

Library Schism

by Arikawa Hiro

Declaration of Library Freedom

- 1. Libraries have the right to gather materials freely.**
- 2. Libraries have the right to make materials freely available.**
- 3. Libraries protect the privacy of their users.**
- 4. Libraries oppose all censorship.**

When the freedom of the library is violated, we librarians will unite and fight to the end to protect its freedom.

Chapter 1, Parental Confusion Tactics

*

Mission: Conceal your assignment to a combat unit from your parents!

Librarian First Class Kasahara Iku enlisted in the Kantou Library Force without telling her conservative parents that she was assigned to a combat role. Because of her exceptional physical prowess, she was lucky enough to be selected for the Library Task Force, front-line fighters in the battle against the extra-legal censorship of the Media Improvement Committee. But she was suddenly faced with a situation: her parents were coming from her hometown to inspect the library where she worked.

If her parents learned about her combat position, "they'd faint on the spot, and probably try and force her to come back home."

Can Kasahara Iku overcome her greatest personal crisis since her enlistment?

--With how things stood, the last holiday in November was the first day of Iku's personal X-Day.¹

*

¹ X-Day was supposed to be the first day of the Allied invasion of Japan during World War II. In Japanese, the phrase has come to mean a bad thing that you know will happen, but you don't know when.

"I-It's been quite a while...I'm glad you're l-looking well..."

Standing at the entrance to the unmarried dorms, Iku delivered this greeting to her parents, who had come from their hometown in Ibaraki Prefecture to visit the Kantou Library Base in Musashino.

"...what the hell was that?" Library Officer Second Class Doujou Atsushi muttered dubiously. The four of them--he and his squad plus Shibasaki--were currently in spectator-mode, having gathered in the lobby out of idle curiosity. Doujou was Iku's immediate superior in the Library Task Force.

"She just stammered talking to her own parents," said Librarian First Class Tedzuka Hikaru, Iku's peer in the Library Task Force, looking surprised. It wasn't clear if he was replying to Doujou or simply making a pointed comment, but his deadpan tone seemed to tickle the funny bone of the often-merry Library Officer Second Class Komaki Mikihisa, who burst out laughing. Komaki was Doujou's second-in-command.

"Well, she's probably scared stiff! She was having nightmares last night," Librarian First Class Shibasaki Asako, Iku's friend and roommate, nonchalantly revealed. Her duty post was not the same as Iku's; she was a librarian with the Library Administrative Division who worked in the Musashino First Library, the library attached to the base. "Her pajamas were so sweat-soaked she had to change in the middle of the night--at this time of year, too! It must have been some nightmare!"

Iku, unaware of commentary being offered by her colleagues in the peanut gallery, had been making flustered small talk (or so it appeared) with her parents, who did indeed seem rather strait-laced. But at length, she tensed in obvious shock, and then ran over to where they were all standing.

"Instructor Doujou!" Her habit of calling Doujou "Instructor" was a relic from her training period, where Doujou had served as the instructor for her training group. "What should I do? My parents want to tour the inside of the dorm...! Tell them that visitors aren't allowed inside!"

"What the hell kind of idiot are you!?" Doujou shook off the hand that was clutching his sleeve and bent down towards her. "We have rooms set aside for family and friends to use when they come to visit! There's no way in hell I could make up a bullshit regulation like that!"

"Can't you do *something*?"

"It's no big deal to let them tour the dorm, is it!? Go and take them around!"

"I don't want to! I don't know where to take them--they didn't give me any warning!" It was no joking matter to Iku--indeed, she seemed near tears. "Shibasaki, come with me!"

"What?? No way, I don't want to be your public relations department, it sounds draining."

"Then, Instructor--!"

Iku grabbed at Doujou's sleeve again, and again he conscientiously shook her off. "Think about it, I'm your commanding officer! What happens if they casually ask me about your performance while I'm showing them around!? I'm going to have to tell them the truth: that when it comes to library duties, you're sloppy, you have a terrible memory, and have no redeeming qualities!"

"You jerk! I have *no* redeeming qualities!?"

"Calm down! I'm not saying you don't have value! But I can't very well tell your parents what areas you're valuable in, now can I!?"

So that they could cope with all possible contingencies, Library Task Force members had to be familiar with a wide range of procedures, from common library tasks to large-scale warfare. However, Iku's talents lay at the far end of the combat side of the spectrum. It wasn't even unusual for her to outperform the male troopers in combat exercises.

However, Iku's parents had indicated their firm opposition to her pursuing a combat occupation, so thus far she had concealed her assignment to a combat unit from them.

"If you let me tell them the truth about your job, I could probably say a few good things about you, but do you really want me to do that?"

"HELL NO!"

"Kasahara-san, you're being too loud. They'll hear you," Komaki interjected a warning.

Iku grabbed at him. "Instructor Komaki...!"

"I don't mind, but I wouldn't be able to lie if they asked me what your duty posting is." Komaki was gentle and soft-spoken, but he never wavered from the path of integrity, and in that way, he could be more firm and unyielding than anyone else. Iku didn't even bother trying to convince him. She glanced up at Tedzuka, then looked away without saying anything.

"...what was that unsatisfied look for?" Tedzuka asked, disgruntled.

Iku jutted out her lip. "I'm not holding out any hope that you'd do something for my benefit."

As the two who had been chosen for the Library Task Force from among the new recruits, Iku and Tedzuka were often competitive with each other. It was probably because they were both headstrong and hated to lose.

At the front entrance, Iku's parents were beginning to steal doubtful glances their way. As their eyes met Doujou's, he smiled uncertainly at them in greeting.

"This has gone on long enough. Shibasaki, just go with them."

"What??" Shibasaki complained.

Iku turned on Shibasaki with an irritation that was uncalled-for, given the situation. "Come on! I'll treat you or something, so help me out here and come with us, damn you!"

"Treat? What are we talking here?"

"I'll take you out to lunch!"

"Including dessert?"

"Aw, geez! Fine!"

Shibasaki's reluctance had evidently been an act to extract a concession from Iku. *You're sure easy to dupe*, Doujou thought to himself, sighing.

I am so glad I made Shibasaki come with me.

Iku breathed a sigh of relief as they toured the dorm. The price for her cooperation had been a little high, but the beautiful, well-behaved Shibasaki was perfect for the role of tour guide.

Iku's mother, Toshiko, chatted with Shibasaki more than her own daughter, asking a stream of questions about the dorm's facilities. Her father, Katsuhiro, remained uncommunicative and followed silently behind them, but he was by nature moody and difficult to please, so this was nothing to worry about.

I wonder if she'd rather I was more like Shibasaki, Iku thought as she watched Toshiko chattering happily with her friend. Shibasaki was delicate, attractive, had a very ladylike appearance, and disliked violence. Her true nature left something to be desired, but she specialized in the kind of clever, charming conversation that Iku's parents liked.

"Ladies should behave like ladies, and stay out of dangerous lines of work!" Her parents held surprisingly conservative opinions for the present day, and if ever there was a daughter whose behavior ran contrary to those opinions, it was Iku.

Iku's inborn physical prowess had been trained and tempered by her belligerent older brothers. Her personality may have been natural, or may have been the result of the never-ending battles with her siblings, but she was the type to run full tilt into reckless situations.

Just as she had carelessly concluded, *Anyway, it takes natural talent to behave like a lady*, Katsuhiko unexpectedly began to question her.

"How is your work?"

"Oh, well, not too bad." She answered vaguely, thinking that if she weren't careful she would blow her cover.

"Was your immediate superior among that group from before?" He was evidently referring to the squabble at the entrance.

"Yeah, he was the, uh...the kinda short one."

"I thought as much."

Huh? How did you know? Just as she started to ask, however, a huge figure of a man came around the corner.

"Oh! What's this?" exclaimed Library Supervisor Third Class Genda Ryuusuke, commander of the Library Task Force, as he nearly collided with them.

"Supervisor Genda, these are Librarian Kasahara's parents," Shibasaki interjected quickly. Then, without giving Genda a chance to interrupt, she turned to Iku's parents. "This is Supervisor Genda, who has done a lot for us since we enlisted."

Shibasaki had purposely avoided calling him "Commander" as she usually did, and as well as purposely interrupted him before he could introduce himself. Genda had the heart of a lion, but he tended not to pay too much attention to details. He had been told about Iku's situation, but it was easy to imagine him letting the truth slip if he were allowed to speak too much.

Genda and Iku's parents managed to safely exchange greetings, and Iku was just thinking that she had cleared this particular hurdle, when something suddenly occurred to Genda, and he asked, "What are your parents doing for accommodations?"

--uh-oh!

As Iku and Shibasaki stiffened--

"Supervisor Genda!"

Doujou came running from behind them. It seemed that he had come after them, worried that something like this would happen.

"Something urgent has come up! Please come with me," he said, pulling at Genda in an attempt to lead him away.

"Hold your horses!" Genda said, not moving. To Iku's parents, "If you're amenable, we can offer you a place to stay in the dorms, so don't hesitate to ask. They're gender-segregated, but if you're alright with that..."

Iku wanted to collapse right there on the floor.

In the end, her parents had cancelled their hotel reservations and decided to stay at the dorm.

The mess hall didn't serve visitors, so they went out for dinner. Iku could have eaten at the mess hall, but she couldn't very well abandon her parents, so she went with them. Her parents expressed a desire to see the neighborhood, so they walked to the commuter rail station.

"This area still has a laid-back feel to it," Toshiko said as she looked around. There was still plenty of farmland remaining within the town of Musashi-sakai, and further from the station a pastoral aura hung in the air.

"Even Mito² feels more urban than this," Katsuhiro nodded.

"Mito is a prefectural capital! It's silly to compare them even for a second." Iku relaxed as they chatted about topics that didn't involve her. *If this were all we ever talked about, I wouldn't even be so bad at dealing with my parents*, she thought.

"I won't be able to come with you tomorrow since I have work--be sure to remember the way."

As she self-importantly explained the route, a bicycle bell rang out from behind her. When she turned around, she saw a short boy getting off his bicycle. "Hello, Kasahara-san," he called. It was Kimura Yuuma, a local middle school student she had met during a recent event at the Musashino First Library, the library affiliated with the base. "I'm glad you're unscathed," Yuuma continued smoothly, as usual trying too hard to sound grown-up. "I encountered the article in *New World Weekly* concerning the battle for the Museum of Information History. It must be dreadful at the library too--I've heard

² The capital of Ibaraki Prefecture, where Iku's parents live.

that the Improvement Special Agency has been zealously censoring that particular issue?"

"Yes, it was terrible for the people who were deployed, but I didn't have anything to do with it so I don't know much about it!" she quickly began talking over Yuuma. She wasn't lying when she said she hadn't had anything to do with the battle.

Yuuma looked at her strangely. "Oh? But..." Iku turned away from her parents and tried to hush him with a finger to her lips, but he didn't catch on. "...Kasahara-san, you--" he continued. She pounced on him and put a hand over his mouth.

"The people behind me are my parents--I've been keeping my posting a secret from them," she explained tersely.

At last Yuuma appeared to grasp the situation. He gave her a significant look as he nodded repeatedly, saying, "--indeed, as a librarian, you personally wouldn't have had anything to do with the affair!"

If you're going to help me, could you at least try and sound a little more natural?! Yuuma had a big mouth--but he was just a child, after all.

"Excuse me," he bowed, mounting his bike and pedaling off again. Iku waved to him, calling, "Be careful on your way home!" When she turned back to her parents, they were both wearing identical expressions of doubt and confusion.

Her parents had requested simple food for dinner, so they chose a soba shop near the station. As soon as the tea and hot towels had been brought out, Toshiko began to speak.

"So, that boy just now--what was he talking about? Some kind of battle...?"

Aw, here it comes, Iku thought, grimacing. "Ah, well, that was..."

Her parents didn't know that she had been assigned to the Task Force, and in fact Iku hadn't even participated in the conflict, but Toshiko probably wouldn't be pleased to know that the base she was working at had engaged in such a battle.

How can I phrase it so that she doesn't freak out so much? As she struggled to avert the inevitable even as it loomed before her, Katsuhiko suddenly spoke up.

"Some private library in Odawara was donating its documents to the Kantou Library Force, and it turned into a battle with the Improvement Special Agency. It was about three weeks ago."

"Good gracious! Really?" Toshiko frowned, just as predicted. "They didn't say anything about this on the news."

"The papers didn't make a big deal about it either. It dominated all the tabloid and weekly magazine headlines, though."

The Museum of Information History had been dedicated to systematically collecting and preserving every piece of information about the Media Improvement Act it could get its hands on. When it closed, and all of those documents were handed over to the Kantou Library Force, they had clashed with the Improvement Special Agency, who had tried to halt the transfer and seize the documents. That was the battle for the Museum of Information History.

Because the Improvement Special Agency was the proxy organization of the Media Improvement Committee, and like the Library Force it had the right to bear arms, it had been predicted that the clash would turn into a large-scale battle. Thus, the entire Library Task Force had been deployed to the scene--an unprecedented show of force.

Only Iku had been excluded from that mass deployment--but that story has already been told.

"Apparently on the same day, a terrorist organization kidnapped the Library Base commander and ordered the Library Force to destroy all the documents they had just received. The tabloids are still investigating whether it was on the instigation of the Media Improvement Committee."

Iku's shoulders stiffened with a jerk. She had been involved in this incident too--she had accompanied the commander during the kidnapping.

If I'm remembering right, no one reported anything about a Force member going with him..., she thought, mentally reviewing the articles from the main magazines.

Even so--

"Father, you sure do know a lot about the whole thing...?" She trailed off questioningly. Truthfully, she hadn't expected him to pay so much attention to an incident at a distant Library Base.

"Well, after a fashion," Katsuhiko nodded vaguely.

"More importantly," Toshiko interrupted, "if things like that are going on, is the library safe enough? You're not going to get caught up in anything dangerous, right?"

Here we go. Now that it had come to this, Iku had no choice but to stand firm. "It is a library, you know. Of course there are censorship

raids. Musashino First is often targeted, because it's attached to a base. But there are rules against involving non-combatants." She wasn't able to add, "So I'm perfectly safe," as a shady way to further conceal her position. She was aware of her own lack of skill at deception--when she told careless lies, they were usually full of holes. So she tried as hard as possible to toe the line of simply not mentioning that she was in a combat role.

"Can you really depend on those rules? They use guns on those censorship raids, don't they--what if someone's aim slipped and they hit you?"

"We have shelters, too, since we're always on the defensive."

"But if you got trapped before you get to one...couldn't you ask for a day off when a raid is likely?"

Iku knew full well that her mother was prone to worrying, and that her proposal was simply the result of her excessive apprehension over her daughter's safety. But her narrow-minded unconcern for anyone else irritated Iku.

"Everyone's in the same boat as me! This is our job--no one can get singled out for special treatment. Even my friend from before, Shibasaki--when there's a raid, she follows her boss's orders and deals with it!"

"Well, she's probably prepared to face it."

Mother, you just placed a land mine! she screamed inside, though she didn't say anything out loud. She was frozen in place, afraid that if she opened her mouth she would start screaming.

Don't say something so uncaring about Shibasaki just because she's a stranger, and don't try and use some made-up, bullshit reason like my lack of mental preparation as your reason for objecting! Besides, what gives you the right to arbitrarily decide that Shibasaki is prepared to face a raid, but I'm not?

Dammit, it's always like this. It's always been like this. Toshiko was always measuring Iku by her own arbitrary standards. Iku hated it, but Toshiko always insisted, "I worry about you because I love you." It was a noble-sounding reason that didn't leave Iku any room to protest. A few times she had tried to answer back; a few times, true to her nature, she had tried to pick a fight. Iku felt her rebellion was perfectly justified. But her mother would start crying, and say accusingly, "How could you, when I'm so worried about you!?" And then Iku's consciousness that she wasn't her parents' ideal daughter would trip her up, and she would lose her will to argue.

Mother would have preferred a daughter who looked becoming in a fluttery dress. The repeated bruising from those feelings of inadequacy had aged her heart beyond her years.

And then the final straw would come from Katsuhiko. "Why can't you try and understand how worried your mother is?" The additional attack made it sound like she wouldn't accept her mother's love, and it was as painful and effective as if he had seared her with a hot branding iron that said "Terrible Daughter."

Ever since she had gone away to Tokyo for college, her visits home had become limited to New Year's. After those four years, she hadn't been thrilled about the prospect of explaining her aspiration to become a Library Defense Force member to her parents, since they would surely object, so she hadn't gone home once since her enlistment. She had met with her brothers a few times in Tokyo, but even though they were always squabbling with her--or perhaps because of that--they understood her. None of her brothers had once suggested that she come home.

Why can't you just realize that I'm avoiding you? Why can't you just give up on me already?

"You're a woman--what if you got scars on your face?"

"You want me to marry a man who would reject me if I did have scars?" She took this opportunity to fling out the retort that Tedzuka had taught her earlier. In Tedzuka's case, it had been an honest question in response to Iku's complaints about her parents, but she was grateful all the same.

"Saying something like that...you're making me worried--"

"Cut it out." Iku didn't look at her mother, knowing there would be a hurt expression on her face. "Let's just stop. I don't get to see you very often, so I don't want things to be unpleasant between us while you're here."

This is where Father is going to say, "Why can't you try and understand your mother?" she thought.

Katsuhiko did indeed open his mouth, but all he said was, "Knock it off, we're about to eat."

It wasn't the reason he usually gave for stopping their fights, and it wasn't a very persuasive one. But what was new to Iku was how he didn't say anything about who was in the wrong.

Their food arrived then, and the conversation continued in stilted fits and starts.

"How long can you stay?" she was compelled to ask, half out of obligation.

Katsuhiro answered, "We'll be here for two more days, then leave the next morning. I had a few vacation days built up."

Meaning that the real battle would last for two more days.

"Since you came all this way, why don't you go sightseeing? You can leave your stuff in the dorm, after all."

Doujou had promised to get the squad shifts in the library while her parents were around, but she'd prefer to minimize the duration of her unreasonable request, even by a little bit. If her parents went sightseeing somewhere, they could do some training, or get plainclothes patrol shifts.

"No, we came to see you work. We want to spend the next two days seeing everything we can at the library. We'd like to tour the facilities, too."

"But, right now is a bit of an unsettled time at our library. I mean, there are more censorship raids than usual, because of the articles about that battle we were just talking about--there might be trouble. Demonstrators from groups that support the Improvement Act come a lot, too."

"That's exactly why we want to see it with our own eyes. Your mother and I would feel much more reassured if we could see how the library handles that kind of trouble."

Her attempt to divert them had backfired. *Instructor Doujou, I'm sorry*, she kowtowed mentally, as she slurped her cold noodles.

Doujou pulled on his fleece jacket and left his room, heading to the shared lobby where Iku had called him.

It was eight o'clock, but it had been close to seven when Iku had left. *They sure hurried back*, he thought as he reached the lobby. Among the small groups of lounging Library Force members was Iku, wearing an expectant look.

"I'm sorry, Instructor."

"Don't worry about it. More importantly, you know you could have taken your time eating out with them." There were still almost three hours until the dorm's gates were locked.

Iku gave him an uncharacteristically wan, nervous smile. "We ran out of things to talk about."

He had no duty to interfere, so he merely nodded vaguely and asked, "Where is your father?" Since he would be staying in the men's

section of the dorm, the task of showing him to his room and the baths had fallen to Doujou.

"Oh, he'll be here soon, he and my mother are dividing the luggage between them. Also..." Iku looked embarrassed. "Can I beg you to be accommodating about our shifts for two days? They said they were going to come see the library both tomorrow and the day after."

Her wilted air was completely out of character, and it threw him off balance. "--what the hell was that? 'Can I beg you.'" He bopped the head that was a little above his own. "The Force has already agreed to respect your constraints. Don't get all coy about it now, it's creepy."

"...how dare you say something so uncalled-for as 'creepy!' I was just trying to be tactful or restrained or whatever!"

"I'm just saying, quit putting on an act that doesn't work for you."

"What the hell do you mean, 'an act'--!"

"Damn, the camphor worked a little too well."

Just as Doujou's face darkened, Iku's father appeared in the lobby. He held a small nylon overnight bag in one hand.

"Ah, your father's here."

Iku stiffened, swallowing the cries she had been about to emit. Doujou didn't know if she was scared of her parents, or just bad with them, but her expression had turned startlingly docile by the time she introduced Doujou to her father.

"This is my father, Katsuhiko." They bowed to each other. Then Iku gestured with an open hand from her father to Doujou. "This is Instructor Doujou. He's been so kind as to offer his help during your stay, so if there's anything you don't understand, please ask him."

"He's been so kind as to offer..." This well-mannered speech would be unthinkable coming from her normal tomboyish persona, thus to Doujou's ears it sounded unnatural in the extreme. *It's not her. It's really, really not her.*

"...Instructor, thank you. I'll leave my father in your hands." Bowing quickly, Iku returned to the women's section of the dorm.

"Why does Iku call you 'Instructor'?" Katsuhiko asked on the way to the visitors' rooms. "I was under the impression that you were her superior...?"

Doujou smiled wryly. "Kasahara--" he began familiarly, then panicked and started over. "Librarian Kasahara was one of my

students during her training period. It must be a habit from that time that she can't break," he explained.

If he asks me right now about Iku's job performance, how should I answer? he pondered. But Katsuhiko guided the conversation in an unexpected direction.

"My daughter seems to place a great deal of trust in you."

"Excuse me?" Doujou's voice rose in blatant, thoughtless disbelief before he could stop it.

Katsuhiko didn't seem to mind. "She wrote to us about you, in the first postcard she sent since entering the Library Force. She mentioned other people too, but she wrote the most about you."

"Well, no, see, that's because..." It wasn't exactly something that needed an excuse, but he felt compelled to give a justification. "I drilled her hard in her training period, and now I've turned into her strict, nagging boss. It probably gives her plenty to talk about."

"She wrote that too. She said you were scarily strict."³

Well, she probably would, he was thinking, when Katsuhiko flew to another unexpected topic. "But evidently she admires you. She was pretty reluctant to admit it, though--it showed in her writing style."

He wasn't sure how to react, and settled on a politely noncommittal, "Is that so?" *What the hell did she write?* he scowled to himself.

"She also said she wished you were a little nicer and easier to understand--"

"No, don't--" Before he knew what he was doing, he had thrown up a hand to interrupt Iku's father. Flustered by his own rude behavior, he scratched his head in chagrin as he apologized. "Please forgive me. But that's something that Librarian Kasahara told you personally. She hasn't seen fit to confide it to me, and it's just too damn unfair to hear from a third party something someone doesn't want to tell you."

He only realized after he had finished speaking that he had let a "damn" slip out⁴; evidently he was flustered at his own flusteration.

³ In Iku's letter in the last book, I made a mistake and read 激しい ("tempestuous") instead of 厳しい ("strict"). So instead of saying Doujou has a scary temper, it should say that he's scarily strict. I'm sorry!

⁴ In Japanese, this sentence said, "He only realized after he had finished speaking that he had used the personal pronoun *ore*." *Ore* is an assertive masculine pronoun, and would be considered rude in this circumstance.

"I'm sorry," Katsuhiko apologized bluntly. "I was very curious about you, and when I had the man himself in front of me, my tongue suddenly ran away with me."

Doujou scratched his head again, feeling pressured by this unwarranted apology. It was his problem that he couldn't remain calm while listening to Katsuhiko. *What the hell are you getting all flustered about?* he chided himself.

"I knew right away that you were the one from her postcard."

At least the conversation had turned from the contents of that postcard, for the moment. But Doujou was on high alert, wondering what he was going to hear next.

"When my wife and I arrived, you were the very first one she went to for rescue."

Because he was prepared, he was able to weather this statement. *Even so, why does he keep talking about how much she trusts me?...is he doing it on purpose, pointing out things that could be construed as adoring?* he scowled fiercely to himself--

But when he looked back, Katsuhiko had a lonely, self-mocking expression on his face. Seeing him, Doujou finally realized.

Katsuhiko had described Iku's behavior when they first arrived as "going for rescue." If he hadn't been aware that he was being kept at a distance by his daughter, he wouldn't have used that phrase.

Perhaps discerning from Doujou's expression that he had guessed, Katsuhiko smiled bitterly. "She did ask how long we could stay, but..." His expression showed that he understood that that was just a form of solicitousness from Iku.

"What is my daughter usually like?"

Doujou had been prepared to answer questions about her work performance with grace, but this question pierced his heart. He considered deception for a moment. He could more or less imagine how the simple Iku acted to soothe her hard-to-please parents.

But he didn't get the feeling that Katsuhiko wanted to be deceived.

"...She's enthusiastic. A little *too* enthusiastic. But--I don't know if you'd call her rash, or what--she gets into a lot of dangerous situations. She's hot-blooded and aggressive, but strangely thin-skinned in spite of it..." What he really wanted to say was that she was a crybaby. "No matter how depressed she gets, she doesn't lose heart. In that sense, she's both stubborn and positive-thinking."

Katsuhiko chuckled slightly as he heard this. "Meaning she's been hiding her true self from us since God knows when," he murmured. How must he be feeling? "...But I don't think you're lying."

Before he could think better of it, he blurted, "Maybe it's because she wants her parents to see her as a good child?" *Ah, wait, what the hell am I saying?* he thought in a panic. *I don't have the kind of relationship with her that I can randomly speculate like that--*

Perhaps it was that he couldn't be silent before this stranger, who at their first meeting had confided the distance between himself and his daughter to a youngster who was approximately the same age as his own children. That, and he couldn't stand to watch Iku at odds with this father, who was perhaps a little overprotective, but obviously truly loved his daughter.

She was usually so rash and fearless, but turned stiff and nervous in front of her parents. Before, too, she had looked uncharacteristically subdued. *"We ran out of things to talk about,"* she had said, self-mockingly. She was probably beating herself up for letting her relationship with her parents get so strained.

But he didn't have enough experience points to know how to make up for the words he had blurted out. He didn't know Iku's father well enough to ask for his understanding.

"...I'm sorry."

His apology for his intrusive comment came just as they arrived at the door to Katsuhiko's room. Doujou breathed a sigh of relief.

The tabloids and weekly magazines were currently full of articles about the events of three weeks ago: the battle for the Museum of Information History, and the suspiciously synchronized kidnapping of the Kantou Library Base commander. Because of that, the Media Improvement Committee had gone on alert and stepped up their censorship of weekly magazines.

All the publishing companies were resisting the censorship by printing more copies and employing clever distribution strategies, but the number of magazines seized was enormous, and it remained difficult for the average person to obtain a weekly magazine.

In principle, the Improvement Special Agency, the proxy organization of the Media Improvement Committee, didn't censor media until it had been distributed to stores, but in reality, since the contents of the work and the distribution plan passed through a

preliminary inspection when the work was sent to the agent, resisting censorship was quite difficult.

Because they were not specialty shops, convenience stores and train station kiosks avoided censorship more easily and thus received goods on a comparatively regular basis, but there was a limit to how many copies stores of that size could stock. At bookstores, it was often a race to sell as many copies as possible before the censors arrived.

Many consumers couldn't keep up with this distribution speed, and naturally they began to depend on the library for access to the censored magazines. Libraries throughout the nation bought more copies to keep up with the demand, but of course this made them targets for Improvement Special Agencies, and censorship raids against the libraries increased as well. Demonstrators from groups who supported the Improvement Act also frequently interfered with patrons trying to access the library.

"...why did they have to come now, of all times..."

Exhausted, Iku collapsed face-down over the *kotatsu*. After entrusting Katsuhiko to Doujou, she had visited the baths with Toshiko, and was now finally able to catch her breath in her own room.

For Iku, talking face-to-face with Toshiko was the very hardest. Even in the bath, she had been interrogated about the library's security precautions. It had completely sapped her strength. Toshiko had even found the faint traces of bruises and, wrinkling her brow, exclaimed, "Oh my goodness, what happened here!?" There was no way Iku could reveal that she had received them during training.

"Well, it's not like your parents deliberately chose to come during a turbulent time. They've been planning to come during the holidays for a while," Shibasaki said placatingly. She poured Iku a cup of tea, perhaps to show her appreciation for Iku's forbearance.

"Yeah, but--" Iku grumbled, sipping her tea. She felt guilty for needing to have their shifts changed, even if it was for only two days. The fact that she hadn't told her parents about her duty post was Iku's own personal problem.

"Your shifts will balance out in the end, so there's no reason to feel bad. Other Library Force members receive the same kind of accommodation, and it's not like the Force is going to be responsible for what happens when your parents find out. Also," Shibasaki added, "your memory for office work is virtually non-existent. If you don't refresh yourself with some library duties soon, you'll completely forget it. So the timing actually works out pretty well, according to him."

"According to who?"

"Instructor Doujou." *Oh, of course*, Iku thought, then Shibasaki continued, "--and Instructor Komaki, and Tedzuka."

"*All of them!?*"

"I added my support while we were at it."

"Stop going behind my back and collectively appraising me!"

"But we're right, aren't we?" Shibasaki returned nonchalantly. Iku had no reply for this penetrating final blow. It was true that she had no aptitude for office work.

"On another note, are you sure you don't want to go and see your mother? There's still a little time before lights-out."

"Gimme a break, I can't take any more!" Iku clung to the *kotatsu* as if to deny the very idea of standing up. She had come back to escape any more conversation with her mother, as it had started to go downhill in the baths. Iku had told her mother her room number, so if she needed anything she would come by.

"Well, your mother is indeed a hard nut to crack."

"...you can tell?"

"She seems like your prototypical helicopter parent. She's amicable enough, but she's the stubborn type."

Iku knew that Shibasaki was being soft in her criticism. Normally she would have said something more flippant, like "doesn't have ears for listening to other people."

"I understand why you want to avoid her, too. Your mother's intentions are good, but they're still a heavy burden, aren't they?"

Tears spontaneously sprang to her eyes, as an outside observer validated her reasons for avoiding her mother.

"That's it exactly," she nodded. She suddenly felt like bursting into real tears, and clamped down hard on her emotions. "I understand that she worries about me because she loves me, but..."

Heavy was the perfect word for it. She was hesitant to recognize it as "annoying" or "depressing."

She wondered if she could be forgiven for believing that being unable to accept that kind of love didn't make her a bad person.

"Waaaaah! Shibasakiiiii!"

Iku clung to her side. Shibasaki bopped Iku lightly on the head and shooed her away. "There, there. Hey, you got away with growing up uncivilized, without being spoiled."

"Don't call me uncivilized!"

"I mean, the way you managed to grow up to be an uncouth hick, standing your ground against that mother of yours, means you and your mother are kind of alike--in your stubbornness, at least."

Iku was incredibly reluctant to admit it, but Shibasaki might not be far off the mark. --In which case, it had been inevitable that Iku would grow up not listening to what her mother said. *So they have no right to scold me for that*, she thought rebelliously.

*

Iku was relieved to discover that she still more or less remembered how to perform her library duties after so long--though she was a little fuzzy on the details.

"Even though it's only for two days, it's not often we get a chance to work in the library. Run through the duties again and get a firm handle on them!" Doujou called to her as he passed by.

"Yes sir!" she cried enthusiastically, saluting.

"What the hell kind of idiot are you!?" he replied immediately, horrified. "Librarians don't salute! If you do that, it'll poke a giant hole in your story!"

"Oh, right!" She quickly withdrew her saluting hand.

Doujou looked as though he wanted to admonish her further, but all he said was, "Be careful" as he walked away.

Do not salute, do not salute, she repeated to herself, clenching her hands to help herself remember. Tedzuka, walking by with a load of books to be reshelved, frowned at her.

"You got our shift changed like you wanted, yet you still look like you want to blow yourself up. Are you all right?"

"I...I did something careless just now, that's all."

"What parts of you *aren't* careless?"

Shut up, mini-Doujou, Iku snapped silently. Her peer was incomparably more efficient than she was at office work, and it was no secret that he idolized Doujou as a superior officer.

"I heard your parents are coming to the library at eleven o'clock."

"What? Where did you hear that?"

"I ran into your father just as I was leaving the dorm, so I asked."

"Wow! Thanks!" Just having some idea of when her parents would arrive changed her outlook considerably. "You're a nicer guy than I thought."

"What's with that high-handed, ungrateful gratitude? I was trying to look out for you," Tedzuka grumbled, walking away towards the shelves. Iku took her own pile from the mountain of returned books on the book cart, and set about reshelving them.

"Kasahara-san, they're here," Komaki called out to her when her parents made their appearance in the reference room. When she turned toward the entrance, she saw Katsuhiko and Toshiko stepping through the door, trying to look everywhere at once. Their open curiosity was quite conspicuous, even at a distance--most patrons headed straight for the counter or the shelves. It wasn't that they had never seen a library before--it was probably just curiosity about their daughter's workplace.

"Good luck!"

"Huh? Where are you going, Instructor Komaki?"

"I'm going to go work in the archives, since I want to avoid contact with your parents." Komaki had already stated that he wouldn't be able to lie if her parents asked about her duty post directly. Avoiding them was an act of consideration, but since Komaki was the easiest person to ask when she had questions about her duties, it was a mixed blessing.

"Thank you, sir..." she said, but her conflicted feelings must have shown in her expression, because Komaki chuckled.

"Don't worry. You're well-equipped to do good work today." Komaki often delivered harsh judgments in his gentle, innocent tone, but he was good at giving support when it counted. It had an immediate effect on the uncomplicated Iku.

"I'll do my best!" she responded enthusiastically. She began to raise her right hand, then lowered it quickly. --*Do not salute*. She looked around to see if Doujou had caught her slip, but happily he was nowhere nearby.

She was breathing a sigh of relief, when Komaki warned, "Be careful not to salute." *Caught anyway*.

"Kasahara, we need you at the counter," Shibasaki called. When Iku looked over at the counter, she saw a line of people waiting their turn. It was funny--when the reference room was empty, it was totally

empty, but once it began to get crowded, patrons seemed to congregate.

Iku took over an open computer terminal to help, and immediately her parents came over to watch. They stood apart, trying not to get in the way, but it was hard to ignore their staring. *Arg, go somewhere else!*

The more she tried not to pay attention, the more her shoulders stiffened and her movements grew clumsy. The barcodes of the books she was checking out stubbornly refused to scan, though normally she didn't even have to think about it. She resorted to entering the codes by hand, but several volumes in, she made an error--she had checked out the wrong book.

Now what? I forget how to cancel this! The patrons forced to wait because of Iku's clumsiness were growing irritated, only increasing the pressure. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she repeated, as the computer vainly beeped out an error sound.

Then--

"What did you do?" a voice came from over her shoulder. Iku turned, grabbing onto that voice like a life preserver. At times like this, the one who asked not "What happened?" but "What did you do?" was Doujou.

"Um, I accidentally clicked OK--how do I undo...?" Iku asked incoherently.

Doujou, looking at the screen, gently rapped her on the head. "Calm down."

He didn't say anything further. But strangely, her shoulders loosened. *Oh right, even Instructor Komaki said I was well-equipped to work today.*

Once she had calmed down, her fingers remembered by themselves how to cancel the instruction. After all, she had been making more mistakes than the average person ever since she had learned her duties, so she had done and redone them more times than the average person.

She finally finished the checkout, tore off the due date receipt, and handed it over, "I'm sorry I kept you waiting." The patron looked a little put out, but let it go without complaining.

For the next patron, she tried going back to the barcode scanner. It read the barcode immediately, proving that the scanner wasn't broken. Apparently she had been pressing down too hard out of nervousness.

After she had handled the next few checkouts, she suddenly realized that Doujou was no longer standing behind her. She felt a surge of self-confidence--he must have decided that she would be fine. Her parents were still watching from their perch, but she didn't feel pressured by their presence anymore.

The line of people waiting for checkout dwindled to nothing, and Shibasaki called to her from the next terminal over. "Thanks, we'll be fine now." Iku gratefully abandoned her post--computer duties were the hardest for her. Immediately, Toshiko approached her.

"My goodness, when you were working there just now, you somehow looked like a real librarian!"

Meaning that normally I don't look like I could be a librarian!? It rankled, but she knew that she was overreacting because of the numerous blows to her ego over the last day, so she didn't say anything. It was obvious that Toshiko hadn't meant anything offensive--simply that it was strange to see her own daughter working at a job.

"Well, be careful not to get in anyone's way while you're watching," Iku shrugged it off and turned to leave. Toshiko held up a hand to stop her.

"Iku, I want to read one of the weekly magazines--which one would be best?"

"Huh? Best for what?"

Toshiko often used logic that only she understood. Since Iku had moved out some time ago, she had lost the knack of following the thread of her mother's conversation.

"What your father was talking about, remember?...the recent incident involving the library."

Iku then understood that she wanted to read a weekly magazine for the continuing coverage of the battle for the Museum of Information History. Iku's shoulders stiffened suddenly.

"In that case, *New World* has the most in-depth articles," Katsuhiko put in. Iku's spirits sank even further. Her father was right--*New World* was spearheading the journalistic movement criticizing the Improvement Act over the recent turmoil involving the library--but for Iku, that magazine was to be avoided like the plague. An old female friend of Genda's was employed with *New World* as a reporter, and she had put a picture of Iku working security in an earlier issue. The picture was small and purposely obscured, but not so much that family and friends wouldn't immediately recognize her.

Since she and Genda were exchanging information directly, it was natural that *New World's* articles about the battle were the most detailed, but the problem was that they were too detailed in this case. She had written much about the situation from the library's side.

Aside from Iku, everyone in her squad had participated in the battle. Her parents knew that Doujou was her superior and that Tedzuka was her peer; if the magazine said anything that implied they had taken part in the battle, the jig would be up, but--

She thought back on the articles about the incident, which she checked every time. If she recalled correctly, they had used aliases when talking about individual Task Force members, and for security reasons they hadn't used pictures that would allow anyone to be identified.

It's fine, it should be fine, she thought, all in a flutter, as she led the two of them to the magazine shelves.

"Aha, these, right?" Toshiko found the back issues quickly and started looking through them. "What about this one?" she asked, suddenly picking up one of the issues--the one with Iku's picture in it. Apparently she had been scanning the cover headlines for articles featuring the library.

Iku was frozen in dismay, and so didn't do something foolish like snatch the magazine from her mother's hands, but she was in a state of perfect panic, having no idea how to get it away from her.

"No, that one isn't related. The coverage started in a more recent issue," Katsuhiko interjected, pulling out the series of issues covering the battle and handing them to Toshiko. Apparently he knew them by their covers; he must have read them thoroughly. Toshiko promptly relinquished the troublesome issue, which Iku put back among the other issues without a moment's hesitation.

"My, you have all of *Parsley Club*. All of *Missus Life* too!" Toshiko exclaimed happily as she found back issues of her favorite housewife magazines.

"Oh, yeah. We've got all kinds of things. You can read as much as you like."

"Oooh, okay. I'll do that after I read these first." Toshiko carried the stack of *New World* issues to a couch in the reading corner and sat down. Katsuhiko also began searching for a magazine of his own, so Iku innocently slipped away.

She immediately went in search of Doujou. She didn't see him anywhere in the reference room, so she peeked in the back room,

where she found him in the middle of unwrapping packages with Tedzuka. They contained new books and other publications, regularly bought and delivered by the logistical support division.

"Instructor Doujou!" she cried, her voice desperate with agitation. Doujou and Tedzuka jumped and turned around.

"What do you need this time?" Doujou frowned.

Iku nearly grabbed him. "Is it okay if I check out *that* issue of *New World*?!?"

"Idiot!" observed Tedzuka from the side. "Why didn't you check it out beforehand?" The two of them understood without further explanation that she was talking about the issue with her picture in it.

"Cause I forgot! It was a long time ago! Besides, how was I supposed to know they would randomly decide to read *New World* here!?"

Doujou was rubbing his temples with a pained expression on his face. Apparently he had no flip comments to make.

"...it's during work hours, so is it not allowed?"

Strictly speaking, it was unpardonable to check out a book in order to keep patrons from reading it.

"...no, it's allowed; librarians are patrons too, so it's legal to check out books; it's also legal to not offer that book to other patrons while it's checked out..." Doujou muttered in a low voice, then finally turned to Iku with a difficult expression. "Did your parents say they wanted to read that issue?"

"No, my mother wanted to read a different one--in fact, she's reading it right now."

"And do you want to read that issue?"

"Huh? No, it's..." *...not that I particularly want to read it*, she began. Doujou and Tedzuka stared at her. Hastily, she nodded vigorously. "--yes, I want to read it, desperately! It's driving me so crazy I can't even sleep at night!"

"In that case, you're authorized to check it out--during a break. However, if the needs of a patron and your personal needs come into conflict, patrons take priority."

"Yes sir, thank you!"

Iku started to run off, when Doujou's stern voice caught up with her. "From now on, take care of your personal checkouts outside of work hours!"

It was a warning that had to be given, for appearance's sake. Iku slumped her shoulders, calling back, "Sorry, sir."

Her parents expressed their desire to eat lunch with her, so when her lunch break rolled around, she entrusted Shibasaki with her library card and the pertinent issue of *New World* and asked her to take care of the checkout. Shibasaki would take the magazine and card back to the dorm with her.

"Are you okay with just going to my usual lunch spot?" she asked, walking toward the front entrance. The restaurant was a shorter walk from the side entrance, but she couldn't take non-authorized personnel through that way.

The moment the sliding door opened, their ears were assaulted by an orator's voice, emitted by speakers with the volume turned up to intolerable levels. The noise was so incredible that they all literally winced. It was coming from a protest rally by a group that supported the Improvement Act.

"Who on earth are these people? They were here when we came, too!" Toshiko asked, hands over her ears.

"The Improvement Committee's supporters, more or less. They're protesting the library's stocking of the weekly magazines that have been criticizing the Improvement Act ever since the battle."

"Dear me, the Improvement Committee has some brutish-looking hangers-on!"

"Mother, if you're going to say something like that, say it quietly!" Right now, the volume of the orator's voice precluded any chance of the group overhearing, but for better or for worse, Toshiko had her moments of blithe indifference. She would probably casually make the same kind of careless remark even if the group could overhear her.

Their destination was a café that probably could have been single-handedly supported by the Library Force members who went there for lunch. Conveniently, a table opened up just as they arrived, so they were seated quickly. The stylish atmosphere that drew the younger female crowd appeared to make Katsuhiko feel out of place, but there were few places suitable for lunch in the neighborhood. They could have gone to the area around the station, but they would have had to rush so that Iku could get back on time.

They ordered, and while sipping the drink that came with the daily special, Toshiko promptly began, "I was reading those magazines, and it seems like it's quite dangerous in the Library Force. Even the entrance to the building seemed unsafe..."

"Yeah, well, the times being what they are..." She tried to blame the current political climate, but Toshiko's interrogation was relentless.

"Have people like that ever attacked the library?"

She hesitated, considering lying for a moment, but they could find out the truth from anyone, and things would only be more complicated if she was caught in a lie. "Sometimes violent groups do come. They get captured by security and handed over to the police."

She couldn't say, of course, that she was one of the people who did the capturing.

"Iku, maybe you should give up working at the library--"

I thought this would happen!

"If you're going to say things like that, I'm going back. You can eat by yourselves," she said, actually beginning to rise.

"Please, sit back down," Katsuhiko said soothingly, then turned to Toshiko. "This is Iku's job. You can't simply tell her to quit," he chided her.

Toshiko fell silent with a discontent look in her eyes, but Iku was surprised too. Yesterday too he had half-heartedly interceded for her, but today he seemed to be firmly taking Iku's side. He hadn't sided with Iku in times like this in the past, so what had brought on this sudden change of heart?

Maybe it's because I have a job? she guessed. The straight-laced Katsuhiko was naturally a serious, single-minded company man, so maybe he had found some room for sympathy towards her in matters of work.

As Toshiko sulked and the atmosphere grew tense, Katsuhiko diffidently asked, "Iku, why did you decided to work at the library?"

Why are you asking that question now? she thought dubiously. Her feelings must have shown on her face, because Katsuhiko added apologetically, "I've just never heard you talk about it."

Come to think of it, she had made the decision to enter the Library Force completely on her own, and unilaterally informed her parents. Since she figured they were just going to object anyway, she had been trying to thwart unnecessary conflict, but her father forced her to recognize anew that her parents had been hurt by her actions, and she felt guilty.

Just because she wanted to avoid clashing with them didn't mean she wanted to hurt them.

"...I've loved books ever since I was little. Also..."

That was the official reason. She was a little embarrassed to state the real reason. But since she had already hurt her parents, she felt that if she could make up for that now, she had to tell them.

"When I was in high school, I was rescued by a member of the Library Force. At a bookstore in the neighborhood, I ran into a censorship raid by the Improvement Special Agency, and the book I wanted to buy was taken from me. Because I had tried to hide the book from them, they threatened to hand me over to the police for flagrant shoplifting."

"That's awful!" Toshiko muttered angrily. She was a good mother in the way she got angry on her daughter's behalf, but there was a catch--"You never told us that something like that happened to you," she accused, swiftly changing the topic to Iku's omission. Iku didn't want a retroactive sermon, so she gave the excuse that she hadn't had a chance to tell them at the time.

She also definitely couldn't say that she had defiantly, suicidally told the Improvement troops that she didn't care if she was treated like a shoplifter, as long as she could take the book with her.

"And then that Library Force member rescued you?" Katsuhiro asked.

Iku nodded, her ears turning helplessly red with embarrassment. It felt somewhat like she was confessing her first love in front of her parents.

"He was a Library Officer Third Class. Library Officers and above have the right to personally select books from bookstores. So he got my book back for me, and all the other books too."

According to what Doujou had told her later, the right of discretionary selection was not to be used by a single person whenever they felt like it, and it was also against the rules to return a particular selected book.

Even so, that man had given Iku's book back to her, and said this:

"You were the one who was willing to be branded a shoplifter to protect this book."

Those words had been fate. They had seized hold of her heart and her future. --Though it would not be wrong to say that they were never intended to have this effect.

She just couldn't help but chase after him.

"My, he's almost like a prince! How wonderful, it's just like a TV drama!"

Her story had apparently made a deep impression on Toshiko, but it was the nature of that impression that made Iku want to collapse in shock. Once, after she had committed a massive screw-up while trying to imitate that Library Officer, she had quarreled with Doujou, let her mouth run away with her, and ended up saying, "my prince." It had been the biggest slip of her life. But--

--is this the origin of my terrible sense for words!?

In a sense, it unexpectedly reinforced Shibasaki's opinion that she resembled her mother, but hearing the word "prince" from someone else's mouth just confirmed how embarrassing it was. She wished she could rub an eraser over Doujou's memory.

"So, did you meet the prince again? Doesn't this just sound like a story of romance waiting to happen?"

Oh God, now she's talking about romance! It was only natural that, as the origin of Iku's word-sense, her mother's vocabulary was even more embarrassing.

"No, there's none of that! First of all, I don't even remember his face, and I forgot to ask his name!"

"Oh, that's no fun. But haven't you thought of seeking him out? You love him, don't you?"

Wanting to make every conversation about love was a trait of housewives like her mother who loved serial dramas and talk shows, but--*Give me a break here, I'm begging you!*

"I only met him once, five years ago, but even now I want to be like him, I respect him, and I love him."

Remembering the words she had thrown in Doujou's face during a heated argument, she chastised herself. *No! From now on I'm going to think things through before I say them!* she vowed--a promise she had no hope of keeping.

"...anyway, it's nothing frivolous like that. I admired that man so much that I decided I wanted to protect books too, just like he did." As soon as she said the words, she instantly regretted them, flinching inwardly. *Maybe I shouldn't have said "protect"? It might imply to them that I'm with the Defense Force...* "That is, I decided I wanted to work at the library," she tried adding, but it sounded vaguely unnatural, and her feelings writhed like snakes. *Maybe I just should have stopped there...*

However--

"Well, it's the first I've heard of it, but it's a good reason," Katsuhiko said. Iku breathed a sigh of relief.

"Be sure and tell me if you meet him again!" Iku, accepting the plate of food that had just been brought to the table, pretended not to hear Toshiko's request.

Her parents retired in the evening, and thus, somehow, she got through that day safely.

*

On the second day, Toshiko seemed to lose interest in the library's atmosphere. She flipped through some magazines, watched a movie in the AV corner, and in the end, went for a walk around the neighborhood. All in all, she wasn't paying much attention to Iku's activities. Since Iku found her mother more difficult to deal with than her father, having her mother's attention elsewhere was enough to put her at ease.

The library grew so busy that Iku's lunch break was delayed, so she didn't have to eat lunch with them either.

"We can cover for you--why don't you go with them?" Shibasaki offered, but she declined, since if she wasn't careful she might be told again, *"Maybe you should give up working at the library..."*

Maybe it was due to lack of stress, but she wasn't making many mistakes at all today, even while working the counter. Well, more accurately, she wasn't making mistakes that she couldn't recover from on her own.

At some point she realized that Katsuhiko was occasionally watching her work from a distance, but he was being careful not to get in her way, so it didn't bother her very much. Before long, she was barely even aware of her parents' presence in the library. So she was completely unprepared for the launch of a surprise attack.

"Pardon me."

It was nearing evening when Katsuhiko approached Iku while she was shelving, speaking in formal tones. "I would like to study this year's current events; what material might you have on that topic?"

Iku froze, caught totally off guard. His courteous manner made it clear that he was asking Iku as a librarian, and she realized he had come to evaluate her work.

However, the reference service that Katsuhiko was testing--the ability to introduce patrons to appropriate materials according to their

desires--was not a simple request, like locating a particular book. One needed to be an expert in library work, and on top of that, have extensive knowledge of a wide variety of topics. It was an especially advanced task even for a professional librarian. Requests from patrons could be anything from "I would like to study the laws and ordinances from before the War" to "Why does the London Bridge fall down in the Mother Goose rhyme?"; their immense variety made them tough to tackle.

Library work was not the Library Task's Force specialty. Iku's aptitude for office work was low even for a Task Force member. And she had next to no experience in the service Katsuhiko was requesting.

"Uh, yes sir! Ummm..." *What should I do? I've never done anything like this before!* she wailed inwardly in panic. She had no choice but to take on this challenge, however. "What kind of current events?" *You sound like an idiot!* she chided herself, and tried again. "What field of current events are you interested in?"

"I'm not interested in a particular field; rather, a panoptic summation."

Panoptic? *Panoptic!?* The seldom-used word flustered her even more. *Father, stop going out of your way to use big words, please!*

He basically means a summary of everything, she guessed. "In essence, all the important news events of the year? Is that what you mean, sir?" Katsuhiko nodded, and Iku began to get a mental picture of his request.

"Just a moment." She dashed over to a handy search terminal. All of the materials in the library were indexed by keyword.

The important news events of this year. She thought for a moment, then entered the year according to the Western calendar: 2019. She thought book titles would be more likely to use the Western date rather than the Seika year number. She then entered "news" and "current events."

Sure enough, her hypothesis bore out in the results of her query. *2019 in Japan: General Remarks, Current Affairs in Japan, 2019, Thinking Back on 2019...*

"The patron who asked about this year's current events?" she called to the waiting Katsuhiko, daringly treating him like a stranger. She showed him the screen. "Is this what you had in mind?"

"May I have the first two or three books from that list?"

"Certainly." She checked the books' location; they were in the archives. She requested that Katsuhiko wait while the books were

brought out, and made the request. It didn't take more than a few minutes for the requested volumes to come up on the archives' dedicated elevator; there were three bulky *mooks*⁵. The turnaround time was short, naturally, because today the archive was staffed with veterans, starting with Komaki. They were a stark contrast to Iku, who had been so inefficient when she started working in the archives that patrons had cancelled their requests before she could fulfill them.

"Thank you for waiting!" She triumphantly handed over the dispatched books to Katsuhiko. She even added solicitously, "They're a little heavy, so please take care."

Wow, have I grown up or what? she gloated. Alas, her triumph was doomed to be short-lived. Katsuhiko took the books and skimmed the table of contents of the top one. He shook his head. "These are last year's."

"No shit!?"

At her unthinking, uninhibited exclamation, Katsuhiko replied, "Of course not!" and showed her the page. Indeed, the lineup of news was a year out of date.

I see, this year's batch are numbered using next year's date, she assumed. She checked the call numbers of the older books: 300, Social Sciences. This year's books would likely be in the reference room with other social sciences books.

Somehow I've got to bounce back from this! "I'm so sorry, I'll bring this year's books right away!" she apologized, her voice shrill and nervous. Returning the out-of-date books to the counter, she ran to the social sciences shelves. On the way, she passed Doujou, who admonished her, "Don't run in the library!" She slowed to a jog. But on her targeted shelf she found--

"None!? Not one volume!?"

There was not one book on the shelf with the call number she was looking for. *Are they all checked out? No, that can't be.* If all of those thick *mooks* were checked out, she would be able to see a gap on the shelves where they had been. *They haven't bought any this year? Don't be silly.* It was impossible they wouldn't have at least one book on the subject. *Is it possible that this year's haven't been published yet?*

⁵ A mook is a book with the look, design, and layout of a magazine. From "magazine" and "book."

It's no good, I have no idea. In times like this, what do I do? -- This.

"Instructor Doujou!"

Since they had just passed each other, she caught up with him again quickly. "Um, my father asked me for help finding references, but this year's *Japan: General Remarks* and *Current Events* aren't on the shelves, and the archives only have last year's..."

Frowning, Doujou listened attentively for a moment to Iku's disjointed explanation, then confirmed, "You gave him last year's, didn't you?" Iku nodded. "Then I'm coming with you. Follow me." He started walking to where Katsuhiko stood waiting.

"What? But he asked me, I've got to do it..."

"What the hell kind of idiot are you?" Doujou tilted his head up to look at Iku and shook his head fiercely. "You've already made one mistake. If you make more, it leads to distrust of the library by our patrons. You can explain that principle to your father."

A harsh truth, but indeed a sound one. Iku withered and followed after Doujou. He found Katsuhiko and walked up to him, bowing.

"Excuse me, you're looking for material on this year's current events? I'm sorry that our staff member's inexperience has caused you inconvenience," Doujou apologized. He prompted Iku with a look.

"I'm sorry," she bowed. "I didn't know where to look, so I asked someone who does."

Katsuhiko nodded silently in acknowledgment, but Iku knew that she had completely failed his surprise inspection. Her shoulders slumped in dejection.

"Toward the end of the year, many books are published summarizing the year's events, and many patrons come to read them, so around this time we set up a special display corner," Doujou said, leading them to the corner near the entrance. The shelves that delineated the corner were lined with *mooks* emblazoned with next year's date.

"It appears that *Japan: General Remarks* and *Current Events* are checked out--well, they're popular series," Doujou expounded, scanning the shelves. "*Go make sure*," he murmured to Iku, who went to a nearby terminal to check the information.

Katsuhiko turned to Doujou. "Can you recommend anything else?"

"What class of material are you looking for?"

"A panoptic view of the flow of the year's events."

"Would you like something light and easy to read, or something in-depth and painstakingly researched?"

"How about something easy to read, but rigorous to a certain extent?"

In response to his request, Doujou pulled several books off the shelf, one by one. After comparing several of them, he recommended two relatively slim volumes.

Iku, who had been waiting for a chance to interject, murmured *sotto voce* to Doujou, "I looked up those books--they're checked out, and there's a waiting list."

"--So, since your father lives within the Kantou region, we *could* put him on the waiting list for an interlibrary loan, but it would take time to transport the books to him, so he's probably better off borrowing them from his local library..."

The way he was giving so much attention to the information that Iku had investigated made her feel vaguely awkward.

Katsuhiro seemed to accept Doujou's explanation, for he took the two books that Doujou had recommended and headed to a corner to read them.

"Now then," Doujou said, turning to Iku. "What did you do?"

Iku's shoulders hunched at the oft-repeated question. She described the sequence of events that had followed Katsuhiro's request for references as best she could.

After she had finished, Doujou opened his mouth. "First of all," he said, "if you aren't confident about your ability to do a job, ask for pointers from someone who does. If you had asked me at the beginning, I could have told you that these kinds of publications are indexed by the next year's date, and that we had a special corner for them. There's no helping your lack of experience, but don't try to fake experience that you don't have," he ordered, merciless as usual.

"Second, when the books came up from the archives, you should have at least checked the table of contents. You can get a good idea about the contents of a book that way, and if it doesn't fit the patron's request, you can send it back instead of giving it to them. Once you've given a patron the wrong book, you've failed your reference duty. Of course it's not good to take too much time, but it's better than giving a patron the wrong information."

Indeed, if Iku had looked at the table of contents, she would have known that it was an older book. There was no excuse for Iku's naïveté in neglecting to authenticate the book.

"Anyway, there's no need for every librarian to be an expert in every field in the first place. Even within the Administration Division, each person has their field of expertise, and everyone relies on each other's specific skills. --Though in your case, you floundered even before that point--you would do well to acquire a little more basic knowledge."

"However," Doujou continued, "good job for trying to determine what kind of material on current events he wanted. Your listening comprehension could use work, but deciphering a patron's needs is the basis of reference work. You did well, instinctively understanding that basic principle in spite of your inexperience."

It was possibly that he was just trying to comfort her, but those words were like water in the desert. The feeling encouraged her. She wanted to learn at least a little more.

"Um, can you tell me how you decided what books to recommend to my father earlier?" There were dozens of books in the current events corner, and naturally she didn't imagine that Doujou had read them all. After all, downtime was even more important for combat personnel than it was for regular library staff.

Doujou frowned, twisting his head in thought. "I guess the short answer is, the practical application of bibliology..."

That would probably be enough for someone who already understood what Doujou meant, but Iku was completely flummoxed. Doujou seemed to understand that his statement hadn't gotten through. From his frown, Iku could tell the the explanation was going to be complicated; she stood up straight, preparing herself.

"Do you understand the theory of reasoning about a book's contents by analogy to its exterior?"

She had a feeling that she had heard a little something to that effect in her lectures, but she didn't remember the theory, so she shook her head frankly.

"For example," Doujou took an A5-sized⁶ *mook* from the shelf. Its title was *2020: The Definitive Source on the Top 100 News Stories*.

"To a certain extent, from a book's format you can determine the maximum number of characters per page. Generally, a *shirokuban*-sized⁷ book will have forty characters to a line and eighteen lines to a

⁶ A5 is a standard size of paper, measuring 5.8 x 8.3 inches or 148 x 210 millimeters.

⁷ A Japanese paper size, measuring 5.0 x 7.4 inches or 127 x 188 millimeters. In comparison, a typical paperback book is about 4 x 6.5 inches.

page⁸. A5 books aren't that much bigger, and since this is a *mook* the organization of the content is bound to be irregular, so you can more or less think of it as *shirokuban*-sized. Then, if you look at the table of contents, you can get a rough idea of how many pages are devoted to each entry."

The book Doujou was currently using as an example had a little less than 150 pages, for a total of 108,000 characters. But, she thought, the table of contents and the chapter title pages would cut down on the amount of actual text, so there was probably closer to 100,000 characters of information contained in the book.

The book's format was a collection of a hundred news stories, leaving about 1,000 characters were allocated per story. One story would take up about two and a half pages of 400-character Japanese manuscript paper. Two and a half pages for one news story wasn't a very generous allotment⁹.

"You can tell that this book can basically be categorized as a digest, with only a brief summary of each news story. However, the content is going to be proportionately skimpy and incomplete, so this book is a little unreliable. In my personal opinion, the grandiose subtitle "Definitive Source" feels like an exaggeration."

Aha, that's why he didn't recommend this book earlier, she thought, giving her belated approval.

"The table of contents is also very important. If you can accurately discern the thesis of a book by looking at its table of contents, that book tends to be very well-organized. By looking at the number of pages dedicated to each chapter, you can also tell what topics the book emphasizes. After that, you can incorporate information about the publisher and author, and you can also roughly determine the level of the book by how it handles the index and bibliography."

"So does that mean that this book isn't very good?" she asked, because it seemed like Doujou didn't think highly of it.

"I can't state that unconditionally," he replied. "For example, if a patron wanted a rough, tabloid-TV-style view of the year's news, this

⁸ The *Toshokan Sensou* books are *shirokuban*-sized, and they have 43 characters per line, 19 lines per page. :o)

⁹ For comparison: if a page of one of the *Toshokan Sensou* books was filled completely, it would have 817 characters on it. The pages usually aren't that dense, since they have a lot of dialogue, but a thousand characters would probably take up less than two pages--which indeed is not very much!

kind of short book is perfect, in terms of number of pages and depth of information."

That's why it's important to determine a patron's needs, she was finally able to understand in her heart. For example, Toshiko didn't have much interest in current events, so this kind of book would be easier for her to read.

"Meanwhile, if you read a representative book with an established reputation in a particular genre, you'll have some basis for judging the rest. In this case, *Japan: General Remarks or Current Events*, perhaps? Or for a change of pace, the *Politics and Economics* series."

Aha, he's read representative books after all! she thought in awe, but she didn't say it out loud, since Doujou would probably say, "*You should at least read that much!*" She didn't like reading when it wasn't for pleasure, so she had no defenses if he decided to prod her.

"If you feel like improving, don't be afraid to try approaching patrons who look like they're searching for something. The most important thing for reference duty is to gain experience; think of it as training and have them let you search. If you can't find what you're looking for, it's fine to ask another staff member for help."

"Thank you, sir," Iku bowed. "By the way," she asked, "are there any books you've been wanting to read, Instructor Doujou?"

Doujou tilted his head to one side, puzzled by the sudden change of topic. "...why do you need to know that right now?"

"Oh, I was just thinking that if I approached a patron out of the blue and then took a long time with the reference, it might be a little... I was hoping that you might be my practice partner."

"Do that with Shibasaki or someone on your days off!" Doujou rebuked her, then walked away, fuming. *Aw, I thought it was a great idea!* Iku thought selfishly, just as Katsuhiko returned from the reading corner.

"You know," he began, his speech reverting to family-mode. Iku cocked her head, and he continued, ruminating over his words as if he was trying to remember something. "Your coworker, um..."

"Tedzuka?" she prompted him, thinking that she had introduced Shibasaki as her friend, so he must be talking about Tedzuka. Katsuhiko nodded in affirmation. *What about Tedzuka?* Iku cocked her head even further, and then received a crushing blow from a completely unexpected direction.

"He led me to the special corner right away, without having to ask Doujou-kun for help."

Her heart reeled, and even her body swayed a little.

"...You tested Tedzuka too!? So you could compare him to me!?"

"Comparing someone with their colleagues is the easiest way to measure work performance," Katsuhiro stated shamelessly. All he had done was use the library's reference service as a patron, so she had no real grounds to condemn him, but-- "I thought you'd be able to do at least as well as he did, but your performance was lamentable."

Don't compare me with someone like that bastard! she thought with misplaced anger. "Tedxuka is a cut above everyone else! He was the top student in my training class, understand!? You know I'm not that smart, so don't compare me with a monster like that!"

"Then what about Shibasaki-san?"

"No! She's an outlier too!"

"So, everyone except for you is amazing? How did you get to be a librarian then? I've heard it's a very competitive field."

Oooh, that hits a nerve! Iku was frozen with rage, but Katsuhiro had already blithely moved on to another topic.

"However, Doujou was naturally more skilled when it came to recommending substitute books for the ones that were checked out. Tedzuka-kun had a little trouble whittling down the selection."

"What do you expect!?" Even the mighty Tedzuka would look pitiful next to Doujou. "He may not look it, but Instructor Doujou is unbelievably good at his job. A new recruit in his first year couldn't possibly hope to catch up to his level any time soon."

"You shouldn't be saying 'he may not look it' about your superior," Katsuhiro warned her with a stern look. "Still," he blurted, "if Tedzuka-kun hasn't caught up to him, it certainly won't be possible for you for you to catch up in the foreseeable future."

"I know that," Iku muttered crossly, then lifted her chin. "You're right, it isn't possible right now. But eventually..." *I'm going to surpass him!* Naturally she couldn't say something so impassioned in front of her father.

*Anyway, there are things that Instructor Doujou respects me for too--*but those were related to her combat skills, so, maddeningly, she couldn't say anything about them.

The demonstrations by the protesters who had also come to the library both days had been loud and obnoxious, but they had ended without any major trouble.

Iku, in what she thought of as her final filial obligation, went to one last dinner with her parents. As expected, Toshiko began to hint at Iku to find another job in her hometown, but again, Katsuhiko stopped her.

"Thank you, father," she murmured in his ear on the way back to the base, low enough that Toshiko couldn't hear.

"Your job is your job," Katsuhiko replied with a curmudgeonly scowl.

Could it be that he's bashful? Iku wondered, fond feelings welling up inside of her.

"Your coworkers are all good, competent people. I think it's a fine place to work. Keep at it."

Her father's encouragement brought the words *"I'm sorry"* to the tip of her tongue.

I'm sorry I lied. I'm sorry I didn't tell you the truth.

They would have opposed her decision. They would have worried too much. But those excuses didn't change the fact that she had lied.

"I have work tomorrow, so I won't be able to see you off. Be safe on your trip home."

At the very least, she could put all of her heart into those words.

*

At ten o'clock in the evening, an hour before lights-out, Katsuhiko came to see Doujou in his room.

Doujou had told him his room number in case he had any problems, so perhaps he had come for help.

"Thank you for everything you've done."

Apparently it was gratitude for showing him around the men's side of the dorm. "No, it was nothing," Doujou demurred, his eyes darting back and forth in embarrassment over his faux pas on the first day. Katsuhiko too seemed hesitant, his eyes cast down.

Finally, he seemed to gather his courage, and broke the ice.

"May I speak to you about something?"

Doujou couldn't think of a reason Katsuhiko would ask to speak to him again, but his formal manner hinted that it wasn't a

conversation that they could have standing around in the doorway. Doujou motioned his guest into the room. "Of course. Please come in."

Katsuhiro accepted politely. Doujou didn't have a zabuton¹⁰ or any other fancy seats for visitors; he was saved by the fact that it was the season for a *kotatsu*.

"Would you like anything to drink?" he asked, implying that Katsuhiro was welcome to take his time.

"No thank you, I won't trouble you for long," Katsuhiro declined. As if to prove this statement, he cut quickly to the heart of the matter. "What do you think of Iku as a member of the Library Force?" He leveled a straight, steady gaze at Doujou and his tone was as frank as it was possible to be.

It was a strong-minded question, radically different from the sentimental "What is my daughter usually like?" from the first day. Doujou had been prepared to give a polite, guarded answer, but without giving it too much thought, he suddenly changed his mind.

Katsuhiro had seen for himself today how bad Iku was at reference service--she had even come to Doujou for help. He had no choice but to answer honestly.

"She's inept," he said baldly.

Katsuhiro replied immediately. "In comparison to Tedzuka-kun?"

"No. Not many of the new recruits can compare with Librarian Tedzuka. She's inept in comparison to the average recruit." She was Katsuhiro's daughter, but from today's incident he could probably discern the truth for himself, so he was blunt.

Task Force members basically only had to be skilled enough at library duties to not burden the Administrative Division. Each individual member was more or less free to decide how much skill they wanted to gain beyond that level. There were Task Force members who dealt with every reference request by passing it on to a librarian. That was why, when Iku asked him more about reference duties, he had begun with the disclaimer, "if you feel like improving." But there was no way he could tell her father that she was only being held up to that meager standard. Anyway, her skill in basic library duties was still questionable.

She was slow to understand things, she was reckless, she was careless--*damn, she has too many faults to list*. It would be so easy to say, "*She has rare physical abilities for a female Force member, so we*

¹⁰ A small, square, flat cushion for sitting on the floor.

have high hopes for her in the future." Since he was forbidden from disclosing her most valuable qualities, there was no way he could make his estimation of her sound anything but negative.

The only thing he could say unequivocally was this.

"...however, she is extremely passionate when it comes to defending books."

In many cases, she was *too* passionate. During her training period, she had interfered with an inspection at a bookstore. In complete ignorance of the rules, she had tried to exercise the right of discretionary selection, though she was a mere Librarian and that right was only granted to Library Officers and above. The gossip still hadn't died down.

He scowled at himself, since he had been compelled to exercise his right of discretionary selection in Iku's stead. But--

"I think she's a match even for Librarian Tedzuka in her desire to defend books. She's more sensitive than anyone else to the pain of censorship. She has what I believe is a rare ability to feel a stranger's pain as her own. A while ago, we dealt with some children whose books were being restricted by the PTA. The one who was most sympathetic to the children's feelings was Librarian Kasahara."

He was talking about the forum between the library and the PTA which Kimura Yuuma and his classmates had participated in. When the PTA had attacked the children, Iku had come to their defense without a moment's thought, and Doujou thought that it was the very impetuous earnestness of that riposte that had shut her opponents' mouths and attracted the sympathy of the neutral audience members. A technical argument using logic to shut down their opponents could not have gained the sympathy of a third party.

No one but Iku could have overwhelmed her enemies with that perfect timing.

"We'd be in a little trouble if *all* of our staff were like Librarian Kasahara, but we'd also be in trouble if none of them were like Librarian Kasahara. Perhaps her motivation makes her a kind of standard-bearer for us all." Maybe that was too *much* praise. "For myself, I would breathe easier if she toned down that motivation a little," he said, trying to cancel some of it out.

Katsuhiro, who had been listening silently, opened his mouth to speak. "She told us that the reason she wanted to work at the library was that she was rescued by a Library Force member at a bookstore when she was in high school. She must admire him very much."

This unexpected attack almost made Doujou fall on his face. Iku, of course, didn't know that that Library Force member had actually been Doujou himself. He didn't feel like telling her either, and he had imposed a strict gag order on those peers of his who knew the truth. The unbelievable story of her entrance interview had been amusing enough to make its way to even the highest levels of the Library Force hierarchy, but since they didn't have much contact with the new recruits, his gag order still stood unbreached.

Iku, who hadn't even been able to remember the base commander's face until she met him personally, naturally didn't remember Doujou's face from their single meeting five years before, but Doujou had remembered her. At least, well enough to recognize her at her entrance interview.

Every time Iku talked about her "prince," it made him irritated. *You don't even remember!*

It was against the rules for Library Force members to exercise the right of discretionary selection according to their own whims, and Doujou hated his younger self for his rash action. He couldn't bear the way Iku devotedly emulated his rash young self. It was like announcing his incompetence to the world.

Even so, at the time he couldn't keep himself from intervening-- though it was no excuse. If he thought that the young Iku's self-sacrificing stand against censorship excused his actions, he should quit the Library Force right now. On the heels of that thought came a realization. "Self-sacrificing" meant not thinking about the consequences of one's actions, and that was why it irritated him to see her now, her reckless personality still in full bloom. Back then, she had gathered her resolve and challenged her attackers to call the police on her. There was still the dangerous possibility that if Iku gathered her resolve, she might decide to do something utterly insane again.

Also, something that he had only fully realized after she had become his subordinate was that Iku didn't have the ability to think about whether something would hurt or not before she did it. That was probably an advantage in certain circumstances, but he couldn't bear the fact that that recklessness of hers had been the reason he had exercised his right of discretionary selection.

"How is Iku as a subordinate?"

"She's very valuable." The answer slipped out smoothly. He panicked for a moment, but the question had been about her worth as a subordinate, so his answer wouldn't seem strange, he assured

himself. "She's still a little green, but I think she will make a fine Library Force member. I genuinely look forward to her continued improvement. --Of course, the same goes for Librarian Tedzuka as well," he tacked on unnecessarily, proving how flustered he was. He frowned involuntarily.

"Thank you. Being able to hear you say that has reassured me greatly."

Katsuhiko rose to leave, and Doujou walked with him out into the hallway.

"Thank you for all you've done for Iku, and I hope you'll continue to help her in the future," Katsuhiko thanked him sincerely. He turned to leave, then looked back at Doujou. "Oh--is it acceptable to use the trash can in my room for all garbage¹¹, or is there some separation I should..."

"Feel free to throw away the combustible garbage. If you could just leave out the things you're not sure about..."

Their last exchange was distressingly domestic.

*

When Iku came back to the dorm the day her parents went home, the dorm manager gave Iku the key to the room her mother had been staying in. It was the responsibility of the visitor's friend or relative to put their room back in order after the visitor had departed--specifically, to tidy up and clean the futon.

"Um, what about the room my father used?"

"I believe Officer Doujou asked one of the other male Force members to take care of it."

Damn, something else I've got to thank him for, she thought, scratching her head. She had done nothing but cost him time and trouble since her parents arrived.

For the time being, she finished her dinner and returned to her room. She found Shibasaki had already returned.

"Yo. Well done, you."

The sympathetic words caused her to deflate like a leaky balloon, and she collapsed to the floor.

"I'm done in..."

¹¹ The Japanese are very serious about recycling and have dozens of categories of recyclables.

"Well, at least you were able to get through it, right?"

"I guess," she said, pulling her sweater and shirt off in one motion. If Toshiko saw her, she would scold her for laziness, Iku thought--then realized she still hadn't come down from her state of high alert. She pulled the trainer she wore for loungewear on over her head, left her jeans for now, and crawled into the *kotatsu*.

"Shibasaki, thank you for all your help."

"Don't mention it--it paid off quite well for me." She was talking about the promised lunch with dessert. "So, what did your parents think about your work?"

"Well, my mother didn't seem to care one way or the other. The second day she had more time on her hands than she knew what to do with. It was like, why even come then? My father was harder--he made me provide reference service on the fly, and then compared my performance to Tedzuka's!"

"That's terrible!" Shibasaki laughed in *schadenfreude*. "It doesn't get any worse than being compared to Tedzuka--out of our year, I'm probably the only one who measures up to him."

"You know, you really need to learn some humility."

"But I am being humble. Don't you think it's a huge compliment, to say that a Task Force member who doesn't specialize in library duties is a match for me?"

"No, see, that's obviously the opposite of humility." It was in fact arrogant in the extreme, but Iku sincerely envied Shibasaki's confidence--*I wish I was good enough to say something like that*.

"Hey, if you're not busy during our next day off, wanna come to the library with me?"

"What are you babbling about all of a sudden?" Shibasaki asked dubiously.

Iku answered self-consciously. "I, um, kind of wanted to get some practice at reference service..."

"Do that with Shibasaki or someone on your days off!" Doujou had scolded her, when she tried to ask him to be her practice partner. She didn't mention this to Shibasaki.

"Task Force members don't need to be especially good at reference service, you know. It'll take you a while to gain experience on top of your regular duties, and there's nothing wrong with directing any complicated requests to a real librarian."

"Yeah, I know, but..." Iku mumbled, trailing off. "It's frustrating when I can't do things and Tedzuka can..." *And it was amazing when*

Instructor Doujou was choosing the perfect books for my father--she hated to acknowledge it, but he had kicked ass. I want to be like that too, she thought, though there was no way she could say those words aloud. She could justify her desire to be like Tedzuka because they were rivals, but she couldn't use the same reasoning for Doujou. She struggled as she searched for a rationalization.

It's because--I decided that before I could follow my prince, I had to surpass him. "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles¹²," right? That's why--

"Learning from a superior's example is a perfectly natural thing to do," Iku spit out sulkily.

Shibasaki grinned. "You're finally admitting your admiration?"

"N-no...!"

"...of our instructors?"

The use of the plural made her realize she'd been set up. "--That's right!" she snarled in the affirmative.

"Well, I'll help you practice once in a while," Shibasaki said with a smirking grin. *Dammit, wasn't there a cat like her in Alice in Wonderland?* "But don't be so hard on yourself," Shibasaki continued. "People from our generation won't catch up to the likes of Instructor Doujou and Instructor Komaki in hurry."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Those two were members of the last graduating class of the National Library Academy¹³."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Iku repeated.

"Fifteen years ago when the Library Force was established, there was a mass resignation among the librarians in protest over the library's new militant stance--so many people quit that it was a major problem. At that time, the Library Force started their own educational institution to cultivate outstanding Force members from an early age--the National Library Academy. They received on-the-job training while they were still in school and had skills drilled into them mercilessly, and during the last two years they did actual work at the library as quasi-Force members. When they graduated, they were commissioned

¹² Sun Tzu.

¹³ The Japanese word I have translated as "academy" refers specifically to educational facilities established in affiliation with government agencies, like police academies or military academies.

as Chief Librarians or Library Officers Third Class, depending on their performance. I bet those two started as Library Officers."

"Daaaamn! I wish I could have gone! Why isn't it around anymore?"

"The official line is that it closed because they got all the good people they needed, but... Well, there are a lot of different rumors, like that the Media Improvement Committee stepped in and had it shut down, or that there was a political deal where the Academy's establishment would be recognized only on the condition that it closed after ten years."

Iku's face hardened at the second rumor.

"You don't think that the Library Force would make a backroom deal like that?" Shibasaki asked pityingly. It was even more impossible to reply in the face of that pity. "The Library Force was outfitted only five years after the Nightmare at Hino. That wouldn't have been possible with just pretty words, you know? You better get a little more used to it."

"We're not champions of justice here in the Library Force," Shibasaki would probably have told her. How many people had told Iku the very same thing since she enlisted?

But Shibasaki's words were even harsher.

"The only place you'll find champions of justice fighting against a nice clean backdrop is in a storybook. In real life no one's going to clear the road for you. If you're not prepared to get dirty, you should give up your dreams of being a champion of justice."

Her words were as sharp as a knife. They cut down Iku's naïveté where it stood.

She swiftly looked down in shame. Two drops of water splashed down onto the *kotatsu* top. Three, four, five followed quickly after.

"I'm sor..." Who was she apologizing to? It didn't make sense to apologize to Shibasaki, so Iku stopped herself. She began to say, "You're right," when Shibasaki came around and hugged her, as if to silence her.

She was soft, and she smelled good.

"I'm sorry, I lied. You don't have to agree with me on this. I was just picking on you a little."

Shibasaki's uncharacteristic softheartedness bewildered Iku.

"You're so innocent that I just have to tease you sometimes. But if you were to do the sensible thing and agree with me, I would definitely be disappointed. Everyone would."

Shibasaki was telling her not to say, "You're right." Iku thought for a long time, and then opened her mouth.

"No matter what happened before the Library Force was established, I respect Commander Inamine as he is now. No matter what secret agreements gave rise to the National Library Academy, I don't think it diminishes the commitment of those who studied there, like Instructor Doujou and Instructor Komaki. No matter what the Library Force does..."

You were willing to be branded a shoplifter to protect this book. That was what her prince had told Iku, when she had attempted to dirty her own name.

"...because there are some things that are worth being branded as dishonorable to protect, I think the Force's members will dirty themselves along with it."

"That's right. That's exactly it," Shibasaki said, still holding Iku tight.

"Officer Doujou."

When Doujou had returned to the dorm after working overtime, who should poke his head into his room, but the Chief Librarian he had asked to tidy the room Katsuhiko had used.

"I finished the cleanup, sir."

"Ah, thank you."

"Also, here--I think he might have left this behind," the Librarian said, proffering a magazine. As Doujou took it, his face fell.

"...Where was it?"

"It was next to the trash can, but not in it, so just to be safe..."

"Gotcha. I'll take care of it. Thanks a lot."

After the Librarian left, Doujou eyed the cover of the magazine again. It was *New World Weekly*. But it wasn't the most recent issue; it was one from quite a while ago--one that Doujou remembered well.

When he flipped to the section he remembered, the magazine automatically fell open to a certain page--it had been viewed often enough to crease the binding.

In an article about the library forum in which the children had participated, Iku appeared in one of the several pictures that had been published. It was a picture of her standing form taken from behind; the caption was "A trooper working security at the event, where the library was harshly attacked. What must she be thinking inside?"

The picture had been published by mistake, and Iku had been anxious that her parents would see it and recognize her.

Why did he bring this, and why did he leave it behind? Doujou thought he could imagine the kind of internal conflict that would lead to such actions, but he didn't dare think further. It wasn't his place to make those guesses. All he needed to understand was that it had something to do with him.

All he needed to understand was that he had been entrusted with a confidence. Though Katsuhiko hadn't particularly cared if it reached him or not.

At length, Doujou shut the magazine and slid it onto his bookshelf.

Chapter 2, A Love Impediment¹⁴

*

"I'm back!"

Shibasaki, who had gone home to Kanazawa for the New Year's holiday, returned to the dorm on January 4th, the day before the library was set to open again.

"Brought you a souvenir--*kintsuba*¹⁵ from my home town," Shibasaki said, passing Iku two small packages.

"Oooh, thanks! You didn't have to get me two!"

"There are two standard varieties, so I thought you might want to try both."

"I do, totally! I'll go make some tea."

It had been a week since she had made tea for two people.

"So, in the end you didn't go home at all?"

"Yeah. I mean, I just saw my parents in November."

Shibasaki, having changed into loungewear, slid into her usual spot at the *kotatsu*. Once Shibasaki was there, Iku finally truly felt like things were back to normal.

"You still could have gone to visit--you haven't been home once since you enlisted."

"But someone still has to patrol, even when the library's closed."

"You're just making excuses," Shibasaki said bluntly. Naturally, during the New Year's holiday, shifts were arranged so that everyone could go home for at least two or three days while the library was closed.

"But the other three only went home for one night."

"Yes, but their families all live in the Tokyo area--for heaven's sake, Instructor Komaki's family lives right in town. They could pop in for a day visit any time they wanted."

"So, why do you think they live in the dorm?"

There were regulations that allowed those who wished to move out of the dorms three years after enlisting, but even though Komaki

¹⁴ The Japanese title was a pun on the word *shougai*, which means both "obstacle, impediment" and "handicap, disability."

¹⁵ *Kintsuba* is a Japanese confection, made by wrapping a thin layer of flour dough around a sweet paste center. They are usually square-shaped.

and Doujou's families lived within commuting distance, they didn't seem inclined to leave their dorm.

"For convenience's sake, probably. In a combat role one might be deployed at a moment's notice or even called in when one is off-duty. I mean, do *you* think you'll move out in three years?"

"No way, absolutely not. That'd be a huge pain." The Library Force's dorms weren't very restrictive rules-wise, and after one became a Library Officer Second Class one could have a room to oneself. As a member of a combat team stationed at the Library Base, there was almost no merit to moving out of the base's dorm. There were even those who, like Genda, stayed in the dorm into their forties.

"Well, all my relatives come to stay for New Year's, so it's already lively enough, and my brothers bring their kids. No one complains if I don't go home." More accurately, no one had time to complain. "More importantly, can I open my souvenir yet?"

She was already opening one of the packages as she asked. Shibasaki opened the other one.

"Whoa, I've never seen green *kintsuba* before. Are they *matcha*-flavored?"

"No, sweet green pea. I prefer the *azuki*-bean-flavored ones personally, but these are also quite popular."

Wetting her throat with tea, Shibasaki unwrapped one of the *azuki*-bean-flavored *kintsuba* and began nibbling it. Iku, feeling she should start with the conventional, took one of the same kind.

"Oh, wow, this is amazingly delicious. It's so flavorful!"

"I've got to take some to work with me tomorrow. Oh, and I bought some for Doujou's squad, so take those in with you, would you? And then could you help me pass these out around the dorm?"

It was customary to bring souvenirs for both one's close friends and those who lived on the same floor.

"You bought *kintsuba* for everyone? Wasn't that heavy?"

"It weighed a ton! I decided to splurge a little since it was my first visit home, but the weight turned out to be more of a problem than the money. I was like, 'I'm not Kasahara, how the hell am I supposed to carry all this?' In the end, I bought a little rolling suitcase."

"Hold on, why did my name come up at a time like that?"

"'Cause you're big and strong and I love you for it!" Shibasaki said in a sugary-sweet tone, practically affixing a heart to the end of the sentence. Just as Iku scowled, someone knocked on the door.

"Kasahara, are you there?"

"Come in!" she called.

One of their peers who lived on the same floor poked her head in the door. "Ah, Shibasaki, you're back too? I brought some souvenirs from home."

"Ah, hold on, hold on, I have some too," Shibasaki said, grabbing two from the packages they had already unwrapped for themselves. All their peers still lived in doubles.

"Sorry, I don't have anything to give you."

"It's okay, I know, you didn't go home. I know someone had to patrol, but still, thanks for toughing it out."

After exchanging souvenirs on the doorstep, their friend left to hand out hers to another room. The gift exchange would probably continue all over the dorm today and tomorrow.

It was a standard scene from the end of a long holiday.

"Was it you who brought the *kintsuba*?" Tedzuka asked her as they patrolled indoors after lunch. Apparently Tedzuka had also eaten some of the souvenirs from Shibasaki, which Iku had handed over to Doujou first thing in the morning. Iku had cheerfully eaten another portion as a member of the squad.

"No, they were from Shibasaki. I didn't go home."

"Ah. Tell Shibasaki thanks for me."

"Weren't they good?"

"Yeah, I don't really like *azuki*-bean-flavored stuff, but I was able to eat those."

Uhh, that was vague--does that mean he thought they were good or not? she thought, but from a boy who didn't like the flavor of *azuki* beans, being able to eat them might be considered a compliment.

"If there are any more left, I thought I might just take another one..."

Doujou had said that when everyone had had their share, the rest would end up in the Force's communal snack supply, but those would be first-come, first-serve, after all.

"There aren't any more, Commander Genda ate them all."

"...by himself!?" Iku's eyes bugged out. "Dammit, there were *how* many left over!? They were so good, and he just gobbled them down like a cow...!"

"A cow? Even if you're not being serious, he is your superior officer, you know!"

"Doesn't matter! It's a crime to eat fine pastries without the proper reverence!"

"Girls get scary when sweets are involved," Tedzuka shuddered a little.

Huffing indignantly, Iku continued walking their patrol route. As they passed the women's restroom, a girl in a white coat walked out and headed to the reference room. A handkerchief fell out of her coat pocket, but the slender girl didn't seem to notice and kept walking.

"You dropped something!" Iku called out, but the girl didn't react. She was a little far away, so maybe she didn't realize that Iku was talking to her. "Hey! Little lady!"

"What was that, some kind of lame pickup line?"

"Screw you!" Iku spat at the scornful Tedzuka, then chased after the girl. On the way she stopped to pick up the handkerchief. "Hey, I'm talking to you!"

Is she ignoring me? Iku wondered. Just then, Komaki appeared from one of the side hallways. He took in the sight of Iku chasing the girl, then ran a few steps over to her and tapped her on the shoulder. Registering the contact, the girl looked up at Komaki, and then her face lit up immediately. Komaki said something and pointed in Iku's direction; startled, the girl turned to look at her.

The motion caused her fine shoulder-length hair to swing out from her face, revealing the ear-mounted hearing aids that had been hidden before. Other than that, she was an entirely normal-- correction. She was a little too pretty to be called normal. She looked approximately high-school-aged; she still had an innocent coltishness that only added to her charm.

Komaki addressed Iku, who had caught up to them. "This girl has a hearing impairment. If you could try to remember her face, and when you need to, signal her in a way she'll see."

"Uh, yes, sir," she nodded, but she wasn't immediately sure what that meant, and how to communicate with the girl. The fact that she had hearing aids meant that she could hear at least a little, right? "Um, here..." she mumbled vaguely.

Komaki jumped in again. "Speak normally but clearly. She can read your lips to catch the sounds that aren't picked up by her hearing aids."

"...Sorry," she apologized reflexively to the girl, for being ignorant and making a muddle of the conversation. "Here, you dropped this," she said, endeavoring to speak clearly, and held out the

handkerchief. The girl inclined her head slightly, then took out a cell phone from her coat pocket and started to press the buttons.

--Holy shit, she's fast!

As Iku stared at her in dumbfounded amazement, the girl finished typing at superhuman speeds and showed the display to Iku. On the screen meant for composing text messages, she had written, "Thank you. I'm sorry I didn't notice"

"Oh. Don't worry about it."

After finishing her exchange with Iku, the girl turned back to her phone. She took a little longer composing this message, then showed the phone to Komaki.

He read the message, then nodded, smiling. "Sure. See you later." As he spoke, he made right angles with the thumb and forefinger on each hand, brought both hands together in front of him, then pulled them apart. Even Iku could guess that it was some kind of sign language.

A smile blossomed across the girl's face like a flower, and she took off for the reference room.

"What did you say just now?" Iku asked, imitating Komaki's gesture.

"It means, 'of course,'" Komaki taught her. "She asked me to recommend a good book, and that was my reply."

"Instructor Komaki, you know sign language?"

"I know some basic vocabulary, but not a lot, since she doesn't use it as her main method of communication. She avoids talking in front of people because she's a little hard to understand, but if we're just talking in private we can talk normally. She also has her cell phone."

"Oh yeah, she was amazingly fast on that thing. It surprised me."

"Recently they've become an important communication tool for people with hearing disabilities. Apparently at conventions and meet-ups, you can see even the elderly wielding them adeptly. Even people who don't know sign language can converse without missing anything, so they're very convenient. After all, you've always got your cell phone on you."

For Iku, her cell phone was nothing but a useful gadget, but Komaki caused her to recognize anew its value as a replacement for a person's voice. *It's amazing, living in a cell phone culture.*

Leaving it at that, Iku's curiosity stirred in a different direction. "Um, are there any people besides her that I should try and remember?" she probed delicately.

Komaki saw through her question and smiled. "It would be impossible to remember them all. That's why this isn't an order from your boss--it's a personal request. Of course, it would be good if you reminded yourself once in a while of the existence of people like her. You can't tell from someone's appearance if they have a hearing disability or not, so it's easy to do something insensitive or careless. Truly, it's pretty dangerous to not have the ability to hear what's going on around you."

Having been introduced to a new viewpoint, Iku nodded in enthusiastic endorsement. --But leaving it at that--"Is she family?" she pushed a little harder.

"No." Komaki smiled, then walked away.

Tedzuka, who had been watching from the sidelines for a break in the conversation, approached Iku after Komaki left her.

"Who was that?"

"Oh, just...I guess she was someone Instructor Komaki knows. He said she had a hearing impairment."

"And there seemed to be something going on between them..." she wanted to add. Perhaps she had been infected with Shibasaki's gossipy curiosity, but she had never seen Komaki smile at anyone like he had smiled at that girl.

When they returned to the Force's office for their break, they found Doujou there, so they all sat down to drink tea together.

"Um," Iku began, determined to take advantage of Komaki's absence to broach the topic. "When we were on our patrol, we met this girl with a hearing disability--it seemed like Instructor Komaki knew her, but..."

"You're such a gossip," Tedzuka said, raising an eyebrow, but even he looked like he was curiously waiting for Doujou's answer.

"Ah," Doujou nodded knowingly. "Nakazawa Marié-chan. She's a girl from Komaki's neighborhood. Their families have been close for a long time, and I think he used to babysit her a lot. She's like his little sister."

"No way! If they were really like siblings, they'd be much more rough with each other, and always fighting and putting each other in German suplexes..."

"That's just you," Doujou and Tedzuka interrupted simultaneously.

"I have a little sister too, but naturally I've never gone that far!" Doujou added incredulously.

Tedzuka thought about that for a moment, then put in, "But if Kasahara were my sister, I might just go that far... I have a feeling that if I didn't go all out, she might kill me first."

"Can we stop talking about me now? *Anyway*, she sure is a cute kid--does she come here often?" Iku forcibly steered the conversation back to its original topic.

Doujou nodded. "She comes about once a week, or thereabouts. Her high school's in the neighborhood."

"Is she coming so she can see Instructor Komaki?"

"At the very least, I think the reason she comes so often is because Komaki's here. Doesn't one patronize a place more often if one has friends there? Though, she can't always see him, since Komaki's not a librarian."

"So are they dating or something like that?" Iku asked avidly.

Doujou gave her another incredulous look. "She's ten years younger than he is! I'm surprised you would even think of such a thing!"

"Ugh, you're such an old man! Don't be such a stick-in-the-mud!" Iku griped.

Doujou looked as though she had pushed him off-balance mentally. "You..." Tedzuka began, shuddering. "*How the hell could you say something like that to a superior officer?*" he seemed on the verge of saying, but Iku didn't pay him any mind. *What's wrong with pointing out when someone's being old-fashioned?*

"She's a high school student, right? If she's ten years younger than Instructor Komaki, she must be seventeen or eighteen already. Don't underestimate girls--at my high school, there were teachers who married former students and so on."

Though that was an extreme example, girls of that age did indeed admire older men. Among Iku's classmates, girls who dated college students or even working adults hadn't been that rare. High school students were fully capable of having full-fledged love lives--well, Iku was a late bloomer in that respect, but that was the prevailing view.

"That girl is unquestionably in love with Instructor Komaki." Marié's smile had blossomed like a flower when she noticed Komaki--

her feelings were obvious to a fellow girl. She also had a sense that Komaki's feelings for her did not entirely fall in the category of "little sister" or "neighbor," but if so, why wouldn't Doujou, his closest friend, know? Iku was baffled.

Doujou replied, a little desperately, "Even if that were true, if you've known a girl since middle school you usually wouldn't think of her that way, right?"

"Wow, has he really known her that long?"

"We entered the Force the year she entered middle school."

If she had been visiting the library every week for that long, her feelings were all the more obvious. But she might hurt Doujou again if she pointed out how slow he was on the uptake, so she held her peace.

"He used to take her to children's events a lot, too. If they were singing nursery rhymes, he would sing them too, and so on."

"Oh, wow. So her hearing aids allow her to sing with other people?" Iku asked, surprised.

"Oh, no," Doujou explained, "she only lost her hearing a few years ago, due to an illness. I was talking about before that."

It was perhaps human nature that caused her to turn melancholy at the news of the misfortune of a girl even younger than she. Iku grew quiet and sober, and Tedzuka's expression mirrored hers.

"Well, remember her face, and if she gets into any trouble, help her out, all right?"

"Leave it to me!" She thumped her chest.

"Your excessive enthusiasm just makes me worry more."

Doujou's muttered concern was rude in the extreme.

*

By the time Marié was old enough to be aware of her surroundings, "big brother Komaki" was already a familiar presence.

Since Marié's mother and Komaki's mother were best friends, their households had been close since long before Komaki's birth, let alone Marié's.

Apparently when Marié was small, their mothers had left her in Komaki's care while they went shopping or to a movie. The fact that they were much more comfortable leaving her with Komaki than with their husbands suggested that Komaki had been levelheaded and dependable even at a young age.

Since Marié had been in the company of such a splendid "big brother" for as far back as she could remember, it was in some sense a perfectly logical consequence that, at every age, Marié would dismiss her male peers as "childish."

Boys were always hitting. They were stupid. They teased. Big brother Komaki was much more dreamy and handsome. Marié cringed to remember how she had told these things to her mother, knowing that everything she said had been piped directly through to the Komaki household. But at the time, she had been able to say, matter-of-factly, "When I grow up, I'm going to marry big brother Komaki." It was amazing.

Marié still remembered the first time he had broken her heart, when she was in second grade and Komaki was a senior in high school. It was autumn, and she saw him walking with another girl, probably one of his classmates.

The minute she caught sight of them, she froze in shock. That was when Komaki noticed her. "Marié-chan," he called to her cheerfully. His tone inspired a violent backlash.

When she thought back on it now, it was probably because her pride had been hurt. Until then, Marié had been reasonably certain that she was Komaki's sweetheart, but when he encountered her while he was out with another girl and showed not the slightest hint of agitation, Marié realized that he saw her as nothing more than the daughter of a family friend.

"She's a girl from my neighborhood," he explained to the girl. Her height complemented Komaki's, which Marié resented as well. Marié's head was a long way from even reaching Komaki's shoulder. The bag the girl carried, navy to designate her school, was another symbol of her age, and Marié cursed the red *radoseru*¹⁶ she carried on her back.

The girl had already taken her first step out of childhood into adulthood; she suited Komaki. Even much later, Marié could remember that they had been an effervescent high school couple. One had to be that age to look good next to Komaki; she was ten years too young. She understood now that she had been jealous in the face of that inexorable truth.

¹⁶ From Wikipedia: "A *radoseru* is a firm-sided backpack made of stitched firm leather or leather-like synthetic material, most commonly used in Japan by elementary schoolchildren."

"Who's *that*?" she asked bluntly, glaring just a little at the girl so that Komaki wouldn't notice. The girl's expression turned slightly uneasy in return, which gave Marié some small satisfaction.

The fact that the girl had recognized her as an enemy--had recognized her as a woman--ever so slightly salvaged her wounded pride.

"She's a friend from school."

How dare you think I wouldn't see through that lie! Outraged color rose in her cheeks, and an implacable fury boiled up inside her.

"Hmph! I hope you'll be very happy together!" she flung out, then ran away. Komaki called after her in confusion, but she didn't turn around.

"Oh, how cute! She's jealous!" the girl said, loudly enough for her to hear.

Marié couldn't let that one go past. "Shut up, stupid-head!" she shouted, turning back.

Komaki's expression grew stern. "Marié-chan!" he said in a scolding tone, which only enraged her more. She refused to listen to him lecture her on manners when he was parading around with a girl like that.

You don't even realize that she said that just to hurt me.

"I hate you!" she screamed, painfully aware of her own childishness. As she ran away without looking back, tears spilled from her eyes.

The next time they met, Komaki admonished Marié gently. "You shouldn't say things like that."

Don't say things that hurt people's feelings--that's something a grown-up would say! So what about that girl who hurt me, is it okay to hurt people's feelings if you don't use mean words? she thought angrily, but she and the girl were the only ones who knew that those words had been intended to hurt her.

"It was 'cause I got a bad feeling about her," she protested, though she knew Komaki probably wouldn't understand.

Komaki didn't pause. "Even if something made you mad--to someone who didn't know you, you just looked like a girl yelling 'stupid-head' at someone in the middle of the street. I don't want strangers to think you're that kind of girl."

She knew that he was implying a lot of things, like "*because you're not that kind of girl*" and "*I don't want you to become that kind*

of girl." In the end, she was left with no choice but to say sorry. Besides, Komaki hadn't defended the girl to her. It let her come to a compromise with her feelings.

Komaki had broken up with that girl a little while after entering the National Library Academy. But before Marié turned eighteen, her heart was broken three times by the same person. The second time was when she was in fourth grade, and just like the first time, she lost her temper.

She knew she was being ridiculous, but faced with the constant presence of someone who was always far superior to the coolest, most handsome boy in her class, there was just no helping it.

She could pinpoint exactly when it was that she became a serious reader--it was when she was thirteen years old and in seventh grade, and under influence of Komaki, who had just become a Library Force member. Komaki had been assigned to the Kantou Library Base and worked at the Musashino First Library, so she had begun to visit often, with the ulterior motive of seeing him. She could fulfill her selfish desire by merely going to the reference room under the pretense of asking him for a book recommendation.

After she would finish reading a book, she would come back to return it and ask for another recommendation, and if Komaki had time, he would ask about her impressions of the book she had just finished. Even if Komaki was busy, she would go over to his house when he came home to visit, and increasingly they discussed books.

Until then, Marié has mostly talked about TV shows or events at school, and it pleased her how much discussing the same book made her feel like an adult. Komaki would assume a listener's role and cede the conversation entirely to Marié when it came to TV or school, but when it came to reading, he didn't let Marié monopolize the conversation. They often had conflicting opinions on the same book, and they would debate them like two adults, which gratified Marié's self-esteem considerably.

She had started reading books as a way to get closer to Komaki, but sometimes Komaki was busy and they couldn't meet, and little by little she began to choose books for herself. Sometimes she got recommendations for easy-to-read books from the short man who seemed to be Komaki's friend, whom she had talked to a few times. At first, she was shy around him because he seemed frightening, but whenever she came to the reference room he treated her kindly

because she was an acquaintance of Komaki's, so he became a familiar face.

Komaki had been pleased when Marié started reading more books, but he was even more pleased when she started choosing them for herself. Apparently it made him happy that Marié had truly fallen in love with reading, rather than just using it as an excuse to spend time with him.

She had started with juvenile literature, but under Komaki's influence she also began to read historical novels and mysteries. She was happy when she was finally able to understand and follow books written for adults; it felt like the age difference between her and Komaki had shrunk a little bit more. Marié, for her part, told him about the light novels that *everyone* in her class was reading, which came in handy for his job at the library. Komaki read the books that Marié had liked, and gratified her by not making light of books that happened to be targeted at children.

"You haven't talked about marrying big brother Komaki in a long time," their mothers observed a little wistfully to Marié, who had finally gained the ability to talk to Komaki like a normal person. *How could I?*

I couldn't possibly say that now that I've actually fallen in love with him.

"Leave me alone; I'm not a child anymore," Marié replied bashfully. Their mothers probably didn't catch the deeper meaning she had packed into that simple statement.

The third time Komaki broke Marié's heart was the spring of her ninth grade year. She was fifteen, and had been visiting the library regularly for three years. Her rival was apparently someone who worked at the library. When she heard the news from her mother, she cried all night. *No! I was finally catching up to him!*

After that, she began to avoid the library. It was painful to see Komaki's face--and she was afraid to find out who among the librarians was Komaki's girlfriend.

It was during that period of estrangement that it happened.

The condition that struck her right before summer vacation was called sudden sensorineural hearing loss.

At first, her neighborhood hospital couldn't reach a conclusive diagnosis, and they tried a number of different medications on her before referring her to a larger hospital, where she was given that

diagnosis. In almost all cases, the chief symptom was the sudden loss of hearing in one ear, but extremely rarely, the condition could occur in both ears, and Marié was unlucky enough to be one of those rare cases. Apparently at the first hospital they had never heard of it occurring in both ears, so they suspected other causes.

As it turned out, the delay at the first hospital had been fatal.

In the case of sudden sensorineural hearing loss, it was best to start medical treatment within two weeks of onset--that was the time limit for complete recovery. After that limit had passed, the chances of recovery fell swiftly. After a month, medical treatment had next to no effect. Marié's limited time had been used up at the first hospital.

She lost all hearing in her right ear, and though somehow her left ear had managed to retain some hearing, she couldn't understand speech unless she was wearing a hearing aid.

Only a few short weeks ago, she had been able to hear perfectly. The shock of suddenly bearing a disability was enormous. If only she had been diagnosed immediately... She was tormented by the knowledge that she had lost so much at such a minor fork in the path of destiny.

School had its problems too. Since she had retained some hearing, she could go to a normal school if she wore a hearing aid, so she could still apply to the high schools she had been aiming for¹⁷, but her limitations shadowed her in every aspect of her life.

Since she wasn't used to her new hearing aid, it was difficult to understand her soft-voiced teachers even when she sat in the front of the room. When she implored them to speak louder, they would try, but soon slip back down to their normal volume. If she repeated her request too often, they would start looking annoyed, though they probably didn't mean to. When it occurred to her that her frequent requests were also bothering her classmates, she stopped speaking up even when she couldn't hear.

Similarly, she began to feel timid about speaking. Though she was hard of hearing, she could still talk perfectly normally--or so she thought. She had lost the ability to regulate the volume of her voice. In quiet places, as well as loud places like the classroom or out in the city, it was difficult to select an appropriate volume, even when she

¹⁷ In Japan middle school consists of the 7th, 8th, and 9th grades, and high school consists of the 10th, 11th, and 12th grades. Since Marié is in the 9th grade, she would now be deciding what high schools she wanted to apply to and studying for their entrance exams.

was wearing her hearing aid. Some of her conversations with her friends stalled just because she was speaking too loudly or too softly.

When she was careless and started speaking at a volume where she could hear her own voice, she would attract stares for speaking too loudly. When she cautiously kept her voice low, this time she would hear that she was speaking too softly. And then the whole process would repeat.

That wasn't all. When she was exchanging secrets with friends, she wasn't able to hear someone else approaching and would blurt out a secret in their hearing. After that happened a few times, she stopped talking during those conversations.

She could defend against those kind of mistakes by typing what she wanted to say on her phone, but writing the message and passing it around introduced a time lag into the conversation, so wasn't a solution that worked with large groups.

Saying "Could you repeat that?" when she couldn't hear was even harder to say to her friends than to her teachers. Group conversations were even harder to follow than one-on-one discussions, but pausing the conversation every time she couldn't hear would ruin the mood. More and more often she found herself vaguely laughing along with everyone else, though she had no idea what the joke had been.

Once Marié resigned herself to missing most of what was said, classes and outings with her friends became boring, and she started to stay home from school frequently. On the rare occasions that she did go, her friends talked to her less and less. She was always behind on the gossip anyway due to her frequent absences, and because of her hearing impairment it was a pain for her friends to try and include her. Without meaning to, everyone behaved as though she were a nuisance. Even when Marié was there, she felt like she was invisible.

Before winter arrived, she had completely given up on going to school, and spent all her time shut up in her room. After talking it over with her parents, she decided to take a year off from school. Rather than forcing herself to take her high school entrance exams this year, it was more important to practice and learn how to live with a hearing impairment--but even so, by this time she had lost her will to do anything at all.

It was at that time that Komaki came to see her. She knew he had come many times before, but Marié hadn't wanted to see him. She

didn't want the pain of seeing Komaki, who was dating another girl, in addition to the pain of losing her hearing.

Probably her parents had begged him to come. Her mother brought Komaki up to her room. "Big brother Komaki is here to see you," was all she said, and then she went back to the living room.

"Long time no see."

He didn't sound like he used to. It tormented her afresh. Voices sounded different coming through her hearing aid into her ear as it was now, and Komaki's voice didn't sound like she remembered it.

She had grown used to the changes in her parents' voices, but she realized with fresh shock that she would never hear Komaki's old voice again.

Even though it was the voice I loved best in the world.

"Would it be easier for you if I wrote?" he asked. She shook her head, not wanting to answer verbally. Her experiences at school had made her pessimistic about her ability to carry on a verbal conversation. Her listening comprehension difficulties irritated people--she grew embarrassed at unexpected times--she could list a hundred reasons for her cowardice.

At this point, she was so annoyed with the trouble she had with comprehension that she didn't even talk much with her parents.

Instead, she wrote her reply on her cell phone. Her circumstances had given her so much practice that it was faster than writing.

"What do you want"

Undaunted by her harsh words, Komaki pulled something out of his pocket and showed it to her. It was a cell phone. --The same model as Marié's.

"I bought one too. I still haven't figured out how to use it yet, though."

Until then, Komaki had never owned a cell phone. When his mother wanted to tell him something, she had to call the dorm and leave him a message. Marié had heard her grumbling about the inconvenience of it all.

"I was wondering if you'd give me your text message address, Marié-chan? Here's mine," Komaki said, passing her a piece of paper with his address written on it. If he was going to ask for Marié's address, it would have been much easier if he had entered it and sent her a blank message so she could get his address. Apparently he was telling the truth about not knowing how to use his phone.

Did you do it for me? she thought about asking. Komaki would probably deny it so she wouldn't have to feel indebted. Even so, she wanted to cry.

I was going to snap at him. I was going to tell him I didn't want to see someone who had normal hearing and a happy life with his stupid girlfriend.

After he did all this for me, there's no way I can act like a brat now.

Marié entered Komaki's address into her phone and sent him a blank message. Komaki jumped when his phone beeped; he really was a complete neophyte.

"It means I sent you a message"

Since he didn't seem to understand how to open his messages, Marié pointed at the buttons and the screen and explained the process. Since she had the same model, she was practically an expert; that was probably why Komaki had chosen that particular phone.

"You didn't write anything."

"It's a blank message so you could get my address. Now you can save it from here"

Marié had used her cell phone enough that it had learned her habits¹⁸, so she was able to quickly construct even long sentences.

"Oh, it's just like a regular email program," Komaki said in approval. Apparently if he thought of it as a computer, he could use it.

He had opened his address book to put her address in; she saw that he hadn't entered any other addresses before hers. The fact that he was entering Marié's address before his own girlfriend's was both gratifying and painful.

Komaki finished fumbling through the process of saving her address and looked up at Marié. "I want to become an expert as soon as possible, so it'd be a big help if we could text back and forth a lot. Will you help me?"

Here, too, she had no choice but to nod.

¹⁸ Typing Japanese presents a technical challenge, since the written language has thousands of characters--it would be impractical to have keyboards with thousands of keys. Typically one enters a Japanese word phonetically, then is presented with a list of possible characters that can be pronounced that way. For example, if I entered the syllable "go" into my text editor, I would get to choose whether I meant 碁 (Go, the Asian board game), 後 (after), or 五 (five). Text editors and cell phones gradually learn what words you typically use and present those options first, which saves time.

"Thank you. I also brought this--" Komaki reached into his bag and brought out a library book. It was the next volume of a long series by one of Marié's favorite authors.

"Your mother lent me your library card, and I went and borrowed this for you. After you've finished it, text me, and I'll bring you the next one. And if there are any other books you've been wanting to read, let me know."

True to his word, a few days after Marié texted him he would visit, bearing the next book. Since the base was close to her house, he didn't even have to wait for a day off; he could come after work.

At first, he used her favorite authors' newest works as bait to draw her out; eventually, he was accompanying her to all sorts of meetups for the hearing-impaired, as well as classes to help her learn how to live with her disability. He also diligently helped her practice sign language and lip-reading. His enthusiasm was infectious; she made tremendous progress in both, lip-reading especially, in just a year. She wasn't good enough to understand someone by only reading their lips, but with the assistance of her hearing aid, her comprehension improved greatly.

Thanks to her training, she was able to speak normally with Komaki and her parents. She was still pessimistic about her ability to talk with strangers; her fear and timidity won out. Still, it was a huge step considering that at first she hadn't even wanted to speak at home.

Komaki also helped her with her studying, awakening her motivation; when she returned to school, she raised her ambitions and applied to Komaki's alma mater.

During that year, Komaki spent almost all of his free time with Marié. Occasionally she wondered if it was alright to desert his girlfriend like that, but being cared for by him made her so happy that she didn't dare ask.

A short time after she was accepted at her first-choice high school, she heard through the maternal grapevine that he had indeed broken up with his girlfriend.

"Was it my fault?" she tried asking, knowing he would deny it.

He did. "No, it's just that she was being relocated! Our relationship died a natural death." Komaki added with a bitter smile, "I can't believe I made you worry about something like that."

He had not, as of yet, broken her heart a fourth time.

Her habit of visiting the library to see Komaki had continued to the present day, and she was now a junior in high school. Komaki, as a Library Task Force member, wasn't always to be found in the reference room, but if he was free he always took a little time for Marié, even in the middle of patrols or drills.

She didn't pester him by texting him to come see her, but she could often find him by taking one complete turn around the library, inside and out. If she didn't find him, she resigned herself to the fact that she couldn't see him that day, found a book to borrow on her own, and went home.

I wonder if that woman before was one of his subordinates? she thought, remembering the tall girl who had picked up her handkerchief for her. She had seemed like a cheerful, high-spirited person. When they were talking, Komaki had worn a different expression than the one he always showed Marié. It had been the expression of a man doing his job.

They hadn't seemed particularly close, she thought--it was something she watched for in all of the women Komaki worked with. She was hyper-attentive because he had once dated someone from work.

As she perused the bookshelf while waiting for Komaki, a woman came into her field of view, straightening the books on their shelves.

"Good afternoon!"

The woman was a rare beauty with long, glossy hair; the name tag on her work apron said *Shibasaki*. She had entered the Force last year. The first time Marié had seen her, her extravagant beauty had caused Marié great worry, but observation had determined that she was more enamored of Doujou than Komaki, so Marié's alarm had melted away.

She seemed as close to Komaki as a normal colleague, and apparently Komaki had told her about Marié, since she often greeted her. When she spoke to Marié, she came close, made sure Marié could see her mouth, and spoke clearly, so it was easy to understand her even in the library, where one had to speak softly.

"Waiting for Komaki-san again? Did you find him yet?" she asked.

Marié nodded. Outside her house she didn't speak much to her acquaintances.

"Glad to hear it," Shibasaki winked. She had also once casually informed Marié of Komaki's duty schedule and the days he would be

working in the library. It seemed as though she had discerned Marié's feelings, but she didn't tease her overmuch, or try to play matchmaker; she kept their interactions professional. Today she ended their conversation here and left quickly.

When Marié had chosen a small pile of books for herself, she felt a light tap on her shoulder. She knew it was Komaki before she turned around; she knew his tap.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Have you checked those out yet?"

Marié nodded, smiling, and thumbed her cell phone. In places like the library, where one had to watch the volume of one's voice, she used her cell phone to talk to Komaki even when they were speaking one-one-one.

"All that's left is your recommendation, Komaki-san"

Marié had begun calling Komaki "Komaki-san" when she entered high school. Calling someone "big brother" just made them more likely to treat you like a child. She was trying to send him the subliminal message that she wasn't a child anymore.

The first time Komaki had broken her heart, he had been a senior in high school. Komaki's then-girlfriend had worn the uniform of the school Marié now attended. Since Marié had taken a year off from school, she was even the same age as they had been. That was how far she had caught up to them.

Did Komaki realize how far she had caught up to them? Did he even want to? Sometimes she got an impatient urge to just ask him straight out.

"Do you have any requests?"

"I'd like to start exploring a new author"

Komaki grew pensive for a time, probably thinking back on the literary styles that Marié had enjoyed in the past.

"Have you heard of _____?"

The name that Komaki spoke was not a name that Marié knew, so it was hard for her to understand what he had said. Komaki must have also thought that it would be faster to show her the name written down, because he moved down a few shelves and pointed at a book. Indeed, the name on the spine was not a name one heard very often.

"She's not very famous, but I have a feeling you'd like her, Marié-chan."

"I'll try her, then"

She would read one book and see if she liked it. Since the author had several books published, she asked Komaki what his favorite had

been. Without hesitation, Komaki plucked a book from the shelf and handed it to her. Its title was *The Land of Raintrees*¹⁹.

"Thank you. I'll read the others if I like this one"

After that, they spent a little time discussing the last book she had read. She then asked him when he would next be home.

"You could just ask my mother, you know," he laughed, but he obliged her by taking out his notebook and flipping through it. "The next weekend day I'll be home is next Saturday--just for one day, though."

"Then I'll finish this book before then. Looking forward to discussing it with you"

After exchanging that casual promise as they always did, Marié waved goodbye, a little reluctantly.

Komaki smiled and raised a gentle hand in response. It was the same way he always bid her goodbye.

*

"By the way, do you know Nakazawa Marié-chan?" Iku asked Shibasaki as they were talking in their room.

Shibasaki nodded immediately. "Instructor Komaki's princess?"

"You know about her already? Aw maaaaan..." Iku collapsed face-down on the *kotatsu*. She had wanted to see what it was like to steal a march on Shibasaki, but--did Shibasaki's information network have any blind spots at all?

Then again, in some sense it was nice to always have a guaranteed gossip partner, so she sat back up. "Hey, don't you think there's some chemistry between them? The guys looked at me like I was crazy when I mentioned it, though."

"Ah, Instructor Doujou and Tedzuka? Yeah, but they're like Captain Oblivious and his trusty sidekick."

Hearing her suspicions confirmed by Shibasaki, Iku did a little victory dance inside. "That girl is unquestionably in love with Instructor Komaki. I want to know how Instructor Komaki feels, it's been bugging me!"

"Oh, don't say anything to Instructor Komaki, I'm begging you. I've been doing a long-term field study on those two."

¹⁹ A fictional novel. Arikawa Hiro must have liked the idea she had for this book, because later she actually wrote it and published it.

"--what the hell are you talking about?"

"For these kinds of things, it's best to just stand back and quietly watch over the gradual changes in the relationship." Shibasaki made this outrageous declaration with a straight face. She really was a complete rascal.

"Man, I *never* want you to figure out who *I* have a crush on."

"I don't have to bother gathering that kind of information on you--it's already blatantly obvious."

"No way!?" *Is there any way she could know about my prince?* Iku wondered, turning pale.

Shibasaki laughed teasingly, "See? You're so transparent."

Iku didn't know what or how much Shibasaki knew, but she knew that if she tried to ask questions she would only end up giving things away, so with an effort, Iku remained silent. Let sleeping dogs lie, after all.

"Maybe I'll join you in your 'field study,'" Iku said, escaping back to the topic at hand. Shibasaki let her go.

"Marié-chan's feelings are easy to guess, but Komaki really plays it close the vest. He's a sly one."

"Ah, I should have known that you'd like that about Instructor Komaki."

"He's a very crafty man." To the uninformed that might sound like an insult, but for Shibasaki it was a high compliment. "Let's just say I would never want to play poker against him, that's for sure."

That's because you're a sly and crafty woman, Iku thought. She didn't say this out loud, because any sarcasm she launched at Shibasaki was always returned threefold.

"Would someone like Instructor Komaki be your type?"

"Ah, no, that wouldn't work at all," Shibasaki dismissed this conjecture immediately. "It would drive me crazy to date someone just like me, neither of us would give the other an inch. We'd just end up all tangled and confused." She turned to Iku and smiled slyly. "That's why someone like you is much more my type."

"...was that your way of casually calling me an idiot?"

"No, it was a compliment, an unequivocal compliment. If you were a man, I would totally date you."

"Shut up!"

This frivolous conversation took place on the first weekend after they returned to work. By the middle of the next week, the subjects of

their conversation had become entangled in a predicament that no one had seen coming.

*

The Improvement Special Agency's invasion followed a different pattern from any previous raid.

Without sealing off the surrounding area or making any other preparations for hostile action, an Improvement Special Agency van pulled into the Musashino First Library's parking lot in broad daylight. It was so unexpected that the Library Force didn't even realize they had come until troopers wearing Improvement Special Agency uniforms climbed out of the vehicle.

The report from the parking lot patrollers had the same effect on the Force as a poke from a sharp stick would have on a beehive. It was unthinkable that an attack would come without any advance warning while the library was still teeming with patrons, but their enemy's intentions were unreadable.

There was an emergency deployment of the Defense Force, and the number of personnel within the library doubled in a mere five minutes. Genda also ordered in all Library Task Force squads that were not otherwise engaged.

To a patron, it would only seem like the patrollers were standing out more than they usually did, but in truth the situation inside and outside the library was a powder keg.

The Improvement Special Agency walked through that tense atmosphere with surprisingly composed steps, and went in the front entrance.

"They're heading for the reference room--we'll circle around and meet them there!"

Doujou's squad, following his order, entered the reference room via a side entrance and arrived before the Improvement troops. Since they had been patrolling in plainclothes, they would startle the patrons much less than uniform-clad Defense Force troops.

No sooner had they entered the reference room than Shibasaki appeared at Iku's side. "What's happening now?"

"We still don't know. The patrollers are in an uproar too--we deployed extra people, but other than that..."

Before Iku had even finished speaking, the Improvement troops marched into the reference room. A ripple of alarm ran through the

patrons, and a kind of low-grade commotion began to develop. Perhaps thinking that an inspection was about to begin, several patrons set their books down on the shelves, and they were imitated by the others. Patrons had never been arrested or punished during an inspection, but the Improvement Special Agency had a reputation as a high-handed organization among the citizenry, so they were playing it safe.

The commander who led the column of troops cast an arrogant eye over the room, then boomed, "Bring out the library director and Library Officer Second Class Komaki Mikihisa!"

This declaration seemed to faze everyone else much more than it did Komaki. Iku and Tedzuka automatically turned around to look at him, and even Doujou visibly stiffened.

The librarians at the counter were also looking at Komaki, meaning the Improvement troops could probably pick out Komaki by the number of stares in his direction.

Komaki didn't falter under the gazes of the Improvement troops. With his usual serene expression, he took one step forward.

"Where is the director!?" the commander blustered, in a voice that had mastered the art of intimidation.

From behind the counter, the assistant director, Hatano, answered, "We'll fetch him immediately. In the meantime, please lower your voice--you're frightening the children."

Hatano then personally left the counter in search of the director. A simple phone call would not be sufficient to persuade the weak-willed, self-serving acting director to take action in this situation.

Doujou quickly snagged Shibasaki by the arm. "Go get the base commander and Commander Genda," he ordered in a low voice. Shibasaki slipped away catlike to the back room, in order to call Inamine and Genda from the phone there.

Who would arrive first? Even Iku, in spite of her inexperience, knew that the outcome hung upon that one thing.

In the end, Genda made it in time. But Inamine did not.

Glaring menacingly at the Improvement troops, Genda met up with Doujou's squad. "What's going on?" he asked Doujou quietly. But no one had an answer to that question.

Acting Director Toba arrived and stood pale-faced next to Komaki, Assistant Director Hatano standing behind him like a second in a duel. When both of the men he had asked for were before him, the Improvement commander smirked.

Then he took a document from his breast pocket, brandished it, and read it straight through.

"Dated January 15th of the 32nd year of the Seika era, number 237, subpoena to an Improvement hearing! Summoned, Library Officer Second Class Komaki Mikihisa! The above has been accused of a human rights violation against a disabled minor, and is commanded to report at once for a hearing!"

"Wait just a minute!...what the--"

Iku tried to launch herself in front of Komaki, but Doujou flung out a single arm to hold her back, with enough force to stop her completely. "Shut up and wait for the base commander," Doujou ordered in a hoarse undertone. The roughness of his voice made it painfully clear that he was holding back a fury that surpassed everyone else's, and Iku had no choice but to subside.

Please, Commander, hurry! she pleaded--but she knew it would take a certain amount of time for Inamine to make his way from headquarters in his wheelchair.

"The Musashino First Library must expedite the immediate detainment of Library Officer Second Class Komaki Mikihisa!"

In other words, hand Komaki over to them.

"Well--well..." Toba's voice cracked and quavered.

Hatano answered first, as if to preempt anything that quavering voice would say. "Officer Komaki is attached to the Kantou Library Base. The Musashino First Library has no authority to make decisions about his disposition."

Genda lent his deep, bold voice in support of the assistant director. "This summons is too sudden and arbitrary. As Officer Komaki's immediate superior officer, I demand his arrest be deferred until I have had time to investigate these allegations."

The Improvement commander, however, completely ignored Hatano and Genda and directed his words at Toba. "The Musashino First Library is affiliated with the Kantou Library Base, and in the base commander's absence, the library director has the right to make official decisions!"

"The base commander is on his way right now!"

"We demand an immediate reply. The fact that the base commander is not right here, right now, is your problem."

Doujou's arm, still holding Iku back, began to press against her harder and harder. Iku understood that at this point, it was no longer to restrain her, but to keep his own anger in check. She laid a spontaneous hand on his arm.

"If you do not hand over Officer Komaki immediately, the entire Musashino First Library will be considered an accessory to this human rights violation!"

This threat was also directed at Toba. The Improvement commander had obviously deduced the weak link in the chain.

"That is over the line!" Hatano was shouting by now.

"I have a duty to protect the library!" Toba cried hysterically.

You're the last person who should be saying that, asshole! Iku cursed creatively inside her head.

As if he could read her thoughts, Genda bellowed, "Idiot!" His too-blunt slur embodied the opinion of every Library Force member except for Toba. "Don't you understand!? Even if we hand over Komaki, they'll find a way to charge us with something anyway!"

But Toba refused to accept this all-too-likely prediction. "As the acting director of the Musashino First Library, I hereby authorize the detainment of Library Officer Second Class Komaki Mikihisa!" he screamed in foolhardy pronouncement.

In response, an Improvement trooper seized Komaki's arm roughly and began marching him away. Even so, Komaki's expression was still serene as he turned his head toward Doujou. "Don't tell my family, will you? I wouldn't want them to worry."

There was probably one other person who fell under that request--in fact, it was probably for her sake that the request was made. That fact was enough to burn through Iku's self-control.

"Wait! The victim you're talking about is Marié-chan, right!? If so, you've made some kind of mistake! Because--"

"Enough!" Doujou grabbed and restrained Iku, who was hot on the heels of the Improvement troops. Tedzuka helped him.

"Blurting out a victim's name--maybe we should be taking this bitch to the police for a human rights violation too!"

Something snapped inside her; the sound of it echoed in her head. "Oh yeah? Bring it on, asshole!"

Even as she raged, in a corner of her mind she was making a calculation. If she could just cause enough trouble to buy some time--if she could stall until Inamine arrived, he might just be able to salvage the situation.

However--

The sound of an open palm hitting a cheek resounded. It was her own cheek. The one who struck her was--Doujou.

While Iku was too dumbstruck to protest, Doujou addressed the Improvement troops. "Go. I'll set my subordinate straight."

What is he doing? How could he let them take him like that? I mean, it's Instructor Komaki! It was these helplessly frustrated thoughts, rather than the tingling pain in her cheek, that brought tears to her eyes.

And just like that, the Improvement troops led Komaki away.

The reference room was as silent as death. In that tomb-like stillness, it was impossible to overlook Toba as he attempted to bolt.

"Where the hell do you think you're going!?"

Toba froze in shock, cowering.

"Thanks to you--thanks to you, Instructor Komaki...!" she lashed out, choking on her tears. "What right did you have!?"

This time no one tried to stop Iku.

"...I-I did it to protect the library...since Officer Komaki caused trouble, we must show the Improvement Committee how cooperative and impartial we can be..."

"I don't want to hear you talk about 'protecting the library!'" *That's something I just can't forgive.* "A c-coward like you...!" She was breathing too hard to continue at this point.

A soothing hand touched her shoulder; Iku shook it off. She knew it was Doujou's, but she was in no mood to be comforted.

Unable to bear it any longer, she ran out of the reference room. Some distance away, she ran smack into Inamine, trailing his bodyguards.

"Kasahara-kun," he called, stopping her in her tracks. She knew he was asking what had happened, but--

"Instructor Komaki was--" Her voice caught in her throat. No matter how hard she tried to continue, the words would not leave her mouth; instead, sobs tried to fight their way out. Helplessly, she ran off again. Inamine did not try to stop her.

When Inamine entered the reference room, he found the whole room frozen in the aftermath of the strange events that had just taken place.

Genda rushed over to explain the situation. After he had heard the whole story, Inamine focused his gaze upon Acting Director Toba, who couldn't meet his eyes.

"You acted quite hastily."

Toba squirmed even harder, trying to avoid his gaze. He had almost never been directly confronted by Inamine before.

"The Kantou Library Force will immediately verify all facts in this case. But please do not think that you will escape blame if this accusation turns out to be true. At this point in time, your abuse of authority in failing to wait for my arrival has caused a tremendous problem. There is no precedent for bypassing the Library Force's chain of command in response to outside pressure. This incident calls into question your suitability as acting director."

Toba's shoulders slumped miserably in the face of this quiet but implacable pronouncement.

*

As she sat hugging her knees in the shadow of the bushes at the back of the library, a voice came from above her head.

"What do you think you're doing, hiding there? You'll catch cold."

She knew it was Doujou without looking up, so Iku kept her head down.

"Next time, pick a more typical spot for a girl to go and cry."

It seemed he had spent a lot of time searching for her. He crouched down in front of Iku and patted her head gently.

"Sorry."

She understood that he was apologizing for hitting her. As if she gave a damn about that. She knew full well why Doujou had slapped her then.

Even so.

"Why did you stop me?" That was the only thing she blamed him for. She glared up at Doujou reprovingly. "If we had bought enough time, Commander Inamine might have made it."

"He might not have made it," Doujou countered. He wasn't being unkind, just stating a fact. "They were in a hurry to withdraw after the acting director gave his permission--if things had ended badly, you might have been arrested for obstruction of justice."

"I was fully prepared for that!"

"And that's exactly why I stopped you," Doujou said quietly. Her protests died in her throat. Doujou's face twisted a little. "I know exactly how far you're willing to go when you've gathered your resolve."

Not fair. How could you say something like that right now? Iku hung her head.

"As if I could hand you *both* over to the enemy without a fight," Doujou muttered crossly.

"What's going to happen to Instructor Komaki? By 'hearing,' they meant..."

"Nothing like this has ever happened before, so I don't really know, but I'm guessing they're broadly interpreting the Improvement Act's mandate to supervise media and applying it on a personal level. Since the subpoena had Komaki's rank on it, they must be calling this the supervision of a public official's use of public property, rather than of Komaki Mikihisa himself. They'll make Komaki admit to an intentional violation of human rights, and then move on to their true objective--implicating the Library Force along with him."

The way he had evaded her real question--the thing that worried her the most--made her even more uneasy. Also, what did he mean by "make Komaki admit"? Would they force a confession from him?

Doujou cast his eyes down, avoiding Iku's gaze. "There are no external checks and balances on the application of the Media Improvement Act. Victims have no choice but to lodge a formal complaint, but it's impossible to lodge such a complaint while in custody. And realistically, reentering society is difficult."

Iku pondered in earnest for a time. But no matter how hard she thought, she couldn't grasp the specific implications of what Doujou was saying. *Ahh, I've turned into a giant idiot. And it's not like I wasn't an idiot before.*

"...what, exactly, is going to happen to Instructor Komaki?"

"The enemy will probably imprison Komaki and try to obtain from him evidence or testimony that will help them further down the line. It'll be a hearing behind closed doors--even if he had crossed a line, it would be difficult to prove without evidence. All the more so if the accused is an organization."

"They wouldn't use violence, would they--?"

"If they did, they would leave evidence in the form of injuries. I'd almost prefer they *did* hurt him--then they'd have to take him to a hospital, and we could come retrieve him."

The unease that had been swirling around her heart crystallized like ice. How much--emotional pressure, would Komaki be under, that Doujou would come out and say that physical violence would be preferable?

"The Library Force will fight back with our right to make materials freely available, guaranteed by Article 31. We'll be able to say that pressure perpetrated upon a Library Force member infringes upon his right to offer materials freely. Don't give me that face," Doujou smiled. "The Force is already moving to verify the facts of this case. How's it going to help Komaki, if the people who are supposed to be saving him are moping around?"

Same goes for you--don't smile with that look in your eyes! She felt a burst of irritation at that clumsy smile. *That pitiful look. The look that practically screams, 'if only I could change places with him'--*

"Right back at you, Instructor," she said, raising her chin aggressively. "Cheer up."

Arg, why does everything I say always come out so hostile at times like this? She was exasperated with herself.

Doujou only smiled wryly and patted her head again before rising, but she had a feeling what he was really trying to say was, "Thank you."

*

Basically, it had all unfolded like a game of Telephone.

It had all started at Marié's high school. During break time, Marié had been reading the book she had borrowed on Komaki's recommendation and talking about it with her classmates.

"Is that a good book?" "Where did you borrow it from?" Marié had replied to those offhand questions, stating without a second thought that it had been recommended to her by a friend at the First Library.

Later, unbeknownst to Marié, her reading habits came up again in casual conversation (her secretive crush was also probably a topic of innocuous interest), and at that time someone raised a problem with the book Marié was reading.

"But--the book Nakazawa-san is reading right now..."

The book Marié was reading on Komaki's recommendation was called *The Land of Raintrees*. It was a love story by a new author, in which the heroine was deaf.

"Don't you think it was kind of insensitive of her friend to recommend a book with a deaf heroine? I mean, Nakazawa-san has hearing problems."

It was not hard to imagine the surge of righteous outrage that developed within that group--teenagers that age have a strong sense of justice. Young men and women who discover a reprehensible act are pure in their indignation and therefore difficult to sway. In the blink of an eye, variations on the theme of "Poor Nakazawa-san" had spread throughout the student community, eventually reaching the ears of teachers and parents, and from there, through some unknown conduit, had come to the attention of the Media Improvement Committee.

Once that had happened, there was no way that the Media Improvement Committee wouldn't try to use the incident to their benefit. The Musashino First Library was the nerve center of the Tokyo public libraries; on top of that, it was attached to the Kantou Library Base. It was the perfect excuse to attack an antagonistic organization that fought against censorship.

Thus, they had manufactured the accusation against an employee of the Musashino First Library of violating the human rights of a disabled minor--

--and that's apparently how it happened," Shibasaki summarized for Iku later that day. Shibasaki, using her network of school librarians, had been a key figure in the unraveling of these nebulous circumstances. "Had we put out a written inquiry, it would have become a big deal and the players would have become tight-lipped. People with personal connections to them questioned them obliquely one-on-one, and when we compared stories and put them all together, that was the picture that emerged."

That picture had already made its way up to the highest levels of the Kantou Library Force, who were currently discussing counter-measures. Besides Inamine, Genda and Doujou were also participating in the discussion. The progress of that conference occupied Iku's mind, but though they were in Komaki's squad, Iku and Tedzuka were too low-ranking to attend, and had gone home after their shifts ended.

There would probably be a meeting to fill in the other members of Doujou's squad immediately following the discussion, so she had bathed and eaten quickly upon returning to the dorm.

"Apparently neither Marié-chan nor her parents are aware of the situation--the ones spreading this 'righteous' rumor *considerately* avoided speaking with them about it," Shibasaki snorted. Her tone of voice was uncharacteristically acerbic. This was saying something, as she usually had a rather sharp tongue, but rarely had she spoken so sarcastically before. "I hate it when people defend the sense of justice kids of that age have just because of its purity. I hate their ignorant arrogance in thinking that they can judge the whole world by their own values, and their well-intentioned, pushy, smothering compassion. Just how important do they think they are compared to the rest of the world? If their egos got any bigger, they'd be in danger of developing fatty liver disease."

"Mph, but..." Iku made a mumbled protest. "That's just what kids that age are like..."

Shibasaki's biting, outspoken critique stung her unexpectedly--since she had a not-too-distant memory of acting the same way herself. She had gone with a group to confront a boy who had rejected one of their friends, for example... Thinking back on it made her moan--she wanted to erase the memory of her skewed sense of justice. In essence, it was the same thing that had happened around Marié.

Their socially-just cause of public order and morality only enabled them to get drunker on their own heroics.

"What, is the comparison with your own teenaged self painful?" Shibasaki asked slyly, and Iku scowled before she could help herself. Shibasaki's expression suddenly turned cheeky. "Don't worry, I'm just the pot calling the kettle black." Her tone as she threw this out was just as flippant as her expression, but Iku understood her feelings.

It wasn't fair of the Media Improvement Committee to take advantage of the mistakes of youth.

Iku had in fact once committed the sort of heedless follies that were now being used for an unfair purpose, and she knew that the same kind of folly still lay dormant inside her. That was why she was so irritated with the half-grown children who brandished that folly as if it were justice or good sense.

Iku's cell phone chimed. It was a text message from Doujou.

"30 minutes--Conference Room 3--text if you can't make it"

The terse phrasing, with no unnecessary words at all, was Doujou all over.

"Looks like their meeting ended."

"Where are you meeting?"

"Conference Room 3, in a half an hour."

"Tell him I'm coming too," the pajama-clad Shibasaki said, pulling out her casual clothes again.

"But you're not even in our squad!"

"I helped gather intelligence. I at least have a right to hear what's going on."

As usual, Shibasaki had a point, so Iku didn't protest further.

The squad minus the absent Komaki gathered for the progress report, as did Genda and Shibasaki. Other groups would be informed of the outcome of the meeting at their individual morning meetings.

Doujou first reported the circumstances that Iku had already heard about from Shibasaki, then Genda took over. "Since the charge itself is a paper-thin fabrication derived from a rumor, if we make a protest statement against the subpoena and drag this into court, our side would win for sure. But for that to happen, we'd need a formal complaint from Komaki, as a central party to this mess. To act as Komaki's agent, we'd also need his authorization. The Library Force has begun negotiations with the Media Improvement Committee by demanding the return of Komaki's person."

"Will they actually return him?" Iku asked bluntly.

No one answered right away. At length, Doujou opened his mouth, displaying a rare reluctance to speak. "The Media Improvement Committee has, more likely than not, detached the hearing from its main organization and entrusted it to a separate group. They will probably delay their responses as much as they dare, citing difficulties in communication and factual errors. It will depend on the negotiating power of the Legal Department."

Before the close of business, the Legal Department had filed requests for face-to-face meetings as well as the return of Komaki. The channel of negotiations was already open, but--

"It will hurt us if they get some suitable testimony out of Komaki before we get him back." Genda folded his arms, a grave expression on his face.

"Hey, but we can beat them if it goes to court, right? So it might be better if they get testimony out of him fast and return him to us sooner...can't you withdraw a forced confession later?"

"If the enemy thought they could win fair-and-square, they wouldn't have gone through all this trouble."

Iku cocked her head, not understanding what Genda was trying to say. Shibasaki spoke up from the side. "Basically, their goal from the beginning has been to tarnish the Library Force's reputation. They fabricated the charge against Komaki intending to accuse the Kantou Library Force of a human rights violation, knowing that the charge would be overturned later. Even if they lose the court case in the end, it's worth it if the fact that the Library Force was thus accused remains in people's minds."

Put that baldly, even Iku was able to grasp her point. The fickle, excitable segment of the journalistic world would widely broadcast the juicy headline "Library Force Accused of Human Rights Violation," and if the trial dragged on, it would be forgotten about and there would be almost no follow-up stories.

The long and short of it was, the Media Improvement Committee could develop a negative campaign against the Library Force just by dragging out the trial.

"Those *bastards*..." Iku hissed profanely. It made her furious to think of such cowardly tactics being used on one of her friends.

At that point, she suddenly noticed that Tedzuka had not said a word since the meeting had begun, and was now looking somewhat pale, his lips pressed together in a thin line. *He must be pretty furious too*, Iku decided sympathetically.

"If only we knew where the 'hearing' was being held..." In this case, by "where the hearing was being held," Genda meant, "where *Komaki* was being held."

"If we just knew the place, we could break in and nab Komaki, and all our problems would be solved."

"...is that possible?"

"The basis for their hearing is questionable at best. They can't make their accusation if they haven't gotten testimony, and it's an unwritten rule that the courts are neutral in the battle between the Library Force and the Media Improvement Committee. Even if they sue us, piddling little charges like trespassing and property damage are nothing compared to the negative campaign that could come out of a human rights violation. If there's a problem, I'll take the heat for it--

our Legal Department has enough brains to get me a suspended sentence."

Doujou made a face at this bandit-like logic. "Please never repeat that outside this room," he chided.

"Hey, wait a minute..." It was only when everyone's faces turned to her that she realized that she had been thinking aloud. *Well, why not*, Iku thought, continuing. "In order to get Komaki back, we need a formal complaint from a central party to the case, right?"

It was an egregious oversimplification, but for the moment no one stopped her.

"If we need another central party to the human rights violation charge, isn't Marié-chan one? If Marié-chan just denied the truth of the charge..."

"Absolutely not!" Doujou promptly dismissed this idea. "You want to let a minor get mixed up in the Library Force's problems?!"

Doujou's violent reaction only proved that Iku's proposal might have some merit, contrary to his dismissive words.

"Why not? This isn't just our problem, it's Marié-chan's problem too."

"Are you saying she should take responsibility for this problem when she did absolutely nothing wrong!? That it was her fault that Komaki was arrested!?"

His mouth had opened in justified surprise and then stayed open. *How oblivious can you get??* "Are you an idiot? I said nothing of the kind, sir!" Iku snapped, losing her cool as well. Doujou had lost his cool first, so it was his fault. "The guy she likes is in trouble, because someone took something she said and twisted it in ways she never intended! Is there a woman alive who could put up with something like that!? She'd want to know! She'd want to help! That goes without saying!"

Doujou looked taken aback for a moment, but he rallied immediately. "That's just your overactive imagination!"

"Shut *up*, Captain Oblivious! If you think you can match a woman's judgement in matters of love, you are seriously mistaken!"

Shibasaki raised her hand gracefully. "On this matter, I believe I agree with Kasahara."

Taking heart from this support, Iku went back to her interrogation. "Anyway, if it was you, how would you feel!? If a girl you liked was detained and *you* were the pretext for it, could you just stand back quietly and watch?"

This stunned Doujou into silence for some reason, and he looked away from Iku for a moment.

Did I win!? As Iku leaned forward unconsciously, Doujou raised his head again and glared at her. "Komaki told me not to tell his family! He meant her too!"

Seeing his stubborn face, seeing that he had completely lost his composure, Iku lost hers as well. "...and I'm trying to tell you that that's selfish and unwarranted! That 'I wouldn't want them to worry' crap is just masculine pride! Don't pay any attention to self-centered shit like that!"

"Ooh, language," Shibasaki murmured with a bystander's delight. Iku heard her, but didn't have the time to waste worrying about what she was saying.

"If it was me, I wouldn't be able to stand it--I'd be way more hurt if I wasn't told immediately! Try and look at it from the perspective of a girl, who was only told later that the man she loved had to sit quietly and take a beating, when she could have helped him!"

"--I don't want to hear you say something like that, when you're always getting yourself into trouble while we have to watch!" Doujou shouted, then halted as if taken aback by his own words. Iku quailed reflexively at his severe expression, his eyebrows drawn down low. She knew he was using the way she had tried to pick a fight with the Improvement commander as an example.

"You don't have to nitpick me at a time like this..."

"Shut up!"

And what do you think you're doing, changing the subject to insulting me!? Iku's hackles rose.

"Komaki asked *me!* Now keep your big mouth shut about this!" Doujou announced unilaterally, then rose violently from his chair and stalked out of the conference room. The door slammed shut after him.

Everyone sat dumbfounded for a moment, then Genda muttered in a stunned sort of way, "...well, that was fun to watch, anyway..."

Iku, the remaining player in Genda's "fun to watch" spectacle, hunched her shoulders. *Hang on--usually it's my role to blow my top and storm out like that!*

"You can be something of a genius sometimes--sending a grown man running out of the room like that is no mean feat," Shibasaki observed in surprise. Iku pouted, not understanding what she meant. *Who sent anyone running out of the room? At the end he was just supplying excuses unasked.*

"As members of the Library Force, our main goal is to let the Legal Department negotiate for us, but as members of the Library Task Force, our main goal will be to force Komaki's whereabouts out of them and use whatever means necessary to break him out!"

We're going with his bandit-like logic after all! There was no one in the room who could say this to Genda's face, however.

After it was all over, Iku was left with a queer feeling. Tedzuka had not said a word for the entire meeting.

*

Two days had passed since Komaki had been taken, but there had been no progress, on either the Legal Department's side or the Task Force's side.

Just as predicted, answers to the Legal Department's questions were delayed by ostensible problems in communication between the Media Improvement Committee and the hearing committee, and the Library Force had had no luck in pinpointing Komaki's location.

Doujou's expression became more and more stony as time passed, and everyone walked on eggshells around him. He and Iku hadn't exchanged words since their fight the other day, both keeping stubbornly silent.

"This can't go on for much longer..." Shibasaki whispered in their room on the evening of the second day, a Friday. Iku winced as well.

If you counted the day he had been kidnapped, it was the third day. By this time Komaki's well-being was becoming a worry.

"The key is whether or not they can extract testimony from Komaki. He must be under all kinds of pressure--they must be using every means besides violence to exhaust his mind and body. This 'hearing' is of course nothing more than a kangaroo court. I doubt they're giving him any time to breathe. For a normal person, this would be about the time his nerve would break."

The fact that he hadn't been returned meant that he was still holding out, but it also meant that by now things were probably very bad for him indeed.

"...hey." Iku finally spoke aloud the thoughts she had been ruminating on for the past three days. "Would it really be so wrong to ask for Marié-chan's cooperation? I know she's an outsider from the Library Force's perspective, but she's closer to Instructor Komaki than we are."

"She's definitely the most central person in this incident," Shibasaki agreed.

"I've been thinking and thinking--I know that it would hurt Marié-chan to find out that Instructor Komaki was in trouble and she was the ostensible reason for it, and I know that's why Instructor Komaki asked him not to tell her..." She was still angry at the one he had asked, so she didn't say his name. "But what if we look at it from Marié-chan's perspective? Isn't it just for the men's convenience that they don't want her to be hurt? If it was me, and the person I loved the most got ensnared in a worst-case scenario like this, I wouldn't ever be able to tell them I loved them."

Even if people told me it wasn't my fault, I absolutely would feel responsible. A girl who wouldn't feel guilty just because she was told it wasn't her fault doesn't actually love the guy involved.

The guilt wouldn't go away as long as he was still embroiled in the incident. And what if the incident left some sort of permanent blemish on his record? How could a girl gather the courage to tell him, "I love you," when she was the reason for that blemish?

"If it were me, I might have to give up on the person I liked without even telling them how I felt." If you were going to get your heart broken, it was better to have a chance to confess your feelings and be honestly turned down. How awful it would be, to be deprived of your chance at love before you had the opportunity to say anything, because the one you loved had been hurt because of you? "It would be unforgivable."

If I fell in love and I felt that much about that person, and then--ugh, that man! Her fury returned and her face hardened. You would do the same thing, I know it. You'd do the same masculine posturing and say that same "I wouldn't want them to worry" crap and go off into unknown dangers at some unknown place. I know you're that kind of guy.

"I don't want to hear you say something like that, when you're always getting yourself into trouble while we have to watch!" --Yeah, well at least I get into trouble where you can still see me. Better than you!

"Your girl engines are firing on all cylinders as usual, aren't they. Are you sure you have enough coolant?"

Iku ducked her head at Shibasaki's surprised tone. Maybe she was running a little low at the moment.

"But in this case, I agree with your girly logic. It would have been nice if they could have gotten him back right away, but there's no excuse for keeping quiet like this. Those two underestimate teenage girls. And heaven forbid that my long-term field study get ruined..." This over-dramatization was Shibasaki all over.

"Take the afternoon off tomorrow, okay? I'll take it off too, and we can go to Marié-chan's house. Since it'll be Saturday, we should be able to catch her in the afternoon.²⁰"

"What, you know where she lives?"

"Well, I know Instructor Komaki's address--I've gotten everyone to give me their addresses by telling them I'm going to send them New Year's cards. I've heard her house is within three houses of his, so we should be able to find it. There shouldn't be a big pack of Nakazawas in one little neighborhood--it's not like we're out in the country." Shibasaki added, "Instructor Komaki didn't actually say not to tell Marié-chan." It was possible that she was actually the most unscrupulous where her friends were concerned.

Before lights-out, Tedzuka grabbed his cell phone and left his room. He waited until the lobby was empty, then walked out the door. Beneath the lights of the porch, he brought up a certain number on his phone.

It was a number he hadn't called in years. Even so, he hadn't forgotten it. He gazed at the sequence of digits for a long moment, until he shivered from the chill air that was creeping under his collar.

He hadn't worn a coat, in order to compel his own resolve.

To hell with it, he thought, and hit "Send." He listened as his phone searched for a signal, then the phone was ringing. He counted the rings, one, two, three, and then someone picked up.

"...It's me."

The person on the other end said Tedzuka's first name in a nostalgic tone.

"You know what's going on in my Force, don't you," he stated as neutrally as possible.

No denial came. He had cleared the first hurdle.

²⁰ In Japan, students go to school for five and a half days a week--every weekday and in the morning on Saturday.

"My supervisor was taken by the Improvement Committee. I want to know where his hearing is being held," he demanded in one breath. "I expect that you'd know--brother."

There was a long silence on the line, and Tedzuka began to sweat. At last--

"It's been a long time since you've needed me for something," said a bright, cheerful voice. It was a tone that Tedzuka could only think of as mocking.

*

On Saturday, the fourth day of Komaki's incarceration, Doujou received a phone call before work. It was Iku, calling in sick.

Perhaps it was the fact that she had been sulking at him for the last few days, but she sounded flustered to him as she asked for sick leave. When he asked if she was alright, he wasn't really asking for details, but she gave a flustered, unnecessary explanation anyway. At last, she announced, "I have cramps!" and hung up.

The entire Task Force was engaged in the search for Komaki, so there was no need to find someone else to cover for her on a patrol shift or anything like that, for a change. Yet, as he began the day's phone work, now with only Tedzuka for company, Tedzuka's utter lack of small talk as he concentrated on the task at hand was a fresh reminder of Komaki's capture. Iku was always being contrary and turning their conversations into contests of wills and irritating Doujou, but when she was gone, there was no one to keep him from brooding.

Since the hearing was using forceful and nearly illegal techniques, and was being shared between two organizations, it would be difficult to resolve any problems that came up, so it was probably being held in Tokyo. They had investigated all facilities and organizations with even a slight connection to the Improvement Committee, and with the help of the Defense Force had gone out on reconnaissance missions as the occasion called for it, but there had been no progress.

At first, they had excluded civilian facilities like public conference rooms or training facilities, thinking that their enemy would probably avoid leaving records; even so, since yesterday they had been scouring those places too. Doujou and his staff had been assigned to those inquiries. The only clue they would have would be if a similar-appearing group had been using the space continuously since the day

after Komaki's capture. At any rate, there was no choice but to gather and analyze the usage information of those facilities, but this was a dull, plodding task of massive proportions.

It was perhaps two hours after lunch. Tedzuka, who had been working steadily beside him, took out his cell phone. Apparently it had vibrated to announce a text message. Tedzuka checked it, then turned to face Doujou.

"Officer Doujou, may I have a moment of your time?"

Doujou agreed and they left the room. In the hallway, Tedzuka showed Doujou his cell phone. Displayed on the screen was a text message with an address near the coast in Shinagawa City.

"This is Officer Komaki's current location," Tedzuka said in a low voice.

Doujou's head snapped up to look at his face. Tedzuka's head was down, his eyes hidden.

"I can't tell you where this information comes from. That was the condition. I don't have any proof, but it's highly probable that the information is valid."

If you're going to use it, you're going to have to take it on blind faith, he means. Tedzuka had never made such a dubious request before.

Doujou stared at his adamant, tight-lipped expression for a long moment, then nodded slowly. "...Right. First we're going to take this to Commander Genda and get his opinion on it."

The tension drained out of Tedzuka's face.

That was when it happened.

"Instructor Doujou!"

She's supposed to be out sick! When he whipped his head around to face the owner of that voice, Iku was running up to him, wearing civilian clothes--and behind her, accompanied by Shibasaki, was Marié, still wearing her school uniform.

Son of a--!

"What happened to your cramps that were 'so bad you couldn't even lift your head from the pillow!?"

In his distraction he yelled these words at the top of his lungs, even though it would have been unusual for a man to say them at all. At his side, Tedzuka jumped, but it was too late to take them back.

Iku flinched, cowering as though his words had been a physical blow, but still she sidled up to him and poured out her excuses.

"Shibasaki told me to take the afternoon off, but I didn't think I'd be able to slip away, so I thought I'd take a sick day for the whole day, and give you a reason you'd be least likely to question..."

"What the hell kind of idiot are you!? No one asked for your flimsy excuses! It was a rhetorical question, of course, you moron!" he spat out, then turned to Shibasaki, glaring. "And you of all people, what were you thinking, going along with this rash, unthinking idiot's--"

"With all due respect, sir," Shibasaki cut in insouciantly, "this time, I believed the title of 'idiot' belonged entirely to the men of this organization, who care too much about their appearance and their pride. I would be pleased if you would think of this as my challenge to a battle plan that slighted a girl during a delicate time in her life."

"--Komaki said not to tell her!"

"Instructor Doujou, *you* may have been so implored, but I don't believe we were?"

On the face of it, Shibasaki's insolent reply was more infuriating than Iku's idiocy. Attracted by the commotion, Force members were starting to poke their heads out of doors to see what was going on.

Marié stepped up to Doujou. She peered down at her phone and tapped at its buttons, then showed Doujou the words she had composed.

"I'm glad they told me. Please don't be angry"

Apparently Doujou had been yelling loudly enough that she could hear his voice with her hearing aid. Entreated by Marié, Doujou had no choice but to lay down his arms.

"...I will ask Commander Genda for his orders, including the matter of Nakazawa Marié-san!" *Are you satisfied now?* he barely refrained from saying, glaring at Iku. The smile that broke out across her whole face grated on his nerves.

The address that was reported by Doujou's squad, upon inquiry, belonged to a training facility owned by the Department of Justice that was set to open the next year.

On top of being owned by a major governmental department, the facility had escaped their investigation because it wasn't open yet and didn't have to disclose any information. If the facility was used informally before it was officially open, no records of that use would remain.

"The higher-ups also agreed that it's extremely likely that Komaki is being held here," Genda announced to those in the Force who were working on the case, who buzzed with excitement. Shibasaki had also brazenly taken a seat. "Also, Nakazawa Marié-san, the other central party in this rumor, will be accompanying us of her own accord during the rescue, due to her friendship with Komaki." Every Force member simultaneously turned to look at Marié, who visibly drew back. Iku shooed away their gazes with her hands. "Don't look! You'll scare her!"

"We'll scare her just by looking at her?" the older Force members grumbled.

"Our enemy took Komaki away using base and cowardly tactics. We will free Komaki by means of justice, thankful for the fighting spirit of our allies!"

Genda's appeal liberated the Force from the heavy burden of stress that had built up over the past four days.

*

The "hearing" was only a hearing in name; in reality it was closer to psychological torture.

He had been blindfolded while being transported in the van and had seen none of the outside world. They had bundled him into a brand new facility that seemed to be on the coast near the harbors of Tokyo; and in a room where all the windows had been tightly sealed, Komaki underwent an endless cross-examination.

If you could call being surrounded by dozens of interrogators roaring a relentless series of questions a cross-examination, that is.

Every time he tried to answer, his words were taken out of context and the conversation veered into territory completely unrelated to the original question. He had been prepared to have his will to argue broken by sheer strength, but it was excruciating.

They didn't seem inclined to explain the actual circumstances of his supposed crime, but he pieced together the outline from bits of the abuse they continuously hurled at him.

His sin was the inexcusable human rights violation of recommending a book with a deaf character to a deaf and mute girl.

The only thing that worried him was whether or not Marié had become somehow entangled into this case and was suffering in some way. It was a question he doggedly asked over and over of the people who stood like a wall blocking his contact with her.

His tormentors wouldn't give him a straight answer, but he endured their abuse and again gathered hints from what they said, after a terribly long time he was able to believe that Marié knew nothing about what was going on. He had consumed half a day on just that inquiry alone.

During that time, Komaki was not given any time to rest. "We're not taking any breaks, so you better not either!" his opponents said, but they had a limitless number of personnel to relieve them, and the group interrogating him would gradually change every few hours, so this argument wasn't exactly fair. His opponents were always fresh and well-rested.

In any case, he relaxed once he learned that Marié hadn't been ensnared in this trap. In these circumstances, he gave thanks that a sweet, innocent girl like her hadn't been caught up in this filthy scheme.

For Komaki, this was all the information he needed. If he could just be sure of that one fact, he didn't care what happened to him otherwise. He saw through his opponents' plan; the Library Force was surely moving to rescue him, and his only duty was to hold out until then, and not give his enemies any promises.

"I refuse to answer any questions except in the presence of the Library Force's Legal Department."

It took another couple of hours for the storm of vitriol that this statement caused to clear up. His sense of time was starting to become distorted. They had taken away his watch at the beginning. From the absence of the thin ray of sunlight that he had watched through a gap in the opaque curtains, he could tell that nightfall had come a long time ago, but he didn't have the slightest idea how long it would be until dawn.

He knew that any request for a break would only be met with scorn and rejection, so he endured without rest. He was led to the bathroom at regular intervals, so he was sure to drink water from the sink there. His opponents were not giving him sufficient water, to say nothing of food. The fact that such things were still happening in modern-day Japan, and that he himself was caught in the middle of this maelstrom, robbed him of his sense of reality and numbed his senses.

At some point he stopped hearing anything. Perhaps it was because his consciousness had given up processing sound.

Night must have given way to dawn, but he was still not allowed to rest. The lineup of his opponents had cycled through once and returned to the first group that had interrogated him. Increasingly he was nodding off to sleep for a few moments at a time. Normally, he wouldn't be suffering ill effects from an all-nighter or two, but with his actions severely restricted and his mind battered by a continuous cross-examination, his consciousness faded at every opportunity as if to escape from the stress.

When he slumped and dozed off, a cool liquid was thrown in his face. Some of it got in his mouth; tasting it, he recognized the liquid as cold green tea. They hadn't offered any tea to Komaki. It must be the hearing committee's leftovers.

So they'd even go this far.

It was the first time in his life he had been treated with so little human dignity. This struck him as funny, and he laughed. This inappropriate laughter earned him another bellowing earful.

This pattern of dozing off and being awakened by cold tea in the face repeated a number of times, until the sun set and he completely lost consciousness.

Apparently he had slept, though it had been closer to unconsciousness than sleep. His rousing was not gentle. He was roughly shaken awake, and before he was completely aware of his surroundings he was force-fed a meal seemingly composed of leftovers, then walked back to the first room. All he knew about the room where he had slept was that it was inside the same facility.

After that, the only consideration they showed him was in allowing him to sleep and eat. He was still sincerely grateful that at least they had enough restraint not to kill him.

It was the kind of situation where one had to be grateful for that.

But they continued their psychological attacks. They were more painful now that sleep had temporarily returned him to his senses.

Regaining the ability to understand their individual condemnations, which at the height of his fatigue had, blessedly, turned into simple noise, was hard on him.

It was especially hard to ignore arguments that used Marié as an excuse to attack him.

What do you people know about that girl?

Do you know better than me what kind of girl she is, what she likes? I know better than anyone besides her what kind of books make her cry, what kind make her laugh, what kind of stories she likes.

I'm certain that that girl read that book with pure enjoyment. How can you people, who don't even know her, deny those feelings?

You say I hurt that girl maliciously? Don't make me laugh.

The only reason I can endure this situation is because of her.

If this hadn't been about Marié, he would have broken down halfway through. The only reason he could continue to refuse his opponents' relentless attempts to make him admit his human rights violation was because it was her.

I won't let anyone deny that girl her right to freely enjoy a book.

"Your methods are not just."

This had the same effect on the hearing committee as a poke with a stick would have on a beehive, and they raged and stormed, but Komaki no longer cared if they heard anything he said.

"If you want me to concede this battle, try using a just argument."

Now Komaki's voice wasn't even reaching his own ears.

"I will never yield to anything except a just argument."

His strict adherence to moral arguments had always been for her sake.

For the sake of that small girl, who loved him desperately and was always trying to follow after him, Komaki had to maintain a moral position that no one would be ashamed to argue.

So as a Library Force member, he would maintain his moral position. He would never bow to a position that ignored Marié's own desires, that denied Marié's own feelings.

For her right to freely enjoy a book--if it was for Marié, he could be a champion of justice. If he could just do that--

I don't care about anything else.

Otherwise, you can do whatever you like to me. If you think that beating me up will make me more cooperative, go ahead.

I don't care anymore.

The very moment he had casually resigned himself to his fate--

The piercing sound of breaking glass drowned out his tormentors' voices.

*

He turned to look at the door and recognized his colleagues as they pushed their way in. Scattered about at Iku's feet were fragments of a large broken plate.

The committee fell silent for a moment, then several voices rose in challenge. Iku reached into the box she was carrying under her arm, drew out breakable items, and smashed them on the floor one after the other. The alarming sounds of glass and crockery shattering in quick succession indeed silenced the committee members.

"...That's enough!" Doujou interposed, at which point Iku finally stopped breaking tableware.

"But I've still got so much left! I spent 10,000 yen at the hundred-yen store!" Tedzuka seemed to be carrying the rest; apparently they had brought in their own breakable items in order to overpower their opponents' voices.

It was a strange entrance, but Komaki still breathed a sigh of relief. *Ah, they've come for me.*

Genda took a step forward. "I apologize for the ruckus," he announced with magnificent irony. "We were worried that you might not notice if we just tried to talk to you. That's the reason for the Kantou Library Force's unannounced visit."

"What authority do you people think you have--"

Before this rebuke could really get started, Iku upended the box of tableware and cast it down on the floor. The committee member fell silent once more, and in that silence, Genda continued his speech.

"If we start talking about 'authority,' we're just going to get into a mudslinging contest, so we'll spare you from that. In fact, we've brought along someone who might be able to confirm the legitimacy of your hearing. You should be grateful."

He doesn't mean--, Komaki thought, just as Marié emerged from the back of the group, accompanied by Shibasaki. He focused his gaze on Doujou involuntarily; Doujou looked uncomfortable and made an apologetic gesture.

Marié stared at Komaki, and for a moment she looked as though she were about to cry, but she soon pressed her lips together and raised head to face the committee.

"This is the alleged victim in the human rights violation you maggots have pinned on Komaki."

On the heels of Genda's explanation--

"Please tell me what Komaki-san has been accused of."

--Marié said plainly.

It had been years since Komaki had seen Marié, who was pessimistic about her ability to hold a conversation with people she didn't know, speak in front of strangers.

He could see that the committee members were shaken. Since none of them seemed inclined to answer, Genda turned to Komaki.

"Komaki, answer me. What did these honorable gentlemen accuse you of?"

"...apparently I showed an egregious lack of consideration toward the victim by recommending a book with a hearing-impaired character to a deaf and mute girl."

"Who did they mean by 'deaf and mute'?" Marié shot back immediately. With her obvious command of spoken Japanese, Marié clearly did not fit the definition of "deaf and mute."

"Er, no, we meant deaf!"

It seemed that Marié had not been able to understand this mumbled response; beside her, Shibasaki drew out a small notepad, wrote down his words, and showed them to Marié.

"Who do you mean by 'deaf'?" Marié shot back again immediately after reading his response. "You can't distinguish between prelingual deafness, post-lingual deafness, and partial deafness, so how do you know that I was discriminated against on the basis of my disability?"

For individuals with hearing disabilities, there were important differences between these categories, and they affected their identities.

A large part of it was language. Prelingually deaf people developed their hearing disabilities before acquiring Japanese, and they mainly thought in sign language. Post-lingually deaf people and people with hearing impairments developed their disabilities after acquiring Japanese, and mainly thought in that language. Their cultures and communication methods themselves were different.

But from their uninformed position, most outsiders couldn't tell the difference between those categories, and people within them could

change which category they identified as--it was an important personal decision.

The prelingually deaf, in particular, had formed such a distinctive culture that a specific Chinese character had been created as an expression of their identity.

Since Marié had lost her hearing after acquiring Japanese, she was post-lingually deaf, on the partially-deaf end of the spectrum. Her main methods of communication were speaking and writing (via her cell phone).

"I enjoyed reading *The Land of Raintrees*, the book that Komaki-san recommended to me. Is it discrimination to give me a book I will enjoy?"

Not one of the committee members answered Marié's blunt question. Their expressions had passed beyond embarrassment and into horrified mortification. They were so selfish that they didn't even try to conceal their discomfort with the duty they had been carrying out, once its reality started deviating from their preconceptions.

"Why do you have to say that enjoying this book means I was discriminated against? It completely spoils that precious enjoyment. It appears to me that *you* are the ones who most want to discriminate against my hearing disability, because I got very attached to the story's main character as I read." Marié's voice grew in strength and volume as she faced the uncomfortable-looking committee. "Are you saying that girls with disabilities don't have the right to be story-book heroines? That it's strange for a girl like me to be the main character in a romance? I strongly object to your assertion that it was cruel to recommend a book with a hearing-impaired character to me. It's like you're looking for discrimination even where it doesn't exist. Do you like discrimination that much?"

Ah--you've become so strong. As he listened to Marié's voice, Komaki closed his eyes.

Even though you really hate speaking in front of old men you don't know, you're trying to protect me from them.

"If you really like discrimination, that's your prerogative, but please leave us out of it!"

Marié, who had maintained a firm and resolute tone over the course of that long speech, finally reached the end of her endurance and ran over to Komaki.

She clung to his neck as he sat in the chair, and her weeping lashed at his ears.

"I worried you. I'm sorry. Thank you," he spoke into the ear that had the hearing aid.

"Can I think of her story as my story?" Marié asked in a choked-up voice.

He knew she was talking about that book--the story in which a hearing-impaired heroine found a happily-ever-after romance.

The main character's circumstances had resembled Marié's, and Komaki had identified her with the main character ever since reading the book. *It would be nice if she could have a fairy-tale romance like this story*, he had thought--he hadn't been bold enough to cast himself in the opposing role, but--

"I'm in trouble and I don't know what to do, because I can't see you as a child anymore," Komaki confessed, and folded Marié into his arms. Then--*Ah, she was right, in the end*. A memory surfaced.

"Was it my fault that you broke up with your girlfriend?" Marié had asked, after she had been accepted to high school. He had told her that his girlfriend had been transferred and that their relationship had died a natural death, but the second part was a lie.

For Komaki, devoting as much time as possible to Marié when she developed her hearing impairment had been such a natural choice that it hadn't really been a choice at all. But his lover hadn't seen it that way.

In the end, without consulting him at all, she had started the conversation with *"I'm sorry,"* as if the decision had already been made.

I wanted to admire you for devoting so much of your time to that girl, but apparently it's hopeless for me. I've been wondering for a long time--why do you have to do so much for her?

You think it's stupid to be jealous of a girl in middle school? But you don't pay enough attention to anything besides her, so I guessed why.

I got to thinking, if something was wrong with her, you'd always prioritize her over everything else. Forever and always. Even if, for example, you and I got married--always.

You underestimate her because you think she's a child. But that girl's going to turn into a gorgeous woman soon.

I can't do it either. If you prioritized a girl who just keeps getting prettier over me every time something happened to her, I wouldn't be able to forgive you. I wouldn't be able to think, "poor girl, she has a

disability so she can't help it." Whether she has a disability or not, to me that girl is a rival for your love, and I think she even has the better chance of winning.

Well. Watch and see. Give it three years.

Because in three years, even you won't be able to see her as a child anymore, and then you'll be in trouble.

As though her parting words had been a magical spell, they had precisely measured out the time it had taken.

Genda made Komaki and Marié leave first, escorted by two men, and then turned back to the committee members.

"The rest of our discussion will be stupid stuff, like telling you to go get kicked in the head," Genda freely mocked the Improvement Committee. "The Library Force doesn't want a lot of press about this incident, since we got Nakazawa-san involved in this mess. Here's the deal we're offering: pretend we never entered this facility, and write an open letter apologizing for your arrest of Komaki the other day and admitting it was undeserved. *Capisce?*"

"Oh, also, also!" On the sidelines, Iku raised her hand. "Ask them if they could please take care of sweeping up the broken plates."

It was a negotiation with no room for argument from the other side. The committee's representative nodded, looking as though he had just eaten a whole crate of lemons.

"I'm sorry, could you speak up?" Genda asked, not giving an inch.

The representative spat, and shouted, "I understand!"

"Shibasaki, you got all that, right?"

The committee members jumped, and watched Shibasaki pull a USB recorder out of her breast pocket. She checked the recording light and gave the OK sign. "Clear as a bell."

"From your perspective, think of it as a record of our promise that we won't sue the pants off you. You have no objections, right?" Genda declared unilaterally. "We'll say the deadline for that apology letter is a week from today. No objections to this either, I assume?" he said, appending conditions.

As they withdrew, Iku took the box of tableware that Tedzuka had been holding, set it carefully down on the floor, and added, "Please allow me to present you with these. Use them in good health!"

The committee members' disgusted expressions deepened at Iku's false expression of kindness.

*

The Media Improvement Committee's apology letter, along with a brief explanation of the events that instigated it, was posted on bulletin boards at every library in the Tokyo area, and soon it was widely known that a Library Force member had been arrested based on a groundless suspicion.

Out of consideration for Marié, the explanation didn't mention her by name, and the sequence of events had been simplified, but apparently the students who started the rumor guessed the truth, and those who were friends with Marié came to apologize to her.

Students at that sensitive age had a strong impression of the Media Improvement Committee as tyrannical, and the fact that the Improvement Committee had exploited their arguments hurt their pride. Though, there hadn't been any backlash against Marié herself--"But we were trying to protect you!"--at least, not to her face.

"Also, I repeated a year of school. Everyone is a little deferential to me," Marié told Iku and Shibasaki when she came to the library. This argument presented her year off from school as a positive thing--if she had been the same year as the others, they might have been more hostile toward her.

She still didn't speak in the reference room, but in places other than that, she had started to speak to Doujou's squad, plus Shibasaki and Genda. To the men besides Komaki, her speech was mostly confined to greetings, but with Iku and Shibasaki she would actually converse a little. It probably meant that she didn't consider them strangers anymore.

But neither Iku nor Shibasaki pressed her on the subject of Komaki. The atmosphere between the two of them had completely changed--but for these kinds of things, it was more mature to just stand back and quietly watch over the gradual changes in the relationship, or so said Shibasaki.

However, just once, Iku had to lord it over Doujou.

"Seeeeeee? It wasn't just my overactive imagination, was it? It was right to let Marié-chan know what had happened, don't you think, sir?"

"Shut up," Doujou spat, sounding extremely disgruntled.

Normally, it would have irritated her and she would have made some sharp retort, but this time, she felt an unexpected stab of apprehension. She remembered how exhausted and drained Komaki had looked at the time of his rescue, and it took no effort at all to imagine Doujou in his place.

If he encountered the same situation, he's the kind of person who would end up that way too, she thought, and the words slipped out.

"Please don't disappear without telling me."

He looked at her strangely.

"I mean, don't get kidnapped and not tell me because you don't want me to worry or something," she added, then remembered belatedly that in the previous case, the assumption had been that Komaki didn't want to worry the girl he loved. Panicking, she added more, "You seem like the type to get all stubborn about it, like, 'how could I worry my subordinates like that?'"

Dammit, now I'm talking nonsense. Flustered by her ill-chosen words, her face turned red. *Why is this happening? All I wanted to do was show a little concern about my stubborn boss...*

"I'm going to do my best not to get kidnapped when you're not around, Instructor, so you better do the same!"

Dammit, that sounded weird too!

"Are you saying I should make the same kind of blunders as you, in front of my subordinates specifically?" Doujou asked acidly.

"That's not what I meant!" She was impatient with her inability to find the right words. "I worry about you!" she ended up shouting, not knowing what else to say. Her face grew even redder.

Doujou gave her a long, sober look, then looked away as if trying to escape. "What a world. Without even having done anything wrong, I've fallen to a level where *you* have to worry about me."

His riposte was laced with incredible sarcasm. *Fallen to a level where I have to worry about you? You didn't have to say it like that, did you!?*

Iku slumped, having lost even the will to snarl back at him.

"Still," he said brusquely, "I'll bear it in mind."

Chapter 3, The Smile of a Beautiful Woman

*

On March 31st, Acting Library Director Toba was dismissed from his post. It was his atonement for the turmoil surrounding Komaki's hearing. Apparently he had only been kept on until the end of the fiscal year out of the kindness of Inamine's heart.

And then, on the first day of April, a new director was appointed to the Musashino First Library.

"Wait, director? Not acting director?" Iku blinked after hearing the news.

Seated across from her, picking at her lunch, was the well-informed-as-usual Shibasaki. "The original director finally gave up any hope of coming back."

She was talking about the director who had been on medical leave since last summer. He was the one Toba had been brought in to replace temporarily.

"He's always been the type of person where stress takes its toll on his health. And his post, because it involved clashing swords with the Improvement Committee on a regular basis, must have been pretty high-pressure, right? He's the type that tries to do too much, so he much have taken it too far."

"Yeah, you're right." Even Iku, who had not often crossed paths with the original director, had had the strong impression that he had been suffering from some sort of malady.

"Apparently he's going back home to the country and taking over his father's farm."

"Oh, that's nice, isn't it? It's probably so much better for him to have a job that has nothing to do with the library."

"At the very least a farmer probably won't be stressed out by censorship raids all the time," Iku said a little flippantly, then changed the subject from concern for the former director to the topic that was preying on her mind. "So, what's his successor like?"

She was talking about the new director, Library Supervisor Special Class Etou Sadahiko. Since Toba had been such a failure, she was especially concerned about the next director. Originally, she had thought that personnel matters at the library had no bearing on the Task Force, but the recent incident with Komaki had taught her that they could cause an unexpected amount of trouble.

To balance out the mismanagement caused by a governmental appointee, the new Director Etou had been appointed by the Library Force.

"I heard he's really young? He's not that much older than the assistant director, is he?" That rumor even made its way to Iku.

"Talent is talent. He made Library Supervisor First Class at that age."

In order to balance their power with the base commander's, when library directors assumed office they were promoted to Library Supervisor Special Class. This worked for people brought in from the government, but for people promoted from inside the Library Force, management difficulties cropped up if they had only been Supervisors Second Class before. Therefore, the director was customarily a Supervisor First Class.

"A Supervisor First Class in his forties? That's incredible."

Hatano, the assistant director, was a Supervisor Second Class in his mid-forties, which meant his rise had been quite rapid. A Supervisor First Class of that age was unheard of.

"Ah, but I'm glad that he wasn't appointed by the government."

Since the governmental appointee had tripped them up so many times, Iku had started thinking more and more about the factions within the library.

Perhaps because Inamine and Genda and others belonged to the faction that supported the principles of the library, the Task Force's very essence leaned toward that faction, and Iku's fundamental philosophies aligned naturally with that faction's ideas.

"You're right, he isn't part of the governmentalist faction, at least."

She perked her ears up at Shibasaki's odd phrasing. "What do you mean, 'at least'?"

"Apparently he's not part of the principlist faction either." Iku cocked her head in confusion. Shibasaki saw through her and said pointedly, "You probably think all Library Force members belong to the principlist faction."

"...They don't?"

Iku, who had little knowledge of the way the factions worked, had mentally divided them roughly by origin: those who worked for the government were governmentalists, and those who worked for the Library Force were principlists. After all, the governmentalists wanted to limit the independence of the library and bring it under the control

of the government. The principlist faction treasured the library's principles and independence; obviously all Library Force members would support it, Iku had thought.

"Not at all. Protecting the library's independence means a lot more responsibility on our part. Enforcing the Law of Library Freedom especially expands the scope of our duties. There are some who think that we should retain enough of the responsibilities that we can deal in emergencies and surrender a certain amount of our authority and control of our budget to the government, and there are other, even more passive ideas."

"Like what?"

"There's a ton of people who think we should give up our rights and responsibilities to the government and confine ourselves to lending out books, within the scope dictated to us by those in charge. On the other hand, there are government workers who don't want the responsibility and support the principlists."

"Eugh." Iku wrinkled her nose.

Shibasaki gave her a placid look. "A principlist is a principlist, even one from that crowd. In a democratic society rank doesn't enter into in your headcount, and it's a blessing that a vote is a vote, whether it's cast in altruism or self-interest."

Iku burst out laughing at this refreshingly honest explanation.

"The assistant base commander is a Library Force veteran, and he's a governmentalist, you know."

"Huh, really?"

"Yep. Whenever there's a problem, he always sides against Commander Inamine."

The assistant base commander, one Library Supervisor First Class Hikoe Mitsumasa, was a mature man in his late fifties. She had the impression that he was a little more headstrong than Inamine, but he normally didn't stand out much. Iku, who was bad with faces, gave herself a 75% certainty rating that the face she connected with his name was the right one.

"But when the government doesn't have a spokesperson, the governmentalsists tend to be at loose ends--after all, they ostensibly stay in step with the government. Assistant Director Toba was probably sent in to play that role."

Maybe he doesn't stand out because he defers to the spokesperson. Meaning that since they lost their spokesperson, they'll be quiet for a little while? Iku imagined, not knowing enough to be

sure. *Or is there another talented person within the base commander's circle that they can stand up as their representative?*

"And then, of course, there are those who hate factional politics and just avoid them altogether."

Was the "not a governmentalist, but not a principalist either" new director one of these?

"But it's still reassuring that he's not a governmentalist."

Shibasaki frowned at Iku's naïve relief. "That's not an unconditionally reassuring thing. Assistant Director Toba's cowardliness and foolishness had consequences in other areas besides factional politics. He caused trouble even for the governmentalist, like when he handed over Instructor Komaki."

"But the new director is supposed to be sharp, right?"

She couldn't see how a brilliant Library Supervisor First Class could possibly repeat the same mistakes that Toba had made.

"Sharp people make staunch allies, but terrifying enemies. For instance, you'd be scared if I was your enemy, right?"

"You said it, not me."

"Well, I suppose from here on out we'll keep an eye on him, and find out what kind of person he is."

The conversation reached a stopping point, so Iku changed the subject. "By the way, what time is your lunch break tomorrow?"

Breaks for both the librarians and the patrollers were determined by their shifts; they weren't at fixed times.

"Noon."

"Ah, then let's eat lunch together. Mine's at noon too."

"If my schedule doesn't change," Shibasaki nodded, but in the end, they did not end up eating lunch together the next day.

*

"Shibasaki-san, how old are you?"

"I'm twenty-three...?"

"Ah, we're two years apart. I thought we were the same age, because you seem so mature."

What is going on? I feel like I'm on an omiai date! Shibasaki peered over the rim of her coffee cup at the young man sitting across from her. She always had her coffee after eating, but today she had had it brought first, to give her something to do with her hands. *Is this*

where I should be asking "What are your hobbies?" came the flippant thought.

The girls from her dorm had said he resembled some actor or another. No one came immediately to Shibasaki's mind, but she had to admit that he wasn't bad-looking. Indeed, he seemed open, cheerful--and if she had to be honest, nothing but a pretty face.

Their eyes met over the rims of their cups, and the man smiled. Shibasaki sipped her coffee in acknowledgement.

Men of his type leave a little something to be desired, Shibasaki couldn't help but think--probably because the men she saw on a daily basis were all so out of the ordinary. Doujou, Komaki, Tedzuka--even restricting herself to the younger set, everyone she could come up with had his own quirks.

"When do you get off for lunch?" he had asked while checking out a book. It was a proposition too blunt to be called a proposition. But it had excited the girls from her dorm, who had gone into a tizzy, adjusted her lunch schedule, and sent them on their way before Shibasaki could even reply.

When did anyone say I accepted? Shibasaki simmered with irritation, but thinking of one girl who had been especially enthusiastic in sending them off--

Well, I can't blame them. Though thinking that probably makes me a bitch. Listening to her own thoughts, she grew fed up with herself.

More importantly, what am I going to do about this guy? she grumbled to herself, just as he asked, "Do you come to this shop often?"

She was about to answer when the bell on the door jangled. Throughout the store, heads turned instinctively toward the raucous sound. Shibasaki glanced over as well.

"...that idiot," she muttered without thinking. At the door was Iku, who had probably forgotten that there was a bell on the door, shoved it open, and was even now standing frozen, startled by the noise she had made. And with her--probably dragged along by her--was Tedzuka. Tedzuka noticed Shibasaki before Iku did, and hunched his shoulders apologetically.

Honestly, those two! We don't come to this shop much, they must have specifically searched for me! Her indignation was probably not fair to the haplessly ensnared Tedzuka.

Iku noticed her too, pretended to laugh in surprise, and sat down some distance from Shibasaki and her partner. She must have been curious enough to come check in on them but still maintained enough distance so that she wasn't eavesdropping. It showed a kind of restraint that was characteristic of the uncivilized yet pure-hearted Iku.

That side of her is so adorable, Shibasaki thought, smiling wryly, and her feelings softened.

"Not often, no. There aren't many places in this neighborhood that serve lunch, but we randomly rotate through two or three of them. We eat in the base's mess hall quite often as well," she said, trying to imply that she didn't always eat out.

He caught her implication. "I suppose it was a bother for you to come out here," he sighed, sounding troubled.

Shibasaki laughed. "Not at all. I was just thinking that I'll probably be teased when I go back."

As Shibasaki spoke, she casually glanced over at where Iku and Tedzuka were sitting. The fact that the rumor of her lunch date had reached these two, even though they were in a different division, meant that it had already spread like wildfire. This didn't *exactly* bother her, but...

It's a bit wearying how obvious they are. Shibasaki had nothing else to do, so she took another sip of coffee.

"I wonder what they're saying?" Iku said, watching Shibasaki's table as she brought a cup of cold water to her lips.

Tedzuka replied in a bored voice. "If you wanted to hear what they were saying, we should have sat closer."

"But that would be rude!" Iku said, pouting.

Tedzuka's eyebrows went up. "And coming to spy on them *isn't*?"

"But I wanted to see what kind of guy he was! Eavesdropping, though, would be kinda...if Shibasaki were interested in him too, it would be rude."

"I do not understand the basis of the female code of conduct," Tedzuka grumbled. "I don't like this kind of nosy spying."

"But it's Shibasaki! It's not like she's a stranger to you, aren't you worried about whether or not this guy is a suspicious character?"

"I would if she had been kidnapped by a suspicious character in the middle of the night or something, but this is a restaurant at midday. And I don't think she would let her guard down around

someone she's never been out with before, so I don't know why we have to..."

Apparently being dragged along to spy on Shibasaki was nothing but a hassle for Tedzuka.

When Iku had gone to get Shibasaki for lunch as they had discussed, she had heard what had happened from the crowd of her peers in the Administrative Division. When she learned that Shibasaki had been invited out to lunch by a male patron, she decided she must see him for herself, and chased after them. She had dragged Tedzuka along for moral support--she would have felt a little timid going by herself.

"He's--well, I guess he's kind of handsome? I don't know, he's not quite my type."

"Yeah, I guess not," Tedzuka said knowingly. Iku gave him a strange look. "No--that's just the impression I--" he backpedaled.

"I guess he's been coming often lately. All the girls know him because he's so conspicuously handsome. They're all in a frenzy over the idea that he could have been coming just so he could get close to Shibasaki."

"Girls get deeply excited over that topic, don't they?"

"Huh? Guys are the same way, right?"

"I have no interest in such matters."

"I wasn't talking about outliers like you," Iku retorted dismissively.

Tedzuka appeared to be straining his brain to come up with a more normal male reaction. "...Well, admittedly Shibasaki is pretty popular. Since she's attractive on the surface."

"And she maintains that surface like an iron wall."

"So there are probably a lot of guys who are concerned over what happened today. Some of the guys in her own section have set their sights on her, after all. They're probably all brooding away right now."

"You don't say," she replied, though given it was Shibasaki this was not surprising. "But right now, her expression is all business."

Tedzuka followed Iku's gaze over to where Shibasaki was.

"Indeed," he agreed. "I get the impression that she's only showing him mercy because he's a patron."

"She doesn't look like she likes him much, does she? I wonder if she was peer-pressured into going with him."

"Would that be in character for her?"

"You wouldn't think so, but Shibasaki finds it hard to ruin a mood like that. She's the type that can't say no if everyone else gets excited and tells her to go."

Tedzuka looked startled. Shibasaki had shown her true self to Tedzuka and the rest of Doujou's squad from the very beginning, so he probably couldn't imagine her being swayed by other people like that.

"She may act a certain way around us, but she's really attuned to other people's feelings--worries a bit too much about them, in fact. She has a soft spot for girls in particular."

"Hmmm. Well, I kinda get what you're saying..." Tedzuka said in vague agreement, then glanced over at Shibasaki's table again. "What kind of guy is he?"

"Ohhh? So you're concerned after all!"

"After we came all the way here, I'd at least like to know if he's a suspicious character or not. She's like an honorary member of our squad, after all."

"Before, you implied that there was no need to worry, since Shibasaki can take care of herself."

"There's a difference between 'not needing to worry' and 'not worrying.'"

There was a lot of strange masculine logic around when it was right to honestly worry.

"Well, if he was suspicious enough that you could tell at a glance, I don't think the other girls would have been irresponsible enough to push her out the door. If Shibasaki doesn't swear me to silence, I'll let you know what else I hear."

"Uh--that's okay, it's not like I really care..." Tedzuka replied, trying to subtly dissociate himself from the whole situation.

She knew how his name was written because it was printed on his library card; she guessed that the characters were pronounced "Asahina Hikaru."

"Do you remember me?"

Because there was no point in lying, Shibasaki nodded. "I taught you how to use an index, didn't I?"

"Ah--yes. I have it all down pat now; it's come in very handy," Asahina smiled shyly.

They had exchanged words for the first time perhaps two months ago, when he had asked her where the encyclopedias were. When she guided him to the right shelf, he had grabbed a volume off the shelf

and started leafing through it, and she found herself blurting out, *"It's better if you use the index first."*

Asahina had given her a dubious look. This was not an unusual reaction for the average library patron. There were surprisingly many people who thought that it was fine to flip directly to the word you wanted to learn about.

"The index?"

Again, this question didn't mean that the patron was particularly ignorant. Patrons who didn't even know that encyclopedias had indexes were not uncommon, and even among those who did know, most of them thought that it was something like a table of contents. Thus, only the very knowledgeable patrons reached for the index first thing when they came to the encyclopedia corner. In particular, because searching on the internet had become commonplace, it was rare that younger people knew how to use the index.

"Here, this one. The very last volume. All encyclopedias have an index volume at the end."

"Uh--it's okay, I was just going to look it up directly." Anything else would be a waste of time was implied.

"May I ask what you're looking up?" Shibasaki asked. Showing him would be faster than explaining.

"Book burning."

My, what a dangerous thing to look up in a library, Shibasaki thought, plucking the corresponding volume off the shelf.

"Look up 'book burning' directly. I'll look it up in the index."

"...All right," Asahina said skeptically, taking the book. Shibasaki pulled out the index.

"Finished." Asahina showed her the page for his topic.

Shibasaki showed him the same entry in the index. *"Look, related topics. You won't find these if you only look in that book."*

There were several related topics under "book burning," including "banned books," "Nazi Party," "The Burning of Books and Burying of Scholars²¹," and "Qin Shi Huang."

"If you started by looking up 'book burning' in the index, you would discover that these topics also have information related to book burning. If you only look up the topic directly, you only find the

²¹ Events that took place in China between 213 and 206 BC. Qin Shi Huang, the emperor, ordered many works of philosophy and history burned in order to discourage discord between different schools of thought. Later, he ordered hundreds of alchemists buried alive after being deceived by a couple of alchemists.

information in that entry, but the index also provides related subjects, giving you a multi-faceted view of your topic. Your research would broaden even further if you then looked up the related topics in the index as well."

"Wow," Asahina whistled, looking truly impressed. *"I didn't know that this was how you used encyclopedias,"* he informed her, smiling bashfully.

Shibasaki smiled back. *"Right now people who do know are in the minority, after all. Well, if you want to know about mochi, go to a mochi stand, as they say; if you want to know about books, go to a librarian. Please feel free to ask us any questions you ever have."*

After that, Asahina began to visit the library often. Occasionally when he saw Shibasaki, he would ask her for reference service; these requests were not annoyingly frequent, nor did she sense any impropriety in them. To Shibasaki, he became a patron she recognized by sight.

She had never anticipated that he would ask her out like this.

"You come to the library often; are you doing research for your employer or something like that?" she asked half out of obligation, feeling that she should do her part to keep the conversation going. They had no common ground, so she had nothing to ask about except for his visits to the library. Anyway, he knew Shibasaki's name and occupation, but Shibasaki only knew his name, which was unfair--at least according to an intelligencer's instincts.

"Er, yes," he said, looking distinctly uncomfortable. "I work as an assistant to someone who's doing research on the administration's issues...lately we've been looking into library issues..."

Ah, that's why he was looking up book burning, she realized.

A few years prior, there had been an incident at a Tokyo-area library where several hundred books had been destroyed in secret--books that had more or less matched the Media Improvement Committee's conditions for censorship.

This large-scale destruction, which had been ordered by an influential person within the library, was explained as the disposal of old, unneeded books, unmotivated by malice or any secret purpose. But there were many irregularities in the list of destroyed books--the majority of them were brand new, and the destruction was biased towards certain authors. Whistleblowers within the library exposed the scandal, which grew even worse after the authors whose books had been destroyed sued the library. Apparently the librarian who had

ordered the destruction held so much behind-the-scenes power that not even the librarian's superiors had been able to oppose the order.

This large-scale biblioclasm, self-righteously and arbitrarily dictated by a single librarian, was denounced as an abuse of authority and a crime against culture itself, and publicized as an incident of modern-day book burning.

In an unprecedented move in the history of legal action against the library, the Library Force gave all its support to the prosecution. In court, though the actions of the librarian who had ordered the destruction and the local response were criticized, the prosecution's suit was dismissed. The decision was appealed all the way to the Japanese Supreme Court. The unexpectedly hard fight hinted that the Media Improvement Committee was influencing the administration of justice.

It was discovered that the large-scale destruction of books targeted for censorship was the result of the governmentals' distaste for direct confrontation with the Ministry of Justice, and within the Force it was remembered as the governmentals' biggest blunder in recent years.

"My apologies..." Asahina was probably apologizing for bringing up the awkward topic, but his guilt was misplaced.

"You have nothing to apologize for. It's true that the library has caused the sort of problems you've been researching. It's natural for citizens to be concerned about them--in fact, that concern is essential."

I feel like I've become the library's public relations department, Shibasaki thought, though at the same time she was grateful for a topic that she was both comfortable with and knowledgeable about. She couldn't help being ill at ease, sitting across from a man who clearly wanted to pursue her but couldn't do it openly.

"If you're researching book burning incidents involving the library, the Library Journal would have plenty of information."

"Um, do you suppose--would a librarian become uncomfortable if I started asking these kinds of questions? Quite honestly, I've been worried that my research topic would alienate the people at the library, and I was afraid of what would happen if you asked me about my research or my job."

Whether he was frank by nature, or whether he just said what was on his mind without thinking about it first, Asahina's question was quite brazen. If it was the latter, he perhaps slightly resembled Iku in

that heedlessness, she thought, casually glancing over at where Iku was sitting. When their eyes met, Iku, playing innocent, giggled again--*cut it out, it doesn't suit you.*

"True, if we're talking about individual feelings, I believe there would be librarians who would become uncomfortable. Some people might feel guilty, as if you were accusing them of the same crimes," she answered frankly, guessing that he didn't want to hear polite lies.

His open, honest face fell. "Shibasaki-san, I hope I didn't..."

Revealing the depth of his concern for her feelings as much as confirmed that he was interested in her--though perhaps that had already been made clear by the lunch invitation.

"It's important to experience that, though, don't you think? One doesn't want to repeat the mistakes of the past because one was too uncomfortable to learn about them."

In fact, the principlist faction did not ever want that incident forgotten. It had violated the very heart of the library's principles--and was good ammunition against the governmentalists.

"Also, the library once had a hand in actual, not metaphorical, book burning, though it was all the way back in World War II."

It had happened when the Japanese libraries had expanded into the colonies²². Books on socialism, local history, and the classics had been targeted, and large numbers of them had been seized or burned.

The local police and the military police had done the actual dirty work, but the library had proactively lent a hand to the survey and selection of the targeted books. Valuable books were carried back to Japan; this was boasted of as "gathering materials," of all things--from which one could guess how ignorant the library world of that day was of the violence with which they had been seized.

Even after the war, the influential members of the library world did not demonstrate that they had reflected upon what they had done. Instead, they went so far as to say they had been coerced by the authorities into helping them, and painted themselves as the victims.

"That's..." Asahina, after listening to the tale, was at a loss for words. "...a very sad story," he finally concluded in a whisper.

"At the time of its establishment, the library was an extremely tenuous and brittle organization. With the government encroaching on them, they were probably deathly serious about establishing a reason

²² During this time period, Japan's colonies would have included Manchuria, Korea, and Taiwan.

for existence. At that point, to get support from the government, they had no choice but to fall in line with the 'rich county, strong army'²³ philosophy."

One of the impetuses for the proliferation of libraries in Japan was a project to commemorate the country's victory in the Russo-Japanese War; even now, libraries that had their roots as monuments to victory in war remained in many places.

In an effort to win more resources for the library again, during the war the library had even proactively tried to help with censorship within the country.

"From our perspective today, it's a pity that they didn't reconsider their methods. It even makes *us* feel ashamed," Shibasaki said lightly, smiling. Asahina smiled back, hesitantly. That hesitance gave her a glimpse of his character. He appeared to be an honest, pleasant young man without a sarcastic bone in his body.

"How does a librarian feel about that episode in the history of the library?" This question probably related back to his work. Clever boy. "Oh, you don't have to answer if you don't want to!" he hastened to add, but his eagerness for information was not exactly a drawback for Shibasaki.

"I don't speak for everyone in the library, so I'll ask that if you quote me, you say 'according to Shibasaki-san,'" she prefaced primly, and wanted to laugh mockingly at herself. *Why the evasive action? It's not like he's asking for official information. Your paranoia is quite unattractive, if I do say so myself.* "I believe it's important to always be cognizant of the fact that the library has not walked the path of justice for all of its history. Many blunders have been made over the years, and today we have the Library Force system. I believe it's meaningful that that system is being used by our organization, which remembers our past mistakes. When an organization that believes it can do no wrong begins to decline, its complete downfall is not far off, because it has become unclear whether it can tell the difference between righteousness and self-righteousness."

"Is that how you would describe the Media Improvement Committee?"

Shibasaki grinned. "Who knows?" she asked rhetorically, tipping her head to the side. Even if this wasn't an official statement, no outsider would get Shibasaki to commit to such a line.

²³ Japan's national slogan at the time.

Once she had finished her lunch plate, Shibasaki started to tilt her wrist a little to glance at her watch. Asahina picked up the check and asked, "Is it time for you to go?" It took her by surprise--she hadn't meant him to catch her looking at her watch. He was unexpectedly sharp-eyed.

She took out her wallet and counted out her part of the bill. "Here."

He made the standard protests.

"I have a personal rule against becoming indebted to men in situations like this," she said plainly. Asahina, looking a little disappointed, accepted Shibasaki's money. She intended to follow this minor blow to his ego with a refusal to accompany him on any future visits, but--

"May I speak with you another time on the subject of the library?" Asahina preempted her as they left the shop. "I don't have any other friends who work there, so I was hoping you could enlighten me on various points."

The way he nonchalantly classified Shibasaki as a "friend" was skillful. Shibasaki hesitated for a moment, pierced in the weak spot between her work life and her private life. "When you have the time, of course," he conceded hastily--also skillfully done.

Her refusal had been anticipated and deflected. Shibasaki smiled ruefully. He had created a situation where to persist in declining--"No, it would be inconvenient for me"--would look ridiculously selfish. Now that she was trapped, becoming stubborn and selfish was unforgivable.

"If you think I can help," she answered; there was no other reply left to her. *Touché*, she thought.

"Then, would you accept this?" Asahina held out a business card. It was a simple one that looked like it had been made on a computer; all it had was his name, cell phone number, and e-mail address. It looked like the kind of personal card one hoped to exchange casually with a woman.

"I'll accept it, but..." *...but I don't feel like giving you my contact information*, she implied.

Asahina laughed. "Accepting it is plenty, for now."

She had no reason to refuse, so she took it. *Don't get used to it*, she thought, a little admiringly.

"See you later!" Asahina headed for the station. Shibasaki watched him go for a moment, then scowled a little.

Could I possibly be...bitter?

Her appraisal of him as a pleasant, pampered preppy had been a miscalculation. *He may be slightly more interesting than I gave him credit for*, she thought sourly, revising her first impression.

*

When Shibasaki returned to the dorm later that day, Iku latched onto her immediately, just as expected.

"Soooooo? What was Asahina-san like, huh huh huh?"

"It's not like we talked long enough for me to judge his character. We ate, and then left the shop right after. You should know; you were watching."

"Come on, I'm asking you what you thought about him!" Iku pounded her shoulder.

"Ow!" she yelled in real pain.

"Sorry!" Iku, in a frenzy, came over to rub the injured shoulder.

"Excuse me! Don't hit me like you mean it, you'll break fragile little me into pieces!"

"I'm sorry, my hand slipped a little." Iku began swinging her fist through the air, to practice pulling her punches.

"No, just don't hit me in the first place!" Shibasaki interrupted.

Iku grinned abashedly, scratching her head, then started pestering her again. "So, what did you think?"

"He was more interesting than I first thought, but that's about it, for now."

"Oh? So is he really smart?" Shibasaki blinked at Iku's outspoken impression. Iku, seeing her expression, continued, "'Cause Shibasaki, you only talk that way about men you've acknowledged as smart. Huh, I really didn't expect that," she muttered to herself. Twisting her mouth into a sarcastic smile, "'Well, I acknowledge his pretty face,' is how I thought you'd dismiss him."

"...wait a minute, was that supposed to be an impression of me?"

"It was the spitting image of you, if I do say so myself."

"Aren't you a sassy one," Shibasaki said, pinching Iku's cheeks. "Your training is not yet complete, young disciple! When you spurn someone, you must look down on them at an oblique angle, and your expression must be more completely aloof! 'Cool beauty, are you okay!?'"

"*That's* the part you're nitpicking!? Anyway, you've got a beautiful woman's conceitedness, calling yourself a cool beauty!" Iku

complained. She massaged her face where it had been pinched, then asked, "Will you meet with him again?"

"I suppose, if our schedules align. He told me he was researching library problems and wanted to ask me some questions or something."

She was too proud to admit that she had meant to refuse any further invitations, but had been outplayed.

"Damn, that's not what I expected," Iku whistled, bluntly speaking her mind. "I thought you would only go with out him this once and then never again. I wondered if you had been reluctantly pressured into going, because everyone else was so excited for you."

"I can't deny that I was reluctant, but I'm not going to start going out with someone right after our first meeting, okay? Anyway, he hasn't actually come out and asked me out in the first place."

She's unexpectedly perceptive about things like this, isn't she--in spite of the fact that she's such a thick-witted late bloomer when it comes to her own love life, Shibasaki observed critically to herself.

Iku gave her a worried look. "You can say no if you want to, you know."

"I'm not a cruel enough person that I'd date someone I didn't actually like." It was Shibasaki's habit to turn aside worries by stating them calmly and dismissing them, but this time, she had a single request. "However, could you not tell the other girls what I said about Asahina-san?" Iku looked even more worried. Shibasaki said preemptively, "You know they'd made fun of me. I resent being an object of amusement for people."

It wasn't a lie, but it was an evasion. "Got it," Iku agreed immediately. The way she let herself be deceived was adorably naive. "But can I tell Tedzuka? He was worried about you, in his own way. Though he was really condescending about it."

"Sure, anyone in Doujou's squad is okay." Tedzuka and the others in Doujou's squad probably wouldn't carelessly blabber her secrets.

"And be sure to convey earnestly to Instructor Doujou that he shouldn't worry, because he's the one I like the best."

"I think the reason Instructor Doujou has been gradually distancing himself from you is because you say things like that."

"I know, that's why I say them. It makes it more interesting. Anyway, what about you?" Perhaps it was because she was a little irritable, but she felt compelled to tease Iku a bit. "Are you really okay with me pursuing Instructor Doujou in earnest?"

Iku stiffened visibly. After a moment, in a tone she probably thought was nonchalant, "Sure, that's your prerogative. It has nothing to do with me, and I have no right to say you should or shouldn't!"

Oh, how bittersweet! Her compulsion to make fun of Iku faded immediately. "Down girl, I was just kidding," Shibasaki said, rising from their low table. "I'm going to bed early--getting mocked so much after lunch tired me out."

Iku's stiff expression turned into one of concern. Her open, easy-to-read face was sometimes too much for Shibasaki to watch.

"Good night. I'll be quiet."

With Iku's solicitous voice at her back, Shibasaki pulled her bed curtains shut.

"I already promised to have lunch with a friend," Shibasaki had tried to refuse.

"It's just Kasahara, right?" Hirose, one of the other girls her age, had interrupted. "We'll tell her where you went, so get going! It's not every day you get an invitation like this!"

Shibasaki had her reservations about agreeing to this friendly-seeming proposal, because she could discern Hirose's true motive, even though the woman was trying to hide it.

Their excited peers and superiors, who felt that their dormmate being asked out by a man was an interesting development, quickly joined Hirose.

"Right, don't waste your chance with him just because of Kasahara!" The other girls joined forces and egged her on, and she was sent off with Asahina almost like an offering.

When she returned, she found that the rumor had spread through the entire Administrative Division, and she was teased on a grand scale. Each time she was asked what they had talked about, she answered, "We started with incidents where the library was involved in book burning, and then moved on to issues facing the library today." Everyone was disappointed by this topic, but this answer was Shibasaki's way of defending herself.

If she wasn't careful, it was not unlikely that they would decide on their own that she should date him.

"Couldn't you have talked about something a little more titillating?" Hirose pouted in discontentment. With her sugary-sweet, slightly nasal voice, she was perfect for the role of the sweet and innocent girl--a world of difference from Iku at the shop.

"Well, he's been researching book burning incidents. I guess he wanted a Library Force member to talk to about it, and he asked me because he remembered me from when I first helped him find information."

"Whaaaat?" she pretended to be disappointed at the lack of good gossip, but she couldn't completely hide her true feelings. Sometimes Shibasaki's ability to read hidden cues and body language was a heavy burden on her.

To explain: Hirose was in love with one of the older men in the division, but it was frequently whispered that this man had his eye on Shibasaki. Shibasaki, as an intelligencer, was necessarily perceptive of the pattern of human relationships around her.

She had been probed on the subject several times by the man himself as well as his friends, but every time, she had replied unambiguously that at present she had no intention of dating anyone. One of the reasons she intentionally made such a fangirlish fuss over Doujou was because it was a pose that kept her from becoming entangled by that kind of talk, but apparently this wasn't enough for a woman in love.

It was a given that Hirose would ask probing questions about Shibasaki's feelings for the man at every opportunity. But whenever invitations to go out drinking with their colleagues didn't reach Shibasaki, it was almost guaranteed that Hirose had volunteered to give her the message, and that the man in question had already decided to come. "It slipped my mind," she would say, but after the third time, it was impossible not to sense her intentions.

In practice, Shibasaki always heard about the division drinking parties or events from other girls in the dorm, so she hadn't been left out of one yet. But sometimes it irritated her that they were deceived by her featherbrained act--"Well, there's no use blaming Hirose, she's not the brightest crayon in the box," they'd say. In Shibasaki's judgement, everything Hirose did was calculated.

Real featherbrains didn't hesitate to do even truly preposterous things--like Iku, for example. Compared to her, Hirose seemed perfectly capable of controlling her level of absentmindedness depending on the context.

If it were only "forgetting" to tell her about parties and other things like that, it would be almost cute. But lately Hirose had begun to see through Shibasaki's lack of open reaction to her attempts to create a hostile atmosphere, which was troublesome. She had spread

rumors about Shibasaki being smitten with another man and apparently paved the way for Shibasaki to date someone else. Each time, Shibasaki evaded her by quipping, "I live only for Instructor Doujou!" but Hirose recognized full well that this was a joke, so she couldn't take it seriously.

Shibasaki was infinitely more talented at social maneuvering than Hirose, so contrary to expectation she didn't fall into any of her traps, but it was irritating and depressing to have so many tricks played on her. She was also a little put out that her opponent thought she was stupid enough to fall for them.

She didn't want to admit it, but women were despicable creatures sometimes.

To Hirose, Asahina's unexpected appearance was undoubtedly the perfect means to get her rival out of the way--surely it was her desire to attach Shibasaki to someone so that her own chances would improve.

This was why Shibasaki had been ready to reject Asahina's invitation, which was perhaps unfair to him. The pride that had balked at giving others the impression that Hirose had outwitted her hadn't bothered to take Asahina's feelings into account.

Just because I'm out of the way doesn't mean things will go well between you and the person you love. Should I have to date someone at random every time some boy falls in love with me?

During puberty, mainly, she had used that line many times--and often, been subsequently slapped. By girls just like Hirose, in fact.

Her opponents' methods had been childishly conspicuous, but Shibasaki's inability to endure quietly without saying something cutting had also been childish. She hadn't had her current knack for dodging attacks, and didn't know how to avoid being trapped in unfavorable situations, except by losing her temper every time.

If she slapped these girls back, it was guaranteed that they would start to cry. "You're horrible!" *And you're not? You hit me first!* But they would counter-balance this fact with, "Because you say such horrible things, Shibasaki-san!"

Then their friends would contrive to denounce Shibasaki to everyone. Shibasaki was labeled as "spiteful" and "full of herself," and until she got a fresh start in high school, she was always isolated among her classmates.

When she chose a distant high school that not many from her school district applied to, her few friends were kind enough to say that

they wished they could go to the same school--but even these girls hadn't tried to help her when she had been ostracized by their classmates.

Even at high school, this kind of trouble didn't completely die out, but after she entered school, Shibasaki devoted all her attention to strengthening her position, thus obtaining contacts she could call allies.

She behaved sociably, accepted wholeheartedly her characterization as "sarcastic," and always kept her eyes and ears open for information about the relationships around her. As she kept her antenna attuned equally to both the girls and the boys, her specialty became obtaining that most fascinating of things to high school students--romantic gossip. She began to proactively offer advice to the lovelorn, and her added-value steadily increased. By graduation, her reputation for usefulness as a purveyor of information had been established not only among her class and year, but had even crossed the barrier between teachers and students.

In college, she further refined the balance of her social maneuvering, and graduated with almost no enemies, though she had made many in high school. The members of the Library Force had met her at that stage of her development.

Shibasaki, you sure are good with people! Teach me your secret!, she had been told enviously. But if Shibasaki had answered honestly, they would certainly have recoiled.

Shibasaki truly believed that the secret to being good with people was to trust no one. Her basic assumption was that anything she said to anyone would be spread around, so she limited the information she disclosed based on the network through which the information might spread and the other person's influence within that network. On top of that, she was always careful to prepare a counter-response in case the information did leak. Usually that counter-response acted like a safety valve and halted the outflow of important information.

Perhaps it was something that everyone did unconsciously, but Shibasaki was completely self-aware as she managed her information flow. It was also why Shibasaki believed no one was trustworthy.

There wasn't a person alive who wouldn't despise someone they learned had always been scheming and analyzing them in her heart of hearts. The charming, popular Shibasaki that they all saw was a creation of the real Shibasaki. She even disguised her habit of sniffing around other people's conversations by pretending to be a bystander

in search of someone's misfortunes to laugh at. If someone else found out how much of her behavior was calculated, it would wound them to the quick. --Probably even Iku.

Why did I do that? "Could you not tell the other girls?" It was a pointless request--and it assumes I trust her completely.

Iku, who had been her roommate for almost a year, was Shibasaki's opposite in every respect. Iku was an uncomplicated character who didn't seem to have any concept of a "public façade." She was easy to understand, and her deepest feelings blazed out so strongly that Shibasaki could read them without even trying. Shibasaki had never before met a person whose words she didn't have to analyze for hidden meanings. It was her good fortune that her roommate was a person she could relax around.

For Shibasaki, Iku's greatest value was as a restful roommate. She hadn't intended to take it any farther than that, but before she knew it, she found herself picking on Iku for no good reason.

Shut up, self. Why would I want a true friend now?

She avidly used those around her so that she could improve her social maneuvering. It had even extended to her job. So why would she decide now that she wanted a friend she could trust?

It's because she makes me strangely emotional that I get the impulse to bully her, she thought, remembering the incident after Iku's parents had come to visit.

It's when she got that expression of pure, adolescent righteousness that I started wanting to make her cry. And I prodded her, and she cried right on cue--

But then my heart ached when I saw that stubbornness shining through her tears.

This really isn't your style, Shibasaki Asako.

She smiled sardonically to herself as she rolled over and tugged the futon closer.

Sentimentality suits you even less than Iku's giggly sweet-and-innocent act at lunch suited her.

*

The third week after Director Etou took up his post, a situation arose which had libraries across the country racking their brains for a solution.

"You're kidding..." Iku's voice trailed off as she realized that the person across from her wasn't the type to kid about things like this; still, she hoped he understood the emotion that had caused her to raise her voice in automatic disbelief.

"Unfortunately, I'm not kidding," Doujou answered gravely. The conversation took place during their squad's morning meeting, right after the Task Force's earlier meeting.

"But how did you find out, if the magazine isn't on sale yet?"

"We got the information from a distributor that specializes in delivering to libraries. The magazine goes on sale tomorrow, but they already have the copies that they'll be distributing," Komaki explained. Then he nodded toward the commander's office. The door, which was normally always open, was currently closed. "My, he was in a bad mood, wasn't he?"

Indeed, Genda had been short-tempered during their morning meeting, and had ruthlessly quizzed those Force members who hadn't been paying attention in a sharp tone that was quite uncharacteristic of him.

"We had better beef up the escort on the new arrivals tomorrow. The Improvement Special Agency might try to seize them during delivery."

All the books and magazines that were shipped to libraries within the Tokyo area were delivered in one shipment to the Library Base by the Library Distribution Union, a distributor that specialized in libraries. They were accepted under guard, and divided and distributed among all the libraries, also under guard.

It was fairly common for the Improvement Special Agency to guess the delivery route and attempt to seize the goods. Since there was no way to effectively seal off the surrounding area, guns were forbidden, but that just meant that they had to resort to brawling hand-to-hand combat, and injuries were frequent.

Each library also often purchased books from local bookstores, but the strength of the escort on these books depended on the library's size, so it was very costly when they were seized.

"The Defense Force will probably be fine-tuning its counter-measures, but the Task Force had better put out an opinion too," Komaki stated, looking at Doujou. Since Genda was the one who had to write up the opinion, Komaki was tacitly urging Doujou to go and calm Genda down so that they could get back to business.

"Why me?" Doujou's face twisted mulishly.

Komaki laughed nonchalantly. "Because the assistant commander asked you. It's your unfortunate duty to bell this cat."

"Cats are cute. That man is a tiger."

"Tigers are close enough to bears, right, Bear-Killer?"

"Shut up."

The reason Genda was so out of sorts was very much linked to the reason why they would have to increase the guard on tomorrow's delivery of new magazines.

It was an article in tomorrow's *New World Weekly*, reporting on the aftermath of that case that had shaken the community: the arrest of a high-school student for a string of serial murders.

Since the boy was under sixteen, he had been tried as a juvenile in family court. After a psychiatric evaluation, he had been sentenced to a medical reformatory where he would undergo treatment. This sentence had been furiously decried as too lenient, and a movement to have the Juvenile Law amended had gained momentum, but almost half a year had passed since then, and public opinion and news coverage had toned down.

Tomorrow's *New World Weekly* was a grenade lobbed at that complacent loss of momentum. An article that raised several questions about the boy's sentence and the current state of the Juvenile Law was the centerpiece of the issue--in which the boy's deposition, which should not have been released to the public, was quoted in its entirety.

It was no wonder that Genda, who had a sworn friend who worked for *New World Weekly* named Orikuchi, was in an ill humor.

The boy's defense lawyer had lodged a protest against Sesousha, the company that published *New World*, but since no official sales ban had been issued, it was entirely up to distributors to decide how they would handle this issue of *New World Weekly*. It was also likely that the Improvement Special Agency would march out angrily to censor it.

"Why would the place that Orikuchi-san works for..." It was a fruitless question, but Iku unconsciously murmured it, then hurriedly clamped her mouth shut. Bitterness bloomed across the others' faces.

The leaking of the boy's deposition was of course illegal, and to publish it was probably also a violation of the Juvenile Law. She couldn't remain detached about the fact that the magazine that Orikuchi worked for had its hand in that kind of journalism. Her closed mouth opened again to murmur, "It's like...we've been betrayed or something."

The furrows on Doujou's forehead deepened, and he scolded her, "Don't you dare say that in Commander Genda's hearing."

Of all of them, Genda was the most hurt. She understood that much. The entire Task Force knew that he and Orikuchi shared a deep bond, despite the fact that when they were together they only traded banter.

"Well, she does have the excuse that she's a journalist. Our views won't always align--the fact that we can cooperate when we need to is plenty," Komaki explained logically.

"What? Don't you think that's kind of heartless?"

"Why? Our professions are different, so it's only natural that we'd clash over certain things."

Sheesh, just because nothing ever ruffles your feathers--except if it involves Marié. Even as she complained to herself, she knew it was a waste of time, so she fell silent with a sulky expression. His previous bitter look might have been an expression of his feelings, but when he spoke he wrapped everything up so unemotionally that sometimes it was a little unsatisfying.

Despite the fact that she was pushy sometimes, Iku thought of Orikuchi as one of the adults nearby that she could respect. Now that this situation had come up, Iku was completely at a loss as to how she should judge Orikuchi and *New World*.

They confirmed their patrol shifts for the day and began to scatter. As Iku made to leave the room with Tedzuka, her buddy for the day, she was called back by Doujou.

"What is it?" she asked, cocking her head and running back to him.

Doujou opened his mouth, looking unsure of what to say. "I more or less understand what's going through your head right now. But don't make the mistake of confounding organizations with individuals and jumping to conclusions."

Iku's shoulders slumped--he had sensed her disappointment with Orikuchi. Then she realized that Doujou had judged that Tedzuka didn't need any such reminder, and her heart was pierced anew.

"I'm sorry," she said, her head drooping.

Doujou gave her a small smile. "It's nothing you really need to apologize for."

"...but how *am* I supposed to feel?"

As they conducted their patrol tour, her thoughts just kept returning to that question.

"About what?" Tedzuka asked her.

Orikuchi, Iku began to blurt out, then hurriedly amended to, "The *New World* thing. No matter what, I just can't believe that what they did was right."

"Well sure. Their methods, at least, weren't right, were they?"

"What do you mean, 'their methods, at least'?"

"I mean that their methods are separate from the point they're trying to make to the world."

Iku disliked Tedzuka's habit of making grown-up, logical arguments at times like these, in spite of the fact that he was otherwise obsessed with fairness. *You know, lately you've come to resemble Instructor Komaki more than Instructor Doujou!*

Her voice developed an edge. "Oh, so if they have a point they want to make, it's okay if their methods are wrong?"

"No, it's not okay. The methods themselves should be criticized. However, the point they're trying to make should be evaluated outside of the methods used to make it. It's up to each individual reader to judge the overall value of the article, taking into account the dishonesty of the methods." As he spoke, Tedzuka gave Iku a reproving look. "You have this bad habit of seeing everything as black or white. You can miss seeing the big picture if you do that, especially when we're talking about organizations."

A groan escaped her lips. His comment had pierced her to the core.

"It's impossible for any organization to always live up to its righteous intentions," he continued, voicing an observation she had heard several times before. Then Tedzuka looked away from her. "Even the Library Force, naturally."

"The only place you'll find champions of justice fighting against a nice clean backdrop is in a storybook." Shibasaki's words were brought back vividly to her once more. *"If you're not prepared to get dirty, you should give up your dreams of being a champion of justice."*

"I know that," she replied, though she had to add silently to herself, *in my head, at least.*

I can get dirty if I have to. But is it wrong to hope that you can always do things the right way?

"By the way," she said, changing the subject because she could no longer bear to think about it. "About Shibasaki..."

Tedzuka hadn't gone so far as to ask about Shibasaki, so the topic hadn't come up before, but she raised it experimentally now.

"She told me he's invited her to lunch twice since then.

Apparently he's researching library issues, and that's pretty much all they talk about."

"I see," Tedzuka replied indifferently. However, he didn't try to keep her from talking, so it seemed he was willing to listen.

"His name is Asahina-san, but his given name is the same as yours. It's written with different characters, though--'light streaming'²⁴."

"Oh, wow." Tedzuka finally appeared slightly interested. After a moment's pause, he asked, "What do you think Shibasaki thinks of him?"

"So you *are* interested!" Iku elbowed him in the side.

"Oh, shut up," he brushed her away unkindly. He was probably embarrassed at his attempt to feign disinterest.

"Sometimes Shibasaki gets carried away on the flow of emotions around her and can't say no to other people, but since he hasn't actually asked her out, I don't think she minds just eating with him. He's met with her a few times and been able to keep the conversation going, so he must be at least that quick-witted."

In spite of the fact that he had been the one to ask, when he heard the answer Tedzuka again replied with an indifferent, "I see." Perhaps he felt that gossip was beneath his masculine dignity.

What the hell is up with your stupid posturing? Iku, pouting, glared at Tedzuka out of the corner of her eye.

*

Not long after she arrived at her office, Orikuchi received a cell phone call from Genda. Usually she would leave her desk to answer, but today she stayed where she was.

"Hello, this is Orikuchi."

Without even bothering with a "hello," Genda asked her acidly, "What the hell is this thing?" His impatient conversational style hadn't changed one bit since when they were young.

²⁴ Asahina and Tedzuka are both named Hikaru, but Tedzuka's name is written with a single character, 光 ("light"), whereas Asahina's is written with two characters, 光流 ("light," "streaming/flowing").

"It's just one of those things," she replied. She hadn't intended to mock him, but her reply came out sounding like she had.

Genda didn't seem offended at all, but questioned her again. "Did you write it?"

"It's an article put out by our magazine, regardless of which reporter wrote it. An article we presented to the world for public debate."

Genda fell silent for a time after this evasive answer, though his disapproval came through loud and clear.

"Leaking the boy's deposition is illegal. What the hell did you need to present to the world so badly that you'd break the law to do it?"

"There are some omelets you can't make without breaking eggs-- or laws, in this case."

Genda and Orikuchi viewed the world from different vantage points. It was only natural that their opinions would differ in some cases. But it was still painful for them when one of those cases was staring them in the face. Though realistically there was nothing to be done about their incompatible beliefs, neither could help trying to find some way to change the other's mind.

It was probably for this reason that their long-ago romance had not ended in marriage but instead had mellowed into their current relationship.

"Don't you think that public mistrust of unethical journalism is one of the reasons our society has turned out the way it has?" It was an argument Genda had been using for a long time, whenever situations like this arose. Though he knew that this line of reasoning implied a personal attack on Orikuchi, he simply couldn't endure in silence. That inner conflict made him realize just how deep Orikuchi's wounds must be too, having to suffer through his censure again and again.

"To hold journalists completely responsible for creating the society that passed the Improvement Act is preposterous," Orikuchi replied in the same way she always did, then added, "Anyway, it's not like we stole the deposition." She had resolved not to make any excuses, but Genda's hurt and annoyed tone compelled her to do so anyway. "It was sent to us by an anonymous source--probably someone connected with the trial. I believe our source was trying to tell us that they wanted it revealed to the public. We still have enough

honor that we don't turn our backs on people who trust us to publicize information because they can't do it themselves."

"Be that as it may..."

Orikuchi could already guess what he was going to say next.

Yes, since we've had this conversation so many times before.

"...was it really necessary to quote the entire thing? Everyone is going to call that article tasteless yellow journalism. Are you still going to be proud of your magazine when the whole world is questioning your company's common sense?"

"I've resigned myself to the inevitable criticism."

Without publicizing the contents of the deposition, the article wouldn't have had much persuasive power. But she couldn't bring herself to use this excuse, because the decision to publish the deposition in its entirety had also certainly been a calculated business decision.

Yes, we most certainly judged that we could take advantage of our readers' curiosity. But to defend her magazine by saying, *"What's wrong with publishing what our readers want to see?"* would truly indicate they had lost all honor. Even if the company could get away with using that line on the public, Orikuchi didn't want to use it on Genda.

Even if I can't always be the kind of person I want to be, I can at least do this much.

"If this issue doesn't meet with the library's approval, you can go ahead and throw it out, I don't mind."

"Don't be an idiot," Genda snapped, sounding angry for the first time. "It's the library's duty to gather materials regardless of our personal feelings about them. It doesn't matter what kind of book or magazine it is; we'll defend it by whatever means necessary. As if that were ever in doubt!"

She could clearly picture his expression. Perhaps she really should have left her desk to take this call--but she had intended to keep it short.

She felt like crying.

Orikuchi's subordinates were shooting her concerned looks, so she spun her chair around to put her back toward them.

"I was also planning to write a follow-up article about the battle for the Museum of Information History, but maybe you'd rather I didn't come by to do interviews."

"Of course you're welcome to come by. Idiot." And on that rude note, he hung up.

*

There was a knock at the door. "Come in!" Genda yelled, and the door opened to admit Doujou. He took one look at Genda's face and smiled. "Looks like you're feeling better, sir."

"Hmmpf," Genda snorted.

Doujou decided not to say any more, and got down to business. "I wanted to talk to you about the plan for tomorrow's delivery escort," he said, passing a draft plan to Genda.

For the pickup of the magazines from the distributor, they would send several decoy vehicles at different times, all with an increased escort. For the distribution of the magazines from the Library Base to all the other libraries, they would divide the vehicles into those carrying *New World Weekly* and those carrying other books, and also send out decoy vehicles with an increased guard. Copies of *New World Weekly* purchased from local bookstores would be compiled at the main library in that area, and their distribution entrusted to the vehicles leaving from the Library Base.

Given the impact the article would have on society, it was certain that the only thing targeted for censorship tomorrow would be that issue of *New World*, thus Doujou's plan was nearly perfect.

Out of considerations for Genda's feelings about this case, Doujou had taken care of the plan. Genda only had to look it over.

"The Defense Force wants our input as soon as possible. If you need to call a meeting to make changes to this plan, please do so quickly."

"No, we won't need to do that. Just one thing--when they're loading the vehicles tomorrow, they should leave out any books targeted for censorship other than *New World*. We'll have our hands too full to deal if our opponent decides to seize them. It means they'll be delivered late, but they'll be safer if we wait to deliver them until after this fuss about *New World* dies down. Let the Administrative Division know that they'll be late, and the reason why."

Without a doubt a similar plan was being written up by the Defense Force at that very minute. Soon the Task Force would have to confer with them on disposition of troops.

"Understood, sir. I'll write up the formal paperwork and bring it by for your signature."

Doujou turned to leave. "Hey," Genda called out to him. "Keep 'em safe. Don't let our opponents lay one finger on this issue."

Doujou shot him a grin over his shoulder. "Of course not, sir."

The mission of the Defense Force was the unconditional defense of every book that was delivered, regardless of personal feelings. Every time a problem like this arose, there was discussion at every library about how best to make the book available to the public, but no matter what the outcome of that discussion, their duty to obtain and defend the book was never in question.

After Doujou left, Genda mumbled to himself. "Idiot."

Of course I'll defend that magazine--it's yours.

But he had never once been able to say that to her face.

*

The next day, *New World Weekly* went on sale.

Iku, as usual, wolfed down three helpings of breakfast and cheerfully went off to work.

Just watching her gave Shibasaki heartburn, and she pushed the rest of her breakfast aside--again, as usual. Iku made short work of the leftovers.

As a result of the delivery tactics and the combined power of the Defense Force and the Library Task Force, the vehicles from the distributor arrived at the Library Base just before noon, and immediately brought copies of *New World Weekly* next door to the Musashino First Library.

During prior discussion they had decided to restrict the magazine's availability for the time being. It was circulated among the Administrative Division during business hours, and was the major topic of conversation after closing time.

Whenever two members of the Administrative Division would meet, they would ask each other, "Did you see it?" The whispering sounds of voices exchanging impressions could be heard everywhere. There was also a continuous flood of questions from patrons asking about the magazine's availability for reading, and she lost track of the number of times she had to tell someone, "Right now we're conferring about the best way to let our patrons read that issue, but I believe a policy will be in place by tomorrow."

Many of the patrons who asked knew about the problematic contents of the article, but there were also many who didn't, and asked in confusion, "Why isn't *New World* set out today like it usually is?" A notice with a cursory explanation was displayed at the entrance, but many people hadn't read it, so she had to explain the situation to a number of patrons.

"Have you had the opportunity to read it yet, Shibasaki-san?" Asahina, who had arrived after noon, came up to ask her.

"Yes, well, erm...what about you?"

"I obtained one this morning from a newsstand at the station. I've heard that censorship inspections have already begun at the larger bookstores. Anyway--" here Asahina's manner turned diffident as he broached the topic, "--I was wondering if I could get an opinion on the matter from someone who works at the library."

"Hard at work as usual, I see," Shibasaki smiled. The library's response to this incident would certainly be of interest to someone who was researching library issues. Since she wasn't busy at the moment, Shibasaki leaned back comfortably.

"Well, it certainly does present a problem. A magazine with an illegally-leaked copy of a minor's deposition--and then there's the content of the deposition itself."

The boy's testimony had included his motive for the crimes--"I thought my sentence would be lighter since I was under sixteen," clearly demonstrating that he had known what he was doing--as well as explicit details of his postmortem rape of the female victims. Additionally, the boy's real name, address, and photograph had appeared in the article, in clear violation of the current Juvenile Law.

"Oh, no, I didn't mean--" Asahina scratched his head, looking flustered. "I meant, could we talk about it over lunch again sometime?"

Of course she had known what he meant. She had just been trying to dodge the invitation. But Asahina didn't give up his pursuit so easily.

"It doesn't have to be today...in fact, perhaps tomorrow or after that would be better. You'd be able to observe the library's initial response before we talk."

Damn but this man is good. He was still maintaining the pretense that he wanted to ask about the library's response; however, his invitation for "tomorrow or after that" prevented her from pretending that she already had plans.

"I'll warn you, there are probably things I won't be able to tell you officially."

"Not a problem. I wouldn't attribute them to you."

She parried this stubborn attempt at persuasion with a winsome smile, and promised to meet him the next day for lunch.

After eating that day's lunch with her dormmates, Shibasaki was reshelving books when one caught her eye. It was an issue of a library newsletter that detailed previous cases where reading access to a magazine or book had been restricted.

Ooh, he might find this handy, she thought. It was understandable that Asahina would come to mind; they had been spending a lot of time together lately.

After speaking with Shibasaki, he had gone to the reference room on the second floor. If his research session had been lengthy, he might still be there.

"I'll be right back," she announced, picking up the book and heading toward the reference room.

Right before a landing on the stairs leading up to the second floor, she stopped. She could see Asahina on the landing, but instead of calling out to him, she silently slipped out of sight. Because Asahina had already been accosted by Hirose.

"That's what I'm trying to tell you, all right?" she said in her usual sugary, nasal tone. "Shibasaki's a coy one, so you probably can't really tell from the way she acts, but I'm pretty sure she likes you."

--You just went too far. She sobered immediately.

"But she's not the type who'd tell you herself, sooo..." In a manner that was less than discreet, she exhorted him repeatedly to be more proactive, or to confess his feelings first. And standing beneath that landing, Shibasaki heard every word.

Why do I have to be humiliated like this just because the guy this girl's fallen for likes me better? Is it my fault that I'm beautiful? If one can't choose to be born beautiful, one can't choose to be popular with men either.

Besides, having guys who aren't even my type falling at my feet isn't satisfying in the slightest. It's nothing but a nuisance.

But, Shibasaki thought, if I ever said that out loud, everyone would call me a bitch and Hirose would get sympathy votes from everyone. Nobody thought Hirose was a bitch. She marketed herself as a charming and sweet character.

Shibasaki called it "marketing"--rather scathingly--because she could see through the other girl's calculated behavior. This behavior was nothing more than simple vanity--wanting to show herself off to everyone--but what irritated Shibasaki was the unconscious calculation behind it.

Her disgust at Hirose's simple, unconscious calculation was a case of the pot calling the kettle black, and her irritation stemmed from the awareness that her own actions were far more calculated than Hirose's. Hirose hadn't done anything wrong. She was just fighting for love, and Shibasaki had just happened to get in her way. Hirose's no-holds-barred pursuit of love was much purer than her own actions.

Asahina hemmed and hawed, looking pained. Eventually, he looked in Shibasaki's direction and spotted her. His expression stiffened.

Shibasaki looked into his eyes, then turned around and walked back downstairs.

The decision faced by every library in the country on how to handle this week's *New World Weekly* was a source of widespread bafflement.

Many neighboring libraries would ask each other, "And what have *you* decided to do?" Inquiries poured in to the Japan Library Association and the Library Bases as well.

The publishing of the boy's deposition, photograph, and real name was obviously a breach of the Juvenile Law, but since his crimes had been so heinous and brutal, many patrons supported *New World Weekly* and expressed their desire to have access to the issue in question.

Obviously there was a large group of people who felt that the media had coddled the boy by protecting his privacy before.

On the other hand, there were many who questioned the intelligence and good taste of the magazine for not only violating the Juvenile Law, but for publishing something that shouldn't have been leaked to the public in the first place. There were also those who stood up for the boy's human rights.

The library's duty to guarantee their patrons' "right to know" was in direct conflict with the need to protect the boy's human rights and privacy. Adding in the conflict between the Media Improvement Act's right to censor and the library's right to gather materials freely, each

library's decision-making process was in danger of becoming trapped in a three-way deadlock.

Confusion and turmoil were at unprecedented levels at the library--indeed, there were those who murmured sympathetically about how unfortunate it was that Director Etou should have to deal with such a thing so soon after his appointment. A chance to judge the new director's talents--by watching how he dealt with this situation--had come more quickly than usual.

The Japan Library Association announced that afternoon that they would leave decisions about *New World Weekly* up to each individual library--but that if asked, they would provide examples of how other libraries were dealing with the issue as a reference.

Nicely done, Tedzuka's dad, she smiled to herself.

The decision, which had likely been driven by Tedzuka's father, the president of the Japan Library Association, was an apt one. There were many libraries that, when faced with thorny problems like this, flinched back from taking individual responsibility and tried to get the Library Association or their local Library Base to decide for them, even though the Association was not technically within the library chain of command.

It was certain that if the Association had suggested a standard course of action, every library in the country would have gone along with it. On the other hand, there were some small libraries that couldn't afford to hold meetings to come up with original solutions to the problem, so other libraries' solutions would be made available to them wholesale. It was the perfect compromise.

Inamine, speaking for the Kantou Library Base, also announced his endorsement of the Japan Library Association's position, and that he would leave decisions about *New World Weekly* up to the discretion of each individual library.

The entire Administrative Division was awaiting the meeting that day where they would come up with a strategy for handling the problem issue of *New World Weekly*. It would be a chance to see Director Etou in action.

Shibasaki, personally, was particularly interested in how he would respond to a fax that had been sent the night before.

The fax, which they later determined had been sent to every library in the Tokyo metropolitan area, had been issued in the name of the chairman of the Lifelong Learning committee of the Tokyo Board of

Education. It informed other libraries how the Tokyo Metropolitan Library was dealing with *New World Weekly*.

The problem issue was kept behind the counter. In order to read it, each patron had to fill out an application, and sit within line of sight of the librarians while reading it. This information had ostensibly been sent "just for reference," but this course of action was just the kind of access restriction that the former acting director Toba would have jumped at.

Though it was presented as a simple informational message, it was quite possible that some of the libraries might take it as a command. In any case, it only served to agitate the already flustered libraries even further.

Shibasaki would be able to assess Etou's personality to a certain extent by seeing how he dealt with this external pressure.

"I'd like to first address the fax that was sent to us last night by the Tokyo Board of Education."

As soon as the meeting started, Etou immediately broached the topic.

"I asked Commander Inamine to ask the Board of Education for a clarification, and they have confirmed that it wasn't a demand, just an example for our reference. I've already arranged for this to be communicated to all the other libraries in the metro area, which I think should go a long way toward reducing the confusion that this fax has created. I also intend to send a strongly-worded protest to the Board, because it is extremely unfortunate that an individual library's coping strategy could have been taken as blanket guidance for every library."

All around the room, staff members perked up.

Etou had impressed them with his decisive tone ever since his appointment, but this was a particularly dazzling display. He had responded promptly to the situation created by the fax, resolving the problem in less than a day--and had done most of the work personally, so it seemed.

As the director of the library attached to the Kantou Library Base, it was perfectly natural for Etou to communicate closely with Inamine, and perfectly natural for him to take initiative to deal with problems that came up. But a talented person who could do all that efficiently and without hesitation was a valuable thing.

Moreover, after half a year of being at the mercy of Toba's spineless fence-sitting, this efficient resolution was especially striking.

Hatano, who was the same age as the director yet beneath him in both rank and the chain of command, probably harbored complicated feelings about him. But he was currently looking at Etou with an expression of open admiration.

--*You just won over the assistant director, I think.* Shibasaki, watching carefully, updated the social network she kept in her head. Winning over the popular Hatano was almost equivalent to winning the hearts of the entire library staff.

Not bad. Not bad at all. Shibasaki, too, had to commend Etou's skill.

"Thus, I'd like you all to disregard the Board of Education's message and share your thoughts and ideas freely."

They began by discussing their impressions of the *New World* article. Etou took on the role of moderator for the discussion, and uniformly questioned every participant on their views, even the younger staff members who usually just attended the meetings without saying a word. It was probably his goal to compel everyone to speak at least once during the meeting; it was an effective technique for making each staff member feel like they had a stake in the library's response to the situation.

There was a world of difference between today's meeting and the perfunctory, apathetic meetings they had had under Toba--though one could also call it a return to the way things had been run under the director before him. The revival of that old dynamism was a pleasant change.

They discussed the article. Everyone agreed that, journalistically speaking, it was an outstanding piece, but most felt that it was important to be mindful of the boy's human rights when deciding how to deal with the sections of the article that violated the Juvenile Law, such as the publication of his deposition, photograph, and real name.

As the conversation shifted to how to manage the problematic issue, they browsed the Japan Library Association's list of examples of other libraries' strategies.

The Musashino First Library had delayed deciding upon a policy until there was time for an extended discussion, but apparently almost all of the other libraries had attempted to implement a strategy the day the magazine came out. By the time the meeting started, most libraries in the Tokyo area had already reported their plans.

The described strategies were divided into two main types: prohibition of access and limitation on access. More libraries allowed limited access--the methods for which also fell into two basic types.

At some libraries, the issue was kept at the counter or in the archives, and a patron had to request access to it--like at Tokyo Metropolitan Library. And at some libraries, the issue was placed on the open shelves, free to be read as usual--except for the offending article.

At these libraries, the article was either completely removed from view, or the sections dealing with personal information were obscured. Either a photocopy of the magazine was produced, leaving out the article or covering up sensitive information--or the magazine itself was altered.

One would think that alterations to the magazine would have been made with the utmost care, but many were downright crude, perhaps reflecting the current climate of confusion. The access restrictions were a by-product of current societal conditions, and in the future they would need to be reevaluated, so any alterations made should have been temporary so that the magazine could be returned to its original state. Unfortunately, however, many libraries had adopted permanent solutions, such as removing the offending pages entirely, or blacking out sensitive information with magic marker.

In addition, there were even libraries that had destroyed the pages after removing them. The number of libraries that had adopted solutions that could be reversed later, such as taping a piece of paper over the controversial sections, was surprisingly low.

They discussed the pros and cons of other libraries' strategies, with the ultimate goal of deciding on a solution for the First Library.

Shibasaki's turn to talk came at this point. "Firstly, I believe we should avoid restrictions that involve permanently altering the magazine. Many other libraries have already ruined their copies, and we should preserve some copies since we'll need to archive them in a deposit library in the future. Magazines are often damaged in the course of normal use, and the number of copies that have already been irreversibly damaged by libraries themselves is significant, so I think our basic goal should be a reversible strategy."

"But if we tape a piece of paper or something over the sensitive sections, some of our patrons will probably peel the tape back so they can read what's underneath. After all, they'll be able to check the magazine out and take it home after it loses its 'new issue' status."

This rebuttal was provided by Hirose. During meetings she put aside her usual cutesy tone and spoke articulately and decisively. This probably just meant that she understood the appropriate time and place for professionalism, but at the moment her calculated restraint disgusted Shibasaki, and intensified her irritation over the incident at lunchtime.

But to some extent, Hirose's assertion was accurate. It was a plain fact that not all of their patrons had enough moral fiber for the library to expect them to spontaneously exercise self-control in times like these. Every day magazine pages were torn or crumpled by patrons "just because they felt like it." It was easy to imagine what would happen to an issue filled with exciting gossip material.

Most of the libraries that had removed pages or blacked out words had cited worries that any sort of temporary material concealing the text would just be ripped off. Even so,

"Magazines subject to access restrictions historically haven't been that popular to check out after they're no longer 'new issues.' I think that libraries that permanently damaged magazines, out of fear that a piece of paper taped over a page would be ripped off, were being a bit shortsighted."

She was careful to criticize the *libraries* that had advocated that solution, but it appeared that the subtle insult had found its mark anyway. Hirose's eyes narrowed peevishly.

"But photocopying the magazine has its own problems. The library prohibits patrons from making copies of works in its collection, so how could we make an almost-complete copy of a brand-new magazine?"

From the perspective of copyright law, making copies of material from a library's collection was a gray area. Under article 31 of the Copyright Law, libraries and other public institutions were permitted to copy works under certain conditions²⁵, but a strategy that involved the almost-total copying of a magazine that had just been released was one that nobody could wholeheartedly endorse. It was the optimum solution in terms of preserving the original magazine, but there was the possibility that patrons would become confused about the

²⁵ I actually looked up the law in question. Copying library materials is permitted under three circumstances: 1) a person may copy a part (or after a certain amount of time, the entirety of) a work for research purposes; 2) libraries may copy a work if its continued existence is in danger; or 3) libraries may make copies of a work for other libraries if the work is out-of-print or similarly difficult to obtain.

prohibitions on photocopying library materials and come in droves seeking clarification from library staff, who would not be prepared to handle detailed questions on a large scale. The libraries that had adopted the strategy of copying the magazine were mainly small-scale libraries that interacted closely with their patrons.

"What if we copied just the problematic article, blacked out the sensitive parts, and inserted the copy into the magazine in place of the original article? We'd store the original pages in the archive for safekeeping. *New World* is saddle-stitched²⁶, so we can take pages out without damaging the magazine too much, and this way we don't need our patrons to request access to the magazine or to watch them while they read it. We could put a legal justification on the front cover if people were curious."

Shibasaki scowled inwardly at the man who had spoken up--it was the man Hirose was in love with. He was probably just contributing his professional opinion, but his statement could also be interpreted as contradicting Hirose, who had pointed out the problems with photocopying the magazine, and thus siding with Shibasaki. Hirose's irritation went up a notch.

Drat, this will probably complicate things again, Shibasaki thought wearily.

"What are your feelings on the matter, Director?" Hatano asked, turning the conversation back over to him.

Etou surveyed his staff. "Personally, I'm troubled by the fact that no one has brought up the option of total prohibition of access."

The room erupted into appalled and noisy protests.

Everyone had acknowledged the point in dispute as the reconciliation of the boy's right to privacy and their patrons' "right to know." The conversation had quite naturally followed that line as it proceeded.

The most important thing to remember was that prohibition of access meant taking away the right of their patrons to access information and make their own judgements about it--and in the end, it was no different from the Media Improvement Committee's censorship. This was why so few libraries had adopted prohibition of access as their strategy.

²⁶ Saddle stitching is a form of bookbinding that involves stapling through the centerfold of a sheaf of folded pages.

"But...if we forbid access to the magazine itself, we trespass upon our patrons' right to read the other articles. Moreover, even if an article has problematic sections, not giving our patrons the chance to read it and judge it for themselves contradicts the library's principles, doesn't it?" Hatano voiced the obvious objection.

Etou was unmoved. "The most important thing an organization can have is a sense of balance. Out of all thirty-two members of the Administrative Division, not one of you brought up the possibility of access prohibition. This suggests to me that the division's mindset is biased, and I must criticize that."

Hatano visibly flinched at the use of the word "biased." It was a word he had previously used exclusively to criticize former Acting Director Toba and the governmentalist faction--no wonder he balked to hear it applied to himself.

"You've all grown too sensitive about issues of principle. I know that you had to put up with former Acting Director Toba, and I understand that there was an inevitable backlash against the governmentalists..."

The entire room was unnerved at the open mention of the friction between Toba and the division.

So he's that kind of man. Taking advantage of her seat at the back, Shibasaki boldly studied Etou. Not a governmentalist yet not a principlist, not on the fence between the two, not affiliated with either. He found his impartiality in his factional independence, and was the type to be proud of it.

His pride in his unique position made it difficult to change his mind.

"Fundamentally, the governmentalist faction is not your enemy. Diverse points of view are a natural and healthy part of any organization, and the governmentalist viewpoint is nothing more than one of those--as well as the principlist viewpoint, of course. It is unnecessary to label short-term solutions to the problem we are discussing as 'governmentalist' or 'principlist.' I would like us to always try to maintain impartiality and think about the perspectives of all members of the library world."

His voice was firm. Because he believed unquestionably in his own impartiality and ability to remember the perspectives of the entire library world, he could make that statement without hesitation.

...Thought so. He's that kind of man.

After that, Shibasaki refrained from speaking for the rest of the meeting, instead devoting her energy to observing its progress closely.

Because of the meeting, the entire Administrative Division arrived at dinner later than usual, so Shibasaki ended up eating with all of her female peers.

Just as the conversation was about to turn to the outcome of the meeting, Iku appeared.

"Hey, nice to see you."

She plopped down across from Shibasaki, visibly exhausted. That was when the table erupted in concern.

"Geez! Kasahara, what *happened* to you!?" Shibasaki exclaimed in justifiable shock. Hirose and the other girls began shrieking a moment later. "Ouch! That must have hurt!" "Are you okay!?"

Iku moaned and covered the left half of her face. "Don't stare at it!"

Under her hands, her left cheek and forehead were covered with bandages and the area around her eye was swollen.

"There was a brawl while we were escorting the delivery truck..."

"Wait--they put a woman on the front lines during a brawl!?" someone exclaimed in surprise.

Iku shook her head quickly. "No, Instructor Doujou was nice enough to order me off the front line, but..."

While guarding the delivery trucks carrying *New World Weekly*, they had clashed with the Improvement Special Agency in front of one of the libraries. During the confusion of the fight, Iku had sprinted to library, carrying a copy of the magazine. It was a good use of the slow-witted yet fleet-footed Iku's skills. However--

"When I reached the library, the automatic door didn't open fast enough..."

"...and you ran into it face-first?" Shibasaki confirmed. Iku nodded miserably. The rest of the girls, so solicitous a moment before, burst out laughing.

"H-hey, quit it! It was really awful! I was covered in glass!"

"You *smashed the door!*?" someone quipped, which set the group off again. Sympathy did not seem forthcoming for poor Iku. Especially since she seemed healthy enough to complain the loudest.

"It's not a big deal, but you know, when the swelling goes down you're going to have a perfectly circular bruise around your eye," Shibasaki informed her.

Iku hung her head again. "That's exactly what Instructor Doujou said!" she wailed. "You're the worst! I already got made fun of plenty by the rest of the Task Force!"

Iku pouted, but everyone was laughing only because it was the type of injury they *could* laugh off.

"I really wanted to look good in front of him, too," she mumbled dejectedly.

"In front of whom?" Shibasaki asked, but Iku grew tight-lipped so she let it go. It wouldn't be fair to expose her in front of the other girls.

"Better than saying something perverted, right? He doesn't know what to do with himself when you go off and do something hare-brained. If you make him worry any more he's going to lose his hair."

"If he were worried about me, would he have started yelling at me as soon as he got to the hospital? It's not like I didn't complete my mission, after all! And he was nice to me right after I got hurt! What did I do to deserve this?"

"What did *he* do to get cursed with you?"

"What the hell are you talking about!?" Iku complained. Shibasaki ignored her. A little girl like Iku wouldn't understand the complex feeling of irrational anger after finding someone safe even if Shibasaki tried to explain it to her. *Sheesh, sheltered girls can be so cruel sometimes.*

Before their idle conversation could turn into something more complicated, Hirose cut in loudly. "So, Shibasaki, I heard you're having lunch with Asahina-san again tomorrow?"

I don't remember mentioning it to YOU, Shibasaki thought grumpily. She didn't know if Hirose had gotten the information out of Asahina, or if she had been eavesdropping while they made plans, but either way, it annoyed Shibasaki to no end that she was bringing it up now.

The other girls, however, went wild with excitement.

"Shibasaki, what's really going on between you and Asahina-san!?"

"Are you going out yet?"

Shibasaki manufactured a smile in response to the gleeful voices of her friends. "He hasn't said anything to that effect. As I told you before, we've only been talking about library issues."

"But Asahina-san told me he likes you, Shibasaki!" The shout of joy that arose hurt her ears. Hirose continued with a smug look on her face. "He might even ask you out tomorrow!"

Right, since you prodded him. You're trying to set us up by telling Asahina-san that I like him, and telling me that he likes me, right? What would you do if I told everyone here about your cheap little trick?

"So why haven't you started dating yet, Shibasaki!? Asahina-san is such a hottie!"

"I'm not sure how to answer that..."

She thought she was making her discomfiture clear, but her dormmates were too excited to pay attention to her mood.

"It'd be a waste to lose this opportunity! I mean, he's nice and polite and he's such a sweetie! If it were me, I'd go out with him in a heartbeat!"

Drat, this is no good, she's turned the situation against me. How can I wiggle out of this without causing bad feelings?

I just enjoy the freedom of being single and independent. Why do you take so much pleasure in discussing someone else's love life? It makes me look bad if I don't do what you want me to!

You guys might go out with him just so you didn't waste your chance, but personally I don't think it would be much of a waste, she thought, though she knew she would be soundly criticized if she voiced this complaint.

Hirose's true motives were evident in her smile as she watched her friends try to persuade Shibasaki to date Asahina "just so she didn't waste the chance." For Shibasaki, the chance to foul up her schemes was more than enough reason to reject Asahina.

If you're so worried about my being single, you should persuade the guy you like to ask me out. I'll turn him down really rudely for you, so you can catch him on the rebound.

"HEY!" Iku interrupted. "You're all acting really thoughtless! None of you would go out with someone only because you had the chance to, would you!?"

Her sharp voice was a splash of cold water on the merry mood of the table.

"He might sound good on paper, but if Shibasaki doesn't like him in that way, what's the point!? Besides, even if she was starting to like him, she might lose that feeling pretty quick if you tease her too much about it!!"

"Sheesh, we were just getting excited for her. You don't have to act so prissy and straitlaced about it," one of the girls pouted, miffed. Iku pouted right back at her.

"What do you mean, 'act prissy and straitlaced'!?"

"Oops, sorry, right. It's not an act for you. You're a genuine straitlaced virgin who even has her very own exalted prince."

Iku shrieked. "How did you know about that!?"

"The story of when you tried to save some books from the Improvement Special Agency while you were still a Librarian made the rounds during our training period. Everyone knows about it. Though I'm not surprised that an innocent girl like you would remain blissfully unaware of the fact."

"Bite me! You wanna take this outside!?"

"No way non-combatants like us are going to fight a killer machine like you!"

The atmosphere grew lively again during this spirited yet ultimately harmless argument. Shibasaki smiled too, cheered by the suddenly upbeat mood.

Ah, this is why.

This is why I love you so much, Kasahara.

*

It was decided that access to the controversial issue of *New World Weekly* would be totally prohibited at the Musashino First Library.

That decision was communicated to the Library Task Force the day after the magazine was released, right after the daily morning meeting.

"Can't you do anything?"

Inamine looked pained at Genda's appeal. "Unfortunately it would be improper for me to interfere with any library's decision."

Genda had known from the start that Inamine could give him no other answer. Even so, Genda's personal feelings wouldn't allow him to give up without trying.

"But...access restrictions I could see, but forbidding access to the entire magazine--that trespasses on our patrons' right to know."

He had been predicting restrictions on the article itself, but the news that the whole magazine would be made unavailable had been completely unexpected. Because the Musashino First Library was the largest public library in the Tokyo area, one anticipated a more even-handed treatment of the problem. The decision to implement access prohibition, a conservative strategy firmly biased in favor of the boy's rights, had caused a stir among the other Tokyo libraries.

"The issue contains several articles that are part of a series, and continued reports on library problems from an anti-Media-Improvement-Act perspective. We're going to end up putting big gaping holes in the middle of any stories in progress."

"To solve that problem, they are planning to photocopy any serialized articles from this issue and attach them to next week's issue," Inamine explained, glancing down at what appeared to be Director Etou's report. "The strategy itself may be biased, but I cannot deny that it's well-considered. They even kept in mind the principles involved in copying periodicals."

Photocopying a magazine was acceptable once it was no longer the latest issue. However, there were many examples of this principle being ignored in extraordinary circumstances like these.

As Genda pressed, the base commander looked more and more distressed. Inamine's obvious concern for him cooled Genda's head.

"I read the minutes of their meeting, and there were opinions voiced from many different angles. At the very least, I do not believe that this decision was made solely at Director Etou's discretion. Though there is the possibility that he instigated the discussion, in the end it was the decision of the entire Administrative Division, and thus I must respect it as the verdict of the Musashino First Library. If I, as the base commander, were to interject a dissenting opinion, *that* would be a biased decision. Can you try to understand that?" he asked placatingly.

Genda jerked his head down in an abbreviated bow. "I'm sorry, sir."

He was reluctant to belabor the point any further.

When Iku returned to their office for lunch break, the commander's door was still shut tight. She gave Doujou, who had been her partner on patrol, a beseeching look. "I guess things didn't go well."

Doujou looked away a little. "Probably not," he nodded.

Genda had gone to Inamine to beg him to intervene in the matter of the treatment of *New World Weekly* right after the morning meeting had ended. The fact that Genda was still holed up in his office like Amaterasu in the Celestial Rock Cave made the result of that conference plain to see.

"Why did they have to decide on that particular strategy?"

"I don't know, they haven't released a detailed explanation yet. What about you? You didn't hear anything from Shibasaki?"

"I never dreamed that they'd decide on total prohibition of access, so I didn't bother asking."

And Shibasaki might have been too uncomfortable with the result to bring it up.

"I heard that Director Etou was really good at his job, but in that case how am I supposed to interpret this strategy?"

She leaned closer to Doujou, who was starting to write up his daily report. When he glanced over at her, he burst out laughing.

"You bastard! How could you spit in an innocent girl's face!?" she screamed, wiping her face on her sleeve.

Doujou's ears turned red with embarrassment. He shouted, "I don't know, maybe because you loomed over me looking like that? Try and think about how pleasant your face looks right now!!"

She suddenly remembered and hid the left half of her face. Just as Shibasaki and Doujou had predicted, her swollen eye had a large, round, cartoonish bruise around it.

"I-It's a black-and-blue badge of honor! Don't you dare laugh at it!"

"I've been doing my best not to, but you have to try not to stick it in my face! I'm not going to be able to contain myself if you lean in suddenly and that clownish face is right in front of me!"

"What are you two getting so excited about?" Komaki asked as he walked in the door, trailing Tedzuka.

"Instructor Komaki, listen! Instructor Doujou did the most horrible thing to me!" Iku implored.

But Komaki took one look at her face, and then he too burst out laughing. He laughed so hard that everyone else began snickering too.

"You're *awful*! I'm going to write in to the base and tell them my superiors' bullying is making my work environment intolerable!"

"It's your *face* that's awful. Who could help laughing at it?" Tedzuka pointed out bluntly, which nettled her even more. '*Awful*'!? Describing a girl's face as '*awful*' is going too far!

"But I couldn't wear an eyepatch! It would totally screw up my depth perception!"

An eyepatch would hide the bruise, but even a slight decrease in her ability to judge distances might slow down her reactions in case of trouble. As a member of a combat profession, she hesitated to wear an eyepatch for non-medical reasons. After she had bravely decided not to hide her ghastly injuries, the lack of sympathy from her team was unendurable.

Her bravado failed and she slid down the side of Doujou's desk to crouch on the floor. Someone gently patted her head; when she looked up, she saw that it was Doujou.

"I'm sorry. Don't look so down."

"...if you're really sorry, look me in the eye when you say it!"

"I told you, I can't look directly at your face when you look like that!!"

Just as they started to snap at each other again, the door to the commander's office banged open.

"Put a sock in it!"

This admonishment was completely unlike Genda. He glared irascibly at them all; when his eyes fell upon Iku, his temper found a target and he started shouting.

"Why the hell do you look like Norakuro? Go get your other eye socked to match!"

"N-Norakuro!?"

Iku looked daggers at Genda, but the rest of the men exploded in laughter. He was referring to a pre-war manga, but it was in the library's archives and everyone knew what he was talking about. The main character was definitely a dog.

"Hey--wait--he's not even *human*!!" Iku sputtered.

Next to her, Doujou gasped out between laughing fits, "C-Commander, his eyes are *white* on a *black* background!"

"*That's* what you're complaining about!?"

"You're right," Komaki put in, wiping tears from his eyes. "The circles are the whites of Norakuro's eyes, not bruises."

"That's not what you should be complaining about either!!"

As her team continued to laugh tactlessly at her, Iku grew more and more offended.

"Okay, now I'm getting really pissed off! I'm going to sue you all for abuse of authority!"

"Abuse of authority only refers to superior officers, so I guess I'm off the hook, then," Tedzuka observed dispassionately.

Without hesitating, Iku snapped, "I'm suing *you* for mental anguish!"

"We get it! Calm down! We'll take you out to lunch, okay?" Doujou said, ruffling Iku's hair. He turned to Genda. "How about you, Commander? Apparently she's going to sue us all, so we should try to get in her good graces." The tone of the invitation was casual, but anyone could see his concern for Genda.

Komaki and Tedzuka both watched Genda closely, and even Iku stopped complaining. --She didn't mind being used as an excuse if it was for a good cause.

Genda looked incensed for a moment, but this was probably to cover up his embarrassment. At last, a frightening smile lit his face.

"All right. Let's hit the road."

As they headed out, Iku suddenly remembered. She put her hand in the air and said, "I get to pick the place, right!? I wanna go to the French place by the bus route!"

"...You have no qualms about picking the most expensive place, I see..."

"I'm under no obligation to worry about the finances of someone who makes more money than me."

"Well, I'd appreciate it if you worried a little bit!"

Doujou bopped her lightly on the head, and Iku stuck her tongue out at him.

*

Orikuchi's cellphone chimed to announce the arrival of a text message; it was from Genda. When she read it, her face split into a broad grin.

The message was untitled, and its body consisted of only one word.

"Sorry"

From that single word, she immediately understood the whole situation. She knew how the Musashino First Library had decided to deal with *New World Weekly*. She knew how Genda had protested, and how he had eventually given up.

He had probably even pushed for a solution that violated his own personal principles.

Orikuchi's reply was equally brief.

"I understand"

That would be enough to convey everything to Genda.

*

Perhaps it was the effect of Iku's righteous tirade the previous day, but when Asahina came to invite Shibasaki out to lunch, her dormmates' commentary was much more tame than usual.

They went to the restaurant where Iku had caused a ruckus with the bell on the door, which had become a routine location for them.

Because of Hirose's attempt at manipulation the previous day, the mood as they faced each other over the table was strangely awkward. Shibasaki had no right to bring up the topic and try to smooth things over, nor did she feel any desire to, so she sipped her water in silence.

Asahina broke the ice first. "What ended up happening with *New World Weekly*?"

Ah, starting with a safe topic.

"It was decided that access to this week's issue would be indefinitely prohibited."

The minutes of the meeting presented it as a unanimous decision in the end. However, from what Shibasaki had observed, Etou's recommendation had been passed over the heads of those who had lost their will to protest in the wake of attacks from the other side.

Not a governmentalist yet not a principlist, Etou was a "nonpartisan"--one who advocated for balance--and his proposal had been for the sake of "balance throughout the Tokyo library world." As of yesterday, the number of libraries who had decided on total access prohibition was quite small. According to Etou, the fact that an overwhelmingly small percent of libraries had decided to give maximum consideration to the boy's rights "could not be called a healthy amount of balance" if one looked at the library world as a whole. The other staff members could not counter this argument.

By implementing access prohibition at the Musashino First Library, the public library with the most patrons in the Tokyo area, that balance would be regained.

But, is the Musashino First Library under any obligation to concern itself with the balance of the library world? Hatano's question was valid. The library was an organization that stressed the uniqueness and independence of each individual library, so the decision of how to deal with *New World Weekly* should be made with respect for the individuality of each library.

But Etou never wavered.

Outsiders judge the library world as an aggregate. There are reasons to respect the principle of library independence, but don't you think it's also important make sure the library presents an appearance of healthy balance to the rest of the world?

"Wow, your director seems pretty insightful," Asahina remarked after hearing Shibasaki's explanation. He appeared deeply impressed.

"Does it seem that way?"

"Oh, is he not? I thought his recommendation for dealing with *New World Weekly* was shrewd, and extremely fair. To worry about the entire library world from his position as director of a single library shows that he sees the big picture, I think."

Shibasaki nodded vaguely.

Sure, he sees the big picture. It's his ability to see the details that I have doubts about.

"Many of our patrons expressed a desire to read that issue--with his decision, he overruled their opinions."

A decision for the sake of the entire library world, Etou had repeated again and again, but had never mentioned, *for the sake of our patrons.* His argument for balance did not fit with the ideal from the "Report on Management of Public Libraries in Medium and Small Cities": that the most important duty of a library is to serve its patrons.

"He didn't really have a choice, did he? Anyway, the article in question was based upon documents that were released illegally. On top of that, I don't think it's the kind of material that the public needs to see. And if they want to see it, they can always go to another library, so..."

"Who the hell gets to decide what the public does and does not need to see?" Shibasaki asked bluntly. Asahina's mouth snapped shut in shock. "Even if it used illegal information, the article is trying to

make some point. Patrons have a right to read the article and judge for themselves whether that point is valid or not. If anyone today behaves like they have the right to make that judgement for someone else, it's the damn Media Improvement Committee."

Asahina looked visibly hurt.

"I'm sorry. But I think it's unfortunate that someone who researched incidents of book burning by libraries would say such a thing."

If libraries started categorizing books as "good" and "bad," that itself would become a kind of censorship. The desire to provide proper guidance to the citizens of Japan, and the resultant labeling of "good" books, were connected with the library's wartime errors.

The modern library had supposedly learned its lesson from historical attempts to separate the wheat from the chaff, and was now devoted to protecting the chaff as well as the wheat.

"Do you think that the director is wrong, Shibasaki-san?"

"I do not think he is wrong. However, his beliefs differ from mine. That's all."

"Then why didn't you stand up for your own beliefs and fight him?" he asked cuttingly.

Just that moment, their lunch arrived. Gradually their conversation returned to neutral territory, but the mood was still awkward as they started to eat.

As they left the restaurant, this time Shibasaki was the one to break the ice.

"Could we stop meeting like this?"

Asahina looked even more hurt than he had in the restaurant. "Is it because of what happened yesterday?"

"That's part of it."

"Do I look foolish enough to take what she said at face value and let it go to my head?"

"No." Asahina revealed his wisdom by not seeking the cause in their disagreement today. It was just that--"I can't bear to be manipulated by her. Anyway..." Shibasaki stepped off to the side of the street, out of the way of pedestrian traffic. She didn't want to embarrass him. "The person you think you like doesn't exist--she's just my business façade. I smile and laugh and act warmly toward you because it's my job. Someone who falls for my business façade is

ineligible for me from the start. Because it's almost inevitable to fall for a pretty girl who treats you nicely, right?"

Asahina gaped at her, stricken dumb. Shibasaki gave him her very best "business" smile.

"I promise to treat you the same as I always have if you honor us by patronizing our library again."

She bowed and walked away.

Asahina didn't try to follow her.

*

The following week, when the problematic issue of *New World Weekly* was no longer the newest one, Asahina visited the Musashino First Library after a few days' absence.

"Shibasaki-san."

As Shibasaki was leaving the reference room on some task, he caught up to her and called her name. She turned around, but before she could say anything, Asahina launched into a speech.

"At first, it was for the reason that you said. But after talking to you that first time, I figured out that you were a bitter and sarcastic person. If I had been discouraged by that fact, I wouldn't have invited you out again." He remarked candidly, "You're not that good at maintaining your business façade."

Shibasaki pouted sullenly. "It's not like I took that much care to hide my real personality." If she had, she didn't think he would have seen through her.

"Oh, really? That's fine then. But anyway, since I still wanted to have lunch with you even after I discovered that you had a nasty side, it's unfair to assert that I was only attracted by your business façade," he insisted stubbornly. "I wanted to talk to you--bitter, sarcastic, nasty you. Even if all we talked about was the library, I wanted to hear from someone whose way of thinking about things was so different from my own. Also--" here he cast down his eyes, looking pained "--it's not fair to avoid me because of what one of your dormmates did. If you're going to spurn me, do it because of something *I've* done."

He always reminds me of Kasahara when he gets that blunt and socially awkward, Shibasaki thought. She replied, "But it creates problems for me when you ask me out at the library. I don't like being made fun of for things like that, and it gives scheming girls like her an opening."

Asahina looked crestfallen.

"Therefore," Shibasaki continued, "if you're going to invite me out, do it by text message, and I'll reply the same way. If you do that, I'll keep going to lunch with you until I find a reason to spurn you."

"Oooh, so you exchanged text message addresses?" Iku exclaimed in surprise.

"Yeah, well. He was right when he said I shouldn't reject him for something that wasn't his fault."

She had been reluctant to fall in line with Hirose's schemes, but she felt better knowing that Asahina knew about them; on top of that, if she pretended to go along, she would be safe from further scheming, which was rather convenient.

Iku smiled in relief. "Well, I'm glad you're not just doing it to make the people around you happy. You're kind of a pushover when you don't want to let people down."

"True," Shibasaki acknowledged honestly. "When people have gotten their hopes up, I'm just no good at disappointing them. It used to cause too much trouble when I was younger, I guess."

It was all right to tell Iku. To reveal a weakness before her. She was keeping that fact firmly in mind during the conversation.

Perhaps guessing Shibasaki's thoughts--though in reality, probably not--Iku thumped her chest. "Well, when that happens, just let me know and I'll handle it for you. I'll make them stop pestering you!"

"I don't know if what you do could be called 'handling.' More like 'manhandling.'"

"H-hey! I totally saved you the other day!"

"That's true. I'm grateful for that."

Iku squirmed uncomfortably in the face of Shibasaki's gratitude. "It's weird when you go all serious," she said, a little impolitely. "But anyway, if you do end up going out with him, let me know!"

"Sure, if that happens. But I don't think it will."

"Come on, why are you deciding that from the beginning?"

"You must know that I love playing hard to get!"

During their conversation, her phone chimed with a text message. Opening and reading it took a mere moment.

"What is it? An invitation from Asahina-san already?"

"No, it's from a friend," Shibasaki replied, snapping her phone shut.

Chapter 4, Big Brother, Little Brother

*

"My, Mikihisa-kun! Good afternoon!"

Marié's parents were the only people who called him "Mikihisa-kun." His own parents just called him Mikihisa, and he had never had the kind of friends who used his first name.²⁷

It was a little embarrassing for a man who was fast approaching thirty to have "-kun" attached to his name by someone who wasn't even a relative, but Marié's mother had called him that since birth, so he had no right to complain.

"Is the library closed today?"

As a member of the Defense Force, Komaki's days off didn't necessarily line up with library holidays. Though he had explained this many times, she always seemed to forget, so he simply answered that his shift that day was at night.

"Is Marié-chan here?"

In reality, he had gotten in touch with her before coming over, but it seemed somehow more polite to pretend that he was stopping by unannounced. Even if he hadn't contacted her first, Marié was usually home on Saturday afternoons.

"She's in her room; go on up. It would be nice if you took her for a walk or something. If you leave that girl to her own devices, she barely goes outside at all." Marié's mother laughed musically. "If not for you, she would probably turn into a *hikikomori*²⁸."

"All right, I'll take her out for tea or something."

"Thank you. I feel bad leaning on you so much. Let me know if it's too much trouble."

"Auntie, that's unworthy of you," Komaki chided her, smiling. "If it were too much trouble, I would have stopped coming long before now."

"I suppose. Thank you anyway. You know, if you were taking care of her, I'd never worry about her again," she said jokingly. Komaki

²⁷ "First name + -kun" is a form of address used mostly to refer to little boys. His friends probably called him "Komaki-kun" or "Komaki-san," which are more grown-up.

²⁸ From Wikipedia: "*Hikikomori* is a Japanese term to refer to the phenomenon of reclusive people who have chosen to withdraw from social life, often seeking extreme degrees of isolation and confinement because of various personal and social factors in their lives."

didn't know what to say, so he just laughed. Marié's mother sighed regretfully. "You're right. I suppose she's still a child."

Uh, no, that's not what I meant.

Driven by an obscure feeling of guilt, Komaki fled to the second floor.

The door was open, but Marié was facing her desk and didn't notice Komaki's appearance. Since sound was a major factor in sensing a person's arrival, Marié was slower to pick up on his presence than most hearing people would be.

He flipped the light switch near the door a few times. Marié noticed the slight flickering and turned around.

"Komaki-san!"

Since she was in her own house, she didn't hesitate to speak. She arose from her chair and ran over to him like a child--Komaki hastily reached behind his back and closed the door--just as Marié threw her arms around him.

He caught her hands, disengaged them from his waist, and thrust Marié away.

"Please don't do that."

"Why not? Does it bother you?"

"No, just this opposite, which is why it's a problem."

By the remark "*if you were taking care of her,*" it was obvious that Marié's parents trusted him completely with Marié because they thought of him as a caretaker or protector. Those ten-odd years of trust weighed heavily on him.

"Didn't you say you couldn't see me as a child anymore?" Marié pouted.

"I don't see you as a child anymore," Komaki replied, at which point Marié understood.

"What do you wanna bet they never see me as an adult?"

"I wouldn't take that bet."

Marié sighed, plopping down on the bed. "You want me to tell them?"

"Stop it, you're making me twitchy." Komaki gave a strained laugh and sat down at the desk. She had the child's room of a standard house plan, so the bed and the desk weren't that far apart, but it was far enough to make it harder for Marié to hear. "The timing is critical. I don't want your parents to keep us apart."

"...why are you sitting over there?" Marié eyed him crossly. When he laughed again, she snapped, "Don't just laugh it off. When can we actually start properly dating?"

"We can't do anything until you understand the kinds of things I'm working hard to suppress around you!"

He thought she might just get angrier, but instead she grinned like a fool.

"...things you're working hard to suppress..." she murmured to herself in a satisfied tone.

Komaki looked away from her. --*If I'm not careful, I'm not going to be able to restrain myself.*

"Were you reading something?" he threw the question out, trying to change the subject, but he hadn't been facing Marié and she hadn't heard him.

"I'm so sorry, what did you say?" Marié had developed the habit of apologizing reflexively when she hadn't heard someone.

"I'm sorry, that was probably hard to hear," Komaki apologized back, berating himself internally. *You idiot, she shouldn't be apologizing to you. How could you be so flustered that you forgot to face her when you said something?* "I was wondering if you were reading something," he enunciated clearly, pointing to the desk. Upon it was a laptop computer, running with a browser window open.

"Oh right, that! I was going to ask you about it if you came!" Marié got up from the bed and came over to the desk. Komaki ceded the chair to her and peered at the computer from over her shoulder. "This, here--it's from the Musashino First Library homepage."

"It is?"

Every public library in Musashino had a different homepage, but the one in Marié's browser had a black background and gave off a different impression than the homepage he remembered.

Their official homepage, which served as a place to post announcements and provide online services to their patrons, aimed to be as simple and usable as possible, with a white background and a large font. They would never use a layout like this, with a black background and dense blocks of text...would they?

"It looks like a page that was added recently. And *this--*" Infuriated, Marié cut herself off in mid-sentence. Apparently it wasn't a pleasant thing that she wanted to show him.

The title across the top of the page was "A Librarian's Rapier Reviews." As she scrolled down, he saw that there were images of

books with their bibliographic information, with some sort of comment attached to each.

"Here." Marié scrolled impatiently to a certain point on the page. There was the cover for *The Land of Raintrees*. It was the book that had caused so much trouble for Komaki at the beginning of the year, but even so, both Marié and Komaki had a special place in their hearts for it.

If I were to describe this book in one word, it would be "superficial." I got fed up to the point of anger with the way the disabled main character's troubles were used as a cheap ploy for tears. The characters were one-dimensional and I couldn't empathize with them at all. I've been reading this author's books since her debut, but after this one I gave up. To put it bluntly, she bit off more than she could chew with this one. This wasn't a novel, it was the author's own wish-fulfillment fantasy. With her lack of talent, it'll be hard to recover from this failure.

Maybe someone who could swallow the spectacle of two children playing at love would enjoy it? Well, keep in mind that this is just my personal opinion, but this book is not worth buying. I humbly recommend borrowing it at our library so that you don't waste your money.

Marié was silent for a long time after Komaki had finished reading. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders. She had probably just read the entire review again along with Komaki.

At last, Marié whispered, "After I read that book at the library, I went out and bought my own copy."

"Yeah. I know." His arms tightened around her shoulders. "I recommended the book to you, remember? I love it too. Don't believe for second that this represents the library's collective opinion."

Marié's head came to rest against Komaki's shoulder with a bump. Apparently that was what had worried and pained her.

Any patron would be hurt if their favorite books were denounced as worthless by their friendly neighborhood library.

"I'm sorry."

Komaki had nothing to do with the page and had no reason to apologize, but when he thought of Marié finding and reading it all by herself, he couldn't bear to stay silent.

*

"I have something I'd like you to look at."

Komaki had come to Doujou's room under the pretext of drinking with him, but as soon as he arrived, he booted up Doujou's laptop and navigated to the offending page from the Musashino First Library's homepage. Doujou had never seen it before either. Librarians and Library Force members, whose lives revolved around the library, had surprisingly little contact with the library's homepage. They didn't need to use it to get information or check out books, since they could always go right to the library, and most of the terminals they used inside the library only connected to the library's intranet.

Doujou looked over the page. It had a black background--an unusual choice for a public institution's webpage; seemed to be run by a single librarian in the Administrative Division; and its content consisted of particularly poisonous book reviews.

"What do you think?"

Komaki had told him about the shock Marié had received when she found a condemnation of one of her favorite books on the page.

"Well..." Doujou scrolled through the page, scratching his head. "...my first thought is, I don't like it." Criticizing books with snide and caustic language did not suit Doujou's sensibilities. "If it wasn't put out by the library, if a single person managed it all on their own, it might be legitimate. Some people find this kind of thing funny. It's just that..."

"...it's not appropriate material for a library's website?"

"I don't think it is. It's not the library's place to review and critique books," Doujou said decisively.

Komaki argued back, "But what about 'Recommended Reading'? Doesn't that amount to reviewing books?"

Komaki was referring to books that were recommended by the library as a way to introduce patrons to new reading material. Periodically they were included in a special feature in the library bulletin or a special corner within the library, as well as on a page on the library's website, separate from "A Librarian's Rapier Reviews."

"What are you talking about?" Doujou stared at him with open puzzlement. "'Recommended Reading' doesn't include any criticism or commentary. It's never negative. Book reviews almost have to be negative sometimes, because they argue for or against the value of a

particular book, but that's incompatible with the idea of public service. Do you disagree?"

Public servants endeavored to provide helpful and pleasant service to all of their patrons. This was why the library didn't critique books; no one became uncomfortable when a librarian recommended a book that they themselves had enjoyed, but it was certainly possible that a patron would become uncomfortable if their favorite book was judged and found wanting.

"But someone *could* object to a book like this being recommended..."

"Do you have a fever or something?"

Doujou, looking concerned, put a hand to Komaki's forehead. But apparently it wasn't a fever talking.

"Fine, if you want to talk possibilities, it's *possible* that someone could object. But still, I don't think it's healthy for a public organization to only think negatively. 'Recommended Reading' is a positive technique to get patrons interested in books; I can't place it in the same category as this 'Rapier Reviews,' which uses the most negative techniques I can think of. I don't think such techniques need to be used in public service."

"Sorry," Komaki whispered, a self-mocking smile on his face. "When that girl is involved, I can't trust myself to be impartial."

After this frank admission, the urge to tease Komaki a little was overwhelming. "She sure has you wrapped around her little finger."

Doujou thought Komaki might blush, but he just laughed nonchalantly and replied, "My princess is more delicate than yours."

"...what's that supposed to mean?"

"What?" Komaki replied innocently.

Because he thought a followup attack was likely, Doujou subsided into an irritable silence. Komaki sometimes showed weakness but Doujou's attacks never got through; for some reason he always ended up being the one forced into retreat.

He knew from experience that the best strategy was to remain silent...but--

"...For your information--!"

--he was usually defeated because his natural competitive spirit would get the better of him, and he wouldn't be able to keep from replying.

"The fact that I was the guy in her 'prince' story has no relevance at this late date. She was still a child then."

"As someone whose partner is around that same 'childish' age, wouldn't that statement be an insult, roundabout and pathetic as it was? Shall I retaliate?"

"No!" Doujou exclaimed, flustered. "I meant she was especially childish, so even though the ages are the same the situations are totally different."

"Oh, I get it! You're upset because you wish she had been less childish and more mature."

"...now you're just misunderstanding on purpose, aren't you." Doujou looked away in a fit of pique.

Komaki chuckled. "I wish your subordinates could see you now. Your face would completely shatter Tedzuka's faith in you as a superior officer."

"I never asked him to place all that faith in me," Doujou grew even more petulant. He muttered irritably, "Anyway, she doesn't even remember that it was me, so your point is moot."

Otherwise she'd never have used the word "prince," let alone--

"Her bad memory isn't just limited to that incident. During her training period, she flagged down Commander Inamine, thinking he was a patron. He was completely flummoxed--I mean, to think that one of his own staff wouldn't know what he looked like!" Komaki chuckled again, remembering. Then his tone turned sly. "But it's childish of *you* to sulk just because you remember her but she doesn't remember you, Prince."

An outrageous followup attack had come after all. Doujou's eyes flashed. "Who's sulking!? I'm not sulking, damn it! Take it back! And never, *ever* call me by that ludicrous title again!"

"Take it back? I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I can't follow an order I don't agree with."

"Your insinuations have absolutely no basis in fact! The one she's in love with is some Library Officer from five years ago who only exists in her mind--not me!!"

Komaki stared at him as though he had grown a second head. It was only then that Doujou realized his slip.

"She told you she was *in love*?"

He immediately registered his mistake and bitterly regretted it, but any attempt to take it back would be a bald-faced lie. "It's just that idiot's usual dramatics," he spat.

I only met him once, five years ago--

--but even now I want to be like him, I respect him, and I love him.

It was plain to see that the whole situation had become irretrievable.

"...don't give me that pitying look!"

"Oh, I'm sorry, was I?"

"And don't apologize either!" Doujou fumed, as he used the laptop's touchpad to scroll the offending page. "Anyway, we were talking about the problem that *you* wanted my opinion on, before you completely derailed the conversation!"

"In that case, you should stop baiting me when you know you can't win."

Doujou was extremely disgruntled about the way Komaki assumed his own invincibility, but their history did bear this conclusion out.

"The main problem is, how the hell did this project get approved in the first place?"

"More of the library director's 'balance'?"

In the two months since his arrival, Etou's "balance" mantra had completely penetrated the library.

"It's a sound idea in its own way, but..."

Whether intentionally or unconsciously, Etou rarely considered the fact that there were some situations that required balance, and some that did not.

"Well, you have to consider that that's probably how he made his way up through the ranks."

Doujou listened with half an ear to Komaki as he scrolled to the end of the page. At the very bottom, he found a name.

"Isn't this one of Tedzuka's roommates?"

Sunagawa Kazuki, it said. Komaki read the name and nodded. They knew their subordinates' friends and acquaintances from events and such at the dorm.

"I think so, yes. What kind of kid is he, though?"

"All right, I'll call Tedzuka over and ask him," Doujou said, pulling out his cell phone.

Komaki gave him a chiding look. "You can't just call him over here with no warning. You're being a pain in the ass."

"Well, I don't want to be alone with you anymore. I never know if you're going to launch some weird verbal attack."

"Wow, that's incredibly selfish of you."

"Damn straight," Doujou replied, dialing Tedzuka's number.

When Tedzuka poked his head in Doujou's room, he was met first not by Doujou but by Komaki, who made a small apologetic gesture. "Sorry I couldn't stop him from bullying you."

"Oh--don't worry about it." Apparently Doujou had called him over in spite of Komaki's protests. But Tedzuka wasn't troubled at all by being imposed upon by a close superior; still less if it was a superior he admired deeply.

"Oh, shut up." Doujou aimed a kick in Komaki's direction. They seemed to have been quarreling prior to Tedzuka's arrival. "Anyway, let's get this thing out of the way, then we can get down to drinking."

Doujou beckoned Tedzuka over to the laptop. "Do you know anything about this? Apparently your roommate Sunagawa's in charge of it."

As Tedzuka skimmed the page, his brow wrinkled.

It was a collection of critical analyses, apparently meant to disparage particular books. The author probably thought he was being wittily sarcastic, but from a third-party perspective, it just looked like an exercise in fitting as much profanity and invective onto a single page as possible. The only people who could possibly approve of the page were those who already hated the books it listed.

"Sunagawa wrote this?"

Before Doujou could reply, Tedzuka had scrolled to the bottom of the page where Sunagawa's name appeared. He had used a template that put the author's name at the very bottom.

"We felt like the content of the page was a bit touchy for a library page, so we wanted to ask what kind of kid the author is."

Tedzuka answered Komaki's inquiry frankly. "I can't say we're close enough for me to say 'This is out of character for him' or something..."

"That's pretty much the answer I would have expected from you," Doujou chuckled. Male Library Force members were housed four to a room at the beginning of their enlistment, so Tedzuka could surround himself with acquaintances without having to form deep relationships with each of them.

"But I *am* surprised. He doesn't seem like the confrontational type."

Though Tedzuka did not know him very well, he seemed like the quiet, self-effacing type. He hadn't caused any conspicuous trouble in

their room in the past year, while the other two had caused several memorable incidents throughout the dorm with their carousing and merrymaking.

Since Tedzuka had been the one who had to intercede for them each time, the fact that Sunagawa never caused that kind of trouble meant Tedzuka thought of him as his unremarkable but undemanding roommate.

"Could you do some reconnaissance for us, if the opportunity presents itself? For instance, find out why the Administrative Division approved this kind of project, or what level of awareness Sunagawa has about what he's doing."

"To what purpose, exactly...?" Tedzuka asked.

Doujou cocked his head and shrugged. "Situational awareness, I guess? I'm guessing Commander Genda doesn't know about this yet. I'd like to collect a little information before I brief him."

Just as Genda acted as Inamine's eyes and ears on the ground, Genda's subordinates were *his* eyes and ears. Because the Musashino First Library was affiliated with the base, there were relatively strong ties between the two, but since Inamine had to supervise the management of the Library Force throughout the entire Kantou area, he couldn't keep track of what was going on at every single library-- unless it became a problem.

Even Tedzuka understood that "A Librarian's Rapier Reviews" was a public relations nightmare waiting to happen. Negative programs had no place in the realm of public service.

Tedzuka nodded. "I understand, sir. I'll see what I can find out from him." He popped open the can that had been handed to him. "I was thinking, you might also be able to get some information from Shibasaki."

Doujou made a face at this suggestion, then nodded reluctantly. "The idiot's going to go ballistic again when she hears about this," he muttered. The others knew without asking that he was talking about Iku, whom they would have to enlist to get the message to Shibasaki.

Ever since he had figured out that Doujou didn't value Iku over him, but was simply overprotective of her for some reason, Tedzuka's frustrations from the time of the squad's formation had evaporated. Maybe Doujou just didn't know how to deal with a female subordinate, or maybe if he had a male subordinate as spectacularly rash and careless as Iku he would worry just as much about him--a position even Tedzuka could agree with.

"If you leave her out again, she's going to get all sulky and melodramatic, sir," he warned, mindful of the collateral damage certain to befall him in that case. Komaki burst out laughing, and Doujou spat out sullenly, "I know that."

*

"I hear that 'A Librarian's Rapier Reviews' is your doing?"

His chance to talk to Sunagawa came around a few days after he received his orders from Doujou and Komaki. Their other two roommates were out for the evening at a mixer. Tedzuka wasn't interested in meeting women at present, so he had refused an invitation, and Sunagawa, apparently, had a long-distance girlfriend.

"Ah, you've read it?" Sunagawa smiled happily, and turned away from the TV to face Tedzuka. "What an honor, to have an elite like you read my work."

"Come on, don't say shit like that."

Tedzuka didn't like it when people mentioned his origins. It was too easy for the tone of the conversation to turn jealous, even when it didn't start that way.

"But it's true, isn't it? You were selected out of all the new recruits to join the Library Task Force, and on top of that, your father is the president of the Japan Library Association..."

"I told you, cut it out. I'm gonna get pissed off in a minute."

While Tedzuka respected his father, he didn't necessarily like having their connection brought up. But Sunagawa apologized, so he held his irritation in check and continued the conversation. "Are you writing those reviews on someone's order?"

"Now you're being rude. It's my own project!"

And apparently it was a project he was so personally invested in that he could call Tedzuka rude for simply implying that it might have been someone else's idea.

"So, remember how I helped out with making the website?"

The frugal Library Force didn't have the budget to outsource anything but their most critical network and security needs. The announcements, and other web content that was frequently updated, were managed by those Library Force members who had an interest in programming and web design, and the whole thing was basically held together by duct tape and chewing gum.

"Anyway, the director selected me to experiment with ways we could use the website to increase the number of visitors."

"And *that* was what you came up with?" Tedzuka attempted to inject some gentle criticism into his tone, but Sunagawa didn't seem to pick up on it.

"Edgy, isn't it? It's not every day you see a library publicly showing its bitter and sarcastic side."

You don't see it every day because common sense stops most libraries from doing it, Tedzuka thought, but he kept this retort to himself for now. He wouldn't learn much if he didn't keep Sunagawa talking.

"I'm surprised you were given the go-ahead."

"I told them, if we're going to have 'Recommended Reading,' it should be okay to have the reverse as well, right? And they said, try it out as a test case. Man, that new director is really a guy you can talk to. Toba only let us make these tame, inoffensive updates--that man had no spine at all."

For stuff like this, I think I felt safer with Toba's fence-sitting and opportunism, Tedzuka thought, but again kept to himself. Tedzuka didn't think there was any point to putting a venomous edge on a public service, and Doujou and Komaki had agreed with him.

"Have you gotten any complaints?" Tedzuka prodded, and indeed the thrust seemed to have hit the mark.

"I put up a disclaimer and everything!"

Indeed, across the top of the page was a large disclaimer. Something like, *"These are the personal views of a single librarian. May include extreme or objectionable language. Proceed at your own risk."*

"I did my part and warned them, so if they read the page and get upset, that's their problem, right?"

If Komaki heard this, he would go quietly livid and never forgive Sunagawa for as long as he lived, Tedzuka thought as he voiced mild disagreement. "I don't really agree, but..."

Maybe if it was a personal or private site, but the fact a library has content on its site that needs a warning like that is the problem here.

"But isn't it strange that libraries work to protect freedom of expression, yet there are restrictions on what a librarian can say?"

"...Look." Tedzuka paused before he spoke because it took a moment to clamp down on his indignation. "Freedom of expression

doesn't mean you can get away with saying whatever the hell you want. Think about what the world was like around the time the Media Improvement Act was passed."

Led by the gossip magazines waving the banner of "freedom of the press," the media had repeatedly reported misinformation and committed libel, causing the courts to begin to take a stance of harsh condemnation against them. The acceptance of the argument that some loss of freedom was necessary to reign in the degenerate media had been the first step toward the passage of the Media Improvement Act.

Thinking back on those historical events, of course it was not possible to tug the definition of "freedom" toward a more convenient interpretation for oneself.

If one was to speak of freedom of expression for librarians, one had to consider whether or not the person was taking a stance appropriate for a librarian. As one who should be approaching all books with a minimum level of neutrality, Sunagawa's statements in his reviews skirted close to the line of acceptability.

"Remember how the library was struggling over how to respond to that *New World Weekly* article?"

If invoking "freedom" actually allowed one to shrug off any problem, there wouldn't have been a struggle at all.

But Sunagawa was giving him a slightly offended look, as if Tedzuka's arguments were grating on his nerves. "Tedzuka, you're a bit narrow-minded. Your brother was a lot more shrewd."

Tedzuka could feel it as his face froze. He didn't know how Sunagawa had interpreted his expression, but the other leaned in with a riveted look on his face.

"Tedzuka Satoshi *is* your older brother, right?"

"So what if he is?"

Tedzuka's tone was stiff, but Sunagawa didn't flinch one bit. Indeed, the confirmation seemed to excite him even more.

"It must be amazing, having a brother like that! I started going to his 'Library of Tomorrow Project' research society after some people invited me. To think it was only begun two years ago--it has so many members and they're all so passionate! I think it's the strongest research group to come out of the Japan Library Association. And the president is still only thirty! That's the kind of example I can look up to."

It doesn't surprise me that he managed to get his group off the ground in two years, Tedzuka thought, recalling his brother's face. Since his last memory of his brother was over five years old, he didn't know how the passage of years had changed his face. Nor had he tried to find out.

The only time Tedzuka had contacted his brother had been to ask about Komaki's whereabouts.

"Recently I got to talk to Tedzuka-san. Apparently he knew we were roommates and deliberately sought me out. He seemed concerned about you--told me to give you his regards."

Try as he might to keep his stiff features empty of any expression, his cheeks twitched all the more. *Why now, after all this time? Is he making fun of me for asking him for that favor?*

"So, what kind of person is your brother?"

"Exactly the kind of person you think he is, probably."

"Hey, come on, tell me!"

Sunagawa had always been a harmless and inoffensive companion, so Tedzuka hadn't realized it until now, but he seemed to lack the talent of reading a person's mood. Either that, or he was just particularly tenacious when he was interested in a topic.

There was only one way to shut up people like him.

"My father and brother don't get along very well. The story would be embarrassing to my brother, so I don't want to talk about it."

As expected, Sunagawa looked uncomfortable at this reply. After invoking the name of his admired brother, Tedzuka wasn't worried that he'd spread any gossip.

Though gossip wouldn't hurt or bother Tedzuka himself. It would be his brother, who was capitalizing on the name of Tedzuka, who would be inconvenienced.

Sunagawa's questions ceased, and their conversation continued in a rather stilted manner.

*

Satoshi, Tedzuka's older brother by eight years, left home when Tedzuka was a junior in high school.

After graduating from the National Library Academy, being assigned to a library in Kawasaki, and joining the Japan Library Association as a full-fledged member, Satoshi captured the attention of

the library world as the eldest son of Association President Tedzuka Sumio.

He had certainly distinguished himself enough to be worthy of the attention. In a world where the library had become a bastion of freedom of expression and freedom of knowledge, the Tedzuka family had particularly close ties to the library, and Tedzuka, steeped in that environment since infancy, revered his father and brother as a matter of course.

He had expected his brother to attain a high rank and assist their father, and of course by that time he would be in a position to help them as well.

Those dreams died suddenly, three years after Satoshi entered the library world.

The library should be brought under one central authority as an organ of the federal government.

The first time Satoshi made that declaration, Tedzuka wondered for a moment if he'd gone crazy. Their father also seemed shocked, and from then on the two engaged in heated discussions almost every day. Tedzuka didn't have the experience or the grounds to put together a cogent argument on the matter, and eventually he had his hands full supporting his mother, whose nerves were fraying as she was torn between her husband and her eldest son.

After the war, the old leaders of the library had longed to centralize the library as an organ of the Ministry of Culture, but due to the political climate during the occupation, as well as economic difficulties, their hopes had never been realized. They opposed the Library Law, which had been passed without establishing the library's duties, centralizing its management, or providing for government subsidy. With the library's pre-war leaders spearheading the movement, they worked for an amendment to the Library Law. They strove for a restructuring of the library system, where the nationwide network of libraries would be maintained and serviced by a central authority.

However, the leaders of that movement didn't show any sign that they had reflected on the violence that had resulted from the cosy relations between the library and the federal government during the war. Though they were using the pretext of gaining financial support for the library, their position of reliance on the government had essentially not changed since before the war.

The movement came to an end without managing to pass the amendment, and eventually the "Report on Management of Public Libraries in Medium and Small Cities" came out, and the library set out on the path of local administration and independence, which it had continued upon to the present day.

The fact that they had eliminated their dependence on the federal government was a point of pride within the library world, and while there was still a small, stubborn faction that called for centralizing the library system, this point of view could be rejected as old-fashioned.

Tedzuka heard many reasons why Satoshi supported it. He said that though it had brought about the establishment of the Library Force, there was just too much of an imbalance in a war between a locally-administered organization and a federally-administered one.

He said that whatever differences there were between local and federal organizations, there was something wrong with the picture of two public institutions, operating within the same society, at war with each other.

Satoshi's claim was that in order to oppose the Media Improvement Committee, which was managed under the Department of Justice, the library too should be brought under the aegis of the Department of Culture, and the conflict could be continued as a purely political fight--a squabble over the extent of one ministry's right to censor the other.

However, this was an argument that assumed that the library would recognize the right of the Media Improvement Committee to carry out its censorship. No matter how much they tried to reject it, it was plain to see that if the library was raised to the position of a Ministry of Culture organization, it would be forced to consent to censorship.

Resistance against all forms of censorship was practically the library world's motto, and it was the mission they had been entrusted with with the passage of the Law of Library Freedom. They could never, ever submit to the censorship that would result from Satoshi's idea.

Giving up territory at the beginning was all part of the plan, Satoshi claimed. If they got more territory at the end than they had lost in the beginning, it would be worth it.

To Satoshi, who had intelligence and self-confidence aplenty, this must have been an obvious fact. He couldn't understand why his

father didn't agree with him, and he took no pains to hide his impatience with the man.

But his father never wavered.

We must not sully the history of the Law of Library Freedom by participating in censorship, even for a short time. In fact, we can't even guarantee that it would be a short time.

Even when we tried to keep in mind our common history, every time the library has tried to get closer to the federal government, or the government has tried to use us, nothing but misfortune and folly awaited us.

The library must not repeat that folly again.

Their father could not be moved from this position, and Tedzuka, though still a high school student, admired his strength of will.

But the relationship between Satoshi and their father broke down, and that was when Satoshi left home.

Their father has apparently prepared himself for this eventuality, but their mother, whose nerves were fragile to begin with, suffered terrible emotional distress. She had a nervous breakdown, and spent a long time in and out of the hospital. On top of studying for college entrance exams, Tedzuka's daily routine also grew to include accompanying his mother to the doctor and managing her medication. In fact, it might be more accurate to say that he studied and went to school on top of caring for his mother.

Satoshi did not let one hint of his estrangement from his father leak to the outside world, and continued to be the perfect "president's son" both within the library and within the Library Association. At the same time, he continued to gather supporters for his pet theory, mostly among the young, and was even opening up a negotiation pipeline to the Media Improvement Committee.

Tedzuka heard all this from Satoshi himself. Since Tedzuka had declared his intention to enter the library world since before his brother left home, Satoshi contacted him periodically, though Tedzuka never reciprocated.

It was obvious that as Satoshi cultivated Tedzuka, he wanted to recruit him to his own faction. It was difficult for Satoshi to convert followers to his radical ideas, which was why he hadn't made his estrangement from his father public. Their father had always held to the assertion that their familial relationship carried no weight within

the Association, but if Satoshi could attract his brother to his cause, their father's very impartiality would be an advertisement for them.

An innovation promoted by the sons of such a leader must be worth a look, and the president himself must approve of it somewhat-- or so it would appear to other people.

Truth be told, the pipeline that Satoshi had opened to the Media Improvement Committee had been useful in its way, and though some voices called his methods into question, Satoshi's stock within his library as well as the Association rose accordingly.

But every time Satoshi contacted him, Tedzuka's annoyance with his brother only intensified. Since leaving home, though he had not once been to visit their ailing mother, he continued to discreetly drop their father's name as much as he dared--and now Satoshi was trying to use him as well.

At last, Tedzuka decided that no matter what plans his brother championed, he could not agree with Satoshi's means of achieving them. This conviction grew as deeply-rooted as the previous respect and adoration he had had for his brother.

"Please don't contact me anymore," Tedzuka said, after being called out by Satoshi, ostensibly to congratulate him on being accepted to college. "If you want to see me, you can come to the house. But no matter how much you try to convince me, I won't ever agree with your logic. I concur with Father's opinion on the matter, and I believe in the principles of the Library Force, which uses its resources to protect books."

These words, which he had tried to say many times before but had never been able to, finally burst emphatically from his mouth.

Satoshi listened with a wry smile.

"Well, if the chance someday arises for us to speak again, let us by all means."

As Satoshi made to leave, Tedzuka tried to return the congratulatory present his brother had bestowed on him, but he did not succeed.

"If we have a reconciliation some day, you can wear it then. Keep it against that day."

Tedzuka couldn't put together a protest. The word "reconciliation" had shaken him. He hadn't been able to discard his hope that one day Satoshi might abandon his radical theories.

The gift Satoshi had given him was a brand-name wristwatch. Tedzuka threw it in the least-used drawer of his desk at home, and

hadn't opened the drawer once since then, as though it contained some dreadful thing.

His enlistment in the Library Force, application to the Defense Force Division, and ambition to join the Library Task Force were all declarations of his resolution.

Opposing all censorship. Fighting to the end to protect freedom. Tedzuka was resolved to take his place on the front lines of that fight.

And he would show them that he was a more worthy son of his father than his brother was. That pledge had contributed to his stiff-necked behavior right after his enlistment.

"God, it's like you're not satisfied unless you're the best at everything!"

That was when Iku's observation had struck like a devastating blow. Though it was something he had heard before from Doujou and Komaki, it hadn't penetrated his brain until Iku's attack hit the bull's-eye.

He had been treading the same road of pride and hubris as Satoshi. After Iku's words forced him to recognize that fact, he was able to confront Doujou and Komaki's well-meant criticism as well.

From Iku's roommate Shibasaki--as well as from Iku herself--he had also received humbling denunciation. *The girls in that room aren't girls*, Tedzuka thought--but for him, this was his highest compliment, for it meant he recognized them as rivals.

*

"Hey, Shibasaki, what the hell is this 'Librarian's Rapier Reviews' thing!?" Iku fumed when they were in their room together.

Shibasaki made a weary *oh, here we go* face. "That site is turning into a problem both inside and outside the library."

"And who the hell does Sunagawa think he is!? Does he think a mere librarian qualifies as a book critic!?"

"If he were a critic, he'd write more impartially. Watch your tongue."

After learning of the site from a squad meeting, Iku had read it and discovered that several of her favorite books had been savagely condemned--thus her ill humor.

And when she found an attack on the fantasy book she associated with her "prince" in the children's section of the page, her anger grew fiercer still.

"Only a child could enjoy it!?! Are you stupid!?! Of *course* more kids would like it, it was written for kids! An adult butting in and saying 'this isn't an adult's idea of art' is just as idiotic as going to a toy store, grabbing a Power Rangers toy robot, and saying, 'this isn't an adult's idea of fun.' Fine, go spend all your money on an ASIMO²⁹ or something!"

"I call BS," Shibasaki interrupted, pointing a sudden finger at Iku. "Children are the hardest people to entertain. Because unlike adults, they don't have the patience for anything boring. If you only knew how hard it was to read aloud to children...!" she concluded bitterly.

"I guess, but..." Iku stubbornly chewed her lip.

When she was young, the series had totally engrossed her, and even as a high school student, she had read the concluding volume with the same passion. For Iku, her memories of high school did not yet belong to the distant past. She had thought that turning twenty would automatically transform her into an adult, but even three years later, she still couldn't find a firm boundary between child and adult within herself. Little by little she was starting to think of past behaviors as "childish," but she could still remember well what her sensibilities and feelings had been when she was a student.

Iku's sensibilities as an adult had developed from her sensibilities as a child, and so unfair criticism of a book she had loved back then hurt her just as much as it would have hurt her younger self.

"You were willing to be branded a shoplifter to protect this book." She still loved the book as much as she had only five years ago, when she had been willing to go to such lengths to protect it. To call it childish--!

You have no right to say that to me, Iku thought, trying to bring to mind the face of the decidedly unmemorable Sunagawa.

"Anyway, was he always so antagonistic?"

Antagonistic was precisely the right word for the collection of reviews. She found it hard to believe that such poisonous prose had been written by a man so unremarkable that he would have been

²⁹ A million-dollar humanoid robot created by Honda.

forgotten in the crowd long ago, if not for the slight common ground they shared in Tedzuka.

"Mmm, his personality has been changing slightly since about six months ago. I couldn't give you any more details, since we're not in the same section."

The fact that she had noticed a change in an unobtrusive peer in a different section was part of what made Shibasaki so scary. *Sheesh, does anyone get by her?* Iku thought in wonder.

"It was around the time he joined this research group...well, maybe he didn't join, but anyway, he started hanging out and getting pretty close to some of its members. Since then, a few people have said that he's turned oddly pushy, or irritating--things like that."

"You know, you can be *really* frightening sometimes," Iku told her, shuddering.

Shibasaki laughed wickedly. "You honor me with your compliment."

"It wasn't a compliment!" Iku denied forcefully, shocked. *How twisted do you have to be to consider that a compliment!?*

Shibasaki turned serious. "That site actually *is* becoming a problem. Rather, I should say, there were many people who questioned its appropriateness from the very beginning. But the guys Sunagawa's been hanging out with backed him, and they knew just how to wrap the director around their fingers."

A page just like 'Recommended Reading,' but the opposite, had been their logic.

"The director just loves his 'balance,' and since he was the one who gave the order to try new things, it got the go-ahead in the end. After all, Sunagawa's the webmaster, and he's got the support of most of his new 'friends.'"

The director hadn't spoken a word of praise or censure about the project after giving his permission, but it had generated quite a bit of hostility within the Administrative Division.

"But anyway, that's inside the library," Shibasaki concluded. Iku remembered that she had said that the site was *"turning into a problem both inside and outside the library."*

"So, by 'problems outside the library,' you mean complaints from patrons probably, right?"

"If only it were that simple," Shibasaki sighed. "We've also started to receive complaints from the authors and publishers of the

books that were singled out. No one's made a formal protest yet, but some of them are pretty angry..."

Meaning it was only a matter of time before their little problems turned into big problems.

"There wouldn't have been a problem if he had started a personal site and said he was a librarian in his profile. Though I don't know that working at a library or another book-related profession is enough to make you a literary critic..." Shibasaki echoed Doujou's arguments.

Iku, too, understood that making disparaging comments about particular books on an official library site was problematic. But in her case, it was an instinctive impression.

No true champion of justice would bad-mouth books. She knew people would just stare at her if she said this out loud, so she kept her mouth shut.

"We've received complaints like, 'why the hell is a library, a public institution, insulting specific books?' and 'should we be taking this as an attack on our company's publications?' And every one of them is completely justified. Responding to them is really tough work."

Perhaps catching the momentary dissatisfaction that flashed across Iku's face, Shibasaki glanced at her. "Hmmm?"

"...The problem with the site didn't start there."

Attacking just one book meant hurting the people who loved it. She wasn't offended for her own sake, since she was used to protecting books from attack, but it made her heartsick and outraged to think of the pain Marié had felt reading those awful words about one of her favorite books.

At the very least, it wasn't something a library should be doing, when their mission was to make books available to area residents. The same went for the Library Force, and all of the other library associations and organizations.

When she told this to Shibasaki after a lot of thought, Shibasaki stroked her head and said, "Good girl, good girl. You tried really hard. Teacher understands exactly what you were trying to say."

"Bite me!" Iku shook off Shibasaki's hand.

Shibasaki laughed, then nodded. "But the authors and publishers complained about it too. Not just that they were being attacked by a public institution, but that we weren't thinking about the feelings of the readers who supported them."

"Yeah, so? What's the library doing in response?" Iku asked curtly to cover her embarrassment.

"We've been telling them that there *is* a disclaimer both within the menu and across the top of the page, that the opinions expressed on the page are strictly that of the author..." Shibasaki smiled drily. "...but of course, that's pure sophistry."

Iku's heart ached to think of Shibasaki and the other librarians being forced to deliver these lines.

"As we've gotten more complaints, we've had to add more and more to the disclaimer. These days it's a total monstrosity."

"...so why hasn't the site been taken down yet?"

"You wanna know?" Shibasaki's dry smile grew wider. "Because we've also gotten responses from people who think it's interesting. A large number, in fact."

Iku didn't have an easy reply to that. Shibasaki was saying that the site had enough supporters to cancel out the protests from patrons and publishing companies.

"And actually, the books that Sunagawa skewered have been getting checked out *more* recently. Well, I suppose some people find enjoyment in reading books just to mock them. That's a matter of taste, and so I can't complain about it. Or about the fact that Sunagawa and the others are using it to defend their actions."

Until a clear-cut problem occurred, Etou, supporter of balance in all things, probably wouldn't order Sunagawa to put an end to "A Librarian's Rapier Reviews."

Obviously, many Library Force members were pained by the fact that articles which knowingly hurt their patrons were being posted as official library content. Saying that they weren't official content because they were the views of one librarian would just be more of Shibasaki's "sophistry." After all, they were linked to from the library's official homepage.

So when Iku, who was a member of the Defense Force and had very little direct contact with patrons, thought about Shibasaki and the rest of the Administrative Division, she couldn't bring herself to vent anymore. If she thought the situation was sad and onerous, how much more anguished must the Administrative Division be, when they had to deal directly with patrons?

And they couldn't even tell their patrons, "It's hard on us too." As the aggressors they had no right to complain. Protestations of personal innocence would hold no water, since patrons lumped all library workers together. All they could do was apologize to the people the library had honestly hurt and upset.

For the first time, Iku truly realized that the Defense Force weren't the only ones who were fighting battles. She habitually made the unconscious distinction that the Defense Force were combatants and the Administrative Division were civilians, but the truth was, the Administrative Division were just fighting different kinds of battles-- against misconceptions, ignorance, and differences of opinion, for instance.

And unlike the Defense Force, they didn't have a physical enemy, which made their battles that much more complex and distressing.

"...hang in there."

The encouragement slipped out of her mouth. Shibasaki grinned and nodded, then winked playfully. "Don't worry, it's only a matter of time. He's already standing on a land mine."

Iku did not question this suggestive statement. She knew from their long acquaintance that when Shibasaki made oblique comments like these, she would never elaborate on them.

*

"I wish this publisher would stop putting out these inane books."

That sentence was apparently the "land mine" Shibasaki had mentioned. Iku found out about it a few weeks later, at the beginning of July.

This was how Sunagawa had concluded his review of a certain novel in a series.

Sunagawa apparently had a particular dislike for the author, for he had already written scathing reviews of several of his other books. Correspondingly, there had already been several complaints made by his publisher.

And then Sunagawa had written that sentence. The reaction of the publisher was swift.

Until that point, the gently-worded protests had come from its editorial department, but this was an official complaint from the company's legal department.

Because Sunagawa's reviews constituted a serious obstruction of business, and because they were an attack on a particular author by a librarian, who should maintain a neutral stance regarding all books, the legal department demanded the deletion of the offending review and all past reviews of that author's books, as well as an apology from

the Musashino First Library. If they did not comply, the publisher would sue. They were already making preparations to go to court.

The publisher had had enough. No matter what the disclaimers said or how salient they were, it was only natural to interpret Sunagawa's page as an official statement from the library, since it was linked to from the library's official page. The publisher was determined to kick up a fuss, even if it meant accusing the library of suppressing free speech.

At this point, all of Sunagawa's incautious remarks began to work against him.

"*I wish this publisher would stop putting out these inane books.*" Even if it didn't reach the level of outright suppression of free speech, this sentence certainly contained dark hints to that effect.

Going through the site's archives, there were a shocking number of other articles that contained material the publisher could use to make its case. However popular Sunagawa's venomous prose had been, it was now nothing but a liability for the library.

But Director Etou's response was equally swift. That same day, he had all of the content under "A Librarian's Rapier Reviews" deleted; in its place, he published an explanation and blanket apology under his own name. In addition, he visited the publishing company in person to apologize.

His preparations were so complete that he must have assumed that such a problem would occur sooner or later, and had already decided on a course of action to follow when it did. This also meant that he had authorized an experimental program even knowing that he would have to take on personal responsibility if it failed. In the end, Etou won more praise than censure for the incident, both within and without the library.

The publishing company also dropped its threat of a lawsuit, citing the Musashino First Library's total compliance with their terms, as well as Etou's sportsmanlike attitude.

"How should I put this--he's *frighteningly* good at his job," Shibasaki told Iku in honest amazement. They had left the reference room so that Shibasaki could brief her on the latest developments. "He's something special, if he can manipulate a hostile situation like this so that he comes out even more respected than before."

Iku peered at her. "Is it just my imagination, or did that sound a little snide...?"

"Oh, just your imagination," Shibasaki snickered. *Yup, definitely snide.* "Well, be that as it may, everyone has to acknowledge his talent now. He even managed to shield Sunagawa. Another director might have blamed 'the rashness of youth,' made Sunagawa a scapegoat, and run away as fast as he could." She was tacitly referring to Acting Director Toba.

"I heard that Commander Inamine was prepared to go the publisher too, but it turned out he didn't have to." Shibasaki probably already knew, but Iku volunteered her own nugget of information anyway. As she had expected, Shibasaki nodded in confirmation.

"Sunagawa and his friends are in total shock over the trouble they caused. They can't look the director in the eye anymore."

Sunagawa and the others who had been directly involved weren't the only ones impressed by the director's response to the situation. Etou's popularity was steadily rising within the library. The number of supporters for his "balance" strategy would probably grow accordingly.

A low buzzing sound interrupted their conversation. It was Shibasaki's cell phone. "Sorry," she said, and answered it. "Hi."

From her brusque tone and the way she turned away from Iku, Iku knew that she was talking to Asahina. Her relationship with Asahina occupied an uncertain place in her world, and whether out of embarrassment or just inexperience, she was always curt with him.

"Lunch? Fine, but my lunch break today is late."

They worked out the details in short order and Shibasaki soon hung up. "Asahina-san?" Iku asked.

Shibasaki nodded, looking a little annoyed, as she usually did when Asahina was concerned. "He said he wanted to hear what happened with 'A Librarian's Rapier Reviews.' That man hears things almost as fast as I do."

Iku knew that making any teasing comments on the subject of romance would just make Shibasaki more obstinate, so she simply observed, "He sure is enthusiastic about his work."

"That he is. I have to give him credit for that, at least."

Does that mean she respects him a little more now? was how Iku interpreted this lukewarm reply.

It was ten days after the uproar had occurred.

While patrolling the library with Tedzuka, Iku encountered Sunagawa, the central actor in the whole mess. He was packing some

things into boxes in front of one of the many storage rooms that surrounded the reference room.

Iku was not inclined to feel kindly toward Sunagawa--his reviews had offended her by criticizing her favorite books, to say nothing of the problems they had caused the whole library. Tedzuka seemed like he was about to offer to help him, but Iku ignored this and purposely lengthened her stride.

"Hey, help me carry these, would ya?" Sunagawa called.

She sighed inwardly in irritation. Tedzuka of course complied immediately, so she had no choice but to help as well. Sunagawa had to transport several cardboard boxes to a warehouse, so she picked one up.

As they walked together, Iku silently maintained a sullen expression. Tedzuka wasn't the type to try and help the situation, and eventually the awkward atmosphere became too much for Sunagawa.

"Uh...are you mad about the trouble from last week?"

He had probably received plenty of censure already from the rest of his peers for the uproar, which was why he could ask that question bluntly.

"I'm not mad because of the trouble from last week." Iku shot a dirty look at Sunagawa. "I was personally offended by the site before that mess happened--the fact that it turned into a legal nightmare doesn't matter. Even if it hadn't, I would still despise you."

"What the hell?" Sunagawa muttered to himself. "Look, I know I was careless..."

"For God's sake, I'm not criticizing you because you were *careless*," Iku silenced him forcefully. She never had been the type to back down from a fight.

"Hey, come on," Tedzuka tried to intervene before things got even worse.

"Stay out of it," Iku snapped at him, glaring.

He turned back to Sunagawa. "Give it up," he advised shortly, and backed away. Tedzuka--indeed, every member of Doujou's squad--knew how incensed Iku was over Sunagawa's reviews.

"I don't know how many people liked your project, but I *do* know that there were patrons who were hurt when you trashed their favorite books. I believe that the mission of the library is to offer books to book-lovers, and the Library Force defends books for that purpose. Your project, and the things you said, were not consistent with the

goals of the library," she told him scornfully, using what Komaki and Doujou had told her about Marié.

Sunagawa's expression grew even more sullen. "But librarians deserve the same freedom of expression--"

"You wanna duke it out? If we fight on a real floor I could take you out in three seconds." Iku jutted her chin pugnaciously, and Sunagawa cringed back. "The problem was that you posted on the library's official site--why can't you understand that? You're free to start a personal website wherever you want, and exercise your freedom there as much as you want. But 'freedom' doesn't mean attacking individual books on a page linked to from the library's homepage. No matter what, patrons are gonna think that you represent the whole library! They're going to think that the whole library is dismissing their favorite books!" Iku shouted, the knowledge that Marié had been hurt that way turning her tone harsh.

"The kind of people who would still be confused about that after all the disclaimers I put up--"

"You better apologize, before I put you in a chokehold until you pass out!"

Iku actually seemed ready to throw her box aside. Sunagawa jerked back from her in terror, bumping into a fire door. It was the entrance to the warehouse.

"Later!"

Iku slammed her box down on top of the one in Sunagawa's arms. Sunagawa had never been very muscular, and he stumbled back with the impact, almost sprawling on his backside.

The sight somewhat gratified her feelings, and Iku stormed off, leaving Sunagawa behind.

Tedzuka caught up with her a few minutes later; he had probably given Sunagawa a little more help. "Well, that was immature," he observed with raised eyebrows.

*

A few days after unexpectedly witnessing Sunagawa and Iku's explosive encounter, Tedzuka fell into a predicament of his own during an excursion after work. The invitation had come via the telephone at his dorm.

"How many years has it been?" His brother's tone and expression were easy, as if he had forgotten the discord of their last parting.

"Five," Tedzuka answered stiffly.

"I didn't think you'd actually agree to meet me."

"Yet you invited me anyway."

Tedzuka didn't answer his cell phone if it was Satoshi calling, but that defense didn't work with the dorm's phone. He hadn't been able to muster the nerve to argue about the meeting over the telephone in the dorm manager's office. Satoshi had named himself as his brother, and his Tedzuka pride hadn't allowed him to let an outsider observe a family quarrel.

He also owed his brother for getting him the information when Komaki was in trouble. Ever since he had asked Satoshi for help, he had been waiting for his brother to attempt to use the debt for his own gain.

Tedzuka had chosen the meeting place, a coffee shop in Kichijouji, two stops away from the Library Base. He didn't want to meet somewhere where his dormmates might see them.

Satoshi sat across from him, looking much as Tedzuka might in eight years. They had always been told how much they resembled each other, and at twenty-three, Tedzuka looked so much like Satoshi had at the same age that it irritated him.

"When you asked me for that favor, I wondered if your attitude toward me had softened," Satoshi said smoothly, without beating around the bush. This bluntness was typical of his brother. "Your roommate...Sunagawa-kun, was it? He might have asked you, but--would you like to join my 'Library of Tomorrow Project'?"

"Even after five years, all you can think about is how to use me."

The words were out of his mouth before he had time to think, or leisure to exercise self-control. It made him realize that he had been secretly hoping for something more affectionate from his brother.

"You just want it to look like your group is run by President Tedzuka's two sons, don't you? I would lend more legitimacy to your project."

"What, is that all you were sulking about?" Satoshi replied, sounding disappointed.

Tedzuka's retort froze on his lips. He was humiliated--by picking out and blatantly attacking one emotion among many, Satoshi had summed up and dismissed all of Tedzuka feelings with a single word.

"I didn't invite you because you're my brother. I don't need incompetent people, even if they are my relatives. I would have wanted you even if we weren't related."

It was an elitist statement, characteristic of Satoshi. But it was strangely beguiling; Tedzuka had to admit that his brother had a certain magnetism. It was probably what gathered people to his side.

"...you had no way of knowing back then whether I could be useful to you or not."

"Back then"--when Satoshi left home. Tedzuka had intended it sardonically, but Satoshi didn't seem to notice. "I knew you'd be useful," he casually countered. "You are my brother, after all."

This nepotism was a shameless contradiction of what he had just said--though those who idolized Satoshi would probably interpret it as a sign of brotherly affection.

Even Tedzuka, who knew all of his brother's tricks, was somewhat moved. As if trying to shake off that reaction, he said, "My feelings have not changed since our last meeting."

His opposition to Satoshi's plans--which involved participating in censorship, for the sake of long-term goals--had driven him so far as to join a combat unit.

"I see. That's too bad," Satoshi backed down readily. Tedzuka must have looked dubious, for his brother smiled wryly. "Don't give me that look. I haven't given up. You're too talented for me to give up on you easily. But I was too impatient, and I admit I was hoping--wrongly--that you had been carried away by your feelings."

--My feelings. How can you talk about my feelings?

"I'll make sure to try a little harder," Satoshi told him, picking up the check and rising from his seat. Tedzuka looked up, and as if to forestall him, Satoshi said, "Let your brother treat you to coffee. It's been five years, after all."

Since it would be childish to make a fuss about such a minor thing, he nodded in thanks.

As he watched his brother walk away with a steady gait, he realized with belated despair that they had never mentioned their father or mother.

*

Shibasaki, who had never once agreed to more than lunch with Asahina, accepted his dinner invitation partially because of the serious expression he wore as he entreated her.

"I want to talk to you without being rushed, when you're free. What I have to say might trouble you, so it would be better to discuss

it when you didn't have to go back to work right afterwards." --in which case they had no choice but to meet after she got off work, and since that wasn't until seven in the evening, when the library closed, it would have been silly not to meet over a meal.

"I have to ask--you're not going to ask me out, are you? If you're just using these melodramatic hints to drag me out, I'm going to be very cross with you," she warned him.

Asahina looked offended. *"At this point, something like that wouldn't concern you enough to affect your work, would it."* This uninhibited frankness was evidence of Shibasaki's bad influence on him.

In order not to arouse the suspicions of other Library Force members, they purposely chose an expensive restaurant as their meeting place. Since Asahina had named it, it was settled that he would pick up the check. It wasn't the kind of restaurant that a Librarian First Class could casually patronize. Even her superiors only went there on special occasions.

Since informal clothing would look out of place, Shibasaki dressed up a little for the occasion. Asahina wore a suit. When they met, he stared at her for a moment, spellbound, then smiled shyly. "It's like you're a different person."

"Same goes for you," she replied. "Though you might want to buy a better suit, since you wear them so well."

"Sheesh, you're merciless," he said, fiddling with his sleeve. "Is the size wrong or something?"

"I'm talking about the material. Cheap fabric doesn't suit you, since you're so good-looking."

"I'm having a *really* tough time telling if that's a compliment or an insult..."

Reverting back to their usual mode of interaction, they entered the restaurant. But even after they had ordered their meals and started eating, Asahina avoided broaching the main topic. After she pestered him several times, he told her, "Since we're here, we might as well enjoy our meal. It's a good restaurant, and this is the only circumstance under which you'd ever agree to have dinner with me."

Thus, they ended up chatting idly all through dinner. To their neighbor's eyes, they must have just looked like a well-matched couple.

But as the meal continued, Asahina's expression grew more and more troubled. From the paleness of his face, she could divine that whatever he had to say to her, it was nothing pleasant.

Her worries were confirmed as they sipped their after-dinner coffee. What Asahina had to say rocked Shibasaki to the core.

"The Musashino First Library has allegedly been illegally disposing of books. I got the information from a friend of mine, who's a newspaper reporter."

Two thoughts came to Shibasaki immediately, and one tumbled out of her mouth before she could stop it.

"Impossible."

If such a thing was going on within the library, no matter how the participants tried to hide it, there was no way they could keep her from finding out. She was that confident in her abilities.

Asahina gave her a pitying look.

"See, the thing is...it's on a really small scale. So small that not even you would notice it."

If she had discovered it, she could have stopped it before it leaked to the press. She bit her lip in vexation.

Then Asahina voiced the second thought that had come to Shibasaki upon hearing the news.

"My friend is considering reporting it as a second instance of modern-day book burning."

She could feel herself flinch. What a profound disgrace for a library. For the library she worked at.

"--What would you say if I told you that I could stop him from going public?"

Her head snapped up. "...what did you just say?"

Her desperate voice sounded pathetic to her own ears. Asahina gave her a pained, watery smile. "He's a close friend, and he owes me a favor. I could ask him not to write the article. So..." Yes, his voice was pained, pained and confused. "It's really, really small-scale. If you could fix it so that it's like the whole thing never happened..."

"...I could save the First Library."

Not just the Musashino First Library. The honor of the entire library world.

She sat silently for what felt like a very long time. When she took a sip of her coffee to try to calm down, she found that it had gone cold.

The temperature of her coffee told her how long Asahina had patiently sat, giving her time to regain her composure.

"How much longer can you keep him from going public?"

She avoided the main question by asking about the details.

"Until the end of tomorrow, I believe."

"I'm sorry," Shibasaki said at last, covering her face with her hands. "I can't give you an answer right now. Gimme some time."

If I let myself answer now, I know exactly what I'd say.

And Shibasaki was trying with all her might to keep herself from saying it.

"Tomorrow. I'll have an answer by tomorrow. Today, I just need to go home."

"I understand," Asahina said. She could hear him nod. "Shall we have just one more cup of coffee?"

"Give yourself time to calm down a little before heading home," was the implicit meaning. Shibasaki nodded helplessly at this solicitous suggestion.

"Welcome back! ...what happened?" Iku's welcoming smile turned quizzical. "Are you sick?"

The anxious question told Shibasaki just how pale her own face must be.

"No, not really. But it got a little chilly outside, so I'm going to go take a bath and get some of my circulation back."

She was also visiting the bath to calm her roiling emotions, and she soaked herself for nearly an hour. When she got back to the room, Iku welcomed her back again and reached for the electric kettle. Their mugs were already sitting out on the table, apparently awaiting Shibasaki's return.

"Is green tea okay?" Using the same cup--a mug--for green tea, black tea, or coffee was a fact of dorm life.

The humble concern of her unsophisticated friend brought sudden tears to her eyes. She suppressed them skillfully with the ease of long practice. By this point, hiding her tears from others was almost as instinctive as breathing.

"Did you have a fight?"

The thought hadn't even occurred to her until Iku asked the question, but it was obvious in hindsight. If a woman goes out to meet a man and comes back white as a sheet, the next concern after her well-being is whether she had a falling-out with him.

"Oh, yes, we had a little spat." If her powers of judgment had been at their normal level, she would have lied and deflected the question, she thought--then smiled wryly to herself. The problem wasn't with her judgment.

The problem was with her nerve. Once she admitted that to herself, she relaxed.

"No, that's not what happened," she assured Iku first. "By the way," she continued, bringing up a new subject, "there's something I want to ask you--hypothetically, of course." She didn't want to burden Iku with the knowledge of the library's misdeeds, so she quickly came up with a comparable situation. If she put it in the simplest terms possible--"Imagine that someone you loved or respected very much was involved in some crime."

"What--wait--why are you asking such a horrible thing? Don't tell me Asahina-san--"

It was a predictable enough guess, and had Iku wide-eyed with alarm.

"Of course not! Would I have specified 'someone you love' if were talking about him?"

"Oh, okay... Though, now I feel kind of sorry for Asahina-san..."

"Well, you could say he *inspired* the question, I suppose," Shibasaki said, then returned to the matter at hand. "So, this person was implicated in some crime, and just before it was made public, you found out that you could fix things so that it was like the whole thing never happened. What would you do?"

"What??" Iku, not the sharpest knife in the drawer at the best of times, cocked her head in confusion at Shibasaki's roundabout phrasing. Apparently it would take her some time to digest the question. "Ummm...so basically..." Agitated, Iku raised her head. "If I was in a position to cover up the crimes of someone I loved, would I do it?"

Iku's characteristically direct summarization hit Shibasaki like a brick to the head.

"If it were me...hmmmm...I'd urge him to give himself up, I think. If he was someone I loved or respected, I wouldn't want to make the crime even worse. If the fact that I tried to cover it up was ever discovered, he'd be in even more trouble, right?"

Shibasaki had stopped listening halfway through Iku's reply.

Coverup. The frank word struck her with a bitter blow. The option she had been agonizing over came down to that. But in truth, it wasn't an option at all. It was heresy.

She was confident that if she had discovered the crime beforehand, she would have been able to prevent it. That was why the reset button that Asahina was offering had confused her temporarily. But a reset button wouldn't prevent the crime from happening in the first place.

All was already lost when someone else discovered it. That truth was inescapable.

"Kasahara." She cut off Iku, who was still babbling on about something, and announced abruptly, "I adore you."

"Excuse me!?" Iku looked at her as if she were crazy. "You asked me a complicated question and then suddenly come out with that?? I was thinking really really hard about your problem, but you weren't even listening, were you!?"

"Oh dear, I'm sorry for asking you to do something that's so hard for you."

"Hang on a minute, are you trying to say that *thinking* is hard for me!?"

"Would you like to present some evidence to the contrary?" Shibasaki replied.

Iku paused at that, despondent. After grumbling for a minute, she resentfully replied, "...no."

She called Asahina the next day on her lunch break.

He picked it up on the first ring, which told her he had been waiting for her call. He sounded a little sleepy--perhaps he hadn't slept well the previous night.

After her talk with Iku, Shibasaki had slept soundly. She felt a little guilty about it now.

"I've decided to pretend that I never heard what you told me last night."

Asahina was silent for a time, then asked carefully, "Are you sure?"

"I am," she replied immediately.

"...I'm relieved." Asahina audibly relaxed. "After I told you, I started thinking about what would happen if you actually took me up on my offer. I thought maybe it had been a mistake to tell you."

"You underestimated me," she lied. This was pure posturing, but maybe Asahina knew it.

"Now I can fall in love with you with an easy conscience."

Though his feelings had been obvious from his behavior and speech, and indeed the from way he had invited her out in the first place, this was the first time he had explicitly stated them.

"You know, even if you try to charm me in a moment of weakness, it's not going to work. I'm a hard woman to please."

"Couldn't you be just a little charmed, for me?" Asahina replied wryly.

*

The incident did not come to light in the way Shibasaki expected. Etou held a sudden press conference, at which he announced that parties within Musashino First Library had chosen to suppress particular books, in violation of official policy.

He explained that he had received a call from an anonymous tipster, and upon investigating the allegations, had discovered they were true. The books that had been suppressed were all works by authors who supported the Media Improvement Act--some few dozen volumes in total.

The "book burning incident" of a few years ago had involved the suppression of books targeted by the Media Improvement Committee for censorship. So while the methods were similar, the objectives were completely different.

This was Etou's official statement on the incident:

The number of books involved is small, and the perpetrators were driven by their passionate objection to censorship. However, a library should never persecute any book, so I regard this as a truly regrettable incident.

As we continue to investigate the case and amend our regulations in response, I would like to offer an apology to the authors of the affected books, the Media Improvement Committee, and finally, to our patrons.

It was a second example of a failure that never should have even happened once within the library. But the library itself had disclosed the incident and apologized, and the suppression had been driven by abhorrence for censorship in accordance with the Media Improvement

Act. Thus, most media sources, even as they decried the incident itself, reserved a sliver of compassion for the library.

"This has been an unexpected development," Shibasaki bluntly voiced her concern to Asahina when he called.

"Don't you think you might be reading too much into things?"

The way Etou had disclosed the incident had allowed the library to just barely escape with its authority intact. Shibasaki had wondered from the start whether someone had manipulated the situation to ensure that the library would suffer minimal damage. Her suspicions immediately, inexorably, had fallen on Asahina.

"I mean, it's a pretty rude thing to suggest," he rebuked her mildly. His reaction was--well, it wasn't particularly odd for him.

"I'm sorry," she apologized.

"This is just my guess," Asahina warned, "but my reporter friend has many contacts within the library world as well as the Department of Justice...he might have informed one of them."

According to Shibasaki's information, Inamine was not among those contacts. Perhaps Etou was? That was a different question.

"I don't like this," she whispered to herself.

The phone must have picked up her remark, for Asahina asked, "What?" But Shibasaki hung up without answering him.

The media might have been sympathetic about the incident, but the library world was not. One could even say that in the absence of external pressure, the internal scrutiny and restriction grew all the more fierce.

Though the library spent its days fighting against censorship and the Media Improvement Committee, the principles of the library dictated a position of absolute neutrality toward all books, as well as all ideologies--even those that supported the Improvement Act.

The previous "book burning incident" had been carried out in the spirit of the censorship of the Media Improvement Act, but this time, it could be claimed that the library had reversed its role and was carrying out censorship against the Improvement Act. Those who supported the Media Improvement Committee, in particular, used this argument as a formidable weapon.

Also, since it was evident that this incident was the result of an overzealous adherence to library principlist ideals, the governmentalist faction saw their chance to regain the points they had lost in the

previous book burning incident and heavily criticized the principlist faction.

The way Etou had disclosed the incident had been a stroke of good luck for the library--his perfect handling of the situation had once again exposed the library to only the minimum level of disgrace. However, that lucky escape and their director's skill shouldn't excuse the library from reflecting deeply on the incident, asserted the governmentalist faction. Their reasons for wanting to treat this incident just as seriously as the previous one--which had escalated to the point of legal action--were transparent, but in this case, they were justified.

If Etou had belonged to the principlist faction, they probably would have strategically paid lip service to his talents, but Etou had maintained a position of staunch neutrality since his posting.

So when the governmentalist faction pressed Etou for the names of the staff involved in the incident, as a neutral party he acceded readily.

Musashino First Library Administrative Division, Librarian First Class Sunagawa Kazuki.

The anonymous tipster had implicated him and him alone.

The governmentalist faction immediately assembled an inquest committee, under the pretense of uncovering all the facts of the case. But it was nothing but an excuse to conduct a witch hunt among the principlist faction.

"I don't feel like Sunagawa was that passionate a principlist..." Iku remarked to Doujou, her buddy for the day. Because of the recentness of the event, it was a difficult topic to get away from for very long.

For Iku, the news that Sunagawa had been the perpetrator had been completely unexpected. From his "Librarian's Rapier Reviews," it was clear that his values were fundamentally incompatible with the ideals of the principlists--the naturally principlist-heavy Library Task Force's near-universal repugnance for the reviews proved that.

The members of Doujou's squad felt the same, especially Komaki, who occasionally revealed a quiet but deep-seated rage over the site, because of Marié's experience with it.

"I don't know if he did it half-heartedly, or got carried away, or what...but I don't think that he cared very much about the reasons or principles behind what he was doing."

Iku had the impression that he had also just gotten carried away while writing his reviews, eventually committing the faux pas that resulted in that minor scandal. When she had confronted him afterwards, she had found him weak-willed and apathetic. She certainly hadn't felt the passion of the "overzealous martyr of the principlists" that the principlist faction was defending and the governmentalist faction was denouncing.

"Yes, but he also hasn't objected to being identified and questioned as a principlist. You can't just ask what he looks like on the surface. Anyway, look at the lineup of books he tried to suppress-- you'd be perfectly justified in calling it an action in line with the ideology of the principlist faction." Iku couldn't dispute this, so she fell silent. But Doujou continued in a pacifying tone, seeing her dissatisfied expression. "Well, we'll be told the facts after the inquest is over. Sit tight until then."

The inquest had taken over the task of determining the facts of the case, and in order to protect against tampering with evidence or testimony until all the facts were clear, they had made no announcements concerning the progress of the investigation.

"Sounds like you were pretty hard on Sunagawa. Threatening to 'take him out in three seconds' or 'put him in a chokehold until he passed out?'" Doujou prodded her.

Iku's head snapped up. "Where did you hear--" she had started to ask before she realized--who else had been there besides Tedzuka? *That bastard*, Iku thought, pouting.

Doujou looked at her seriously. "It's no idle threat when you make it. Don't go crushing his pride as a man."

"B-But the way all he could do was make stupid excuses wasn't manly at all!"

"In some sense, it's hard to find a man more manly than you. Don't be so hard on him!"

"T-That was uncalled for! Simply uncalled for, sir! I demand that you take it back and apologize!" she raged at him.

Doujou patted her head softly. "Look, forget about Sunagawa. He's gotten enough shit from his coworkers and dormmates, and it seems like he's pretty down in the dumps about the inquest." Doujou added bitterly, "As well he should be; it'll be a mockery of justice, like it always is."

Iku cocked her head, surprised. *It almost sounds like--*

"...Have you ever been brought before an inquest committee, Instructor Doujou?"

Doujou grimaced reflexively; it was a very characteristic reaction. He couldn't easily lie.

"Seriously? No shit! For what?"

"Is that the way you should be speaking to a superior officer!?" His insistence on formality was a blatant attempt to avoid the question.

"Why, whatever for, sir? Some kind of error by the governmentalsists?" The governmentalist faction was famous throughout the Force for being more unscrupulous in their inquests than the principlist faction, so it was a natural guess. "Did you get mixed up in something, or dragged in somehow?"

The thought of Doujou himself being the perpetrator never crossed Iku's mind. She could more easily picture him taking responsibility for someone else's mess, as he often did with Genda. Genda must do plenty of things that the governmentalsists could criticize. In fact, his outrageous way of handling Commander Inamine's kidnapping had turned into a weapon for the governmentalsists in no time.

"Kasahara." Doujou's tone was serious. She gulped, and reflexively leaned down closer, meeting his eyes. He went on. "Everyone has at least one incident in their past they prefer not to discuss. Do you understand me?"

"What...?"

While she was still trying to puzzle out what he meant, he announced loudly, "Enough!" and quickly walked away. "By my authority as your superior officer, I forbid you to ever bring up the topic again!"

"Ugh, you've gone from a superior officer to a tyrant! You know you don't have the authority to enforce that order!"

"Shut up! No more talking! You're dismissed!"

--is this a clue to some secret weakness he's been hiding!?

She followed and continued to badger him relentlessly, but Doujou kept his mouth firmly shut. Toward the end, his mood had deteriorated so far that every time Iku so much as opened her mouth, he would shout, "Shut up!"

She tried switching the target of her questioning to Komaki, but he replied with his usual incorruptibility. "If Doujou doesn't want to tell you something, I can't go behind his back and divulge his secrets. It's

pointless to ask anyone else, either," he warned. "No one in the Force would betray Doujou in a matter that concerns his dignity."

It was frustrating to give up when she had finally found a chink in Doujou's armor, but there was nothing else she could do, so Iku reluctantly abandoned her pursuit.

*

A few days later, Genda summoned Doujou to his office after the morning meeting and shut the door. A closed door could only mean a private matter or bad news, and the rest of the squad was on edge as they worked, wondering which it was.

At last--

"IMPOSSIBLE!" Doujou bellowed in a furious tone, at a volume that passed through the closed door as if it weren't even there. "Sir, it must be some kind of mistake! Please don't make me carry out that order!"

"I don't care what you want, just do it!" Genda's tone was equally fierce.

After a while they seemed to make an effort to lower their voices. It was still plain, however, that a knock-down-drag-out argument was continuing inside the office.

At length, the door opened. Doujou spoke, not meeting anyone's eyes. "--Kasahara. Get in here."

Komaki and Tedzuka gave her worried glances, but Iku's attention was fixed on Doujou's anguished, resentful expression. *Never mind me--are you okay??* She was so busy worrying about Doujou that she forgot to worry for herself, and entered Genda's office with surprising calm.

She stood before Genda, with Doujou at her side. Genda wore a bitter expression too. Whatever he had to say, she guessed it wasn't good news.

Rare for Genda, he seemed to be at a loss for words for a moment, then at last very reluctantly opened his mouth.

"The inquest committee investigating Sunagawa has subpoenaed you to appear before them."

She didn't understand what he was telling her at all, so she didn't know what to say.

"Apparently, Sunagawa named you as an accomplice to his crimes."

I beg your pardon!?

It's not true!

Screw you, Sunagawa!!

Instead of immediately replying with a belligerent comment, as she usually would--she looked over at Doujou, standing next to her with a surly expression on his face.

Doujou's mysterious explosion, which had startled and perplexed those on the other side of the closed door, had been outrage on her behalf.

"*Impossible,*" he had asserted instinctively. It was that implicit trust that allowed her to maintain her composure.

"...I have no memory of doing anything of the sort, sir," she answered quietly, impressed with her own self-possession.

"You're pretty calm about this," Genda commented.

Iku regarded Doujou again. "I get the feeling that someone already got angry enough for both of us."

Doujou didn't look at her, but his earlobes turned red. He was probably embarrassed with himself for losing his composure--he was that kind of person.

But if I told him how happy it made me that he got so angry on my behalf that he lost his cool--how happy it made me that he believed in me that much--he'd probably get angry at me.

"Will you do it?" Genda asked tersely.

Iku nodded. "I have to clear my name," she said resolutely. She wanted Genda, and Doujou beside her, to hear her resolution. She hoped they understood that her courage owed much to Doujou's belief in her.

After they left the room, Doujou murmured, "Will you be able to endure it?"

His concern probably stemmed from his past personal experience with the inquest committee. She suddenly quavered, realizing that she was heading into an ordeal that was so unpleasant and harsh that Doujou still had bitter memories of it.

However.

"At least it's a Library Force inquest--it's got to be better than the one Instructor Komaki went through recently. Anyway," she turned to Doujou and gave him a mocking smile, "my daily abuse at the hands of a certain demon instructor might finally pay off."

Iku expected a chagrined smirk at most, but he gave her a surprisingly tender smile. "Good girl," he said, brushing his hand once over her head.

Chapter 5, Where Lies the Future of the Library?

*

Doujou's squad had been on the training roster for that day, but they exchanged their plans for a morning-long meeting concerning Iku's subpoena. Iku was first due to appear before the inquest committee that afternoon.

Halfway through Genda and Doujou's explanation, Tedzuka rose wildly from his seat, unable to contain himself.

"Tedxuka, where do you think you're going!?" Genda's deep voice halted him in his tracks.

Tedxuka, in an unusual display of temper, bit out, "To the Administrative Division, sir. I'm going to ask Sunagawa what the hell he's playing at."

"Sit down," Doujou ordered quietly. "Sunagawa got a medical certificate stating that he was suffering from stress-induced illness and received permission to go home to recover. He's probably already there by now. The part of the inquest concerning his personal actions has been postponed until his return."

Genda had probably reined him in with a similar enumeration of the facts, which was why he was able to recite them so smoothly.

"He just gave them the name of a convenient stand-in and ran! He didn't say a single word about taking medical leave this morning! Isn't that the kind of thing you'd usually tell your roommates? It's highly suspicious!"

"I understand how you feel, but don't say anything you'll regret later. These are uncertain times. It's possible that something you say could be used against Kasahara later."

Genda's words, though they were delivered with a certain measure of reluctance, had the desired effect. Tedzuka's argument with Doujou had proven that Doujou did not have his usual power to restrain him.

"The question is why he gave them Kasahara-san's name," Komaki said, getting to the heart of the issue. "Do you have any ideas?"

Iku began to shake her head--then knit her brows. "...uh, I picked a fight with him over his reviews once."

"That doesn't matter now, don't worry about it," Doujou immediately assured her. "They're too strict to even let him consider trying to take revenge for a personal quarrel."

Iku knew that Doujou had gone through an inquest before, and so his assertion reassured her. But Tedzuka frowned, still looking somewhat unconvinced.

"Did he ever approach you with any strange ideas? Have you had any especially deep conversations?" Komaki pressed her.

This time, Iku shook her head firmly. "To be honest, sir, I would have forgotten all about him if he wasn't Tedzuka's roommate, even though we were in the same class. He doesn't stand out, and we were never that close. His reviews did piss me off, though, which is why I gave him a piece of my mind that time I met him on my patrols."

"I was with her too. Kasahara really did just let him have it; Sunagawa barely said anything. I can testify to that fact."

Tedzuka probably thought he was being helpful, but their superiors just smiled wryly. Iku had to fight the urge to tell him, "*What are you trying to do, embarrass me even more?*"

Then Komaki folded his arms. "I feared as much. I strongly suspect that Sunagawa was led by the inquest committee to name you."

Iku gave him a dubious look, as usual unable to follow his logic. Unusually, Tedzuka also looked uncertain. Neither had ever seen a Library Force inquest unfold.

"In other words, they're targeting the Library Task Force," Genda appended, but his explanation was still too vague for them to understand.

It was left to Doujou to spell it out. "The last 'book burning' incident was caused by the governmentalsists. It's still their biggest Achilles heel. The recent disgrace of Acting Director Toba weakened their position even further."

"So this incident might help them salvage their reputation, you're saying?" Predictably, Tedzuka caught on faster than Iku, even starting from the same level of ignorance.

"Hey! Don't make them stop explaining just because you understand what's going on!" For once, Iku was desperate to understand the situation, since she was so personally involved in it.

"Of course I'm going to keep explaining, you idiot, so pipe down!" Doujou roared. "Have I ever once given up on you before you understood something?" he added a little sullenly.

"Poor underappreciated Doujou," Komaki teased, laughing. Since Tedzuka seemed to have unraveled the whole situation, Doujou addressed Iku directly. "The governmentalsists want the principlists to screw up. That makes this incident a godsend for them." His phrasing was hard for Iku to stomach.

"A godsend? ...How could something that disgraces the library be a godsend?"

"That's factional logic for you." Doujou's tone was purposely blunt. "Even the principlists tally the governmentalsists' blunders, and use them as ammunition at critical moments. We're both the same."

Her instinctive reaction against what Doujou was saying--*No, the principlists are different!*--had been nipped in the bud. She wanted to believe the principlists were different because of the people she respected who were principlists: Inamine, for one, and everyone who sat with her now. --Even Doujou.

Why the hell would he say that--"we're both the same." I was proud to be on this side. I was happy that I stood together with others who let their love of books guide their principles.

--I was proud to be your subordinate.

She was flustered by this sudden yet undeniable realization. Her agitation robbed her of the chance to reply to Doujou.

"The governmentalsists would like to overplay this incident as much as possible, thus offsetting all the past blows to their own reputation. That's why they're targeting the Task Force."

"Why?" The question came out in a whisper.

"Basically, it's my fault," Genda answered, sounding inexplicably proud of the fact.

Doujou nodded. "The commander is one of the key people in the principlist faction, and the Task Force has an even higher concentration of principlists than the rest of the Defense Force, since it's under Commander Genda's control. They're using the situation as an excuse to tarnish the commander's name."

"When will they learn that tarnish never sticks to me?"

"Even if it doesn't stick to you, it sticks to the principlist faction. Please try not to be rash," Doujou reminded him quickly.

Komaki took over the explanation. "And, if they're trying to tarnish the Task Force's reputation, it makes sense to target a newcomer, since they'd be the most vulnerable, right?"

"But why Kasahara?" Tedzuka pressed. "No matter how you look at it, the most obvious point of contact between Sunagawa and the Task Force is me, his roommate. I don't know if they even would have considered targeting the Task Force if there hadn't been that connection. So why did they bypass me and go for Kasahara?"

Could you not ask that question here?! Iku glared spitefully at Tedzuka, but he didn't notice at all. Of them all, Iku understood best why she had been targeted.

"...are you asking me to explain it to you now?" Komaki smiled wryly.

Iku made a face and spat at Tedzuka, "It's because I look stupider and easier to attack, moron! They probably would have come after me even if I were a governmentalist--who would target a menace like you if they had a choice about it?!"

"I...I didn't mean it like--"

"Then why did you ask!? Narcissism!?"

Tedzuka, perhaps sensing that nothing he could say would salve her wounded pride, reluctantly shut his mouth.

"Anyway, we're hobbled by Sunagawa's medical leave," Doujou said, returning to the matter at hand. "Normally, Kasahara would just deny Sunagawa's accusation, and his testimony would have to be reevaluated. But since Sunagawa's inquest is in recess, they'll probably try to throw you off balance and turn it into a he-said-she-said argument. In any case, don't let them get you to confess to anything."

For the governmentalsists, this was a battle worth starting, whatever the outcome.

If they falsely accused Iku and got her to confess, they could turn their investigation to possible criminal tendencies in the Task Force itself, and try to expose additional indiscretions. And even if their attack didn't succeed, all they would lose was time and effort.

Since Sunagawa was on leave, and since the governmentalsists wanted to throw Iku off balance, her inquest would probably stretch to several sessions.

Their meeting ended with time to spare, so Doujou's squad left to join the training exercise--with the exception of Iku.

"Study hard until your summons," Doujou said, and gave her the quickly-prepared, handwritten collection of counter-strategies that the squad had created after Genda had left them. Doujou, Komaki, and Tedzuka had tried to anticipate the questions that the inquest committee would ask, and written example responses. It was

practically a work of art--the three had managed to compress the instructions into an amount that Iku could reasonably memorize.

My teammates really are ridiculously talented, she thought, a little dejected at her own uselessness. But she put this thought aside. *My work right now is to pound all this stuff into my head.*

"Good luck," Komaki said as he left, putting a light hand on the conflicted-looking Tedzuka's shoulder and steering him toward the door. As Sunagawa's roommate, Tedzuka probably couldn't help feeling guilty that Iku being attacked. He might also be vexed that he wasn't the one being targeted, since he had full confidence in his *own* ability to make it through such an inquest.

At last only Doujou remained. He paused next to Iku's desk. When she looked up at him--for a change--he seemed to be at a loss for words for a moment, then pointed at the instructions the squad had written for her and ordered, "Just copy it out. A hundred times."

"A *hun*--...!?"

"Your type doesn't remember anything unless you learn it in your bones. Copy it out."

It was almost like he had known Iku in her student years, so accurate was his assessment. In no time at all she had a pencil in her hand, poised over a sheet of paper.

The shadow over her desk didn't budge. Iku looked up again, and found Doujou looking straight at her. Drawn in by the intensity of his gaze, she looked back at him, until she realized that they were practically staring into each other's eyes. Flustered, she averted her eyes, but before she could say anything, Doujou spoke.

"Things are going to get hard from here on."

Not "very hard" or "extremely hard"--just plain hard. That, plus the fact that the warning came from Doujou, made her sit up and pay attention.

"If it gets to be too much for you, tell me. That's an order."

Iku wasn't sure how to reply, so she mumbled something.

"What do you say?!" he prodded her harshly.

"Yes sir!" she shouted, saluting smartly.

Doujou's expression softened a little. "All right. Remember, you promised."

"Promised?"

You just said it was an order. Confused, Iku questioned him, but he just glowered at her.

"Whichever, as long as it keeps you safe. Remember it however you want," he flung off, and left the room.

"Either way, you..." she whispered to herself. As she began to ponder how she should consider her pledge, her heart felt unaccountably lightened.

*

Her first interview with the inquest committee was to take place from two o'clock until three, in a conference room at base headquarters.

When Iku knocked and entered, she found five older men waiting for her behind a long table. From their rank insignia, she saw that they ranged from Library Supervisor Third Class to First Class. The single Library Supervisor First Class was a bony, angular man in his late fifties who was seated at the center of the table. A year ago, the uninformed Iku wouldn't have known who he was, but now even she knew he was Assistant Base Commander Hikoe Mitsumasa, the highest-ranking member of the governmental faction in the Force.

Ugh, he looks like a vulture! It was the sickly appearance of his thinning hair that prompted this association. She knew it was rude in the extreme, but the sharp glint in his eye lent some credence to the resemblance.

Silently, Hikoe indicated a chair set before the long table. Apparently he meant for her to sit; she bowed and did so.

He confirmed her full name and affiliation, and then started the interrogation with an unexpected question.

"Do you support the principlist faction?"

She had only written it a few dozen times, not a hundred, but the answer still came automatically. It had originally been written in Doujou's somewhat bad handwriting.

"I'm only in my second year with the Library Force, so I haven't thought very deeply about factional politics."

"But when we look at your record, you seem to take a lot of action that suggests a principlist leaning. For instance, the incident when you tried to claim the right of discretionary selection during your training period."

She had prepared herself for the inevitable mention of that incident, but the attack still smarted a little.

"I still can't fathom why you tried to claim a right that, as a Librarian, you didn't hold..."

Hikoe smirked as he flipped through the documents in front of him. The other members of the committee snickered. Iku's temperature rose and her cheeks grew pink with humiliation at this obviously intentional bullying.

"A single Force member, arbitrarily invoking the right of discretionary selection in a civilian bookstore, a demilitarized zone...it's unthinkable."

"I have since repented my actions," she replied mechanically. *Switch off your feelings*, Doujou had advised her.

The truth was, she hadn't repented at all.

The young mother who had smiled and shyly told her that she had wanted to buy her child any book she wanted for her birthday. The child who had been so happy when Iku returned her picture book that she had dropped her lollipop to take it.

This humiliation was nothing when she thought of the happiness she had been able to preserve.

"The last Force member who pulled that kind of stunt was indeed a principist--though one who held the rank of Library Officer Third Class and actually *had* the right of discretionary selection..."

Her heart skipped a beat. *Could it be...?* Her thoughts were whirling. *But...if it was my prince...he might have been raked over the coals just like I was. Or even had to face an inquest. --Because of me.*

Her overwhelming guilt was matched only by her overwhelming curiosity.

Who was it?

She wanted to ask. The prince whose name and face she had forgotten, whom she could only pursue through her memories, was within her grasp. The question was on the tip of her tongue. But--

Absolutely do not speak unless you're answering a question.

This order from Doujou during their meeting was enough to conquer even her curiosity.

The collection of counter-strategies had been assembled under the assumption that Iku would not say anything spontaneous. They wouldn't have anticipated Iku asking who that Library Officer Third Class had been, and Iku couldn't predict how the conversation would unfold after. Also, the record of this inquest session would be studied

and discussed later. There was a voice recorder placed before Hikoe on the table.

Don't say anything other than the bare minimum. Just answer the questions they put to you. If you do that, the answers we wrote out should be able to protect you.

The collection of instructions, which she had been ordered to copy out a hundred times, had been put together to keep her safe.

"Very principlist. A very, very principlist incident." Hikoe resumed the interrogation while Iku was still struggling with her feelings.

"Furthermore, your superiors backed your discretionary selection. Library Officers Second Class Doujou and Komaki, as well as Library Supervisor Third Class Genda."

Komaki and Genda technically hadn't been her direct superiors at the time--but this mix-up was probably intentional.

"It's a well-known fact that Supervisor Genda is Commander Inamine's right hand when it comes to championing principlist causes in factional matters, and the principlist bias within the Library Task Force that Supervisor Genda commands has frequently been considered problematic."

I think it's a lot more healthy than a governmentalist bias, she wanted to say. Her natural combative spirit was rearing its head, but she reined it in.

"I wonder if you're being indoctrinated into that same principlist philosophy?"

This answer had been in Tedzuka's writing. She remembered his precise, blocky characters as she replied. "I have not been indoctrinated into any particular factional philosophy."

Iku followed and emulated her superiors because she wanted to, not because they were brainwashing her. The person she pictured herself running to catch up with was a little shorter than she was.

After that, the committee questioned her endlessly, trying to get her to admit to principlist leanings, but she somehow managed to resist them.

That was when the line of questioning changed.

"What do you think of the Media Improvement Act?"

--*Here it comes.* Iku swallowed. The right answer here had been in Komaki's handwriting. Maybe it was lucky that her comrades had written out her instructions by hand. It left a deeper impression than printed words could.

"I oppose it."

Be as brief as possible. The more words you speak, the more openings you give your opponent.

"Why is that?"

"I am a member of the Library Force. The Law of Library Freedom is our *raison d'être*. I think it's obvious."

Hikoe snorted. "I see you did your homework," he muttered, loud enough to be overheard.

The Library Supervisor Second Class to his left picked up the questioning. "What about censorship?"

"It infringes upon both freedom of expression and the right to know. I believe censorship is an inherently unjust act."

"Even when the material being censored is in conflict with an individual's human rights or privacy?"

"It's the duty of the judicial system to remedy those situations. They don't legitimize censorship on their own."

The rest of this answer had included some real-life examples of those legal remedies, but she had been instructed not to mention them if she wasn't confident that she could recite them accurately, so she didn't bother.

"We have the same stance on censorship," the Supervisor Second Class told her. She must have given him a dubious look, for he smiled dryly and added, "The principlists and the governmentalsists don't disagree on the fundamental objectives of the Library Force. We simply have several disagreements on how to carry out those objectives."

Sorry, she almost said, but managed to convert it to, "Oh, I see." Iku's fundamental strategy was to pretend to be uninformed about factional politics, after all. And in actuality, it wasn't like anyone at the Task Force had been stuffing principlist doctrine down her throat.

"However, the governmentalist faction holds the fundamental belief that censorship should be carried out scrupulously and impartially. A governmentalist would never exercise the right of discretionary selection based solely on their own whims. Thus, the incident during your training period was due to your strong principlist leanings. You can't deny that you have a natural sympathy for the principlist side, can you?"

"Ummm..." Iku was flustered for a moment by this sudden curve ball, but recovered quickly. "I'm not actually sure myself."

"Isn't it possible that your natural principlist leanings are being cultivated further in the Library Task Force?"

"I don't think I can judge that for myself."

The few dozen times she had copied out these answers were paying off handsomely. The only problem was--

"Recently, an unfortunate incident was caused by an overzealous Force member who hated censorship too much."

They hadn't been able to guess what Sunagawa had said about the incident, or in what context Iku's name had come up. The part of the instructions that dealt with the incident was thus necessarily skimpy.

"I'm talking about Librarian First Class Sunagawa. You're familiar with the case, I assume?" Hikoe prompted.

"It's being widely discussed within the Force. Naturally I've heard about it," she replied tersely.

"You knew him before he became a topic of conversation for the whole base, I think."

"My coworker, Librarian First Class Tedzuka, is his roommate, so I knew his name, at least. But I haven't spoken with him much, and I never thought of him as more than just one among my many peers."

In reality, she had hated him since she read his reviews, but there was no need to volunteer that information. The inquest committee would just interpret her hatred as proof of a closer relationship than actually existed.

The soft-spoken Supervisor Second Class took up the questioning again. "Librarian Sunagawa orchestrated the concealment of a few dozen books written by supporters of censorship and the Media Improvement Act. He identified his motive as 'not wanting to let the works of censorship apologists go unchecked.' What are your feelings on this?"

Somehow, her squad had managed to write a counter-strategy for this question.

"I understand Librarian Sunagawa's feelings, but he's mistaken."

When the library had refused to hand over a teenage murder suspect's lending records to the police and faced censure from every news organization, Iku had fumed over the need to stock such obviously biased newspapers. But Doujou hadn't batted an eye.

Now, she understood why. Doujou and her other superiors' stance had been explained to her since the incident.

"Patrons have a right to read material and judge it for themselves, no matter what kind of material it is. The library should not be taking that chance away from patrons, or prejudicing them by devaluing certain books. Even if those books are unfavorable toward

the library. The library must, at the very least, maintain neutrality toward all materials."

The answer had been written for her, but Iku spoke the words just as passionately as if they had been her own.

If the library bought ten books championing a certain idea, they also bought ten books refuting it. That was how far they would go in the cause of their self-imposed neutrality.

"I think every member of the Library Force sympathizes with Librarian Sunagawa's abhorrence of censorship. But in the end, Librarian Sunagawa's actions constituted censorship on the part of the library. Which I don't think is something that can be excused."

This was where the prepared answer ended. But Iku continued without hesitation.

She knew it was what Doujou would have said.

"Even books that support censorship and defend the Media Improvement Act, for example, are part of the library's collection, and thus should be afforded the same protection that any other book enjoys."

The members of the inquest committee all gave her identical looks of astonishment. They had probably researched Iku's personal record beforehand, after all, and the picture her record painted was certainly in conflict with her statements now.

Back when she had tried to claim the right of discretionary selection, she had understood conceptually that the library had to protect a book even if it advocated censorship, but she would never have been able to actually argue for it.

"...that's a very evenhanded attitude. I have the same feelings on the matter," the Supervisor Second Class said coaxingly.

Hikoe picked up the thread of the interrogation. "But then why do you suppose that Librarian Sunagawa named you as an accomplice to his suppression of library material?"

"I don't know."

This wasn't entirely true. Doujou might think otherwise, but Iku didn't think that her attack of his reviews was unrelated. It had been a relatively recent occurrence, after all, and if he had been in a situation where naming someone else would take the heat off himself, wouldn't he name the person who had most recently antagonized him?

"If you had some sort of dealings with him, it would not be to your benefit to try to conceal them from us."

"We had the kind of relationship where I would talk to him if I saw him around, but we've never even eaten lunch together." This was true, so she spoke unhesitatingly. *Like hell I would eat lunch with that bastard.*

For a while they continued to badger her about her relationship with Sunagawa, but since they hadn't had any contact aside from Iku's one-sided rant, she stubbornly held them off with a repeated "I don't know."

"Sunagawa carried out the concealment of the books on July 18th." Perhaps she had finally exceeded his patience, but Hikoe moved on to the contents of Sunagawa's deposition. Since her squad hadn't heard anything about the details of the case, Iku had been ordered to wait for the other side to bring it up. She felt as though she had crossed a finish line.

The middle of the month, huh? That's around when I had that fight with him--

"According to his testimony, 'I boxed up the books in the back room of the second reference room, then carried them a long way to the storeroom in the third public building. Librarian Kasahara assisted me with this task, but partway through we had an argument and separated.'"

Her dismay must have been written all over her face. "Looks like that rings a bell," Hikoe said, delivering the final blow.

"Wait...wait a minute."

The route was the same one they had taken on the day she had helped Sunagawa carry those boxes, arguing with him on the way. Had he combined that incident with his own concealment of the books? Or--had those boxes *actually* contained the hidden books?

But Tedzuka had been there too. Why hadn't Tedzuka's name come up? Should she tell the committee that he had been with them?

She swiftly decided to only mention her own actions. "*Don't say anything you don't have to*"--that rule was doubtlessly still in effect. Anyway, it would be harder to revise her testimony than add to it later.

"The events that he described did happen."

"So you admit that you aided and abetted--"

"No, sir!" she interrupted Hikoe. "I came across Librarian Sunagawa when he was packing some boxes. He asked for my assistance in carrying them, so I did. By the time I saw the boxes, he had already finished packing them, so I didn't know what was inside. Not until you told me just now. I had no idea--none!"

"Didn't you think of checking the contents?"

"Packing and transporting boxes is an extremely common task for a member of the library staff. I do not suspiciously inspect the contents of each one."

"But didn't you find it suspicious that you were asked to carry boxes from the back of a reference room all the way to a public building?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if it happens on a regular basis. If I suspected someone of concealing books based on that alone, I would find someone to suspect every time I went out on patrol."

"But didn't you guess that the box contained books based on how it felt when you carried it?"

"Like I keep telling you..." Iku's gathering irritation finally found its way out of her mouth. "The boxes were packed when I saw them. I couldn't tell what was in them just by picking them up. Do you think I'm a freaking psychic or something?"

A few of the inquest members burst out laughing, and Hikoe, perhaps realizing the absurdity of his question, subsided into a sullen silence.

"...Watch your language, Librarian Kasahara," the Supervisor Second Class chided her.

"Sorry," Iku apologized perfunctorily, scowling. *Why don't you tell the assistant base commander to stop asking stupid questions, while you're at it?* she thought, disgruntled.

"Librarian Sunagawa testified that you had an argument and separated."

"...we did have an argument, but it was about a completely unrelated topic."

"Please tell us what it was about."

She had reached the limit of what her squad's instructions covered. She had no choice but to face the enemy directly.

"It concerned Librarian Sunagawa's 'Rapier Reviews.'"

"Could you give us more details?"

"I thought that a site which criticized particular books was unsuitable as a service offered by a public library. I took the opportunity to point that out to him, and we quarreled."

"So, you had a difference of opinion over the function of the library?"

Shit. Not good, her instincts told her. She had been forced to acknowledge that they had quarreled and parted over a difference of

opinion. But the Supervisor Second Class's statement was technically true. *Dammit! If I'd known it would come to this, I would have told him I hated his stupid face, or something totally insignificant.*

"...I suppose you could put it that way."

"By the way, you implied before that you were barely acquainted with Librarian Sunagawa, and in fact barely conscious of his existence." Hikoe had jumped in again. "But according to the statement you just made, it seems that you had been aware of him for quite some time."

Is that what they're trying to do!? Iku ground her teeth. This must be the inquest committee's goal for today. If they could get Iku to commit perjury on record, or even just give ambiguous testimony that ruined her credibility, the situation would develop more advantageously for them.

"It was only after his 'Rapier Reviews' got to be a problem! Before that, I didn't know him at all..."

"So, when you said you would talk to him if you saw him around, was that a lie?"

Shit, wrong thing to say! The Supervisor Second Class had quickly and deftly delivered the second half of a one-two punch. *Dammit, they told me to remember absolutely everything I said, too...*

"No, it was not a lie. When I said 'I didn't know him at all,' I misspoke." She managed to correct herself, but her emotions had stretched to the breaking point. She had zero confidence in her ability to hold out any longer. The more she was prodded the more likely that holes would emerge in her story, in spite of her squad's best efforts.

But just then, the sound of a loud, commanding knock resounded through the room.

Before the inquest committee could give permission, the door was opened. Iku turned around--and saw Doujou standing in the doorway.

"Pardon the intrusion," he said, saluting. Iku nearly burst into tears at the sight of his sober, serious expression. Hastily, she suppressed the urge. "It is now 1500 hours, and I have come to return Librarian Kasahara to her duties."

Hikoe was visibly chagrined. The Supervisor Second Class called an end to the inquest for the day.

"Kasahara, come with me."

"Yes, sir!" She shot out of her chair and ran a few steps, then hastily turned back to the inquest committee and bowed.

Hikoe looked not at Iku, but at Doujou.

"Bosses will be bosses, and subordinates will be subordinates, I see."

Doujou acknowledged the sarcasm with a bow and replied, "Excuse me."

After they had left the building, Iku's remaining strength deserted her and she slid down to the floor. "That was *terrifying*..." she whispered, hugging her knees. Doujou halted, waiting for her.

As she squatted on the ground, trying to make her knees stop shaking, she felt a light pat on her head.

"You did a great job."

"Please...don't be nice to me now, you're gonna make me cry..." she whispered, her voice already choked with tears.

"It's okay to cry, you know."

"No! If I cry, they win!" she shook her head fiercely, and then stood up in a show of resolution.

Doujou raised his brows. "You're still thinking of it in terms of a contest?"

"I don't want it said that the governmentals made me cry!" *Dammit, dammit. Change the subject.* If they kept talking in this vein, she really would break down and cry.

"Anyway..."

Here was the topic that came to her mind.

"...I wanted to ask you something about my prince."

Doujou's head whipped around to look at her. *What's the deal with you?* she wondered, half-distracted by puzzlement as she continued.

"I was wondering if maybe he had to go through an inquest after he saved me."

"...And why are you wondering about this all of a sudden?"

"Well, see, the assistant base commander was talking about that time during my training period where I tried to select those books. He said that a Library Officer Third Class, a principist, had done the same thing in the past and caused a ruckus. I wondered if maybe he was talking about my prince."

"How the hell would I know?"

Any other day, she would have made some angry retort at this rude remark, but she was still feeling down from her experience at the inquest, so it just depressed her more. In a morose tone, she

continued, "The inquest tied my stomach in knots and put me through the wringer, and the committee said such horrible things to me. It was awful. I hate to think that my prince might have had to go through the same ordeal, because of me." Doujou didn't say anything, so she went on moaning. "When they asked me about the thing from my training period, I said, 'I have since repented my actions,' like you told me to. I wonder if my prince was forced to say he had repented too? Because of me, he did something he had to atone for."

"Quit worrying about it." Iku fumed over his insensitivity. Without looking at her, he continued. "Do you regret it?"

It took her a moment to understand the sudden question, but the moment she did she replied immediately. "Not at all!"

She neither regretted nor repented her decision to return that book to that little family. Not one bit.

"I would do the same thing a hundred times over!"

"Please don't," he advised her dryly, always ready to curb her impulsiveness. "However, if you don't regret it, I bet he doesn't either. ...Though he may have repented a bit."

She felt like crying again--though for a completely different reason. "Instructor Doujou, you remind me of each other."

"What does?" he asked stubbornly, his voice tinged the color of denial--she noticed that he hadn't asked, "*Who does?*"

"The way you both act like champions of justice."

Doujou didn't look at her, but made a face. She ignored it.

"You acted like one just a few minutes ago, too. In fact, if I think about it, every time I'm in a scrape, you come and rescue me. Ever since I entered the Library Force."

"And whose fault is that?!" Doujou suddenly pointed a finger in Iku's face. "Yours! You and your recklessness and your unbelievable bad luck! Stop getting yourself into scrapes, then I won't have to come rescue you!" He took a breath between each of these declarations, then delivered them with hammer-like force.

Undaunted, Iku shot back sullenly, "Gimme a break! If we were talking about my lack of brains, maybe, but I can't do anything about my bad luck!"

"If you're aware of your own lack of brains and lack of luck, why don't you learn a little prudence already!"

"Your rudeness just totally ruined your champion-of-justice image, you know!"

"I don't *want* that image, thank you very much! I'm a member of the Library Force, not some superhero!" Doujou spat, then started walking. Iku followed him, grumbling.

Suddenly, an idea occurred to her. "Aha!" she cried suddenly.

"What now?!" Doujou shouted, turning to her.

Iku babbled in her excitement. "I wonder--if I looked through the inquest archives, could I find out the identity of my prince? The assistant base commander made it sound like what he did was a pretty big deal!"

"And here I was wondering what you had dreamed up this time..." Doujou looked down in supreme irritation. Then his rage poured down on her like a monsoon. "Individuals are prohibited from viewing those archives without a justifiable reason, dumbass! You need the approval of your superior as well as someone in the department in question, and what the hell are you going to write on your application form? 'I want to find the identity of my prince'!? And if you think I would ever in a million years give my seal of approval to such an idiot form, you're even stupider than I thought!"

There was no arguing with the force of his refusal, even as he sank Iku's hopes. "Let's go!" he barked, putting an end to the conversation.

Back at Genda's office, the rest of the squad was waiting for them.

"Good, you're back. Hand it over."

At Genda's urging, she pulled a USB recorder out of her breast pocket.

"Okay, where's the rewind button...?" As Genda poked at random buttons on the recorder, Komaki casually plucked it out of his hands.

Iku was uneasy. "Um, was it really okay to take this into the inquest, sir?"

"What are you talking about? You put a personal possession in your pocket and forgot about it, and then the 'record' switch happened to get flipped at a bad time. Anyway, there's no clear, written rule that you can't bring a recording device into an inquest, and even if there was, it was the inquest committee's responsibility to do a pat-down to make sure you weren't carrying any prohibited items."

Iku groaned. "You have the mind of a crook!" It was a sign of the personality of the Task Force that Genda took this as a compliment.

The fact that the recorder had been in her breast pocket--the most questionable pocket to pat down on woman--wasn't an accident, but an act of nearly criminal cunning. Genda had even suggested placing the recorder in her cleavage, a suggestion that bordered on sexual harassment, until the other three men had chorused, *"There's a fundamental problem with that idea,"* crossing the sexual harassment line by miles and offending Iku mightily. *Even I can get cleavage if I wear a push-up bra!* she thought, but it was futile.

"Anyway, it's not even my recorder..."

It was the property of the Task Force, but Genda peeled off the label that identified it as such.

"Don't worry about little details like that."

Little details!? *I'm pretty sure that's not a little detail!* But arguing this point would be a waste of time, so she didn't bother.

The recording was meant to verify the details of the inquest and create a perfect record of the events so that they could develop and polish their counter-strategies for the next one.

Iku shelved the topic in the back of her mind and listened to the recording. When they got to Sunagawa's testimony, Tedzuka went pale. "He's talking about that time we helped him carry boxes!" he snapped at her--unfairly, but in Sunagawa's absence she was the most convenient outlet for his shock. The testimony had thrown Iku off-balance too, the first time she heard it. "Why didn't my name come up in this discussion?!"

Their superiors didn't have a ready answer and remained silent. Iku gave her explanation, "I didn't know if it was alright to mention that you were there, so I decided to only answer for my own actions for the time being."

"Mmm, I think it would have been fine to tell them and see what happened...oh well, it's okay, we didn't plan for this scenario. You can play that card next time and see how they take it." Iku sighed in relief at Komaki's approval of her strategy. "But it's quite a dilemma. Did those boxes you carried actually contain books, do you think?" Komaki was asking Tedzuka; of the two of them, Tedzuka's memory had long been established as the more reliable one.

"The contents were heavy and solid and didn't shift around; I think it's possible that they were books."

"Then let's assume that you two did help him carry the concealed books. I expect that the inquest committee's investigation revealed that the books were actually discovered in that same storeroom, so I

think we can take it as truth. If you think about it, I bet they didn't mention Tedzuka's name because they were holding it in reserve."

Iku cocked her head, bewildered. Doujou enlightened her. "They withheld the information about Tedzuka because they were hoping to use it to draw you out, or to trap you."

This answer caused Iku to lose her composure. "They--so it would have been better to mention Tedzuka today after all!?"

"I'm not saying that. It wasn't particularly remarkable for you to spend all your energy only answering questions about yourself. You were having a hard enough time there as it was."

Komaki chuckled at this. "My favorite part was when you asked the Assistant Base Commander if he thought you were psychic." They had paused the recording at that point. Iku's face burned red, and she dropped her eyes to her lap. "Well, since you didn't mention it this round, next time you can pre-empt them. The second the interview begins, interrupt them and get your testimony in."

Make sure that our side is the first one who mentions that Tedzuka was there too, he means.

"Okay, let's hear the rest," Komaki said. Iku cringed. This was the point when her defense began to get shaky and muddled.

It was painful to hear her own faltering voice played back. Eventually Doujou appeared and ended the interview, and there was nothing more to be heard but the soft rustling of clothing. Iku breathed a sigh of relief.

"Hmmm...well, I have to say, you put up a pretty good fight." Komaki was the first to speak. "The way you were able to insist at the very end that your previous testimony was not a lie, but a slip of the tongue, was very well done. Don't you think?" He turned to Doujou for confirmation.

Doujou nodded. "I agree. To be frank, I didn't think you'd be able to hold out so well."

"I...I see."

Iku's lingering doubts must have shown in her face, for Genda boomed, "Have a little confidence in yourself!" and slapped her on the back, hard enough to cause a violent coughing fit. She wished he could be a little less enthusiastic. "I would have made three times the number of screw-ups you did!"

"That's nothing to be proud of!" she scolded, but Genda paid her no heed.

Doujou, ignoring both of them, returned to the matter at hand. "Alright, the most important thing to do next is to write up counter-strategies for next time. Regulations state that they can't call you back for another three days at least, so we have plenty of time to polish your script."

The inquest committee's strategy was to ask the same questions many times, looking for inconsistencies or contradictions in her testimony; thus, the best strategy for the opposing side was to make sure all her statements were consistent as possible, leaving no room for the inquest committee to contest her testimony.

"Tedzuka can corroborate the content of your argument with Sunagawa, so if we play our cards right, after a few more sessions we should be able to dispel any remaining suspicion, and it should all be over," Komaki said encouragingly.

It had the opposite effect. "A few more sessions'...?" Iku repeated miserably, and collapsed face-down on the desk.

Just then--

'...That was terrifying...'

Iku's head snapped up at the sound of her own tear-choked voice.

'You did a great job.'

"Nooooooooooooo!" she cried, trying to drown out the recording, but she didn't entirely succeed. She ran out of breath around the time her recorded self whispered nonsensically, *'Please...don't be nice to me now,'* and Doujou's reply came through loud and clear.

"...Boy, this is sappier than a pine tree."

"Noooooooooo! Don't listen to that!!" Iku nearly tackled Komaki in her panic, while Doujou, who was stiff and purple-faced with rage, snatched up the recorder and pressed the stop button.

"What the hell kind of idiot are you!? Why didn't you turn the recorder off!?" he roared, like an enraged bull. He was just as flustered as she was, in his own way.

"I-I forgot...!"

"Are you a chicken or something!? Does your memory only last for three steps³⁰!?"

"I noticed you didn't say anything about it either, *sir!*"

³⁰ Japanese proverb: "A chicken forgets after taking three steps."

"How was I supposed to know that my subordinate was a chicken instead of a person!? Do you really want people to suspect you have chicken brains!?"

Their battle was halted by a few mortifying words from Genda: "You know, you don't have to pretend to fight just because we're here."

*

Iku was ordered to accompany Doujou back to the dorm, so she had to wait a little while until he had finished his duties. She thought that he would lecture her on the way back, but she was wrong--they were both a little quiet and awkward after the incident with the recorder, but otherwise it was an unremarkable walk.

Then she saw Shibasaki waiting for them in the dorm's entryway.

"Shibasaki? What are you doing here?"

Shibasaki smiled a little crookedly and didn't answer. Doujou looked at her. "Thanks."

"Leave it to me!" she said jestingly. Doujou retreated swiftly, heading for the men's side. *What is going on?* Iku wondered.

"Let's go get dinner and then go back to our room," Shibasaki suggested.

"Oh--sure..." Confused, she followed Shibasaki until she entered the mess hall.

--oh.

The mess hall, which had reverberated with the voices and laughter of Force members a moment earlier, fell instantly silent.

For a moment, the only sound was the voice of the television news anchor, unnaturally clear in the hushed room. The din resumed its previous volume a second later, but it wasn't difficult to guess how the land lay.

"Keep cool," Shibasaki directed her in a low voice, and Iku devoted all her energy to following that directive. Shibasaki chattered on about something and Iku made conversational noises in the right places, but the words went in one ear and out the other. *What am I even saying?*

As they headed to the meal counter and stood in line, Iku could feel her peers' eyes on her. Their faces held a mixture of curiosity and suspicion, and nothing that resembled goodwill.

"Things are going to get hard from here on." She finally understood Doujou's warning, and was suddenly doubly grateful for his sensitivity in arranging the rendezvous with Shibasaki.

She ate her food but didn't taste it; the rice felt like sand in her mouth. But losing her appetite would be like admitting defeat, so she stubbornly choked it down.

They returned their trays and headed back to the room. Every Force member they passed along the way said hello and chatted with Shibasaki, but kept a peculiar distance from Iku. Her acquaintances at least spoke to her, but she still felt a strange cautious restraint in their manner.

After being called before the inquest committee, it was natural that others would be careful around her until she could prove her innocence. Natural that she would be an object of mistrust and frank curiosity.

She reached her room and closed the door behind her, then collapsed against it. Pressing her back to the door, she hugged her knees.

She would never have thought that such a thing could happen to her in her own dorm. The swiftness with which she had been proven wrong made her head spin.

"Good work today," Shibasaki said. Her tone was not especially gentle or diffident, just the same as it would be on any other day.

It was that very normality that caused her to blurt out, "...thank you."

"Don't mention it. As usual, I only did it because he asked me to."

"Yeah. I know."

She also knew that brusqueness was just Shibasaki's brand of cryptic kindness.

"Come on. Cheer up and we'll go to the bath."

As Shibasaki began preparations for her bath, Iku too stood up and began changing clothes.

After their bath--during which Iku felt like she was sitting on a bed of nails--they returned to their room, and Shibasaki confessed, "To

be honest, everyone thinks the accusations just might be true. Because it's you."

The discretionary selection incident during her training period was well-known throughout the base, and it was generally accepted that she could be impulsive and belligerent, given cause. Her antipathy to the Improvement Special Agency was equally well-known.

An over-enthusiastic assault on censorship fit with Iku's personality. There were many who knew Iku well enough to judge it was possible; there were not many who knew her well enough to know it was impossible, except for Shibasaki.

"That girl just might do it." Those who didn't know Iku directly would be led by gossip to believe it was true.

As if that wasn't bad enough, everyone at the base had at least heard of her, as the first woman ever accepted to the Library Task Force.

"A few people are sympathetic, but..."

"She would never do something like that! Well, maybe, but if she did, it was because she just hates censorship so much!" A defense like that would only make the accusations against Iku more plausible.

It wasn't anyone's fault. It was simply the reputation she had, after nearly a year with the Library Force. No matter what explanations and justifications she pushed at them, those around her would still think of her as "that girl who goes too far when she crusades against censorship." The time she had tried to use the right of discretionary selection at a civilian bookstore--a demilitarized buffer zone in their battle against the Media Improvement Committee--was counted as proof of her imprudence.

"Do you regret it?" She reconsidered Doujou's question. --She didn't regret her actions. Nor did she repent them. But she understood now what their consequences were.

The next time she did something like that, it would be with that understanding. Surely her prince had understood that he was breaking the rules and would have to suffer the consequences, when he decided to save Iku.

"People have been asking me about you, about this incident. For now, I've been telling them I don't know anything."

It wasn't in Shibasaki's character to tell people, *"Kasahara would never do such a thing!"* Still, in all the time they had spent together that night, Shibasaki had never once asked her if she were really innocent.

"After tonight I'll tell them that you said you didn't know a thing about the concealed books. But I have to say, I don't think public opinion will change much until the inquest is through."

In that case, Iku resented that the inquest couldn't call her back every day until it was done. She was willing to plow through one or two weeks of continuous hearings if it meant she could quickly clear her name. Iku, who was swift in her decisions and actions, wasn't made to endure protracted warfare.

"Apparently when Sunagawa left, he took all his clothes and most of his belongings. There's nothing left in his corner of the room but an empty futon."

Shibasaki was well-informed as usual, but her news didn't give Iku much hope. It was a sign of how long Sunagawa had obtained medical leave for. In recent years, many public institutions had adopted policies regarding recuperation from mental illness caused by societal stress; the Library Force was one of them. Since mental illness took longer to treat than physical illnesses, it was comparatively easy to obtain leave for several weeks to several months.

"If he ends up diagnosed with full-blown depression, he might not return for another couple months. They say that in terms of recovery time, two or three days for a cold is equivalent to two or three months for depression. In fact, he could easily stretch his leave time to at least two months even with his current diagnosis."

"That long...?"

If Sunagawa's inquest had been taking place at the same time as her own, it wouldn't have taken long for the full picture to emerge, but with only Iku's side of the story being told, it was pointless to hope for a prompt resolution. The inquest committee would also probably drag it out as long as possible in their quest to disgrace the principlist faction; her superiors had told her as much.

"How did Instructor Doujou and the others explain why you were targeted?"

"They said Sunagawa was probably prompted by the inquest committee to name me...though it looks like it's true that I helped him transport the concealed books. But so did Tedzuka."

"What are you talking about?"

"Tedsuka and I once helped Sunagawa carry some boxes, and apparently the books were in them. Remember when I told you about the fight I got into with Sunagawa? It was during that."

Shibasaki remembered, and looked grim. "So now it all comes down to whether you and Tedzuka knew what you were carrying. Damn, I don't like that."

"They didn't mention Tedzuka at all today, though. I think they wanted to make it sound like Sunagawa and I had a falling-out while we were hiding the books together and parted ways. Next time I plan to bring up Tedzuka myself."

"Yes, tell them as soon as possible. I'm sure the Task Force will be very relieved if the inquest committee goes after him as well."

She was implying that the Task Force would rather have more of its members under suspicion than have Iku risking the inquest alone.

"Well, I'm sure Instructor Doujou and your squad are hard at work on strategies for you..." Shibasaki fixed Iku with a stern look. "So don't you dare give up."

There were many Force members who, fatigued by a long inquest, had caved and admitted guilt in exchange for a lighter sentence. Iku already understood that most of the fatigue would come not from the inquest committee itself, but from the whispers and hard looks of her peers.

"Don't worry."

An order, or a promise? "*Whichever, as long as it keeps you safe,*" he had replied, impatient and angry.

The demon instructor was terrifying when he stood before her, but was more reassuring than anyone else in the world when he stood behind her.

She had known that ever since the discretionary selection incident.

*

She reported Tedzuka's presence during her argument with Sunagawa at her second interview, but still no summons to an inquest came for Tedzuka. The ostensible reason was that Sunagawa was still on leave, so he couldn't reconfirm her testimony. It was an unexpected blow for the Task Force, which had been anticipating Tedzuka's addition to the case.

"Sticking to a divide-and-conquer strategy, huh?" Genda growled bitterly, and encouraged Iku to bear with it for now. Protests had begun to pour in from Inamine and many others, saying that the inquest was unfairly focusing on a single Force member in spite of the

fact that she had denied involvement, putting her under excessive mental strain, but these efforts had so far not borne fruit.

As members of the governmentalist faction, they were not likely to give up their chance to pressure Iku into submission.

Doujou showed up to pick her up the moment her interview was set to end, every single time. And every time, he would ask if she was all right.

"I'm fine," she would answer every time. It was a bluff, and she thought he probably knew it. But she wanted to pretend to be strong. "I'm totally used to it by now. I don't even get flustered anymore when they ask questions that we didn't predict."

No, the inquest itself wasn't the difficult part.

A month had passed since life in the dorm had been bearable. Summer had given way to autumn without any hints that Sunagawa would soon return.

"Like, today they kept changing tacks on me, but I think I still fought back fairly well."

"I see. I look forward to seeing how well, when we listen to the tape."

The inquest committee still hadn't found out about the recorder, so Iku had continued to use it every time.

"...Instructor Doujou, how long did it last in your case?"

He knew without asking that she was talking about his inquest. Doujou hesitated for a moment before answering. "Two months."

"Then I'm past the halfway point."

She didn't know if her inquest would end at the same point Doujou's had. But she tried not to think about that too hard.

"How is she really doing?" Doujou asked Shibasaki, whom he had caught during a spare moment. Shibasaki pursed her lips.

"I think she's at her wit's end, in more than one way."

Her answer told him most of what he needed to know about the situation in Iku's dorm.

"I try to make sure we have our meals and baths together as often as I can, but I can't always make it. Besides, we're not in high school. I'm not gonna follow her into the bathroom, or anything like that. I'd just end up embarrassing her." Shibasaki concluded, shrugging. "Girls are less forgiving than boys in these situations. For better or for worse, our networks are stronger and we're more conservative. Even I've had trouble maintaining a neutral face."

Even Shibasaki. Jokes and bluffs wouldn't be enough to ease that pain.

"Shit," Doujou muttered before he could stop himself. "Why didn't she say anything?"

"What, you don't get it?" Shibasaki grinned, and patted his shoulder. "She's trying to show off, of course."

Doujou blinked in surprise. "At a time like this?"

"Especially at a time like this. Don't you understand why she wants to show off?"

"No...why?" Doujou asked dubiously.

Shibasaki gave him a *you're hopeless* look. "Because she couldn't stand looking weak while you're going around being so heroic."

"Yeah, right," he scoffed, but Shibasaki had another surprise for him.

"She really does admire you, you know. About as much as she admires her prince."

Doujou froze, and Shibasaki slipped away, back to the reference room.

A few days after the exchange with Shibasaki, a serious-faced Tedzuka came to Doujou asking for advice.

He wanted Komaki present as well, so they decided to gather in Doujou's room that evening.

Doujou set out alcohol, thinking it might be easier to talk in a more comfortable setting, but Tedzuka didn't touch a drop. He sat stiffly and formally, wearing a quiet expression.

"The matter is somewhat personal, if that's alright with you," Tedzuka began reluctantly, like he was crossing a hurdle. "I have an older brother."

"Oh, I know of him." Komaki was the one who said this, but Doujou had heard of him too. "He has a research group in the Library Association. People tell me he's a very capable man. He's in...Kanagawa, was it?"

"That's what I'm told." This response was suggestive of what was to come. --*It means he and his brother don't get along.* Tedzuka didn't talk much about his family, but while he had occasionally spoken of his father the Association president and his frail mother, he had never once mentioned his brother, though they were in the same profession. "We met recently. It was the first time I had seen him in five years."

Doujou didn't know what to say, so he nodded dumbly. Tedzuka continued.

"He walked out of our home even earlier than that. Since then, he hasn't been back once."

Doujou and Komaki shared a glance, neither understanding Tedzuka's motive in bringing up such a private matter. Also mysterious was how Tedzuka was acting as though he were confessing some failing or error.

After a silent consultation with Doujou, Komaki was the one who broke the ice. "Was your brother disinherited, or something like that?"

"My brother was the one who chose to leave. He finally gave up our father as hopeless."

Doujou was even more confused. But then--

"My brother believes the library should be brought under one central, federal authority."

Those few words made the situation almost entirely clear. That belief was in direct conflict with the current Library Force system, which depended on its independence from the federal government to carry out opposition to its policies.

The basic reasoning behind the idea was this: to secure the library's place in society by elevating it to a Ministry of Culture organization, thus centralizing its operation under one authority and guaranteeing a stable source of funding.

"He is of the opinion that fighting censorship on the ground will never solve the fundamental problem. Instead, the library should become an organization on the same level as the Media Improvement Committee, and continue the conflict as a purely political fight over the scope of censorship enforcement."

Doujou was at a loss for words for a moment, then commented, "That...is not an opinion that the president of the Library Association could realistically endorse."

"Exactly, sir."

In order to become a ministerial organization, the library would have to comply with current federal policies, which in this case meant recognizing the Justice Department's right of censorship. At a minimum, the library's right to enforce Section Four of the Library Laws would be severely curtailed.

"My brother's 'Library of Tomorrow Project' is a group devoted to researching the idea. In theory, they're just supposed to be investigating it as one of several hypothetical solutions."

"It's a bold idea your brother has," Komaki remarked carefully. "But..."

Doujou continued for him. "Everyone is allowed to have their own beliefs. We can't speak to your brother's. --Where are you going with this?"

Tedzuka was surely not just looking for affirmation that his brother's ideas were misguided.

"I think it might be my fault that Kasahara was targeted."

This statement at first appeared to be totally unconnected to the rest of the conversation, but Tedzuka clarified immediately.

"My brother wants me for his research society. That's why he asked me to meet with him. Since I was indebted to him for telling me where Instructor Komaki was being held, he thought I might give in this time."

"So that was your source."

"I can't tell you where this information comes from, but it's highly probable that it's valid," and indeed the information that Tedzuka had reported had been accurate. Tedzuka's brother probably had several connections at the Department of Justice due to the agenda he was advancing.

The existence of those connections alone was enough to prove that Tedzuka's brother was serious about his plans.

"I turned him down in spite of the debt between us. So now I wonder if my brother is trying to get at me through my colleagues."

"It's not impossible, but right now this is all conjecture. Do you have any other evidence?" Doujou asked.

Tedzuka answered immediately. "Sunagawa belonged to the Library of Tomorrow Project, and he seemed to completely idolize my brother. Also, a friend of my brother's works as a doctor in the department of psychosomatic medicine at the hospital where Sunagawa got his medical certificate."

"Mmm, that's pretty damn suspicious." Komaki grimaced. It was unlike him to be so blunt; it probably discomfited him to be the cause of Tedzuka's debt to his brother.

"Personally, I suspect that my brother also put Sunagawa up to concealing those books." Tedzuka spoke of his brother with the frankness of a relative, but it was a fear that Doujou shared.

If the concealment was indeed part of a larger plan of Tedzuka's brother's, Sunagawa would have been ordered not to mention

Tedzuka's name at the inquest. That explained why Tedzuka hadn't been summoned before the inquest committee.

They had all thought that the inquest committee was using the fact that Sunagawa couldn't reconfirm his testimony as an excuse to take down Iku and Tedzuka separately, but if Sunagawa had never mentioned Tedzuka's presence in the first place, Iku's story was actually new evidence. It was only natural to put off dealing with new evidence until they could confirm it with the original witness. It was only proper to suspect that Iku and Tedzuka had arranged their stories ahead of time so that they could shift all blame onto Sunagawa. To force Sunagawa to verify evidence while he was on medical leave would be unfair--putting the antagonistic inquest committee on the side of right this time.

"Okay. I'll report this to Commander Genda."

"Could it put a stop to the investigation of Kasahara?" Tedzuka badgered him. Doujou's sympathy for his subordinate was nearly painful.

Doujou could imagine how he would feel if a family feud of his had spilled over onto a bystander--a fellow dormmate, no less--and understood Tedzuka's pressing impatience to act.

But--

"It's not that simple." Which Tedzuka had probably already figured out for himself. "All we have is circumstantial evidence, and even if we had more, it still wouldn't justify suspending the inquest. If the Library of Tomorrow Project has ties to the governmentalist faction, we can try to exploit that to make a deal, but if not, the Project is just one Library Association research group out of many to them. The governmentalists wouldn't give a damn if the Project were implicated."

In fact, since Sunagawa, a purported principlist, belonged to the Library of Tomorrow Project, it was more likely that presenting Tedzuka's theory would only throw more suspicion on the principlist faction.

"I...how am I going to apologize to Kasahara?"

"Don't you say a word to Kasahara," Doujou instructed him grimly. "It isn't like you have any proof, and it isn't like it will affect her inquest. Telling her now would just unnecessarily agitate her. You'd get a little bit of peace of mind at the expense of hers."

"Sorry." Tedzuka sat up straighter.

"All we can do for Kasahara now is back her up, and you're contributing plenty in that area," Komaki reassured him.

Doujou, somewhat embarrassed by the stern tone he had taken, added gruffly, "None of this is your fault, anyway."

"Well, that'll have to pass for an apology from your pigheaded squad leader," Komaki joked, and Tedzuka finally cracked a smile.

"Why don't you have a drink or two before you go, since they're right here," Doujou encouraged them.

Tedzuka at last relaxed his posture, but as he did so, he planted both hands firmly on the floor. Thinking he was about to prostrate himself³¹, Doujou half-rose to his feet in panic.

"Don't you dare bow to me!"

"No, no...it's my legs...!" Apparently his legs had fallen asleep during the time he had sat kneeling on the floor.

Komaki, who was unexpectedly fond of the classic response to this situation, went to poke him, and a scuffle broke out. Hastily, Doujou leapt to pull the table with the alcohol and snacks out of harm's way.

*

Shibasaki hadn't yet come back to their room when Iku got home that evening. Since she hadn't said anything about coming home late, she had probably just been slightly delayed.

Iku glanced at the dirty clothes piling up in her laundry basket, and briefly considered doing laundry before Shibasaki's return. But she faltered at the sounds of women's laughter coming from across the hall.

I can throw them in when we go to dinner, and they'll be clean by the time we come out of the bath. It wasn't far to the laundry room, but Iku had taken to avoiding leaving her room alone.

As if to mock her cowardice, that moment an announcement came over the intercom. *'Paging Kasahara-san in room 302. There is a phone call for you in the dorm manager's office.'*

Huh? Who on earth would be calling me right now? Her friends and family members all called her cell phone to talk to her, so it must be a stranger. The dorm manager was preternaturally skilled at

³¹ Literally *dogeza*, a very, very humble and self-abasing bow. Watchers of anime may recognize the bow and the horror it usually inspires in the other party.

spotting telemarketers, so she knew it was a legitimate call. Still, calls for her were so rare that she felt a twinge of uneasiness.

But if she kept lollygagging, they would page her again. Iku sighed hugely and lifted her head.

As she left her room, the babble of voices in the hallway ceased for a moment. No matter how many times it happened, Iku would never get used to the cold feeling it gave her.

Keep your head high, she told herself, jogging to the stairs. It didn't look funny for someone going to answer a phone call to jog, did it? She hated the way she had been reduced to analyzing her every move.

In the dorm manager's office, the pay phone's receiver was off the hook and sitting to the side. The manager, as was customary, had retreated to the inner office and closed the door, in order to give her privacy. She would receive a warning if the call went on for too long.

Also as was customary, the dorm manager had asked the caller's name and scrawled it on a memo pad beside the phone. --*Tedzuka, Association's Library of Tomorrow Project*--

The 'Association'--the Library Association, maybe? She had never heard of the Library of Tomorrow Project. *Whoever it is has the same name as Tedzuka*, she thought as she picked up the receiver.

"Hello? I'm sorry I kept you waiting. This is Kasahara speaking...?" she trailed off questioningly, hoping the caller would clarify the purpose of the call.

A cheerful male voice replied, *'Pleased to meet you.'*

Oh good, it's someone I don't know. She felt unaccountably relieved. The few people who had called Iku at the dorm manager's office since the inquest started had hung up without speaking.

The caller's next words took her by surprise.

'Thank you for all you've done for my younger brother.'

It took her ten full seconds to realize that she was talking to Tedzuka's older brother. He waited very, very patiently until then.

Doujou had just returned to his room and was taking a breather when Shibasaki called his cell phone.

"I'm on my way right now. Round up the rest of the squad and Commander Genda," she demanded before hanging up on him. It wasn't until he called Komaki and was asked, *'Where are we meeting?'* that he realized she hadn't specified.

'On your way' to where? he was musing, when a knock came at the door. Before he could answer it, the door opened; it was Shibasaki. She glanced once around the room, then shot a glare at Doujou.

"What's taking so long!?" she yelled.

"W-wait, what do you think you're doing here?"

'What's going on?' Komaki asked over the phone.

"Uh, Shibasaki's here."

'Excuse me?'

"Just find the commander and Tedzuka and get over to my room," he demanded and hung up, ultimately doing the same thing to Komaki that Shibasaki had done to him.

Shibasaki, bursting with impatience, rounded on him. "Didn't I say 'right now'? What are you sitting around daydreaming for?"

"Be reasonable! You only called two or three minutes ago! Besides, what are you thinking, barging in here! Didn't anyone try and stop you?"

"Do you really think there's anywhere in the men's dorm I can't get into by smiling and saying, 'I'm sorry but it's really, really important?'" she snickered at him. Doujou was lost for words. It sunk in that even the men's dorm manager must have fallen before her. She really had infiltrated the place.

She is undoubtedly Kasahara's friend, in more than one sense, he thought bitterly. She was much more competent than Iku but in a sense equally more diabolical.

"Congratulations on sneaking in, but whatever you have to tell us, we can't talk about it here," said Komaki from behind them, slightly out of breath from rushing over. When Doujou and Shibasaki turned to look, they saw that a crowd had gathered outside Doujou's open door. "You should have considered your effect on the men of the dorm. How could the presence of the flower of the Force fail to stir their curiosity?"

"Oh my," Shibasaki giggled, "I'm sorry. Silly me, I didn't think about that." But her impudent tone said otherwise.

I can't take you two anywhere. --So where does that leave for the meeting? Doujou eyed the crowd outside his door and pondered the question.

Eventually they relocated to a conference room in the co-ed section of the dorm. The moment they had all gathered, Shibasaki

slapped a note down on the table. They all leaned in to read it, and Tedzuka immediately turned pale.

--I went out to meet Tedzuka's brother. He said he wanted talk to me about his research society. I'll be back before curfew.--

"This is a setup by the Library of Tomorrow Project, isn't it," Shibasaki remarked.

Doujou jumped. They hadn't spoken of Tedzuka's brother or his Library of Tomorrow Project to anyone outside the squad except for Genda. "Where did you hear about--!"

"Just how long do you think it's been since this all started? I had it all figured out by the third day."

"You're scaring the hell out of me here!"

"Never mind that! What are you going to do about Kasahara?!" she screamed at him, so fiercely that Doujou took a step back. Instantly, Shibasaki's face smoothed, and she regained her customary tranquility. "...thank you for allowing me to report this. I'll leave the rest to you." She bowed elegantly and smiled, then swept out of the room. At the doorway, she paused and looked back. "My guess is that they're meeting at that lounge where all the government bigwigs go. It's the only place where they could talk without worrying about being seen that's close enough for her to make it back by curfew."

With that, she left, leaving four disoriented men in her wake.

"...that's the place the top brass in the Library Force use, right? I'll go," Tedzuka volunteered, his face pale.

Komaki held up a forestalling hand. "Do you really think you have enough self-control not to start an argument when you get there? The top brass are going to be miffed if we make a scene and they can't use the lounge anymore."

Tedzuka didn't answer him. "Even *if* someone is going, it's not going to be you," Komaki concluded decisively. "So what are we doing, Doujou?"

This time it was Doujou who didn't answer him.

The hypothesis that Tedzuka's brother had set in motion the recent chain of problems all in order to force Tedzuka into his Library of Tomorrow Project was, after all, only a hypothesis.

The ostensible reason for the meeting was to try to recruit Iku to a Library Association research group. They had no right to interfere with such a meeting, nor did they have a right to stop Iku from hearing what he had to say if she wanted to.

"...what is your decision, Commander?"

Genda scowled in silence for a moment, then stood up. "Kasahara's your subordinate. *You* decide."

It had been several years--back in his rookie days--since he'd tasted the pain of outright rejection. While he was absorbing the blow, Genda left the room. Just looking at his retreating figure, which displayed neither sympathy nor indulgence, made Doujou want to hang his head.

"What do you think, Komaki?"

It isn't weakness to ask my aide for an opinion. He realized he was reciting this to himself over and over, like he was making an excuse, and wanted to roll his eyes.

Komaki gave a small sigh, and answered. "Our theory about Tedzuka Satoshi's actions is just a guess. He invited Kasahara-san out under the pretext of recruiting for the Library of Tomorrow Project, which no one has a right to interfere with--all the more if Kasahara-san herself expressed a desire to hear what he had to say."

As his aide, as a member of his squad asked for official advice, Komaki could only give him a morally- and logically-sound answer. Komaki knew that, which was why he had sighed before speaking.

There had been no point in asking the question in the first place.

No one spoke, and a silence fell over the drab conference room. The only sound was the ticking of the second hand on the clock.

How many circuits had it made around the clock face?

--"We'll wait for Kasahara to return."

"Officer Doujou!" Tedzuka raised his voice in undisguised disapproval.

Doujou rounded on him. "To go after Kasahara would be inconsistent with the proper standard of behavior of a Library Force member!"

"But--!"

"Don't make me repeat myself!" *You're not her; I shouldn't have to*, he almost blurted out, but swallowed the words instead. They had a bitter taste.

The atmosphere was tense as they adjourned. Doujou and Komaki headed back to their rooms, which were on the same floor. Before they parted, Komaki stopped.

"Are you sure about this?" Doujou, halfway through the door to his room, turned to look at him. "If you asked me now, I might give you a different answer."

For a moment, his feelings warred within him. As if to shake free of them, Doujou shut the door.

"Dammit." The word hissed from his mouth before he was even aware of it. *What is wrong with everyone?*

What the hell do you want me to do?

As he raised his head from his hands, his eye fell upon a corner of his bookshelf.

Remembering the magazine that sat there, and the person who had left it for him, Doujou's face twisted.

*

He was the spitting image of Tedzuka.

Sipping her aperitif, Iku snuck a look at Tedzuka Satoshi, who was sitting across from her in front of the window. He had a face that made her think of a thirty-year old Tedzuka.

It gave her a weird feeling.

Iku squirmed uncomfortably, disconcerted to be in such a fancy lounge with a man who looked like a Tedzuka from the future. The lounge's atmosphere was probably pleasant for people who were used to it, but the place was so far beyond Iku's means that it just made her nervous. Within the Force it was famous as the lounge where all the top brass entertained.

"Maybe you could get a little dressed up and meet me somewhere?" he had asked her on the phone. She had pictured a modest restaurant, so when Satoshi led her here, she raised an objection.

"I can't! There's no way I can pay half the bill if we go here!"

She had planned to only accept his invitation if they split the bill, but Satoshi eventually overcame her resistance. He insisted that he would treat her "since she was his little brother's girlfriend"--she accepted, but demanded that he amend that to "coworker."

"If I let you think I was his girlfriend, Tedzuka would kill me!"

"You're a funny kid," Satoshi chuckled at her, but to Iku it was no laughing matter.

"I didn't even know that Tedzuka *had* an older brother."

"Yep. I left home recently, so I don't run into him as often as I used to."

Iku knew from observing her own brothers that this was often the case with male siblings who had left home. Satoshi had told her

that he wanted to talk to her about his brother; Iku naturally thought he meant that he wanted to ask how his brother was doing.

I better not tell him anything too embarrassing--Tedzuka will get pissed at me if he finds out later. She told a series of moderately amusing stories; still, Satoshi seemed very pleased to hear them.

"Sounds like he loosened up a lot while I wasn't looking."

Aw shit, Tedzuka might not like that if he hears it. "Please don't say anything to him about it!" As she tried to command Satoshi's silence, the middle courses of their meal came and went.

"Ummm..." *We're done with the main course, so now all that's left is dessert and coffee, I think,* she mused, reviewing the menu in her head. "Did you want to have that discussion you mentioned?"

They were ostensibly meeting to discuss her invitation to join Satoshi's research group, the Library of Tomorrow Project. He had heard about Iku from Tedzuka; according to Satoshi, Tedzuka had mentioned her during a phone call, and Tedzuka's admiration of her drive and motivation had stuck in Satoshi's memory, so he decided to try inviting her to join his group.

She was surprised yet pleased to hear that Tedzuka had been praising her behind her back. --Especially considering recent events.

"He swore me to secrecy, so don't tell him I told you. And of course, don't tell him that I invited you out like this because of something he said," he had told her on the phone, laughing. Sensing his good nature, she had agreed to come out with him, but so far he hadn't said a word about his research group.

That was when Satoshi asked her an unexpected question.

"Kasahara-san, what do you think of censorship?"

"I oppose it one hundred percent," she replied, a reflex response rivaling Pavlov's dogs'.

"Do you think that censorship should no longer be a part of our society?"

"Yes!" Iku nodded enthusiastically.

Satoshi laughed at her. "My group's purpose is to brainstorm about ways to rid our society of censorship."

Oooh, sounds neat. She was immediately intrigued.

The Media Improvement Act had been passed over thirty years ago, so a world rife with censorship was the only one Iku had ever known. What would a society without censorship be like? A world where books weren't hunted down like animals? A world where

everyone was free to read any book they wanted? A world where booksellers didn't have to live in fear of inspection and seizure, or--

A world where the library didn't have to take up arms to defend itself.

That could be awesome! Just imagining it lifted her spirits.

"It should be possible. Thirty-some years ago, there was no censorship in Japan."

"...that's true!" Iku exclaimed. She had never thought about it like that before. Since it had been passed before she was born, she felt like the Media Improvement Act was carved in stone. But thinking about it more carefully, when her parents had been children, there had been no censorship.

These days, there were only two choices regarding censorship: passive or active, accept or reject. Iku had never thought of it any other way--but once upon a time, censorship itself hadn't even been an option.

Only thirty years ago.

"At the Library of Tomorrow Project, we've devised a realistic plan to eradicate censorship from our society."

"Oooh, tell me tell me!" she blurted out without thinking. Satoshi was exactly the same age as her eldest brother, so she had forgotten herself and babbled like a child. Realizing what she had done, she corrected herself hastily. "I mean--I'd love to hear about it."

"First of all, in order to strike at and destroy the very roots of censorship, the library needs to gain the same rank as the Media Improvement Committee--that is, become a federal organization. Probably under the Ministry of Culture--that would be in keeping with the library's nature."

"What? But--" Iku cocked her head. "I thought the very reason why the library could fight federal censorship was because it was a local organization."

One usually just said that the library battled against censorship. But it would be more accurate to say that the local governments rejected what they saw as interference by the federal government in the form of censorship by the Media Improvement Committee, and used the military power of the Library Force, a locally-based but widespread organization, to combat it.

"Right. But don't you think that there's something very wrong about an official federal organization engaging in armed conflict with

an official local organization? From an international perspective, Japan is in the middle of a civil war."

Iku gave him a bewildered look. Satoshi continued, "Other countries don't publicly speak out against it, since it's a limited-scale war and they don't want to interfere in our internal affairs. They seem to regard our situation as similar to a period of widespread student protests, since even the Japanese military hasn't been deployed as a peacekeeping force. But for all practical purposes, Japan is experiencing armed civil strife. It's a pretty sorry state for a democratic society to be in."

Iku was trying hard to assimilate this information, but though Satoshi had used hard-hitting words like "civil war" and "civil strife," it just didn't sound right to her. It might be a civil war in the abstract sense, but the phrase rang false for Iku, who had lived with the conflict her whole life. The use of firearms was strictly limited to certain areas, and the Media Improvement Committee was required to seal off those areas in order to prevent civilian casualties.

If one excluded those skirmishes, Japan had one of the more moderately peaceful societies in the world.

Even the police get involved in shoot-outs sometimes, right? was Iku's general feeling on the subject, a feeling that was shared by many. *And even the police don't wait until someone's been killed before they start shooting,* was how they understood the conflict.

But at the same time, she recognized the insight behind Satoshi's contention that they were experiencing a civil war. *He's just as smart as you'd expect from Tedzuka's brother,* she thought inanely. Perhaps other members of the Library Force knew that the conflict was being carried out on an absurd level. Perhaps they accepted that and continued to fight regardless.

Everyone around me is too damn smart anyway, she scowled to herself.

In the meanwhile, Satoshi had moved on to another topic.

"At any rate, the current Library Force system is not suited for eliminating censorship once and for all. Armed resistance by the library only treats the symptoms, not the cause."

Her conditioned reflex against any argument that denounced the Library Force caused her to balk a little, but the idea of a society without censorship was so beguiling that she couldn't muster the strength to halt the conversation.

"So what is the ultimate solution?"

"Now you're talking," Satoshi smiled. The amiability in that smile drove home how different he was from the stiff-necked Tedzuka. "After the library becomes an official federal organization like the Media Improvement Committee, the conflict will become a political battle between the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Culture."

"Wait, but..." Her discomfort was proof that her colleagues' lectures over the past year were at last starting to sink in. Especially Doujou's. "Can two organizations with contradictory laws coexist in the same government?"

More to the point, she didn't think the Media Improvement Committee would allow it.

"Naturally, when the library becomes a federal organization, drastic restrictions will probably be applied to Section Four of the Library Laws. At that point, I'm guessing that there will be a lot of bargaining over how much power the Library Force will retain."

"So basically, the Law of Library Freedom would be slashed, in more than one way."

"Well, basically," Satoshi admitted without hesitation. "But it's alright to surrender some of our power as long as we get it back in the end. The important thing is to acquire a political foothold from which we can legitimately bargain. The Library Force system will never lead to anything except a battle of wills between federal and local governments."

Iku put her head in her hands; her brain had almost reached its saturation point. *Someone get me an interpreter!*

"A political battle will need to result in the demise of censorship, in the long term. The Library Force operates under the assumption that there is censorship to oppose; it is not a system for eradicating censorship. Paradoxically, it could be said that the Library Force *must* allow censorship in order to exist. If that is the case, in order to eliminate censorship, at some point we'll need to jettison the Library Force system."

Satoshi's presentation of this sudden, radical paradigm shift bewildered and unsettled Iku greatly. A world without censorship was, without a doubt, desirable and right. But.

"Um, I'm sorry, could you put it a little more simply...?" she begged him, throwing in the towel at last.

Satoshi laughed at her again. "In other words, 'if you do not enter the tiger's den, you will not catch its cub.'³²"

Thanks to a childhood spent reading *The Manga Guide to Proverbs* from cover to cover, she finally understood.

"So the 'tiger cub' is the elimination of censorship, and 'entering the tiger's den' is becoming an official federal organization and accepting limitations on the Law of Library Freedom?"

"Indeed." Satoshi gave her an benevolent nod, like a teacher praising a student. "Everything involves some kind of risk. To accomplish a great goal like eliminating censorship required a great risk. After that, it becomes a battle of risk management with your opponent. And I think we can win that battle. That's the purpose of our research society." Smiling impishly, he added, "Of course, we're still at the simulation stage for now."

"You have the temperament for that, don't you, Kasahara-san? 'Entering the tiger's den.'"

"Uh, I guess you could say that...maybe."

"Then would you consider becoming a member?" His tone was light, but Iku's thoughts were heavy.

A society where censorship didn't exist. A society she had never seen, but which had existed in the recent past. A society they might be able to bring back.

It was so beguiling--so dazzling--so right--it was so natural to try to bring it back--

But.

"If your plan were implemented, how long would it take to completely get rid of censorship?" The question slipped out almost unconsciously.

Satoshi was silent for a moment, seemingly taken aback. But he recovered quickly, and answered in a casual tone, "Sure, it'll take a long time. Ten years, twenty years, maybe even longer...but you have to be prepared to spend that long, if you're trying to change an established system. The Media Improvement Committee's power base is pretty solidly entrenched."

"I see. Thank you," Iku said, and nodded. "I'm afraid I can't join your group. Invite someone else."

Satoshi fixed her with a long, hard look, as though she had said something bizarre. He looked so baffled that she faltered a bit. "...The

³² A Japanese proverb meaning "nothing ventured, nothing gained."

Library Force won't make censorship go away," he repeated, as if to make sure she understood.

Iku nodded, still a little torn. "I know. But..." *Dammit, why am I so stupid? It's times like this I wish I could borrow Shibasaki's brain. The things I want to say aren't coming out right.* Irritated with herself, Iku took her time selecting her words. "...I couldn't tell other people, 'censorship will be gone in a few dozen years, so just endure it until then.'" At last, she had a grip on her argument. "When you want to read something, you want to be able to read it right now. I can't tell people to throw away freedoms they have now for ones they'll have years and years in the future."

Satoshi too took his time in replying. Almost as if he were trying his best to carefully persuade her.

"So you approve of a society that is warped in its very foundations? You want to continue a warped battle that will never definitively resolve the real issue?"

No! It's not like I approve of this society! It's wrong and I hate it, but--!

"Look, we're already living in that society. We may not like it, but it's the one we're stuck with, and because of that, the freedoms that we have left are precious. There may be people who can endure hardship now for the sake of a better future, but I think it's wrong to tell everyone to endure it, and I also think it's wrong to criticize the people who don't want to throw away the freedoms they have now."

You don't want to wait dozens of years to read something, you want to read it now. I think it's noble to give up your own freedoms for the sake of a worthy future, and I admire people who can do it. But it's wrong to look down on people who can't.

"The ability to give up rights you have now to make a better future is a very noble privilege. I respect those who can do it. But if we made it compulsory and forced it on everyone, we'd be no better than the Media Improvement Committee. Everyone has the right to give up their freedoms, and everyone has the right to hold on to their freedoms, and everyone is free to choose which they want to do."

"Then what do you think is the best way to change our society? Surely you don't think it's fine the way it is."

"Well..." *It's not my job to think about stuff like that,* she thought, scowling reproachfully at Satoshi. But right now, neither Shibasaki, nor Tedzuka, nor Komaki, nor even...Doujou--were here to answer for her. "If a politician..."

"Are you going to wait for a politician to move on their own?"

"Maybe if there was some kind of citizen action..." Iku trailed off.

Satoshi gave her a pitying, almost sympathetic smile. "The citizenry won't act. Unless they are severely, personally inconvenienced, only a small number of them will care enough to mobilize. There may be discontent, but as long as the problem doesn't have any more catastrophic consequences, the vast majority of people will learn to adapt. It's easier to grumble about something and adapt to it than try to change it. Unfortunately, the number of people who consider regulations on the books they can read and restrictions on free speech to be catastrophic consequences is smaller than you think. Which is how a society where the Media Improvement Act is routinely enforced came about in the first place."

Satoshi was right, and Iku couldn't argue otherwise, so she gave up trying.

"I'm not very smart, so I don't understand all the complicated things you've been talking about," she informed him candidly, "but I believe that the Library Force is doing the right thing by fighting to preserve our current freedoms, and I'm proud to fight with them. So I just can't agree with what you're saying. And I'm afraid I can't accept your invitation to the Library of Tomorrow Project."

Satoshi gazed at Iku silently for a time, then snorted and started chuckling. "--You got me there. This is why I hate dealing with sentimentalists. It always comes down to this." When Iku gave him a questioning look, he laughed and added, "No matter how painstakingly I lay out my logic, in the end kids like you always say, 'I don't really get it, but I know I don't like it,' and all my careful explanations go down the drain."

...why do I get the distinct impression that he's laughing at me? When Iku pouted indignantly, Satoshi leaned toward her.

"Alright, in that case let's try a simpler, dirtier line of attack."

He still has something else up his sleeve? Iku wondered, pulling back as Satoshi leaned forward. Paying no heed to her hostile body language, Satoshi opened his mouth.

"To tell you the truth, I didn't actually want you at all. Hikaru is the one I want."

It took her a few seconds to realize that the name "Hikaru" referred to Tedzuka.

"He's also been stubbornly refusing my invitations. So I thought if I caught a friend of his, his attitude might improve. I tried using his

roommate, but it didn't have much effect. You seem to be closer to him, so I tried for you instead."

Aha.

"So the story you used to lure me out was a lie, too."

"Don't tell him that I told you that he was singing your praises over the phone," Satoshi had said, implying a close relationship between the brothers, but in truth, there was probably animosity between them over this issue. Serious animosity.

"It may not *necessarily* be a lie. At the very least, you seem to make more effective bait than Sunagawa-kun."

"...that was an insult plain and simple."

"I told you I would try a simple line of attack. And a dirty one."

Dirty like how? Satoshi didn't give her much time to wonder before he played his next hand.

"Would you tell him this for me? 'If you do what I want, I'll stop the inquest against Kasahara-san, prove her innocence, and let her go free.'"

--Her mind went blank with shock.

"You--" she whispered, not sure if she had said the word aloud or not.

"You think I can't do it?" he teased her. She couldn't say a word. "Let me put all my cards on the table. My organization has been behind everything from the very beginning, all so that you could take this deal to Hikaru. Sunagawa-kun is a member of the Library of Tomorrow Project, and he did everything in accordance with our orders. Including getting you and Hikaru to help him carry the concealed books."

Which probably meant he could clear up the affair whenever and however he chose.

She was shaking like a leaf.

"...that's awful."

"I do feel bad for what I did to you. But that's how badly I want Hikaru."

"That's not what I meant."

I wasn't talking about what you did to me. Iku hid her face. --*I meant what you did to Tedzuka.*

The faces of her brothers, whom she had fought with constantly since childhood, came to her mind. They were obnoxious and irritating, and when they were roughhousing they would calmly and mercilessly perform German suplexes on her--but.... Of all the people in the world,

her brothers were the only ones she could relax around completely and rely on unhesitatingly. Since she had moved to Tokyo, they had never once taken their parents' side and told her to go back home.

If one of her brothers did something like this to her, Iku would never forgive him. But at the same time, she knew she could also never, ever hate him.

Why would you do such an awful thing to a brother you want on your side so badly?

"You're having a pretty tough time of it, aren't you?"

Her indignation evaporated.

The dorm that it now pained her to return to in the evening. The conversations that halted for a moment whenever she walked by, the glances that held either curiosity or scorn, the quietly averted eyes of the kind and honorable. The way no one but Shibasaki would talk to her except to exchange meaningless pleasantries. The fact that she waited to do laundry until Shibasaki was back, and couldn't walk down the hallway without being conscious of other people's watching eyes.

There was no way she could tell him she wasn't having a tough time.

"You have no proof, so telling the inquest committee what I just told you would be pointless. And I can drag the inquest out as long as I want."

"Then I'm past the halfway point," she had told Doujou with false bravery, but had there been a conspiracy like this at work during Doujou's inquest? If there hadn't, and his inquest had still lasted two months, how long would hers last...?

"All you have to do is tell Hikaru. Your responsibility ends there. The decision will be up to Hikaru then."

This sophistry shook her already unbalanced stance. *If all I have to do is tell him... No matter what Tedzuka decides, I won't get blamed for it.*

There was a small candle burning brightly in its glass holder by the window. Its wavering light was like her own wavering feelings--

No! Don't let him manipulate you--think! If you were someone else, what would you do? Someone like--

At that moment, there was a loud *bang* at the window. Iku looked up in surprise.

The person who had knocked on the glass--the person she had *just* been thinking about--was standing outside, his shoulders heaving as he tried to catch his breath. He opened his mouth.

I'm coming, his lips said.

Iku sat up straight, and turned to face Satoshi. "If you want to tell him, tell him yourself. I won't say it."

Not looking particularly put out or unhappy, Satoshi steadily returned Iku's gaze.

"After his own brother did such a horrible thing to him, I don't have the heart to do something horrible to him myself. Tedzuka is my friend."

The bell on the door to the restaurant jingled.

"I couldn't give someone such an awful message--one that tries to exploit his feelings of duty toward a squadmate. Not to a friend. Not from his own brother. Tell him yourself. That way I won't hurt Tedzuka any more than he's already been hurt."

She could hear the steady beat of footsteps approaching them.

"His opinions may be different from yours, but please don't hurt Tedzuka any more than you have to. I don't want to help anyone hurt my own friends."

The footsteps stopped right next to her. When she looked up, she found Doujou, wearing his uniform and focusing his gaze on Satoshi. Still breathing hard, he said, "This is my subordinate. I'm taking her home."

Satoshi was studying Doujou with intense interest. "You must be Officer Doujou," he murmured.

Doujou didn't answer, but looked down at Iku. "We're leaving." He grabbed her hand and pulled her up, and just like that led her toward the door. He thrust a handful of bills at the busboy without counting them--apparently he had shoved them into his uniform pocket in advance. "Her companion will be paying the rest," he said, and they left the restaurant. --Judging from their color, he had handed over two 10,000 yen bills.

They had been walking quickly home for a few minutes when Iku finally caved in and spoke up. Mostly, she was having a hard time keeping up with Doujou's military pace in her high heels. "Instructor Doujou, you're hurting my hand."

Doujou looked down at his hand as if he had just realized it was still gripping hers, and released her hastily. He then halted and stood stiffly before Iku. Neither of them knew what to say, so Iku finally broke the ice with something inconsequential. "Why are you wearing your uniform?"

They were forced to buy the uniforms when they enlisted, and only wore them to official functions. Doujou scowled. "I was out of dress shirts. Thanks a lot for going to a place with a dress code," he snarled in misdirected anger.

At length--

"What did he tell you?"

His tone told her that he knew everything already, and that was why he had come to fetch her back.

"I refused. After I heard everything."

Doujou was silent for a moment. "I see," he replied at last, sounding deflated.

"You didn't have to come and get me. I still would have refused him and come home on my own," Iku blustered. "What, you don't trust your own subordinate? Even though you trained me yourself?"

Iku expected him to make some sarcastic remark, but Doujou just scowled and looked away. "I came to get you for my own selfish reasons." *What...? --No, don't, that's fighting dirty...* "You've been going through a lot lately, so naturally I was worried about you. I am your superior officer, after all."

Dammit, I'm gonna cry! She suppressed her tears with an effort. If she cried now, all of her previous pretensions to bravery would come to nothing. *And I wanted so badly to show how strong I could be.*

"Y-you worry too much, sir. And--and anyway, I-I promised to tell you if it got to be too much, didn't I?"

The words had sounded so clear and brilliant in her head, but in her tear-choked voice, they sounded weak and shaky.

"You did a good job." Doujou reached up to pat her head. Then--"Why," he asked, sounding unamused, "are you wearing high heels?" His hand was stretching even farther than usual to reach the top of Iku's head.

*

Iku's inquest ended abruptly after two more hearings.

According to the committee, they could not at the present time determine whether or not Iku had participated in concealing the books, and they would wait for Sunagawa's return to double-check his story. For the time being, she would be presumed more-or-less innocent.

Public opinion in the dorm was still against her, but that too was getting better little by little. Apparently Shibasaki's public relations work with the other girls on her behalf was behind the improvement.

She and Tedzuka spoke about it only once. "So, what did you and my brother talk about?" he asked.

She answered nonchalantly, "He made his pitch to me, but I didn't really agree with his point of view, so I refused." She added, "If you see your brother, tell him I said I'm sorry."

She wasn't sure if she had fooled him, but Tedzuka accepted her story with only a look of vague misgiving. Apparently he really didn't want to delve too deeply into the topic of his brother.

And then one day, Iku returned to the dorm to find that a letter had come for her by registered mail.

Iku's brows knit as she looked over the envelope the dorm manager had handed her.

The return address was in Kanagawa Prefecture, and the sender was listed as "Tetzuka Satoshi of the Library of Tomorrow Project." Not wanting to open the letter in the hallway, she ran back to her room. Shibasaki had told her that she would be coming home late today, so she entered the empty room and flipped on the light switch. Lately things had improved to the point where her acquaintances let her sit with them in the mess hall, so mealtimes were bearable even if Shibasaki wasn't there.

Too impatient to look for scissors, Iku tore open the envelope. Inside were two 10,000 yen bills and a sheet of stationary. The amount was probably related to the money Doujou had left at the restaurant.

When she opened the letter, she found a few lines penned in a flowing hand.

--For a true friend of my brother, with my compliments.--

This probably referred to the way the inquest had suddenly ended.

The next sentence read:

--Since I promised to treat you to dinner, please return the enclosed to Officer Doujou.--

After a discussion, Iku and Doujou had agreed to split the cost of Iku's meal, but there was no reason to complain if Satoshi was returning the money to them. He had his own dignity to uphold, after all.

Then, the last line.

--*A girl whose superior officer is the prince she's admired since high school is no one to be trifled with. You sure taught me a lesson! Take care, &c.*--

--Her mind was whited-out with shock.

It was too much--

The shock of learning of Satoshi's schemes had been nothing compared to this--

"Her superior officer is the prince she's admired since high school" could only mean--

"Ohmygod, *ohmygod*, OH MY GOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOD!"

If rumor is to be believed, the scream that exploded from her well-trained abdominal muscles reverberated all the way to the men's dorm.

*

Asahina arrived at the nearby park where she had summoned him, looking as cheerful and happy-go-lucky as always. "I'm sorry I kept you waiting!" He grinned at her. "Where are we going?"

Shibasaki smiled back at him. "This is the end of the line."

Asahina's expression changed. He had probably read her intentions.

"I won't meet with you anymore. --I promised I'd keep seeing you until I found a reason to spurn you, remember?" Asahina gazed at her silently. Shibasaki kept a perfect smile affixed to her face like a mask--it was her special talent.

--Had she *ever* found a reason to spurn him.

"I wasn't brought up well enough to date a young hotshot elite bureaucrat from the Ministry of Justice. A cross-class romance would only bring us misery," she told him, trying to insinuate as strongly as possible that there had never been any "romance" in the first place.

Asahina wilted, as if he had been forced to give up some hope. His expression turned serious, and he asked respectfully, "You know everything?"

"Hardly *everything*," Shibasaki said modestly. "But are you speaking, for example, of the connection between the Library of Tomorrow Project and a faction within the Ministry of Justice?" Asahina didn't answer. Shibasaki continued on her own, "What would have *really* happened if I had asked you to hush up the incident with the concealed books, I wonder? Would there have been a different article, about a library cover-up? Or would you have blackmailed me into joining the Library of Tomorrow Project?"

"...will you listen to what I have to say?"

"Of course. Since this is the last time you'll see me, you'll feel better if you get everything off your chest."

Asahina looked hurt. Was he truly upset, or was it just an act? She no longer cared.

"Even within the Ministry of Justice, there are people who oppose the Media Improvement Act. Not...not the majority, of course. That faction, along with the Library of Tomorrow Project, has a long-term plan to overturn the Media Improvement Act, and I am one of its members. --Shibasaki-san, I hate censorship as much as you do! Our goals are the same; please believe that!"

"My goals do not include sneak attacks. Except on my enemies."

Asahina's hurt expression deepened at this riposte. "I was against doing it that way!"

She had tricked him into acknowledging the plot just by dropping one strong hint. He really was almost idiotically ingenuous. Even after all that had happened, he still reminded her of Iku in that way.

You fool. She smiled bitterly to herself. *You should have told some brazen lie. You should have told me that there was no plot, that you spilled the beans to me because you wanted to save the library where I worked.*

Shibasaki remembered Asahina's pained, watery smile when he had told her about the concealed books. Perhaps that expression would have been enough to fool some people. But still, Asahina wasn't suited for secret dealings if he revealed them openly at the drop of a hat.

Although, one could say that their relationship had lasted this long precisely because Asahina hadn't told bold lies, hadn't been able to completely pull the wool over Shibasaki's eyes even in her distressed state.

"I was telling the truth when I said I was glad you didn't take me up on my offer. I fell in love with you because of those scruples."

She waited for a few moments after this statement, but Asahina didn't say another word. After she had waited long enough, Shibasaki sighed softly. She didn't feel betrayed or disheartened, nothing so heavy. Just...unlucky.

You know, we had some fun times together, you and I.

And you still forced me to bring it to an end.

"Oh really? Then why didn't you tell me the reason you made contact with me was because I was a cadet of the Library Force's experimental intelligence department?"

Asahina looked as though she had struck him.

His feelings were probably genuine. However--. The success of the plot had clearly been more important to him than coming clean to Shibasaki.

She would bring that conflict to an end too.

"Would it help if I said I'm sorry? I really wanted to work with you to build a world without censorship."

"Unfortunately for you, you and your cohorts have truly aroused my anger."

Two months. Two bloody *months*.

That was how long Iku had been forced to endure that agony. There was nothing worse, nothing more unbearable, than living communally with other girls under those circumstances. And Shibasaki had been helpless to improve them.

On the contrary.

The Library of Tomorrow Project had wanted Tedzuka Satoshi's younger brother--as well as a certain intelligence department cadet. And they had ensnared Iku as a warning to both of them.

Because of me, that poor girl... Her anger had overwhelmed any previous feelings. She was no longer inclined to give Asahina the benefit of any doubt, and her antipathy extended to the entire faction he belonged to.

"I don't dispute your goals. But neither can I agree with them personally. So let's each agree to work hard for what we believe, and leave it at that. I think this is a very amicable bargain, don't you?"

Asahina didn't say anything more. He faced Shibasaki, bowed to her at a forty-five-degree angle, and silently departed.

When Asahina had completely disappeared, Shibasaki turned to a stand of trees. "You can come out now!" she called.

Tedzuka emerged from his hiding place. Perhaps as an attempt at camouflage, he was dressed in black from head to toe.

"Sorry for making you act as my bodyguard."

"No, it's fine...this was my problem too."

They both shared the guilt of Iku being used as a proxy to get at them.

"Also, thanks for the information. It didn't take me long to figure out who I was dealing with, thanks to you."

She was referring to the text message she had received the night she and Asahina had traded text message addresses. "Asahina-san?" Iku had asked. "A friend," Shibasaki had replied. The message had been from Tedzuka.

"Don't get too involved. He's with the Ministry of Justice"

Based on that message, Shibasaki had revealed her position with the intelligence department to Tedzuka, and they had begun to pool information.

"...I thought I remembered one of my brother's acquaintances having that name. 'Asahina' isn't all that common a family name, and when I heard that his given name was the same as mine, I knew without a doubt. I wanted to keep you from getting tangled up in that mess. But you ended up entangled anyway."

"I wasn't entangled; I entered it willingly. Don't beat yourself up for that. It's an insult to me."

"...you win," Tedzuka muttered with a wry smile.

"I'm a woman who always aims for perfection," Shibasaki smirked.

She gazed off in the direction Asahina had gone. "I wish we could have held onto him for a little longer, but we would have been in trouble if he had started working with Director Etou."

Investigations by the nascent intelligence department had established that Etou was a pivotal figure in the Library of Tomorrow Project. This information had been passed up to Inamine, who headed the intelligence department on top of his other duties. Fewer than half of the key figures in the Project were official members; it was typical for many to hide their relationship to the group. One began to believe that Tedzuka Satoshi was making a genuine effort to secretly amass real power in the Library Force.

"Once Asahina-san had completely gained the trust of a Musashino First employee, the Project would have moved to force her to join. If the director of the library was collaborating with them, he could provide plenty of information to help make that capture. Now would have been the perfect time."

Etou must have been directing Sunagawa, or he would have never made such bold moves. No matter how much he idolized Tedzuka Satoshi, Sunagawa was basically a small fry, and it was impossible to think that he would have been able to execute the plan to conceal the books all on his own. Also telling was the fact that the incident had been brought to light in a way that was not damaging to Etou's career.

"So I thought it was the right time to end it," Shibasaki concluded calmly.

Tedzuka was silent for a time. After a few moments, "I'll let you be alone."

For a moment, she didn't understand the reason behind his solicitude. With a small shock, she realized he thought she might want have some time to herself to cry, and her heart was unexpectedly touched.

She found herself wanting to take advantage of that diffident concern. Shibasaki turned to face away from Tedzuka. "Would you mind listening to me gripe for a minute?"

Tedzuka didn't say anything, but he didn't seem to be backing away, either.

It was another shy offer of kindness. Shibasaki took it.

"A long time ago I had a lot of trouble because of my looks. Whatever, it's practically a cliché at this point. Anyway, it made romance very hard for me. I seem to only fall for people who will never be interested in me, so when I do fall for someone, I get scared and 'jokingly' confess my love right away. I need him to tell me 'no' and crush any hopes I had, or I go crazy from the suspense. So..." She lifted her head and looked at the sky, but she couldn't see the stars. "I'm not as hurt as you were fearing, honestly. I had a bit of fun spending time with Asahina-san, and I did feel something for him, but I'm confident that it would never have become love. I thought I could end it at any time, and I did."

Indeed, she had asked Tedzuka to accompany her not so much for moral support, but because she didn't trust Asahina, showing just how little she was attached to him.

"I don't mind playing at love for the sake of my job. I could do it again, however many times I needed to. I think I have a natural aptitude for intelligence work, if I do say so myself. In fact, I think I could sleep with my target, if the need arose." She addressed Tedzuka, standing behind her, for the first time. "Tedzuka? Do you think if

Kasahara knew that it didn't bother me to do the honeytrap thing for work, that she'd think worse of me?"

A girl who really believed in champions of justice. A girl who hadn't realized that the champion of justice she admired from long ago was Doujou, but was plainly being drawn to him all over again. A girl who was forthright and naïve to the point of foolishness--

Is there any chance that she wouldn't hate me if she knew?

Tedzuka didn't reply at first, and Shibasaki wasn't really expecting an answer. After her unexpected outburst, a reply was probably beyond him.

"...This is just what I imagine happening, but--" Tedzuka began slowly, unsure of his words. "If Kasahara found out, I think she'd get angry at you. Can't you just hear her yelling at you? 'Put yourself before your job! Why would you even have to go that far!?'"

He seemed to expect some expression of agreement, but she couldn't say a word. If she opened her mouth now, the dam would burst. And crying in front of anyone was against Shibasaki's principles.

"Now it's my turn to gripe," Tedzuka declared decisively. "I have a huge complex about my brother. When I was younger, he was so talented and amazing. I always wanted to be just like him when I grew up. Even when he does these things to me--no matter how many times he disappoints me--somewhere deep inside I still expect better of him."

Tedzuka paused for a minute. "Don't laugh," he warned Shibasaki, and then confessed, "Officer Doujou...reminds me of how my brother used to be. He has a similar vibe, or something like that."

Though he had told her not to laugh, she couldn't contain the high-pitched giggles that escaped her. They helped dissipate the tears that threatened to flow.

"I said don't laugh!" Tedzuka yelled.

"Sorry, sorry!" she apologized. Turning around to face Tedzuka again, she found herself face-to-face with a watch, dangled in Tedzuka's outstretched hand. One look made it plain that it was nicer than Tedzuka could have personally afforded.

"Could you get rid of this for me?" Eyeing Tedzuka's serious expression, Shibasaki allowed him to hand her the watch. Tedzuka continued, "My brother gave it to me a long time ago. I tried to give it back, but he made me take it. Said I could wear it if we ever had a reconciliation. I don't think I'll ever wear it, but I also can't bring myself to throw it away."

"So I can do whatever I want with it?" Tedzuka nodded, and Shibasaki smiled wickedly. "Wanna go to a pawnshop? This model will fetch a pretty penny, even if it's not in its original packaging. It'll pay for enough liquor to drink our troubles away. I could go for some appetizers, too."

Tedzuka's jaw dropped; plainly he had not been thinking along those lines. It was rare to see such a stupefied expression on his face.

"If you were a girl, you'd know--when you break up with a guy, you sell all his presents right away and have all the fun you can with the money!"

"You...you want to compare breaking up with some guy to having a falling-out with a sibling!?"

"Come on, they're pretty similar. Don't act so hoity-toity."

Tedzuka opened his mouth to argue, but suddenly the fire went out of him, and he started to laugh. "Fine, you're right. I was being pretty melodramatic."

"Okay, it's decided. I know a place where we can get a good price--it's a stop away, though."

"How do you know something like that?" Tedzuka asked, eyebrows raised.

Shibasaki smiled another wicked smile. "It's one of the first things you learn when you live in a dorm full of women."

"...my hopes and dreams about women are shattered," Tedzuka muttered, shivering, as he caught up to Shibasaki and they set off side by side.

*

"Why did you have to pick the one day I come home late to get sick?"

Shibasaki, who had returned slightly drunk with just moments to spare before curfew, regarded the bedridden Iku with surprise.

"Lemme alone, I can get sick whenever I want to." *It's not like I actually thought you could come down with a fever just from shock. What is this, some old-fashioned soap opera!?* she thought, though no power on earth could have made her reveal this to Shibasaki.

"Have you eaten anything?"

"No..." It had taken her long enough to drag herself into bed after the sudden onset of her illness; going down to dinner had been out of the question.

"Want me to go buy you something? Jello, or some ice cream?"

"No thanks, I'm good..." Iku shook her head weakly at Shibasaki's sympathetic offer and burrowed under the covers.

A girl whose superior officer is the prince she's admired since high school is no one to be trifled with.

This line from Satoshi's letter--which she had managed to stash away before crawling into bed--echoed endlessly within her head.

She wanted to think that Satoshi was just yanking her chain. Why would Satoshi know such a personal thing about her in the first place? But indeed, she could believe Satoshi capable of ferreting out just about any piece of information. And the more she thought about his intrusive revelation, the more it explained.

Doujou's abnormally stiff-necked attitude concerning her prince. The conversation they had had during special training in Okutama, when Doujou mentioned that he had seen most of Kantou over the course of his training. Iku's home might be in the countryside, but it was still Ibaraki.

She had heard that her prince's discretionary selection had caused an uproar in the Library Force; this accounted for Doujou's experience with an inquest committee. And when Doujou had thundered so fiercely at her when Iku had pondered searching the inquest records for her prince's name, it must have been because he didn't want her to find out the truth. Now that she thought about it, he had been much more angry than the situation really called for.

Above all, it just *felt* right. His form and manner fit into her memories without any trouble. Iku was, as Satoshi had called her, a sentimentalist; as someone who judged everything on instinct, her feelings were the most compelling evidence. She couldn't remember her prince anymore without picturing him with Doujou's face.

This wasn't the way it was suppose to go! Iku cursed at nothing in particular. *My reunion with my esteemed prince should have been more--more romantic, more bittersweet!*

We weren't supposed to get into a no-holds barred judo match! I wasn't supposed to drop kick him in the back because I was upset that he beat me, and he wasn't supposed to turn right around and put me in an armbreaker lock! And since then, all we've ever done is snarl at each other!

"I only met him once, five years ago, but even now I want to be like him, I respect him, and I love him."

"AUUUUUUGGGHHHHH!" The memory of that speech brought a scream to her lips.

"What? What is it!?" From the paleness of her face, it appeared that Iku had managed to startle even the unflappable Shibasaki.

"Nothing!"

"Nothing!? What do you mean, 'nothing'!?"

"It was a dream! A bad dream!"

"You weren't even sleeping!"

"I fell asleep for one second and dreamt it!" Iku insisted, evading Shibasaki's questions. She pulled the futon up over her head.

As she thought back on all the things she had ever said to Doujou, each and every one made her want to scream.

"No! I didn't mean it!"

"What is wrong with you!? You're testing my patience!"

She ignored Shibasaki and burrowed further under the covers. *I didn't mean that--*

When I said I wanted to be like him, I was talking about my prince from high school! I don't aspire to be like the person he is now, not especially anyway--

Wait. What does he think?

As she turned her thoughts to Doujou, and the way he got annoyed and changed the subject every time Iku started rhapsodizing about her prince, her heart contracted painfully.

...I've been a giant thorn in his side.

She thought back on the most recent incident, when she had been scolded to within an inch of her life for asking about the inquest records. That was how badly he wanted to hide his secret from her.

He thinks I'm a pest...he hates me...--wait, why am I getting so upset about that!?

The realization troubled and confused her even more.

How do I feel about Instructor Doujou?

How does Instructor Doujou feel about me?

Neither question yielded an answer.

Anyway! she realized with a jolt. What am I gonna do from now on? How should I act around him?

Calm down, he doesn't know that you know. But would it be possible to convincingly pretend that she didn't? She was already

acting suspiciously around Shibasaki. How would she act around the man involved?

"What am I gonna do tomorrow?..." she whispered.

Shibasaki must have heard her, for she replied, "If your fever hasn't gone down, maybe you should stay home?"

Actually, it wasn't bad advice.

...To be continued.