her about the guy, but Stella obviously denied it.”

“The heck? That’s a terrible rumor. Girls can be awful sometimes!” Larry seethed.

“Jenny,” Seron said, breaking his silence, “did you find out anything about the senior-classman?”

“Do you realize how many boys there are in this school, Seron Maxwell?”

“You have a point, but I get the feeling you’ve already found a clue.”

“Hmph! You got that right,” Jenny replied, getting to her feet and heading towards the darkroom. She grabbed a photograph from the shelf beside the door.

Then she placed it on the table.

It was a black-and-white photo about the size of a notepad. It was still moist.

“Hm.” “What’s this?”

Seron and Larry examined the photo.

The photograph featured a male student from the knees up.

He was not the only subject of the photo, being part of a large crowd of students, but he had been singled out and zoomed in on. What little background there was happened to be out of focus, but there was something resembling a school building. The photo must have been taken on campus.

The boy was very well-built.

He was even taller than most adults. The other boys in the photo only reached his chin.



The boy had broad shoulders and threatening features. But his expression was gentle and almost fainthearted.

Put nicely, he looked like an athlete. To be more blunt, he looked like a gorilla.

In his left hand was his bag, and on his right wrist was a watch.

Larry stared into the picture for a time, then opened his mouth.

“Who’s this?”

“The boy from the rumors.”

“What?” Larry’s jaw dropped. Meanwhile, Seron smiled faintly.

“You really are amazing, Jenny.”

“This is him? This is the guy?” asked Larry.

“Most likely. I asked one of the witnesses to describe him, and it was kind of hard to find anyone else who matched the descriptor. ‘Built like a gorilla, looks more fainthearted than a girl, and wears a watch on his right wrist.’”

“So this is the one...”

“I figured someone like that would be easy to spot, and I happened to find him near the central gardens outside the cafeteria. I waited for him to finish his lunch and took a photo while everyone was on the move. I even found out what one of his afternoon classes are.”

“Jenny, you’re incredible! But you sure this is legal?”

“What are you talking about? It’s just a snapshot I happened to take. I pretended I was photographing the building. Then I skipped an afternoon class to develop the photo.”

“You’re starting to scare me, Jenny. The newspaper club’s a front for something, I just know it,” Larry exclaimed, shocked and terrified.

“I checked the student list and the photographs at the administrative desk too, just in case. And I couldn’t find anyone else matching the description. This guy’s probably our man.”

“I’m surprised they let you check,” Seron said. Jenny was nonchalant.

“Our avid reader the office administrator didn’t ‘let me check’, she just gave an honor student named Jenny Jones permission to help rearrange the misaligned student photographs.”

Larry stared, still holding the photograph.

“So you know his name?” asked Seron. Jenny brought her teacup to her lips.

“Linus Francis.”

## **Chapter 4: Linus**

“Linus Francis. Sixth-year. One of his classes this term is Natural Sciences 601: Astronomy. That’s all I have on him so far,” Jenny explained.

“Hm. Even if the rumors about him and Stella are true, it’s hard to say anything conclusive yet,” said Seron.

“Yeah. Maybe he’s stalking her, or maybe it’s literally just a rumor. Or maybe they’re just friends and people happened to spot them chatting on campus. Or…”

“Or?” asked Seron.

“Maybe they were dating.”

“What?” Larry was incredulous. “Why?”

“Dunno. Cause they’re both wearing watches.”

Larry went silent.

“That’s not exactly concrete evidence,” Seron pointed out, all the while deluding himself with the idea of getting Meg a wristwatch.

“…Hey. Jenny,” Larry said gravely, “could you look into this guy? SC Linus?”

“Sure. Why though? Worried? Or are you jealous?” Jenny asked with a playful grin.

“Both,” Larry replied, surprisingly serious.

“…I’ll do what I can. I’ve been out and about all day today though, so I’m taking the rest of the day off.”

Blinking, Jenny put the photograph in her bag and walked over to the telephone.

“Thanks. I’ll wash the cups,” Larry said, gathering the teacups and taking them to the sink.

“Larry. Jenny,” Seron said, “Could we keep this stuff to ourselves for now? Until we find out more about SC Linus, I mean.”

“Hm? Sure.”

“Yeah. That sounds like a good idea.”

Seron also stood. He put the Whitfield catalogue in his bag and helped Jenny lock up.

As they stepped outside, Jenny handed Larry a photograph the same size as the one of Linus Francis.

“Almost forgot. This one’s yours.”

“Huh?”

Larry’s gaze fell on the photograph.

“AAAAAHHHH!”

Seron flinched because of the scream, not the photo.

The photo depicted Stella, who was facing the camera.

It was from earlier that day, when she was walking arm-in-arm with Larry through the halls. Larry’s left arm was narrowly in the frame. The photo had been framed this way from the beginning, as opposed to having been trimmed later. It was even in perfect focus.

Larry turned to Jenny as he showed the photo to Seron.

“Wh-wh-when did you take—”

“I needed a shot of her face for this story. I was kinda far and I only had a second to take the shot. It was tough, let me tell you,” Jenny said nonchalantly. Larry looked like he had swallowed a bug.

“Are you training to be a sniper or something, Jenny? And why am I not in the photo?”

“Why would I include you? It’d be a waste of perfectly good film.”

“Tch. Anyway, thanks.”

Once Seron had gotten a good look at the photo, Larry wrapped it up in a handkerchief and tucked it away in his bag.

\* \* \*

The Hepburn manor was about 20 minutes from school by bus, or an hour on foot. Though the Capital District was mostly crowded with apartment buildings, the vicinity of the Hepburn home was mostly occupied by old mansions.

It was that evening, after dinner.

Larry was in his room doing the homework he really did not want to do.

The room was furnished with a bed, a dresser, and a desk. There was a clean sheet on his bed, much like at a hotel. But the sheet had not been prepared by a servant or his mother—Larry had done it himself.

The large room was tidy, the walls plastered with posters of motorcycles and cars, and antique rifles that used black powder. Larry’s school and army uniforms hung neatly in the closet.

Larry was in a T-shirt and a pair of shorts, wrestling with his schoolwork.

At one point he heard the telephone ring outside, but someone seemed to have picked up.

Larry’s father was a colonel in the Confederation Army, and was out of the house for several days for a training session. Cato, Larry’s older brother, lived in the dorms as per military academy regulations. The only people at home were Larry, his mother, the butler, the live-in maids, and the bodyguard.

“Done...”

Once he had finished, Larry put his textbook and notebook in his bag so he wouldn’t forget them the next day. Then he took out the photograph.

Stella was clinging to him blankly. Larry fell into thought.

“I wonder what she’s thinking,” he wondered, smiling.

Suddenly, there was a knock. Larry quickly put the photo back, asking who it was. A maid replied that there was a phone call for him.

“Hm?”

Normally the maid would mention who the call was from. Confused, Larry headed to the telephone room. The Hepburn family had a separate room for the telephone so they could sit down for long conversations.

He entered.

“That sounds wonderful, sir. If nothing else, I personally made certain to raise our boys to be gentlemen. Yes, absolutely.”

His mother was in the chair, engaged in conversation.

“Huh?”

Larry tilted his head.

His mother Mia Hepburn was a woman in her early forties. Unusually for a woman of her age, her blond hair was cut short, giving her the look of an athlete. And indeed she led an active lifestyle, enjoying hobbies like horseback riding and skiing. She was more than a match for the men of the family.

“What’s going on?” Larry asked, still in the dark. Mia finally noticed his presence.

“Oh my, speak of the devil. Larry is here. Yes, I’ll switch you over, shall I? Thank you for the lovely conversation.”

With that, Mia put a hand over the receiver.

“Here.”

“Who is this, Mom? Why were you taking my call?”

“He’s an important man. It’s only proper for your mother to speak to him first.”

“Wait, is this the call from earlier? How long have you been talking?”

“Never mind that, Larry. Introduce yourself and make sure to be extra-polite.”

Giving his mother a quizzical look, Larry sat down on the chair she had kept warm. Mia gave him a smile and a wave, and left.

Larry picked up the receiver.

“I’m terribly sorry to keep you waiting, sir. This is Larry Hepburn speaking.”

<Ah! It’s you!>

From the receiver came the voice of a sprightly old man. Larry had never heard the voice before.

“Yes, sir. Pardon me, but my mother didn’t mention your name. Might I ask who you are?”

<Hm. You have a strong voice, young man. Yes. I approve. I am Aubrey Whitfield, CEO of Whitfield Watchmakers.>

‘*The one who won the family feud!*’ Larry thought, but he wisely kept it to himself.

“Then you would be Stella’s grandfather, sir?”

<Indeed. It seems you’ve been taking very good care of her recently.>

“N-not at all, sir. It’s an honor to make your acquaintance. Er...”

‘*How does he know?*’ Larry wondered. Word had traveled too fast. Aubrey Whitfield continued regardless.

<Are you surprised? So was I, when Stella suddenly declared over dinner that she had a boyfriend! I was moved, young man, to see that shy girl speak up to her parents like she did today.>

“S-she did? Really?”

<My son and his wife, naturally, were stupefied. ‘She’s too young’, they say. Bah! Stella is the only one who can decide that. No longer can parents force their children to marry against their will! I support my darling granddaughter. There’s nothing wrong with trying new things while you’re still young, do you not agree?>

“Y-yes...of course, sir.”

<But truth be told, I did wonder about her boyfriend.>

“Of course. That’s perfectly natural, sir.”

<So I asked for your name and made this phone call.>

*'Talk about fast, old man,'* Larry thought, but naturally he did not say a thing.

<Imagine my surprise when it turned out you were a son of the prestigious Hepburn family! The great warriors of the East! I recall hearing tales about your noble ancestors during my time serving in the military!>

"I-it's an honor, sir. I'm very proud of my ancestors, and I hope to live up to their great deeds someday."

<Hm. It is good to see that you are both dignified and humble. I approve of your courting my granddaughter, young man. Be good to her.>

"Of course, sir."

<By the way, do you like wristwatches, young man?>

"Yes, sir. I love them—wearing them, looking at them, and fiddling with them."

<Excellent! Then I'll have you enroll at the Whitfield Academy upon your graduation from secondary school. I am the chairman of the academy. I will grant you special admission.>

"Pardon me, sir? I'm not sure what you mean..."

<Ahem. The Whitfield Academy trains skilled watchmakers, you see. And company policy strictly states that the CEO must be a watchmaker himself.>

*'Because of the family feud, eh?'* Larry thought, but of course he did not dare say it out loud.

"I see, sir. And how does this connect to—"

<Should you marry Stella in the future, you will become the CEO of Whitfield Watchmakers. Which of course necessitates that you become a watchmaker. Do you understand now?>

"N-not at all, sir! Please give me a moment, Mr. Whitfield. I still haven't thought quite that far about my future."

Larry, who dreamed of attending the same military academy as Cato and becoming a career soldier, had to give an awkward lie.

<Hm. Perhaps I was getting a little too ahead of myself.>

*'A little?'* Larry thought, but managed to hold himself back.

<In any case, Stella is my only grandchild. She simply must inherit the company. Things will become difficult for her if her husband is unable to so much as build a single watch.>

*'You're making things difficult for me!'* Larry thought, but managed to hold himself back from the brink of anger.

"I understand what you mean, sir. My fellow students and I are still trying to figure out what we want to do after graduation. I still have three years before finishing school, and I hope that I will be able to build up my knowledge and expertise so as to one day go above and beyond expectations," he said without missing a beat. He knew exactly how to please adults because he often had to deal with superiors from the military.

<Of course,> Aubrey Whitfield said satisfactorily. Then his tone dropped, as though he had grown 10 years older in an instant. <If only Stella would take over the company... But the girl absolutely hates wristwatches.>

"Pardon me, sir? I'm surprised," Larry said, genuinely shocked.

<Yes. She'd been surrounded by watches since birth, so her parents and I never gave it much thought. Stella was never the most expressive girl, after all. But it was a year and a half ago that she began to speak up for herself. Out of nowhere she said to us that she hated watches and did not want to even look at them. It saddened us, of course, but we couldn't very well force it upon her. I can only hope that this is a passing phase that she one day grows out of.>

"Er..." Larry said, unable to hold back, "doesn't Stella have a Whitfield wristwatch?"

<No, she does not. We offered her the pick of our catalogue, but she refused them all. Stella says she doesn't wish to bring something so expensive to her classes. Once I went along to drop her off at school, and indeed she was not wearing a watch.>

"...I...I see. I'm sorry to hear that, sir."

<I suppose young people have their share of worries. And perhaps Stella will change her mind someday. Thank you for giving me your time so late in the evening, young man. It was a pleasure to speak to your mother as well. I'll be certain to invite you to the next party I host.>

"Th-thank you, sir."

<If you'll excuse me, then.>

"Have a good evening, sir."

Larry waited for Aubrey Whitfield to hang up before slowly putting down the receiver. Then he pouted, looking more upset than ever.

His train of thought was interrupted by his mother.

"Are you finished, Larry?"

She opened the door and peered inside, stepping in when she saw the conversation was over.

"Yeah. That was exhausting."

"Who would've guessed you'd get a call from such an important man? Asking you to take good care of his granddaughter, at that!"

"What'd he say to you, Mom?"

"That you're seeing the Whitfield heiress at school. Congratulations, honey. Are you thinking of getting married?"

*'Not this again. Why does everyone have to ask me the same thing?'* Larry complained inwardly, and went limp.

"I don't know. And apparently I have to become a watchmaker if I want to marry her. Then I have to inherit the company."

"Why not?" his mother asked nonchalantly. Larry got angry.

"Mom! I wanna be a soldier like Dad and Cato! You've raised me for 15 years, I thought you'd at least know that much."

"I do. But do you want to become a soldier just because you're part of the Hepburn family? Or because you really want to?"

"Both. I want to be a soldier because I was born into this family."

"I won't stop you from going into the military, honey. But you should think of it more as one potential choice out of many. You're only 15—you still have plenty of time to think about your future."

"Wouldn't Dad get upset, though?"

“Your father agrees with me, honey.”

“...What?”

“We never talked about it at home because it’s not the happiest topic, but the Confederation military’s not going to be Roxche’s backbone for much longer.”

“...Maybe.”

“The cold war ended after the Mural was found. So naturally the military’s budget shrank and the military itself is being downsized. They even ended conscription, too.”

“Which is why career soldiers will be in higher demand!”

“And that’s a sound argument. But you know, honey. We’re happy to produce soldiers in the Hepburn family, but we’d be just as happy to produce businessmen and other professionals too.”

Larry was silent.

“I’m just trying to say that if you really come to love Stella, you’re free to take a different path from the rest of the family.”

Larry remained silent.

“Remember, there are so many paths out there you can choose from. You’re still young; you shouldn’t settle on one thing so soon.”

\* \* \*

### **The next day. The 25th.**

It was the 11th day of the new term. The weather was cloudy. Larry walked to school alone.

He walked out of the neighborhood and onto the main street, continuing for about an hour. The closer he got to school, the more students he spotted.

Things were clearly different that day. He could feel the students’ whispers the moment he spotted their gazes.

It was obvious why; so Larry decided not to worry and fell into thought.

“Maybe I should tell Seron after all. But what if I’m wrong?” he wondered under his breath, finally arriving at the roundabout in front of the campus.

The roundabout was packed with luxury cars dropping off students at school.

“Hey, it’s him.” “The lovey-dovey guy from yesterday?” “What does she see in him?” “The whole school’s talking about them now.”

“C’mon, Larry. Don’t let them get to you,” Larry said to himself, heading for the crowded gates.

“SC Hepburn...”

He heard a soft voice beside him. Someone touched the bag in his left hand.

“Huh?”

Larry turned to find none other than Stella. She looked up at him blankly.

“Good morning.”

“M-morning. Did you just get here?”

Instead of answering, Stella clung to his arm. She began to walk just as they had the previous day.

The other students stirred for a moment, then went silent. Larry was once again the subject of many warm gazes.

“School’s starting to look a lot like a chapel,” a student joked as Larry passed through the gates.

Larry glanced at Stella’s left wrist.

She was not wearing a watch.

\* \* \*

During a long break between second and third period.

“Hey there. Thanks for your cooperation.”

“Not at all, SC Jones. I’m a big fan of your paper.”

Jenny was on the grounds talking to a second-year girl.

On the grounds were two wooden benches placed back-to-back.

Jenny sat on one, and the girl on the other. Because they were looking in opposite directions it simply looked as though they were strangers.

The self-proclaimed fan was tall enough to be a model. She seemed excited to be able to contribute.

“This is so cool! It’s just like a secret investigation! Ask me anything, SC Jones, and I will spill the beans. It’s about Stella, isn’t it? Everybody’s talking about it! How she’s dating the senior-classman with stupidly nice blond hair!”

Jenny concealed her notepad in her left hand and held a short pen in her right.

“I hear Stella’s supposed to be mature, but she doesn’t have a lot of friends.”

“Hm, maybe. She’s not in a club, she doesn’t say much during breaks, and she goes home straight after classes. But nobody hates her or anything.”

“I could tell from the investigation so far. No one’s said anything bad about her.”

“Right? She never talks behind anybody’s back since she’s so quiet to begin with. That’s the great thing about Stella. If you need anything, she helps you out. And she’s nice. It’d be great if she could make some friends.”

“I see. Anyway, about yesterday.”

“Yes? Yes?”

“Those rumors about her and the blond guy spread awfully fast, don’t you think?”

“Yeah. Everyone who saw was talking about it, and even Stella said it was true—”

“She did? Personally?”

“Yeah. We were in Roxchean class that afternoon and someone asked her about the senior-classman. That’s when she dropped the bomb! ‘Dating with marriage in mind’! The class exploded, I swear. We didn’t quiet down even when the teacher showed up. Then Stella had to explain again and the class exploded again!”

“...So she really said so herself? I’m surprised.”

‘Rumors confirmed true’, Jenny wrote on her notepad. “All right. Let’s rewind a bit. Do you know about the rumors with Stella and the hulking senior-classman?”

“You bet! Stella and the gorilla. That was the biggest piece of gossip last term. I saw them together too.”

“Really? When did this rumor get big, and how exactly did it go?”

“Well, a bunch of people said they saw Stella and the gorilla talking alone in secluded places. It started about a year ago, I think? Wait, it was the term we started here, so it must have been earlier.”

Jenny quickly jotted down the information.

“So it was pretty soon after you started secondary school?”

“Yeah.”

“How did the rumor go?”

“I mean, Stella almost never talks with boys, so nobody believed it at first. But once a month or so someone would say they saw them together. It sounded like a total urban legend. Someone told Stella to tell a teacher if the senior-classman was stalking her, but Stella said straight-up that he wasn’t stalking her. Then everyone stopped worrying. Well, I mean before *this* completely overshadowed it!”

“When did you see them together?”

“Last term. Er...around the beginning of the seventh month.”

“That’s pretty recent. Where?”

“I was visiting a friend on the top floor of the dorms and happened to look out the window. They were by the library—”

“Secluded place. Check. What was it like between them?”

“See, that’s the thing. I didn’t tell anyone because no one would ever believe me...”

“Tell me.”

“It looked like he couldn’t possibly be a stalker or something like that.”

“Then?”

“It looked like they were a couple.”

Jenny’s hand froze over the notepad.

“...What made you think that?”

“Because it was really...nice.”

“Specifically?”

“They were looking at one another and—”

Jenny got off the bench.

“Thanks. You were a big help.”

“Happy to be of service! If you need any more info, you know who to ask!”

“Call the office if you remember anything else. If no one picks up, call my house.”

“Sure thing! But I don’t have your number.”

“Check the scrap of paper under your bench.”

The girl looked down. There was a neatly folded piece of paper pinned under a small rock.

“Wow! It’s just like a spy film!”

“See you.”

Jenny and her informant parted ways without once meeting each other's gaze. The school bell rang to signal the end of the break.

Jenny went into the building and glanced at her notepad.

And she reread the last sentence.

'Looking at one another and smiling. Stella never looked so happy and adorable.'

"So you're on to something, eh Larry?" Jenny whispered, putting the notepad in her bag.

\* \* \*

"Sure. How could they *not* be the talk of the campus, acting like that every day?" Natalia remarked, popping a piece of meatloaf into her mouth.

It was lunchtime. Natalia and Nick, along with Meg and Seron, were sitting together to eat as they had the previous day.

The difference was that all four of them were eating cafeteria food. Everyone had ordered meatloaf and salad, but Natalia also had an order of clam chowder.

Just like the previous day, Larry and Stella sat at another table some distance away as if in a world of their own. Stella had once again brought a home-cooked lunch. And the students around them were once again watching uncomfortably.

"Somebody figured out I was friends with Larry and started hounding me about 'em. How am I supposed to know? Am I his mother or something?" Natalia grumbled.

"A girl from the drama club talked to me in class as well. 'It looks like the boy who helped us out during the summer camp is dating a junior-classman. Shouldn't we call the police?' she asked me," Nick chimed in, bringing a boiled carrot slice to his mouth.

"Everyone is too much...if the two are happy together, that is that. It is a very good thing," Meg said angrily.

Seron sat across from her, blankly losing himself in happiness at the sight of her face.

Natalia continued once she had finished off her meatloaf.

"Anyway, we didn't get any new info. What's the chief say? Anything?"

Seron put down his fork and wiped his mouth with a napkin. Then—

"No. Nothing notable so far."

"Right."

Natalia asked no more, turning her attention to her clam chowder. She scooped up a spoonful into her mouth, her eye glinting.

"Mhm. Delicious. You're worth being eaten by yours truly," she commented, finishing off the rest.

Seron changed the subject. "How are the drama club rehearsals going, Megmica?"

"They are doing very well! They are flowing!" "Quite well," Meg and Nick replied. Meg continued.

"Ms. Krantz is very hardworking as well. President Sears and Vice-president Ulericks look to be happy. But rehearsals will continue. We cannot go to the club office again today. On our behalf, please tell Jenny sorry."

"For myself as well. Other than Larry's recent state of near-wedded bliss, has anything noteworthy happened?" asked Nick. Seron's response was brief.

“No.”

## **Chapter 5: Wristwatches**

After school.

The clouds gave way to rain. Umbrellas opened up like flowers at the building doors, and students in sports clubs looked up resentfully at the sky.

Jenny entered the newspaper club office. Seron and Larry were already inside. They were engaged in serious discussion, without even drinking tea.

“What’s going on?” Jenny asked. Seron responded.

“Stella’s grandfather called Larry last night.”

“What?” Jenny gasped, “To ask you to take care of his granddaughter, Larry?”

“Yeah.”

Jenny frowned. Seron gave her a quick summary of what Larry had told him earlier.

“Oh, I forgot to add something to that,” Larry said, “I didn’t tell Stella about the phone call today. It was kinda awkward to bring up, and I couldn’t just ask her why she told her folks about us.”

Jenny, who had been listening to the end, came up with a theory.

“She’s beating her family to the punch.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m guessing Stella’s parents and grandfather are some of the most doting people in the world. They probably keep tabs on everything their precious little princess does.”

“So the opposite of your folks, Jenny?” Larry joked.

“I guess,” Jenny admitted. “So basically she got the jump on them. She came out and told them that the guy she’s dating is the son of a prestigious family.”

“But her grandfather said he was happy to let her date whoever.”

“That’s what he *says*, but you can never know for sure with adults. He might think he’s letting Stella see whoever she wants, but it might not be true from our perspective. If you didn’t impress him at all, he might have said, ‘stay away from my granddaughter’. You’re a Hepburn, though, so he probably approves. You better be grateful to your ancestors.”

“Er...you might be right. Thank you, ancestors...”

“Suppose it was me Stella was dating,” Seron speculated, “The son of a nouveau riche single mother from the countryside, heir to a foodstuffs company. Mr. Whitfield probably wouldn’t have approved.”

“Don’t put yourself down like that, Seron! Your mother’s an incredible person!”

“One more thing,” Jenny said, “I looked into why those rumors about you and Stella’s potential marriage were spreading so fast.”

“Hm?” “Yeah?”

“It’s because Stella said so herself during an afternoon class. It wasn’t just a bunch of gossiping girls blowing things out of proportion.”

Seron fell into thought.

“Why would she do that? I never said anything remotely similar. Maybe she just has the wrong idea?” Larry wondered. He did not sound happy at all, but something seemed to have occurred to him.

“Maybe. Maybe Stella didn’t want people to think it wasn’t a wholesome relationship. The fastest way to find out would be to ask her in person.”

“I’ll do that,” Larry said with a nod, “And we also have to solve the mystery of her wristwatch.”

“So she’s flaunting her relationship and wearing a wristwatch she shouldn’t actually have, huh,” Jenny muttered, taking out her notepad, “Linus Francis, 18 years old. A sixth-year at our school,” she continued without warning.

Seron and Larry listened intently, not missing a word.

“His parents own the Capital Department Stores chain. Yes, the super-high-end department stores next to all three of the Capital District train stations. SC Linus’s grandfather founded the business, and the company is doing well. So he’s a pretty rich guy. He has an older sister, but I don’t have details on her. His grades are average-to-below, and the only thing notable about him is his build. He’s shy and doesn’t have a lot of friends, and he’s turned down all the sports club offers he got and goes home straight after class. And you wouldn’t know it from the way he looks, but he’s really good with his hands. Last year he apparently pulled off a really intricate ornamented sculpture on his own for the school festival. Also, he’s always wearing a wristwatch. That’s all I’ve got.”

“Thanks,” Larry replied.

“And about those rumors about Stella from yesterday…”

“Yeah?”

“It’s pretty likely that the rumors are true. The eyewitness accounts add up, unless all the second-year girls are collectively conspiring against us.”

“So she’s spreading false rumors on purpose,” Seron muttered.

“The witness I spoke to today said she spotted Stella and SC Linus by the library last term. And he wasn’t bothering her—she says they were both smiling.”

Larry lowered his gaze. He was silent.

“You’re still looking into SC Linus, right?” asked Seron.

“Oh? Why do you think I am?”

“Just a hunch.”

“Too lazy to answer me, Seron? Oh all right. Fine. Yes, I’m still looking into him.”

“How?” asked Larry.

“When I heard that he leaves straight after class, I called up Mr. Kurtz and had him tail SC Linus. It’s not likely, but maybe he’s meeting Stella off-campus,” Jenny replied nonchalantly.

“You’re really something else, Jenny. I’m counting on you.”

“Mr. Kurtz’ll call the office if he sees anything noteworthy. We’ll wait here until sundown, but don’t expect anything. Investigations aren’t as easy as they might look,” Jenny warned sternly. At that moment, the phone began to ring.

“Oh.” “Whoa.” Seron and Larry gasped.

“Ugh.” Jenny cringed and picked up the receiver. “It’s me. Mhm. Mhm. I see. Where? … All right. I’ll have Litner pick me up. Yeah. Thanks. See you soon.”

Jenny hung up. Seron and Larry waited.

“We’ve tracked down Linus Francis. Litner’s coming get me by car. You in?”

“Obviously.” “Yeah.”

“All right. I’ll brief you on the details on the way.”

After leaving the office, Jenny, Seron, and Larry went to the gates with their umbrellas. Jenny was carrying a camera bag.

The after-school rush was over, leaving the roundabout clear. The club members climbed into a small hatchback driven by Elsa Litner, Jenny’s bodyguard. Litner was a black-haired woman in her late twenties who had escorted the club on their summer camp, so Seron and Larry were already acquainted with her.

Seron sat in the front next to Litner, and Larry and Jenny in the back. Soon they were off.

“Your things are in the back, Miss Jenny.”

“Thanks.”

Jenny turned and took out a long bag from the luggage compartment behind the seat. Inside was a large single-lens reflex camera and an extreme telephoto lens large enough to use as a club.

“Wow...” Larry breathed, his eyes wide. “It looks expensive.”

“It is.”

The rain had let up somewhat. The car continued down the thoroughfare.

“So, where are we headed?” asked Larry.

“Balfour Technical School. Have you heard of it?”

“Yeah. What about you, Seron?”

“No. Could you tell me more?”

“It’s a school for continuing education. It’s actually an offshoot of Balfour Vocational School, and the classes start after the vocational school students go home for the day. The technical school students can use the vocational school’s equipment and facilities, and classes include everything from light woodworking to building car engines. It’s mostly for people who’re already working but want to get technical education for a different career path. Tuition is on the expensive end.”

“Thanks, Larry,” said Seron.

“I’m impressed. Even I didn’t know all that,” Jenny added. She and Seron quickly realized why.

“Aha. I get it now.”

“Did you read my mind or something, Jenny?” Larry asked defensively.

“You weren’t sure if you could get into our school with your grades, right? So you were thinking about vocational school too, just in case. And you decided on Balfour Vocational School because it’s the most prestigious school for technicians and engineers in the Capital District. Am I wrong?”

“...You’re too smart for your own good, Jenny. Anyway, SC Linus’s gone to Balfour?”

“Waltzed right in, according to Kurtz. But—”

“But?” “But?”

“He changed out of his uniform at the department store bathroom on the way.”

“Hm.” “I see.”

“Balfour Technical School’s for working people, but there’s no age limit or anything. Even a working teenager can attend. But—”

Larry continued where Jenny left off.

“He’d stick out like a sore thumb if he went in wearing a secondary school uniform. So he had to change out of it. And it makes sense he’d hide it from his classmates, too.”

“I’m not going to cover this story since it’s real.”

“What’s the point of publishing a newspaper, then? Anyway, why is SC Linus going to this school? Is he actually taking classes there?”

“Probably, unless he’s going to hang out with a friend who studies there.”

“But that doesn’t add up. He goes to secondary school *and* technical school every day?” Larry furrowed his brow. Seron agreed.

“It’s hard to imagine someone doing both at once. It would have been a lot easier for SC Linus if he’d just gone to vocational school instead of secondary school to begin with. Maybe he’s planning to go to university *and* learning something at Balfour as a hobby?”

“Or maybe his grades slipped so much he decided to try Balfour instead. But in that case, it would have been easier to drop out of secondary school. I don’t get it,” Jenny said.

By then, they were in front of Balfour Vocational School. It looked like a factory, with low walls around the campus which included three buildings with few floors.

Jenny instructed Litner to pass the school slowly. As they passed the gate, Jenny peered into the school and snapped photographs with her rangefinder.

“What’re we gonna do? I’m sure they’d let us get a tour of the place, but we’ll stand out in our uniforms,” Larry said.

“I’m not too keen on going in there, actually. Litner, take us to Kurtz,” Jenny ordered. The car came to a stop in front of an apartment building in the block next to the school.

The rain had almost completely let up.

“Hold this, Larry,” Jenny said as she handed over her long bag and stepped out of the car. At the same time, Kurtz came out of the building in his usual black suit.

“Good afternoon, Miss Jenny. And it’s good to see you again, Mr. Maxwell. Mr. Hepburn.”

Kurtz led the group into the apartment building. Larry slung the long bag over his shoulder and asked, “Are we allowed to go inside?”

“Yes. This apartment has units for rent. Put on your best confident smile and act as though you’re here to peruse the building.”

They took the elevator up to the fifth floor and ran into a middle-aged woman holding an empty shopping bag. She seemed to be a building resident.

“Hi! We’re here to look at some of the units here. The building’s very nice, isn’t it?” Jenny said with a smile. The woman smiled back.

“It certainly is. Take your time looking around!”

“Are you going shopping nearby now that the rain’s stopped?”

“That’s right. There’s a shopping district just two blocks away.”

“That sounds very convenient.”

The woman entered the elevator with a smile, completely oblivious.

Jenny, Seron, Larry, and Kurtz walked all the way to the end of the hall to a common-use balcony furnished with chairs, tables, and a folded parasol.

From the balcony they had a view of the entire Balfour campus. Jenny took the bag from Larry's shoulder and took out a camera equipped with a telephoto lens. Then she took out two binoculars from her own bag and handed them to Seron and Larry.

Kurtz was the only one standing on the balcony. The others crouched down to keep out of sight, turning their lenses towards the school.

Not caring that the floor was wet, Jenny got down on one knee and steadied her lens on a chair.

Three buildings came into view.

"I'll take the closest building. Larry, you take the one at the end. Seron, the one in the middle. Speak up as soon as you find the gorilla. And I hope I don't have to remind you that we're doing this to try and figure out what he's doing at this school."

"This is practically stalking," Larry muttered, but he followed orders and scrutinized the classrooms one by one.

The first class he saw contained wide desks with about 10 or so adult students engaged in woodworking. The beautifully sculpted wood would probably be turned into luxurious chairs.

In the next class over, students were sculpting circular pieces of wood. It was the traditional Roxchean art of making decorative dishes.

Jenny also searched the classes through her viewfinder.

The students in the first class she saw were making brass instruments, carefully bending the golden pipes.

Next to them were people testing out different wind instruments.

"There!" Seron cried suddenly, "the first floor in the central building. Third classroom from the right."

Larry and Jenny turned their lenses.

Chairs and desks were placed at regular intervals in the room, no different than an ordinary school. However, the desks themselves were very tall.

Sitting there were students in white. The desks went all the way up to their shoulders.

The students almost hugged the desks as they leaned in close to the tiny objects before their eyes, moving both their hands as they worked.

On the desks were lights and small boxes.

"The seat at the back of the class, by the window. That's got to be SC Linus," Seron said.

As Seron said, at the back of the classroom sat Linus with his massive frame wrapped up in white and his large arms on the desk. There was a cylindrical magnifying loupe over his left eye.

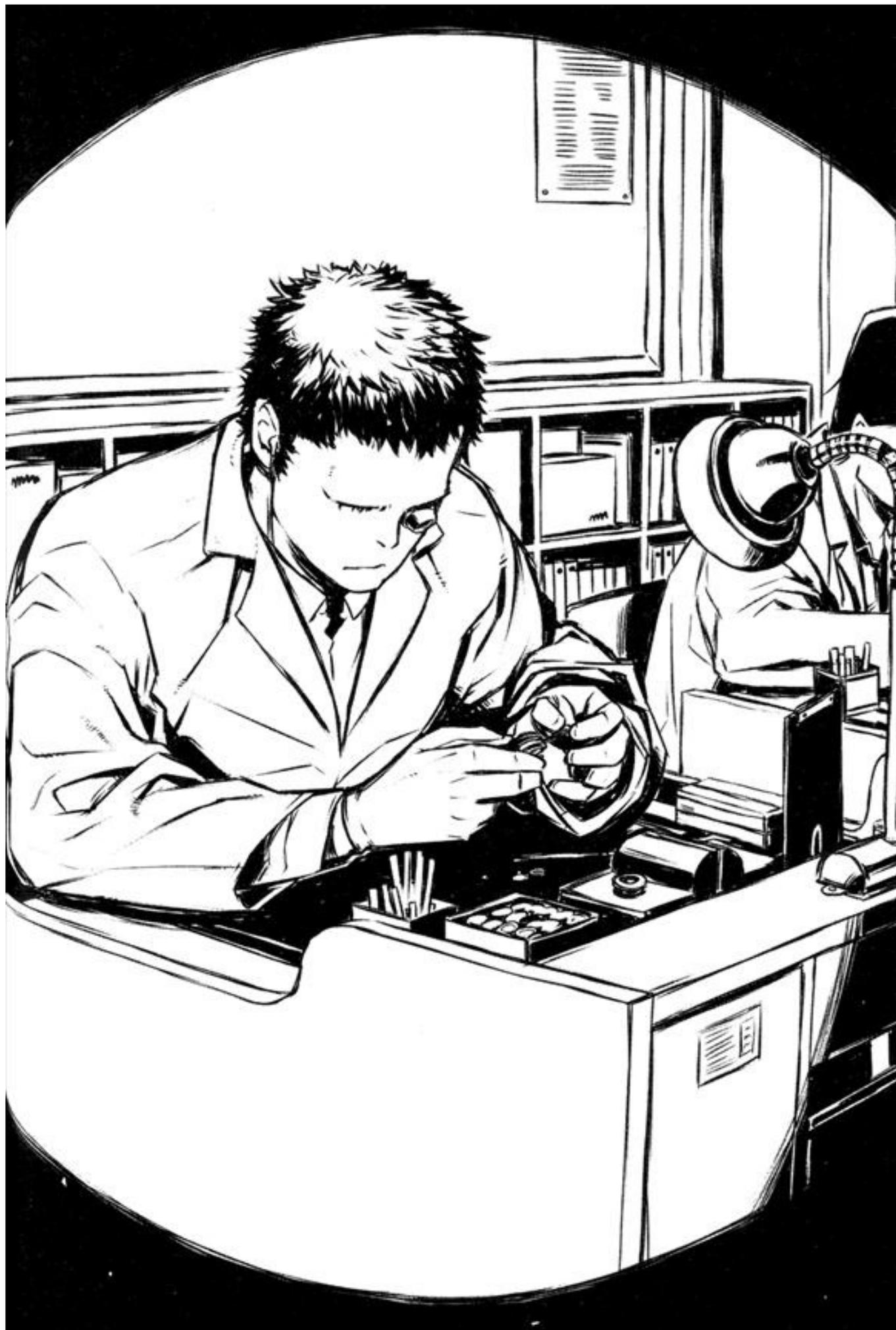
Linus scrutinized the tiny object before him as he lost himself in his work. Other than the angle of his gaze, it looked like he was lying on the desk.

"That's definitely him," Jenny said with several clicks of the shutter. She wound the film and shot again. Then again, changing the exposure.

"What are they working on? It looks like they have to hold those things close to their eyes," wondered Seron. They could not make out the objects with their binoculars and the camera.

But Larry knew the instant he saw.

"Easy," he said bitterly, "Watches."



\* \* \*

Just as the stakeout crew began to pack up and leave—

“When am I gonna get a chance to shine?” Natalia groaned.

The rehearsals had been moved from the gym to the auditorium, where the drama club would put on the play later in the term. Natalia and the orchestra club were on standby just below the stage, waiting just as they would during the performance.

On the stage, the impassioned Ms. Krantz directed the actors. The orchestra club and the four members of the chorus club were left with nothing to do. Dozens were left to wait idly.

“I wish to appear. I wish to be singing,” whispered one of the four chorus club members—Megmica.

On stage, Ms. Krantz finished and clapped loudly.

On cue, Nick the Black Knight ran forward in his school-issue tracksuit and took center stage.

“But remember this! I know your true identity!” he cried.

\* \* \*

“Hey Meg. It’s been too long.”

<Yes, it has been very long, Miss Lillianne Aikashia Corazòn Whittington Schultz. Have you fared well?>

“Whoa! You’re pretty good at the old-timey lady Roxchean, Meg!”

<Hee hee. Thanks. I’ve been listening to a lot of archaic Roxchean because of the play so I kind of wanted to try it myself.>

“Still busy with the drama club?”

<Yeah. It’s hard trying to participate in all these club activities every day. They call us in, but a lot of times I barely get to sing at all. Like today.>

“That sucks. But I promise I’ll come see the performance.”

<Thanks, Lillia. The senior-classmen and I are going to sing our hearts out. And it’s so nice singing with live accompaniment from the orchestra.>

“What about the newspaper club? Helping out with them too?”

<No, the drama club’s been keeping me busy. Our president Jenny’s kind of bummed out.>

“Huh.”

<By the way, Lillia, didn’t you have a wristwatch? I thought I saw one in your room the other day.>

“Yeah. I wear it when I go out.”

<Is it not common for a female student in Roxche to have a wristwatch?>

“You don’t see many girls with watches, yeah. I mean, they’re expensive.”

<I see. What about you?>

“It’s actually a hand-me-down from my mom.”

<Oh.>

“So it’s really manly and not cute at all. They made it really big and easy to read because it was designed for pilots, so it practically feels like a bangle. So I don’t usually wear it.”

<I see.>

“Mom wears a new one she got from a watch company, thought. The company was doing a marketing campaign saying elite Air Force pilots wear their products, so they handed them out. Her co-workers said they were fine with what they had, but Mom took hers. Why turn down a free lunch, she said.”

<That’s interesting. By any chance, was the watch from Whitfield?>

“No, I don’t think so. Don’t remember the name, though.”

<You think she’ll model for an advertisement one day? A beautiful Air Force test pilot’s bound to attract attention.>

“You think? I dunno. You know what she’s like. Just the other day she flew off without permission on a test unit and had to submit a report. Not like she had much of a choice, but still...”

<Hm?>

“N-never mind. Just talking to myself.”

\* \* \*

### **The 26th day of the ninth month.**

It was the day after the Balfour investigation. The sky was clear.

Yet again, Stella found Larry on campus as he stepped through the gates and linked arms with him. At lunchtime, she opened up a homemade lunchbox.

A seemingly unpopular muscular boy and a quiet, stoic girl. As a couple, they were already a cafeteria legend. Which naturally meant that the mystique had worn off and students were reacting less and less to their presence. They simply passed by as if nothing was wrong.

“No complaints here. Cafeteria food’s great,” said Natalia, yet again with two servings on her tray.

“It is good to eat, but I think no longer we should watch Larry and Stella,” Meg chimed in.

“Have you made any progress?” asked Nick.

“Maybe, maybe not. I’ll tell you more at the office later,” Seron replied, avoiding the question.

After school, Jenny, Seron, and Larry gathered at the office.

They sat on the sofas around the coffee table.

“Let’s get all the facts straight,” Seron said.

On the table was a photo of Linus at work. The image was grainy because Jenny had to zoom in, but it was clear that he was making a wristwatch. Seron continued.

“At the beginning of the term, Stella Whitfield asked Larry out saying she wanted to hang out with him only on campus. When Larry accepted, she began to flaunt their relationship in

many different ways. She told her classmates and her family that they were dating with marriage in mind,” Seron recited mechanically.

Larry nodded slightly, not saying a word.

“Let’s rewind a bit. Not long after starting school here, Stella Whitfield was spotted with then-fifth-year student Linus Francis. Everyone thought he was stalking her, but there’s a good chance they were very close, at least until last term. Rumors about them began to spread. Linus Francis currently attends Balfour Technical School and is learning to make wristwatches.”

Seron stopped there. Jenny picked up where he left off.

“At this point, we can probably conclude that Stella had been dating Linus until last term before breaking up and moving on to Larry. She might be flaunting her new relationship to make a point of telling Linus that she’s found someone new and that he should give up on her.”

“Right,” Seron agreed.

“I hope that’s what it really is,” said Larry. Jenny shot him a glare.

“Hey. Larry Hepburn.”

“Yes, Jenny?”

“Spill the beans already.”

“What?”

“What’s your game? No one asks for an investigation on someone they just started dating. I started helping out because I was curious about the saint of a girl who decided to go out with you, but I didn’t think we’d end up getting in this deep.”

“Right...”

“And Seron!” Jenny turned, this time glaring at Seron.

“What is it?”

Seron simply stared back.

“Why did you agree to Larry’s request immediately? Did he tell you something ahead of time?”

“No.” “No,” Seron and Larry replied in unison. Seron continued.

“I was shocked when Larry asked us to investigate, but I knew he must have had a good reason. I decided to help out because I knew he’d tell us why.”

Larry’s eyes narrowed in a smile.

“Thanks,” he said.

“It’s nothing,” Seron replied, as casually as though Larry had borrowed a pen.

“Ugh! This is why boys are such a nuisance!” Jenny said with a hollow laugh, “I’m sick of all this ambiguity. I want the truth, Larry.”

“All right,” Larry said, and took a deep breath.

He closed his eyes and turned his face to the ceiling, exhaling.

Then he looked down and opened his eyes again, meeting Seron and Jenny’s gaze.

“Stella,” Larry said firmly, “isn’t in love with me.”

## **Chapter 6: The Trap**

“Stella isn’t in love with me,” Larry said.

Seron and Jenny listened on, calm and displeased respectively.

“I knew it as soon as I met her under the tree. I could tell she wasn’t in love with me. But she asked me out anyway. So I started wondering, ‘why?’ And I realized that this was a trap.”

“And how did you know she wasn’t in love with you?” asked Jenny.

“I can’t answer that yet,” Larry replied.

“Seriously? Fine. Keep going.”

“Right. So I willingly walked into the trap. Stella’s using me to fool people into thinking she’s going out with me. I confirmed my suspicions when I saw her flaunting our relationship everywhere yesterday and today. This is a diversionary tactic. The louder the diversion, the more effective it is. I just learned that recently.”

Seron remembered Larry saying the same thing in uniform before the start of the term.

“So?” Jenny demanded.

“So I wanted to know why Stella was doing all this.”

“Hm.”

“I...I gave up on going out with her from the moment I met her under the tree. But I want to know why she set this trap. And once I find out, I’m going to try and help her out. If I can’t figure it out, I’ll have to ask her myself. Not that she’s likely to tell me, anyway.”

“Yeah,” Jenny agreed. Seron nodded.

“If I asked, she might break up with me first,” Larry speculated, “then that’s just another life experience under my belt.”

Jenny realized that Larry was quoting what she had said two days ago. “Heh! You’re getting better, Hepburn,” she said with a self-deprecating smile.

Larry smiled back. “Then Stella would probably find another target. A boy from a prestigious family her parents would accept. She’d cling to him and share homemade lunches with him for the whole school to see. I know she has her reasons and it’s nosy of me to butt in, but I don’t want to watch Stella go through with this anymore.”

“All right. I understand,” Jenny said, nodding.

“Yeah,” said Seron, “thanks for telling us, Larry.”

“Nah, nothing to be thankful about. In fact, I should be apologizing for lying to you. Sorry, guys. I mean it,” Larry replied with a shake of the head. Then he stood and resumed his usual upbeat tone, “All right! Who wants some tea?”

He strode over to the kitchenette and began to prepare the tea.

As Jenny watched, she asked him, “What’s your take on Linus Francis?”

“He looks like a gorilla,” Larry replied, still busy at work.

“Anything else?”

Larry’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“I don’t have any concrete evidence, but I get the feeling Stella and SC Linus still like each other. But they’re hiding it for some reason.”

“Yeah. I think so too,” said Jenny.

“Same. But that doesn’t make sense,” Seron said. Larry was leaning against the wall by the kitchen, and Jenny sat near Seron on the sofa. Both gave him their full attention. “SC Linus’s family runs the Capital Department Stores chain. Sure, they’re not as prestigious as the Hepburns, but—and I really don’t want to put it this way—in terms of standing, they’re definitely a good match for the Whitfields.”

“His grades could use work, though,” Jenny pointed out.

“So could mine,” Larry rebutted her.

“Then get to it,” Jenny scolded him.

“And,” Seron continued, looking down at his watch, “consider the rule that Stella has to marry a watchmaker. SC Linus is a perfect fit. He’s even doing something as crazy as going to technical school on top of secondary school.”

Larry nodded, pointing at the photos. “SC Linus was putting together clockwork. Which means he has to put together all these tiny gears and springs and parts into a tiny system with special tweezers. While looking through a loupe. It’s really intricate work, and not everyone can do it.”

“I checked with Balfour Technical School this afternoon,” said Jenny, “Apparently their watchmaking course is really advanced. Students even make original wristwatches out of scratch. So you basically need foundational knowledge *before* you enroll.”

“In other words, there’s no reason SC Linus can’t make his relationship with Stella public,” Seron concluded, “I don’t understand why she would go so far to hide the relationship. And so suddenly, too.”

“Yeah.” “Same.”

Jenny and Larry nodded in unison.

“If only we knew, we could figure out why Stella’s doing all this,” Jenny sighed.

Many seconds passed in silence. It was broken by the whistling of the kettle.

Larry put a teabag in the teapot and brought it to the table with their cups.

“Thanks.” “Thanks.”

Handing Seron and Jenny their cups of tea, Larry poured some into his own flower-print cup and took a seat.

For some time they sipped tea in silence. Then—

“Looks like we’ll need to do some more investigating.” “Looks like we need to investigate some more.” “Looks like we have more investigating to do.”

Jenny, Larry, and Seron spoke nearly at once.

Jenny continued first. “We’ve done about all we can on campus. We’re down to investigating the technical school, but if we make too much of a fuss—”

“Stella and SC Linus will notice,” Seron finished.

“Yeah,” Larry agreed, and took a sip of tea. He continued, “What about this? We could talk to SC Linus and not Stella. They don’t meet after class, so we can catch SC Linus while he’s on his way to Balfour.”

“And?” Jenny asked.

“I’ll tell him that I want to help, and get the whole story.”

“A direct assault, huh. But what if he doesn’t tell you? He’d tell Stella about it, and our plan’ll be kaput.”

“True. Sorry, that was a stupid idea. Forget I said anything,” Larry said with a shrug.

“Don’t worry about it,” Jenny replied, “If anything, I’m glad you haven’t changed.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You were sounding so much smarter than usual I was starting to worry—”

“Okay. I get it. Never mind.”

“Jenny,” Seron said, “could I have another look at the photo of SC Linus on campus?”

Jenny took out the photo from her bag and handed it to Seron. Then she picked up the photo from the technical school and filed it away.

The photo depicted Linus Francis, the large boy with the gentle expression. And his watch.

Seron scrutinized the photo for some time.

“I..can’t think of anything,” he finally said, turning the photo over and placing it on the table. “I need to clear my thoughts.”

“Should I sing you a song?” Larry joked. There was no response.

The air was heavy.

“We’re here~!” The door opened and Natalia’s exaggerated voice broke the silence. She was singing, projecting like an opera singer or a musical actress.

“Pfft!” Larry spat out his tea.

“Ah~ so good to return~ to our good old office~”

She was by no means a bad singer, but Natalia’s song was an unconventional one. She was followed by—

“My heart is~ also happy~”

Meg, singing in a lovely soprano.

Seron’s heart skipped a beat at the beautiful voice filling the room. He was so distracted that he forgot to put the photo away.

And finally—

“And~ la la la la~”

Nick arrived in his school-issue tracksuit, closing the door behind him and skillfully singing one conjunction and several lyric-less notes.

The finale belonged to Natalia.

“So what I mean to say is~,” she sang, in a rather high pitch, “Larry~ put the kettle on~!”

It was an order.

The others stared, lost for words.

“What’s wrong, guys?” Natalia demanded, “It’s me! Natalia the bespectacled beauty! You didn’t forget me just because I was gone for a few days?”

“I wish we had,” Larry replied.

“Cruel, Larry. —Chief, Seron, It’s been a while!”

“The practice finished earlier today so we came to this office to drink cups of delicious tea!” said Meg.

“We are still part of the newspaper club, after all,” Nick added.

Larry wiped down the table and sofa and turned. “So what was that song supposed to be?”

“We made it up on the way here,” Natalia replied, “We were going to sing one part in unison but there wasn’t enough time to practice. Didn’t live up to your ridiculous expectations, eh?”

“We didn’t have expectations in the first place. What was the point of all that?”

“Isn’t it obvious? We were bringing some peace of mind to you poor lambs, lost and lonely without us!”

“More like you blew our minds to pieces,” Larry sighed, getting to his feet, “I’ll put the kettle on.”

He picked up the teapot and headed to the kitchenette again. Natalia, Meg, and Nick sat down in a row.

“Why the long face?” Natalia asked, looking at Jenny and Seron.

“Is the thing you are researching well?” asked Meg.

“Not really,” Seron admitted.

“Is there anything we can do? We would be happy to help,” offered Nick.

“Nah...we’re all right for today,” Jenny said. That was when Meg noticed something.

“Hm?”

The photo on the table.

“What is this a photo of, Seron?”

Her pale, slender arm reached for the upside-down photo on the table.

“Ah!”

Seron reached out to stop her, ready to grab Meg’s hand if he had to.

But his hand froze in midair, unable to go through with the deed.

“What is this?”

Not noticing Seron, Meg picked up to photograph. It showed Linus, upside-down. Meg turned it around.

“Oh my goodness.”

“Hm? Who’s in it?” “The subject?” Natalia and Nick leaned over.

“Er...”

Seron slowly withdrew his hand and cast Jenny a glance.

She was visibly upset.

Larry turned his gaze from the boiling water to the table at the sound of the voices.

“Ah...not good.”

The others had discovered the photo, he realized.

“Seron,” Meg said, “this is—”

“That’s! Er...a misunderstanding...?”

“A misunderstanding?”

“Er...”

Just as Jenny and Larry stepped up to help, Meg raised her voice.

“This is SC Linus! Yes?”

“Hm?” “Huh?” “What?”

Seron, Larry, and Jenny’s shock was eclipsed by the sound of the whistling kettle.

Larry gave up on the tea. He turned off the stove and ran to the sofa.

“Megmica! You know this guy?”

“Pardon me? Yes,” Meg nodded. Jenny leapt.

“How?!”

“Huh? Er...I attended last year a Bezelese class along with this senior-classman.”

“Why were you in a Bezelese class, Megmica?” asked Natalia.

Meg replied, “To be completely correct, I did not take the class. The teacher asked me to come to the class. The teacher needed a conversation partner helper so I could help.”

“Ah. They needed someone to help out for listening exercises.”

“Yes, that is right. But it was just once. This person was there at that time. I remember because he is very tall. He introduced himself, ‘My name is Linus’, in Bezelese of course. I did not remember his family name. I am sorry.”

“I see...” Seron breathed, finally recovering from the shock. But his state of calm did not last.

“It’s ‘Francis’,” said Natalia.

“What?” Jenny turned.

“H-how’d you know that, Lia?” Larry cried, going pale.

“Tea ready yet?” Natalia asked instead of replying.

“No—look, I’ll get your tea *after* you explain. Yes, his family name is Francis. How did you know? You met him before?”

“Yeah. In the orchestra club.”

“What?” “What?” “No way...”

“Oh my...” Meg blinked in confusion, though not as much as Jenny and Seron.

“How?” Jenny asked.

“This guy looks like a gorilla, but he’s really good with his hands. You know him, chief?”

“Yeah. And?”

“He repairs instruments.”

“So he goes to the orchestra club after classes?”

“Yeah. Sometimes our supervisor calls him in to the prep room to do some light repairs. He’s pretty nice too, so everyone calls him SC Sweet Gorilla. Heard he goes to a technical school after class, so he must really like this kinda stuff,” Natalia said nonchalantly.

“Oh, I understand,” Meg said, impressed.

Jenny, Larry, and Seron, on the other hand, went limp.

“I didn’t ask the orchestra club because they were so busy,” Jenny groaned.

“So what *about* this guy, chief? Is he the secret to womankind’s happiness? Or the heir to some really noble family?”

“That’s what I want to know...”

“I see this investigation of yours has been putting quite the strain on you all,” Nick remarked.

“Hey...Nick. Nicholas Browning,” Larry finally said.

“Yes? What is it?”

“You’re not gonna say you know this guy too, are you? Please tell me no.”

“No, I do not recognize him.”

Three of the club members sighed in relief. Nick scrutinized the photo in Meg’s hands.

“A student of his stature would be quite difficult to miss. Although I suppose I wouldn’t have taken any classes with him anyway, as you say he is a senior-classman.”

“Sixth-year,” Natalia said.

“Of course. His name is Linus Francis, you say? Interesting. I believe the family that owns the department stores by the train stations were called Francis.”

Seron nodded. “You know your stuff, Nick. Yeah, his parents run the chain.”

“Aha! So he really is the Francis family’s son. Then I suppose it’s only natural for you to investigate him as well,” Nick said with a smile.

“Huh?” “What?” “Hm?”

Jenny, Larry, and Seron reacted once more.

“What do you mean, Nick?” asked Seron.

“Naturally—hm? Have I not mentioned this before?”

“Mentioned what?”

“The Francis family—”

Nick began to explain. It did not take long. In fact, it was over in two sentences.

“—one.”

Afterwards,

Seron,

Larry,

And Jenny,

Yelled in unison.

“That’s it!”

\* \* \*

“And that’s how it is,” Seron said, explaining everything to Natalia, Meg, and Nick. It had taken him some time but he managed to cover all the important points.

“That’s one complicated story. Aww, don’t cry, Larry,” Natalia teased.

“I’m not crying,” Larry growled.

“That is...it is so sorry for Larry! It is okay because he says he is okay, but...” Meg trailed off.

“Thanks, Megmica. I appreciate it,” Larry replied with a smile.

“I suppose things would have been much easier for you if I had explained everything fully from the outset. My apologies,” said Nick.

“Don’t worry about it. Better late than never,” Larry said, pouring Nick another cup of tea.

“So what now?” Natalia asked the obvious question. Seron spoke again.

“Nick, when do they announce the results of the Whitfield Competition?”

“Before the upcoming weekend, which would mean...on the 28th, two days from now. It will make the papers on the 29th at the latest. Of course, as the competition is known only to wristwatch aficionados and industry players, the news will only make a corner of the pages.”

“Then it won’t be too late to take action on the 31st, the day we get back to school.”

“Yes, if your hunch is correct.”

Seron nodded.

“There’s a good chance SC Linus’s name will make the article. If that happens,” he said, looking at Jenny, “it’ll be the newspaper club’s turn.”

## **Chapter 7: Cana**

### **The 28th day of the ninth month.**

It was lunchtime at the cafeteria.

“Is something the matter...?” Stella asked Larry.

Spread between them was a delicious homemade lunch. Omelette with plenty of ground beef—Larry’s favorite—along with boiled broccoli salad, bread, and chocolate chip cookies for dessert.

“Huh? Oh, it’s nothing,” Larry replied. But Stella was not fooled.

“No. You’re...acting strange, SC Hepburn. Yesterday too,” she said. “You look...tired. And a little sad.”

Larry’s eyes narrowed. “Maybe,” he paused, then opened his mouth, “Stella.”

“Yes?”

“About the 31st. The first day back after the weekend.”

“What is it?”

“I have something to take care of at lunchtime, so we won’t be able to eat together.”

“I see.”

“So you don’t need to make me anything. Don’t push yourself, okay?”

“All right.”

“But in exchange, could you give me some time after school that day?”

“...I...have to go straight home.”

“Just for a little while. It won’t take longer than one of those days when classes end a little late. And if your family gets worried, I’ll give your grandfather a call and apologize. Or we can go apologize to him together. How’s that?”

“That...sounds fine,” Stella said with a nod.

“Thanks. Then let’s meet after class on the 31st, under the same tree as before.”

Seron watched as Larry scratched his right ear, then the back of his head.

“All right. Depending on tomorrow’s results, we’ll take action on the 31st,” he said to Natalia, Meg, and Nick, who were sitting with him.

“Do you think it will work?” asked Nick. Natalia and Meg looked at Seron.

“I believe in SC Linus.”

\* \* \*

### **The next day. Very early in the morning of the 29th.**

Because it was the weekend, the school was deserted that day. Seron walked out the quiet gates and left the campus empty-handed.

About an hour later, he returned through the quiet gates, entering the campus with a newspaper in hand.

He stepped into a telephone booth in the dormitory building lobby and called Jenny Jones.

<Well?>

“We’re good to go, Jenny. SC Linus really did it.”

In a corner of the newspaper in Seron’s hand was a small article.

‘3305 Whitfield Competition Winner Announced: Linus F.’

His family name had been shortened to an initial, but Linus had indeed made it.

The name of the prize-winning wristwatch was also featured in the article.

\* \* \*

### **The 31st day of the ninth month.**

It was lunchtime on the first day of school that week.

Seron quickly finished his lunch alone and headed to the newspaper club office.

“Hey there!”

“Come on in.”

Larry and Jenny were sitting inside. A large piece of paper was spread on the table before them. A black-and-white newspaper for posting on the wall.

Seron stood over the paper with his hands on the table and read its contents in one go.

Then, he looked up.

“Perfect.”

“Thanks. I got so pumped up I decided to print 50 copies this time. I can’t wait for class to end.”

\* \* \*

Breaktime, before the last class of the day. In the hallway.

“Sorry, got some business to take care of. Put in a good word with SC Portman for me,” Natalia said to her orchestra club friends.

“Put in a good word...” “...with *SC Portman*?!” her friends complained as Natalia set off for class.

At around the same time, in a different hallway.

“I am very sorry. There is a job that can never be missed today, so I wish to rest from practice,” Meg pleaded, bowing to her chorus club senior-classmen.

“We understand. Don’t worry about it,” they replied.

At the same time, in another hallway.

“President,” Nick called, stopping Arthur Sears in the hall. He and Sophia Ulericks both turned.

“Hey there, Nick. What is it?”

“I’m afraid I will have to miss practice today. I have business to attend to at the newspaper club.”

\* \* \*

After school. It was clear.

Students were swarming in droves towards the gates.

But a certain part of the campus was separated from the massive flow of people.

The grounds behind the school building were grassy with flower beds dotting the area. And standing prominently over it all was a massive oak tree with green branches.

Jenny had once called it a legendary tree, which guaranteed that any confession made under its branches would be reciprocated.

A student walked over to the tree.

Sixth-year Linus Francis, his frame so large that his tie looked unnaturally thin, and his face so gentle it did not fit the rest of his body.

He was carrying his bag, which also looked disproportionately small, and a cloth bag containing a change of clothes. On this right wrist was a watch.

He looked as powerless as a man facing the gallows.

When he found no one under the tree, he looked around.

Then he leaned against the trunk and waited nervously.

“He’s here.”

Larry Hepburn was keeping a watchful eye on Linus as the latter leaned against the tree. He was watching from very close by.

“He is there...”

Meg, Seron, Jenny, Natalia, and Nick were also watching as Linus leaned against the tree.

They were watching him from a distance, through their binoculars.

“I must say I am getting rather used to this kind of activity,” Nick remarked. The five students were each holding binoculars, pressed against the office window as they watched Linus.

This time, the three girls were half-kneeling on a soft rug under the window with their elbows on the windowsill. Seron and Nick stood behind them.

Mounted on a tripod to Jenny’s right was a camera equipped with a long telephoto lens pointing at the tree. Jenny was holding the cable release.

She took a shot and wound the film.

“We didn’t give Larry a script,” Natalia said, “Is he gonna be all right? He’s not gonna run off at the big moment?”

“Actually, he gave me a telephone call yesterday afternoon,” Nick answered, “He asked me the secret to giving a good performance. So I gave him an answer.”

“What did you answer him with?” asked Meg.

“‘You must be bold’.”

“Oh my goodness.”

“Nick, you’re the one who lied to get SC Gorilla out there, right?” asked Natalia.

“Indeed I am.”

“What’d you tell him to get him to skip technical school? He looks like he’s about to faint.”

Nick flashed an elegant smile.

“I’m afraid I cannot say. It would be a shame if our friendship were to be ruined over such a trivial matter.”

“Scary,” Natalia said with a grin, “So now the rest is up to Larry.”

“It’s gonna be all right,” said Seron, “Larry’s not going to run.”

Just as Jenny smiled at Seron’s remark—

<What’s going on...?>

Linus’s anxious voice filled the newspaper club members’ ears. He had a deep but frail voice.

The voice was coming from the speakers on the table behind the club members. The speakers were hooked up to a tube amp, whose tubes were glowing a dull orange.

A long cable was connected to the amp. It ran out the office window, towards the tree, before it disappeared into the ground.

At the end of the cable was a microphone sealed in a buried box.

“Sounds great. The marvels of civilization,” Natalia commented.

“Obviously,” Jenny replied, “It was tough planting the cable and the microphone over lunch break.”

“And thanks to your efforts, we will be privy to the truth of the situation. Thank you, Jenny. Your efforts are much—”

Nick stopped.

“There! Our star has arrived,” he exclaimed.

Everyone stared hard into their binoculars.

Through their lenses they saw Stella’s petite form, next to the building behind Linus and the tree. Linus was facing away from her.

Stella did not seem to have noticed Linus. She walked briskly to the tree.

Larry heard her footsteps.

“Whew...all right.”

With leather gloves on his hands, he tightened his grip on the rope.



<Ah! Why are you—>

Stella's voice filled the office.

Stella had drawn close to the tree and noticed the boy leaning against it.

<Huh...? Whoa!>

Linus's cry of shock followed.

Jenny smirked. "Now let's see what you're made of, Sir Larry Hepburn."

"Huh...? Whoa!"

"Wh-what are you doing here?!" Stella demanded as Linus flinched.

"...Er...I..." Linus could not manage a proper word. Instead he shook his head slightly and held his bag in front of him with trembling hands.

Stella quickly looked around.

"Y-you have to go, now!"

"B-but...I..."

"Please, you have to leave!" Stella said, and reached into her bag.

She pulled out her wristwatch.

As Linus watched, she put the watch around her left wrist.

"Please, you have to do as I say! You can't be here!"

"But I—"

Then came a third voice.

"Whoa there, calm down!"

The voice had come from above.

"Hm?" "Huh?"

Stella and Linus looked up in unison. The first thing they saw were the branches of the oak tree and its splendid foliage.

Larry had been hiding inside. A rope came down from the branches, its end touching the ground.

"Hah!"

Larry rappelled down the rope.

"Whoa!" "Ah..."

Larry appeared before the surprised couple, dressed in camouflage gear.

He was wearing a Confederation Army uniform with a pair of combat boots. He also wore a hat and a camouflage scarf over his face.

The rope was wrapped around his waist and thighs, fixed to metal carabiners. The rope passed through the carabiners and slowed his descent.

Pulling the scarf off his face and unclipping the rope, Larry greeted Stella and Linus.

"Hey there! The name's Larry. Larry Hepburn."

Larry landed safely between the large boy and the tiny girl.

<Hey there! The name's Larry. Larry Hepburn.>

And he threw out a line straight from a radio drama.

Natalia could not keep her composure, her hand over her stomach as she trembled in barely-suppressed fits of laughter.

Jenny continued to take more photos. “Going good so far.”

“He will do a fine job, so long as he remembers my advice,” Nick said with a smile.

“Do your best, Larry!” Meg cheered.

“Wh-what are you—”

“SC Hepburn?”

Larry looked at both Linus and Stella.

“You want to know why I’m wearing this? Obviously, I’m dressed for combat!”

“PFFFFT! AHAHAHAHA!”

Back in the office, Natalia finally burst out laughing. But as Larry could not hear her, he continued.

“Stella!” he cried without warning.

Stella flinched.

“I’m going to save you!”

“What...?”

“From *him!*”

With his gloved hand, Larry pointed an accusing finger at Linus. It was bad manners from anyone’s perspective, but he continued regardless.

“I started hearing these weird rumors after we started going out.”

As Stella and Linus stood in silence, Larry continued his monologue.

“I heard that a senior-classman named Linus Francis was bothering you. So I asked some good friends of mine to investigate, and it turned out the rumors were true. We have eyewitness accounts from people who saw you with this guy in deserted places on campus.”

“Er...I...” Linus stammered, shrinking.

“You were stalking Stella!” Larry accused, finally lowering his hand.

Linus flinched. But Larry’s onslaught was not yet finished.

“Granted, Stella is really cute! But SC Linus! You took advantage of how shy she was and followed her around when people weren’t nearby! The reason she asked me out this term and asked me to hang out with her as much as possible on campus was because she wanted to avoid you! Not because she was in love with me!”

“Can’t breathe...someone save me...” Natalia wheezed, almost in tears, but because Larry could not see her he continued without stopping.

“This is unforgivable! A real man doesn’t coerce or stalk girls!”

“I...erm...”

“Have I made myself clear? Don’t ever bother Stella again! I’ll deal with you personally if you get near her! I realize it’s wrong of me to use my military training to hurt a civilian, but

I'm willing to make an exception when it's against someone who hurts a woman! Do you have anything to say for yourself, SC Linus?"

Larry was firing on all cylinders. Linus was struck dumb. But Stella managed to speak up.

"Er...SC Hepburn."

"What is it, Stella?"

"Er...I—"

But Larry intentionally cut her off.

"Don't worry, Stella. I'll protect you."

"What? But I—"

Stella was beginning to panic. But Larry—

"I'll make sure you don't regret choosing me."

Larry narrowed his eyes, for once telling the truth. Then he suddenly raised his voice.

"That's all I have to say, SC Linus! Leave Stella alone, and don't get near her on campus until the day you graduate! She's got bodyguards off-campus and me here to protect her. Don't you forget that!"

Though Linus had shrank back with his head bowed, and looked like he was on the verge of tears, he refused to run.

"I..." he said, finally opening his mouth, "I...I can't..."

Stella was looking at Linus. Linus was looking down.

And as a result, both missed the sad look in Larry's eyes.

"Good on you," Jenny whispered, taking a photo of his face.

"Which one are you talking to?" asked Seron.

"Is that even a question?" Jenny snapped, before mouthing, 'Both'.

"Man, this is killing me..." Natalia snickered as she finally came back to life. Five binoculars turned in the same direction for a glimpse of Larry's heroics.

"What? Do you realize what you're saying, SC Linus?!" roared Larry, who knew exactly what he was doing. He took one intimidating step after another towards Linus. "Fine by me! I wanted to back down here for honor's sake, but you leave me with no choice!"

Larry reached out. Linus was two heads taller than him and his arms were thicker, but Larry was not daunted in the least.

"I'm taking you to the faculty office, stalker! Don't blame me if I break an arm or two!"

"NOOOOO!" Stella shrieked, shoving Larry.

<NOOOOO!>

"Whoa!" "Ah!" "Eek!" "Oh!" "Wow."

The club members in the office flinched.

"Huh?"

Larry flew through the air and landed on his back.

"Gurk!"

Creating a new Roxchean exclamation for pain, Larry rolled and hit the tree trunk back-first. His hat went flying. Finally, his head hit the tree with a resounding noise and his body slumped forward on reflex.

He fell on the grass and stopped moving.

“That an act too?” Natalia wondered. From the office, Larry looked like a giant frog.

“I don’t seem to recall teaching him that particular technique. Although I am quite tempted to adopt it for my last fight scene,” Nick remarked.

“S-Stella...?”

Linus was first to break the silence.

“Er...I...what do I do...?”

He was clearly bewildered at the sight of Stella shoving the belligerent boy.

“Ow, that hurt...”

Larry slowly rose. He rolled over to his side and leaned against the tree.

“I...I...” Stella stammered, finally lowering her hands.

Larry looked up.

And he looked at Stella, his sky-blue eyes shining.

Several seconds later, he broke into a grin with blades of grass in his blond hair and dirt on his face. “Good job.”

Stella did not understand.

“Wh-what do you mean...?”

“Good job, Stella. You win,” Larry replied.

“Huh?”

“You’re a really strong person. You beat me.”

Meanwhile, in the office.

“Why’s he still in that pose?” Natalia wondered.

“It makes sense,” Seron replied, “you can’t look at a star unless you’re looking up.”

“Wow! It is very romantic, Seron! It is very cool!” Meg exclaimed.

Seron’s thoughts came grinding to a halt.

Stella slowly stepped forward, towards Larry.

Larry looked up at her.

“I knew from the start.”

“Knew what?”

“That you weren’t in love with me.”

Stella was silent.

“And I found out after doing some investigation that the guy you really like is standing over there. SC Linus. And that he feels the same about you.”

Stella and Linus’s eyes met. They both looked away.

“They’re trying to figure out who spilled the beans. It’s written on their faces,” Natalia remarked.

“We figured it out ourselves, though,” Jenny said proudly.

<So all that stuff I said was a lie!> Larry said, <Specifically...er...now where did I start lying?>

“C’mon, get a grip, Larry! When else are you gonna get to shine?” Natalia jeered.

“Er...so...basically, I was lying when I said you were stalking Stella, SC Linus. I’m really sorry!”

Stella was silent, but Linus stepped forward to be next to her. He gave Larry an awkward look.

Larry looked at the two wristwatches before him. One on the left wrist and the other on the right.

“You two must’ve met not long after Stella started school here. And you fell in love. Probably because you both love watches. Right?”

Stella nodded silently.

“So I was right. Yeah. You love watches, Stella. And SC Linus, you like watches enough to make some of your own.”

Shock spread over Linus’s face. Larry answered the unspoken question.

“I’m really sorry, SC Linus. I tailed you after class and found out you were attending Balfour Technical School.”

“I see...” Linus said, finally breaking his silence. Larry continued.

“You love each other enough to want to pledge your futures together. But there weren’t many places you could see each other. Off-campus is out of the question, and even on campus, people would spread rumors if they saw you together. Which is what really happened. And—”

<And you had a good reason for not wanting to be found out.>

Larry’s calm explanation filled the office.

<Your ancestry.>

Nick, still holding his binoculars to his eyes, quietly repeated what he had told he others several days earlier.

“The Francis family was founded by the brother of the current Whitfield CEO after the family feud split them apart. In other words, the Francis family and the Whitfield family were originally one.”

“You two were second cousins. Stella’s grandfather and SC Linus’s grandfather were brothers, but they had a such a bad falling-out that SC Linus’s grandfather even changed his name. And they’re still on bad terms. They don’t even contact each other, let alone meet in person. That was the reality you two were facing.”

Larry looked at Stella, who wore a completely new expression. She had a determined, powerful gaze.

Linus stood beside her, also looking at Larry.

“You met by coincidence at this school. And you were free to see each other in secret here. But if your families were to find out, well...honestly, I can’t even imagine, but...er...it couldn’t be good. I think.”

“Damn that Larry! Can’t you set up a microphone on this end, chief?! This guy’s butchering his delivery!” Natalia fumed.

“It is finally the starting,” Meg said, trying to calm her down.

<SC Linus. You love watches, and you want to become a watchmaker someday. And you love Whitfield watches, I bet. So everything fit together. Marrying Stella and joining Whitfield Watchmakers. It was a goal worth aiming for.>

“Indeed,” Nick nodded, “if not for one problem.”

<But the family feud still isn’t over. Even with your skill, you would never pass the Whitfield Academy entrance exam because of your background. So there was only one way forward.>

Seron, who had finally come back to life, whispered along with Larry’s voice.

“Winning the Whitfield Competition.”

<I don’t know which of you came up with the idea, but it’s a great one. Whitfield will have no choice but to hire you if you win. So you submitted a custom-made wristwatch for the competition. You must’ve made one last year, but it didn’t work out. So you worked even harder this time.>

Only Larry’s voice came through the speakers, but the newspaper club’s lenses showed Stella and Linus as well. They were listening to Larry under the tree, facing away from each other.

<But then there was more trouble. The second-year girls started talking about how you two were meeting in secret. At this rate, your families might find out—and if they found out this term before the competition ended, Whitfield might disqualify SC Linus by force. So—>

Larry continued, looking straight at Stella.

“So you chose me.”

Stella was silent.

“We happened to meet in the hallway after summer break ended. That’s when you heard that I’m from a noble family, and that I’m unpopular and don’t have a girlfriend. The perfect target. So you asked me out and told the entire school and your family that I was your boyfriend.”

Stella did not say a word.

“You weren’t in love with me. It was all an act to show the school that you were dating someone who wasn’t SC Linus.”

Stella still did not speak.

“And now, you don’t have to put on an act anymore.”

Slowly, Larry rose.

He approached Stella and Linus.

“SC Linus.”

When he heard his name, Linus's gaze wavered.

"Ah..."

"You're not the one who thought of this plan, are you?"

Larry nodded at Linus's silent answer and turned to Stella.

"It was you, Stella. Excuse me."

Larry quickly grabbed Stella's left arm.

"Ah!"

Stella did not have time to react. Larry gently twisted her wrist to bring the face of her watch into view.

"I knew it."

His eyes scanned the letters on the face.

"My dearest Cana..." he muttered, letting go of Stella's arm. "This looks like a Whitfield watch, but it's not, is it? It's a one-of-a-kind made for Stella alone. It's a reminder that even if you're far apart, your hearts are always together."

Back in the office—

"You told him that part, right Seron?" Jenny asked.

"Yeah," Seron nodded.

"So...well, er...I didn't know I had that in me. Looks like hard work pays off after all!"

"Er...SC Hepburn?"

"Hm? Don't tell me I got something wrong?"

"No..." Stella shook her head. "I'm sorry. Everything you said...is true."

Larry could not say a word.

"Aww, there, there," Natalia said from the office.

"SC Linus. Congratulations on winning the Whitfield Competition!" Larry said, turning.

"Huh? Oh...er...thank you. But how did you—"

"I knew it as soon as I read the article. You're the only one who would have sent in a watch called 'Cana'."

"I see...you must know someone who's very good at Bezelese."

"That's right. Anyway, now you can take a job at Whitfield with your head held high!"

"I...I can't say for sure."

"Huh? Why not?" Larry asked. He noticed that Stella still looked sad.

"It's true that I won the competition. But I had to falsify a lot of information when I submitted my watch. My address, my contact information, my birthday, everything. I couldn't let them find out that I was a Francis. If the Whitfield family makes up their mind to stop me from joining their company...they might make it so that this competition never happened to begin with."

"I see...so Seron was right. I'm impressed."

"Hm?"

“N-nothing! Don’t worry about that! We just need to get the word out. We’ll make one big announcement about you and Stella, about your families, and all that hard work you put into developing your talent! That way Whitfield won’t be able to cut you out without getting a whole lot of angry questions getting directed their way!”

For several seconds, Stella and Linus were silent.

But finally, Stella spoke.

“How...?”

“Did you forget?” Larry replied, “Our school’s full of kids from all sorts of rich families.”

Larry’s statement filled the office.

“All right, that’s the cue!” Jenny said with a clap, taking one last photo, “The goods are on the table! Get out there and make some waves! Move out!”

Jenny pointed at the coffee table, laden with a stack of 50 large sheets of paper and rolls of tape.

The remaining newspaper club members rushed out of the office, with the rolled-up newspapers under their arms and rolls of tape in their hands.

“Do your best work, Seron!” Meg said with a smile.

“Yeah!”

Seron rushed to the grounds behind the school on his own, towards the oak tree.

Jenny remained alone in the office.

“I knew it,” she said with a grin, “The first headliner of the year is a love story.”

“When we tell the students, word will spread to the parents too. And maybe your grandfathers will change their minds when they see how much everyone is cheering you two on. They’ll realize soon enough that stubbornly clinging to the past won’t benefit anyone.”

Stella and Linus were still in shock. That was when Seron approached.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Larry.”

Passing by Stella and Linus, Seron stopped beside Larry and said one word.

“Extra.”

He pulled out a sheet of paper from under his arm, handed it to Larry, and ran off.

“Thanks, buddy!” Larry replied, and opened up the paper.

The poster-sized piece of paper featured photographs, articles, and a large headline.

Larry spread out the newspaper and held it out for Stella and Linus to see.

‘Linus Francis Clinches Victory in Whitfield Competition’, said the eye-catching headline. Below was an article covering the truth of the incident in easy-to-read font.

And though Jenny had written the article, there was no sign of conspiracy theories or anything of the like.

Below was another article entitled, ‘Linus Francis and Stella Whitfield’s Star-Crossed Love’. It covered the story behind their relationship in detail.

The article covered the story behind the Whitfield and Francis families and the fact that Stella and Linus were forced to hide their relationship for over a year, and claimed that Linus’s victory in the Whitfield Competition had already solved all their problems.

Another interesting point was that the article also covered Larry. ‘Third-year wristwatch aficionado Larry Hepburn, who happened to learn their secret, assisted the beleaguered couple by playing the part of Stella’s boyfriend until the competition results were announced’, the article claimed, though it was all a lie Jenny had cooked up.

‘Congratulations, SC Linus. Stella. I knew you could do it. It was an honor to lend a hand,’ said an excerpt from a fake interview with Larry.

Wide-eyed, Stella and Linus read the articles about themselves. They were both stunned into silence.

But finally, Stella turned.

“Does this mean that we have a future together after all?”

Larry, who knew very well that he was not included in that future, responded—without a smile, but in a reassuring voice.

“You bet! See? I told you you wouldn’t regret choosing me.”

“No guarantee it’s gonna work out all hunky-dory, though,” Jenny mumbled, listening to his voice over the speakers, “You can make all the fuss in the world, but if the adults decide to screw saving face and really go all-out, it’s not gonna work. The rest is up to luck. Damn it, Seron. You knew all that but didn’t tell Larry.”

“Extra! Extra! Read all about it!” Natalia cried.

“These are the newspaper club wall newspapers! They are moving articles!” Meg called.

“May I? Excuse me, miss. How would you like to have a read? We’re covering a very romantic story this issue,” Nick advertised.

“...Is this a little crooked?” Seron wondered.

In all, they posted over 40 copies of the newspaper around the campus. The newspapers began to cause a stir among the students and staff who had not yet left.

“I suppose there’s no sense in taking down a *proper* newspaper...”

Not a single one was removed.

\* \* \*

### **The 1st day of the tenth month.**

By the next day, even more students had read the newspapers, and the story spread like wildfire throughout the school.

“Larry! Is this for real?”

Larry’s classmates surrounded him at the lockers between classes.

“Course it is! The newspaper doesn’t lie.”

“Figures. I knew something was fishy when I heard a girl actually liked you at all.”

“Whaaaat. Come on, man. Anyway, the important thing here is that SC Linus is a swell guy who’s gonna manage Whitfield someday!”

In the faculty office, the teachers were talking over tea. First came the topic of Linus's award. Then—

“Come to think of it, what should we do about giving the newspaper club official status?”

“Well, they've published a newspaper and filled the membership requirement. We don't have any reason to refuse them.”

“I suppose. But they need a supervisor, don't they?”

“That's going to be a problem. Who'd want to work with a troublemaker like Jones?”

“We could always leave it to someone who's not around right now.”

“What are we, children? But you do have a point.”

“Are you thinking what I'm thinking?”

“Mr. Murdoch's coming back this month. It'll be perfect.”

Larry ran into Seron in the hall during the next break.

“Hey buddy! How're things in your classes?”

“Not bad at all. Word is getting out and people are cheering on Stella and SC Linus. It's fulfilling, seeing people read our work and talk about the story we covered.”

“Sure is! Everyone said I put on a really good performance!”

“... You really did great.”

“Did you hear some of the newspapers we put up got stolen?”

“Wow. Jenny must be pleased.”

“Yeah. She's grinning and putting up more copies she printed today. We'll talk more after school, yeah? I'm eating in the classroom today so I can tell more people about what an awesome job I did.”

“Actually—I was going to leave a note about it—the librarian asked me to help out after school today. I don't think I can make it to the office. Could you tell Jenny for me?”

“Sure thing. And I'll contact you again if we get word from the happy couple.”

“All right. Looking forward to good news.”

“Yeah.”

Seron watched Larry depart.

“The happy couple, huh,” he mumbled.

Seron looked up from his watch.

“Oh, hello there Seron.”

“Ah!”

His eyes met Meg's. Seron flinched.

“I am sorry. Are you surprised?”

“N-no! I'm all right! Hey there.”

“Hello. Everything is doing very well! It is very good,” Meg said, smiling as brightly as though she were one half of the happy couple.

It was only then that Seron noticed the other girl standing next to Meg.

“Hey Seron. Remember me? We're in Roxchean class together this term.”

Seron nodded. “Schultz. I remember.”

Meg leapt in.

“Lillia took the art class last term with us as well! After it, we are best friends! Lillia, you already know but I will again introduce you. This is Seron Maxwell, and he is in the newspaper club with us.”

Lillia turned, looking neither particularly pleased nor displeased.

“I read the paper. It was really interesting.”

“Thanks. I’m sure the others will be happy to hear that.”

“Take good care of Meg, will you? She can be a bit of a ditz sometimes.”

“Ah! That is mean, Lillia! I am older than you!”

Meg’s voice stirred up determination in Seron. He would take care of her. He would even give his life for her sake.

“Of course. If someone tries to stab Megmica, I’ll take the blow in her stead. Will that work?”

Lillia’s eyes widened. Then,

“Pfft! Ahahahaha!”

She burst into laughter. Meg chuckled as well.

“I’m surprised. You’re such a clown, Seron.”

“Seron is more often serious.”

Unable to figure out what was so funny about what he had said, Seron decided to put on a smile.



\* \* \*

After school, Larry went to the newspaper club office.

“Look who’s here. The man of the hour,” Jenny said from the sofa, welcoming him in. She was drinking tea.

“You’re here early. What happened to class?”

“Ditched afternoon classes.”

“Are your grades gonna be all right?”

“You’re worrying about *my* grades? I don’t know if I should laugh or get mad.”

“...Anyway,” Larry said, taking a seat, “Any new info?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah?”

“About the Whitfields.”

That was when Larry noticed two empty teacups on the table.

“Guests?”

“Are you a detective, Larry?”

“Even a five-year-old could figure it out. Stella and SC Linus, right?”

“So you *are* a detective. Yes. It was them.”

“What’d they say?”

“Let’s wait for Seron.”

“He’s busy at the library today.”

“Oh. Okay then, I’ll tell you. To start with the most important part—”

Larry held his breath.

“—Linus Francis is probably going to get that Whitfield position.”

“ALL RIGHT!” Larry cheered, pumping his fists. Jenny continued unfazed at his reaction.

“They went straight to the Whitfield family after our little performance. SC Linus told them everything, revealed that he was the competition winner, and that he was dating Stella. They showed our newspaper to the family and told them that the whole school knew already. The Whitfields were pretty surprised when they heard who SC Linus was, too. In the end, Stella’s grandfather thought for a long time and asked SC Linus, ‘Does this mean you are willing to abandon your family for Stella?’.”

“And what’d he say?”

“He said, ‘Yes, as long as you feed me bananas every day’.”

“Jenfiel I’m being serious here!”

“Fine, fine. He actually said, ‘There’s nothing I want more than to become a watchmaker and spend my life with Stella. I’m willing to give up anything for my dream’.”

“Man, that is so cool! And what happened?”

“Back to what I said before. He’s been granted admission to Whitfield. Now it’s up to him to accept.”

“Sweet! Sweet! I’m so happy for them! Now Stella’ll find happiness!” Larry cheered. But Jenny gave him a cold look.

“Hey.”

“Huh?”

“How’d you figure out Stella wasn’t in love with you?”

“I didn’t tell you, did I? I couldn’t say it before because Seron was around, but I could see it in her eyes.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I could see that she wasn’t in love with me. She didn’t have the eyes of someone who’s really deeply and desperately in love. I can tell, you know, since I see someone like that all the time.”

“Hmph. You’re too nice and stupid for your own good.”

“I know I’m stupid, but you’re the one who’s too nice for her own good.”

“What?”

“You mobilized the newspaper club to help.”

“I...was doing it to get a good story.”

“You gave your all when SC Sophia asked for help, too.”

“Th-that’s...”

“You’re really nice when it comes to other people’s love stories,” Larry remarked with a grin.

Jenny’s eyes widened, then narrowed in rage.

“Shut up! Argh! See if I help with any of *your* crushes!”

“Ha ha! Sure, whatever. But...”

“Yeah?”

“Make sure to give Seron a hand.”

“...Dunno how much I can help, but I’m not going to get in the way.”

“The past few days were really interesting. I think it really gave me a chance to reconsider my possibilities,” Larry said, recalling his mother’s advice.

“Like your possibilities as a ladies’ man?”

“That too.”

Jenny nodded dubiously, then looked up.

“Almost forgot. There’s something I’m supposed to give you,” she said, getting up. She went to the desk, picked up a small wooden box, and returned to sit across from Larry.

The box resembled a jewelry case or a music box, with a polished wooden finish.

There was a buckle for securing the lid shut, but otherwise the box was unmarked.

“It’s from Stella and the gorilla. They wanted to give this to you.”

“What is it?” Larry wondered, pulling the box over.

“They didn’t give me anything else. Stella said she tried to write a note but couldn’t think of anything, so she’s just giving you this.”

“I see...can I open it?”

“Why’re you asking me permission? I’m curious too, so hurry up and open it. It’s not gonna explode.”

“All right. Wonder what’s inside.”

“My guess is...a sliced-up banana.”

“Enough with the bananas already.”

Larry unclasped the buckle and slowly opened the lid.

He still could not tell what was inside, because the contents were covered with a beige cloth. Larry pulled it off.

“Ah...”

He froze, his blue eyes narrowing and locked on the contents of the box. Jenny waited.

Finally, Larry reached in and slowly, very slowly took out his present.

“Look, Jenny.”

“Wow.”

It was a wristwatch.

Around the small cushion in the box was a large, sturdy wristwatch.

It had a black case and a rotating bezel marked off in minutes. On the black face were the words ‘Whitfield-Farkas’, and the hands were finished with luminous paint.

“A Whitfield military-use wristwatch...” Larry gasped, pulling out the cushion.

He held the watch by the end of the strap, holding it just above eye-level.

The time and date had been set to perfection. The second hand whirred smoothly around the face.

“Stella...” Larry whispered, looking up at the watch with a smile.

“Hey,” Jenny said, looking at the watch and Larry’s eyes, “Look at the back.”

“Huh?”

Larry turned the watch over.

Like all the other models, the word ‘ARMY’, a serial number, and a military standard code were engraved on the back.

But above the mainstays were words exclusive to this one watch. The words had been engraved by hand.

‘To Sir Larry Hepburn’.

Without a word, Larry put the watch around his left wrist.

He tightened the strap and shook his arm, sensing the weight on his wrist.

“We didn’t talk much...but she was a good girl. I...I think I might have liked her a little...”

Larry trailed off, his eyes narrowing in a smile as he gazed lovingly at his new watch.

“I can’t speak for you, but it’s a general rule of thumb that first love never works out,” Jenny advised quietly.

“Maybe you’re right. My job is done.”

“Satisfied?”

“Yeah,” Larry replied. His teary gaze went from the watch to Jenny as he added, “Know what a knight’s supposed to do in the grand finale? After he protects everyone, he rides off into the sunset.”

“Yeah.”

Jenny got up and headed to the desk once more. She picked up her rangefinder and took out a single roll of color film from the drawer.

She opened the camera, loaded the film, and wound it up as she returned to the sofa.

Then she pointed the lens at Larry.

“What’re you doing?” Larry asked.

“It’s the grand finale, so I’m taking a photo of you,” Jenny replied, “Gimme a nice bright smile, Sir Hepburn.”

Larry put on an embarrassed grin. Jenny focused through the viewfinder and slowly put pressure in her index finger.

No one else was around to hear the click of the camera.

**-To be continued-**



# 👁️ 黒星紇のあとがき。

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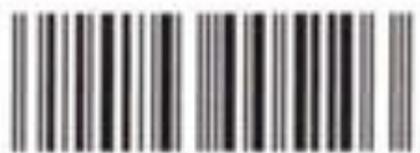




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