
Shin Akigi
ILLUSTRATION BY
Shu
PHANTOM THIEF
RED
2
The Junior High Detective

Phantom Thief Red

The Junior High Detective

2

Shin Akigi

ILLUSTRATION BY Shu

JY

New York

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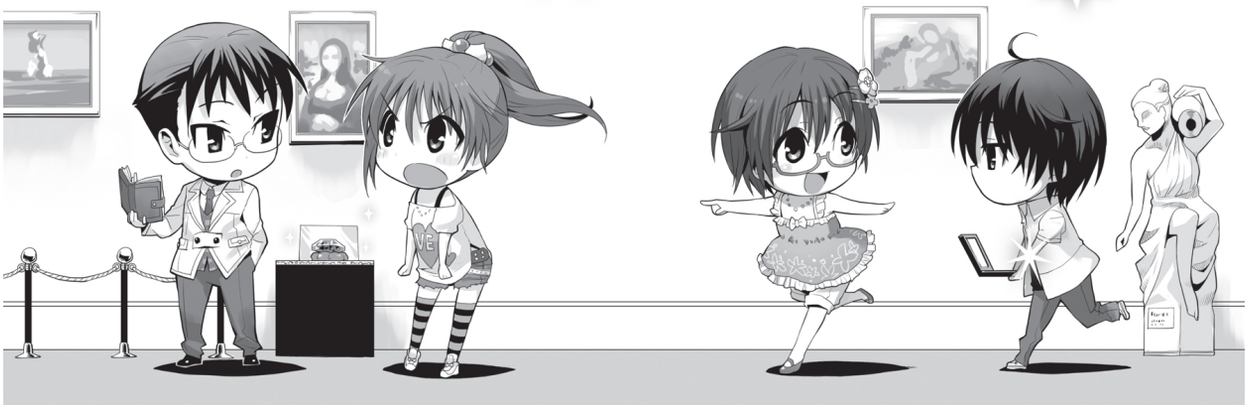
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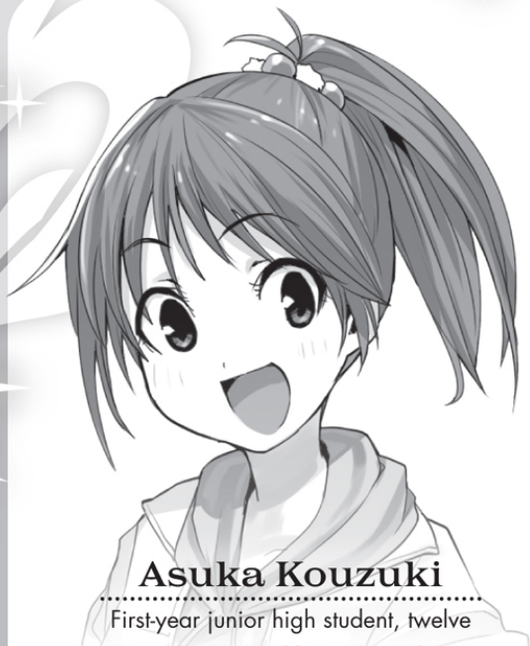
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Afterword





Asuka Kouzuki

First-year junior high student, twelve years old. Super athletic, does Phantom Thief Red's actual breaking and entering.



Kei Kouzuki

Asuka's twelve-year-old cousin. Good at computers, in charge of strategy and guidance.



Misaki Himuro

Asuka's best friend since forever.

Hibiki Shirasato

Third-year junior high student. The kid detective everyone is talking about.





Tsubasa Kouzuki

Asuka's dad, first-generation Phantom Thief Red.



Keiichiro Kouzuki

Kei's dad.

1

A Challenge from the Junior High Detective!

“Ugh, it’s so hot…!” I groaned the second I woke up.

I looked at my alarm clock. It was just after eight. If this was a school day, I’d be leaping out of bed, but it was summer vacation. Life was good. I wanted to sleep a little more, but it was too hot.

Might as well get up!

I yawned and rubbed my eyes. Since I’m on the top bunk, the white ceiling was right in front of my face. Being careful not to bump my head, I peeked at the bottom bunk. My cousin, Kei—who’s the same age as me—was still snoozing away. He was breathing peacefully, and his face was calm.

How could he sleep in this heat?

I sighed. He looks so innocent here. When he’s awake, he acts like he has no emotions and he makes fun of me. It’s a little annoying. A *lot* annoying.

But as much as I hate to admit it, he also gets me out of a lot of tight spots. Especially when we’re Red.

Still leaning over the edge of my bunk, I gently pushed myself off and flipped onto the ground. I made a soft *thump* when I landed, but Kei didn’t even twitch. I think he stayed up pretty late again last night, so he’d probably sleep in a little more.

I went into the living room, where a delicious smell was in the air. My stomach grumbled.

“Good mo— Whoa, you’re up early, Uncle K!”

Uncle Keiichiro was sitting at the low table in the living room, reading the newspaper. I didn’t see Dad.

I blinked and glanced at the living room clock. It was only a few minutes past eight. I almost wondered if it was eight at night…but it was too bright out for that.

“I’m offended, Asuka! Why are you so surprised to see me?” he said, looking up from the paper.

“You’re almost never up so early! And if you are, you’re a zombie.”

“A zombie?” He smiled sheepishly.

But it’s true! If Uncle K or Kei are even awake before ten, they can barely open their eyes or hold their heads up. For a while at least, they’re totally useless. I mean, on school days, I think Kei is half asleep until lunch. But every time the teacher calls on him, he always knows the answer. Wish I could look inside his brain one day.

“I stayed up all night,” Uncle Kei admitted. “I’m going to sleep soon.”

Now that made sense. He’d probably be a zombie when he woke up again.

“Where’s Dad?” I asked.

“Taking the trash out.”

“Oh.”

With nothing better to do, I sat in a chair near Uncle K.

Now, if you just saw us talking like this, you might think we’re a normal family. But actually, we have a huge secret.

So, you’ve probably heard of Phantom Thief Red, right? The modern Robin Hood who can sneak past the tightest security in Japan and never get caught. The one who only steals from bad guys. That’s me and Kei—we’re Phantom Thief Red!

Dad and Uncle K were Red first, but this spring vacation, Kei and Uncle K moved in with us, and Kei and I took over. We’ve had some close calls, but I think we’ve been doing a pretty good job lately!

I wasn’t so excited about living together at first, but now I’m completely used to it. I’ve forgotten a couple times that they haven’t always been here. I don’t even mind having less space in my room.

“Bored, Asuka? Here, maybe this’ll wake you up,” Uncle K said, holding out the paper he’d been reading.

“Uh, I’m not much of a newspaper person…”

I only read the TV listings and the comics. I’m not proud of it, but I mean, the news is so boring, and there’s hardly any pictures!

“Just take a look,” he said, pointing to the front page. With a sigh, I took the paper and glanced at the article.

“This one that says, ‘Junior High Detective Cracks Another Case’?”

“That’s the one.”

Huh. A detective in junior high? That sounded like me and Kei. Of course, detectives and phantom thieves are usually on opposite sides.

“Let me see…,” I muttered. This could be interesting.

The article read:

Last night, Haruto Tada, a four-year-old boy who had been missing since the fourteenth of this month, returned safely home. He had the famous fourteen-year-old detective Hibiki Shirasato to thank.

Shirasato independently discovered Tada’s whereabouts after an unsuccessful investigation by the police. He then worked with the police to retrieve the little boy and arrest the kidnapper. Shirasato has helped solve over one hundred cases to date, earning a place among the famous detectives of our day.

“Wow, it’s amazing he could pull that off. But what’s it got to do with me?” I asked.

I was impressed that someone so young was a detective, but was I supposed to be surprised? I mean, Kei and I are basically the same age.

“I wouldn’t be so carefree, Asuka.”

“Oh, hi, Dad!”

I hadn’t realized he was looming in the doorway, dressed in a bright-red apron. He must have just come back from throwing out the trash.

Wait, he went downstairs in that?! I hope none of the neighbors saw him! People have already been talking about how weird we are ever since Kei and Uncle K moved in!

But I didn’t have time to bug him about that right now.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Turn on the TV, and you’ll see.”

“Why so mysterious?!”

I clicked the remote. A familiar talk show was on, where the host chats with commentators.

“I don’t see… Huh? …Wait, what?!” I blurted out when I saw the words on the screen. “What the heck?”

I looked at Dad and Uncle K, then back at the TV. Written in red and black letters were the words:

Showdown: Junior High Detective vs. Phantom Thief Red!

We were having a showdown?! But Red hadn’t done a single job since summer vacation started!

The shot switched to a view of a teenage boy surrounded by reporters. He was pretty good-looking, and his trendy glasses made him seem smart. He was wearing a white jacket (even though it was summer). He was slender and a little taller than me, but I could tell he wasn’t weak. Judging from the way he kept his footing even as the reporters jostled him, he probably did some kind of martial arts.

Was this Hibiki Shirasato?

“Mr. Shirasato, I’ve heard you were asked to provide security,” one of the reporters said. Huh, the grown-up was calling this kid “Mister.”

“That’s right. I will be helping guard the Red Star, which will be in an exhibit that begins this weekend.”

“Does that mean the Red Star has already been threatened?” the reporter asked.

“Not at all. The owner is simply acting from an abundance of caution,” Hibiki said, looking straight into the camera. Even through the TV screen, I could feel the determination in his eyes.

“Wow. So you aren’t concerned about any potential theft?”

I could sense the excitement drain from the crowd of reporters. They must have assumed Hibiki Shirasato’s involvement meant imminent drama. But he shook his head.

“Who can say? Thieves don’t necessarily announce their crimes in advance. What I can tell you is that as long as I’m guarding the Red Star, it will not be taken…not even by Phantom Thief Red.”


SHOWDOWN
Junior High Detective vs. Phantom Thief Red!



“Has Phantom Thief Red made a threat?!” the reporter asked excitedly.

“Oh, no. But I think the possibility exists. And if Red does make a move, it will be their last,” Hibiki declared confidently, pushing his glasses up with his fingertips.

H-hey, who does this guy think he is?!

The interview ended, and the program returned to the studio. Apparently, Hibiki’s comments weren’t live.

“It’s entirely possible that Phantom Thief Red will go after the Red Star,” the commentator said knowingly.

I stabbed the power button with my finger.

“Who even is this Hibiki Shirasato guy?! We don’t steal things for no reason!”

“What do you expect? Red’s famous now,” Dad said as he got breakfast ready.

“That’s all you have to say?! Doesn’t it make you mad?!”

“You and Kei are Red now. You need to work this out yourselves,” Uncle K said serenely.

Since neither of them seemed interested in coming out of retirement, my only option was to go shake Kei awa— Oh, never mind.

“Oh, Kei! You’re up!” I said as he walked out of our room.

Strangely enough, he didn’t look like a zombie. And it wasn’t even eight thirty yet!

“You’re making so much noise.” He glared at me. “I was just about to fall asleep!”

“You were sleeping a few minutes ago!”

He’d been snoring and not moving, so I was certain.

“My eyes were closed, but I wasn’t asleep. It’s easier to run simulations when I’m lying down.”

He sure must be busy…but if you’re lying down already, why not just go to sleep?! Agh, back on topic!

“Kei! On TV—”

“I know.” He stopped me with one hand before I could pick up the remote again. “If you’re talking about Hibiki Shirasato, I saw the news online. This is clearly a challenge…or a dare.”

“I know! It’s so infuriating!” I stamped my foot. “But we can’t take the dare, can we? I mean, Red doesn’t steal for no reason…”

That's been the unbreakable rule since Dad and Uncle K were Red.

"…Yes, we can."

"What?! Kei, are you sure?"

He glanced at me before saying confidently, "…Red's got a reason to steal the Red Star."

2

Three Kids Visit an Art Museum

“Wow, it sure is crowded,” I said as I surveyed the line outside the art museum.

“That news story must have been good advertising,” Misaki said, joining the back of the line.

I’d come to look around the museum where the Red Star was on display. I still wasn’t convinced we should do this, but Kei had promised I’d understand when I saw the real thing, so I figured I’d at least go along.

Meanwhile, Kei…uh…

“…Blargh…”

He was standing behind us, his face white and his hand over his mouth. I think he was about to pass out.

We had to ride the train for about half an hour to get here. Kei gets really bad motion sickness—he can’t even ride a bike. That’s why he walks everywhere. But the museum was too far, so we had to take the train. I think it was pretty rough for him.

“Hey, Kei—Asuka and I will buy the tickets. Why don’t you rest on that bench?” Misaki said, looking at him worriedly.

“I’m f-f-fine…” He grimaced. He did not look fine.

“You shouldn’t push yourself,” Misaki said.

“He said he’s okay. He knew ahead of time he’d have to ride the train,” I pointed out.

“But…”

Misaki looked like she wanted to say something. She’s so nice. I’m used to Kei by now, so I don’t worry that much about him. Also, I knew he’d feel better soon.

Oh, I forgot to say why Misaki was with us on our trip to case the museum for Red. Short version—I invited her. She’s an art person, and she’d told me a little while ago that she wanted to see this exhibit. I figured she might as well come, since we were on summer vacation. Also, I wasn’t too thrilled about the idea of

going out alone with someone as logical as Kei. I didn't know if he would agree, but he didn't even complain. I was expecting him to be like, "We're not going there for fun" or something.

"This architecture is so lovely! Don't you think so, Asuka?" Misaki asked me.

"I guess," I said.

I looked at the building. The walls were about three stories tall and made of wine-colored bricks. Something so tall and solid should be imposing, but this one was more inviting.

There was a glassed-in terrace café on the first floor where I could see customers enjoying their drinks. Garden beds full of flowers and other plants surrounded the building. It wasn't new, but it had a pleasant atmosphere that I guess you could call elegant.

"The museum was designed over sixty years ago by a Dutch architect. Last year, it was designated a national cultural property," Kei explained as I stared at the building. He wasn't any more chipper than usual, but at least his color was coming back. If he could speak, he must be feeling better.

"Wow, you know so much, Kei!" Misaki said, sounding genuinely impressed.

All three of us are in the same class in junior high, so we talk a lot. Kei just listens most of the time, but Misaki likes his random facts. It's interesting to hear things we don't learn in school, but his speeches give me a headache. I guess it's just too much information for me. My brain starts to feel like it's going to explode.

"Asuka, it's our turn," Misaki said, standing by the door and gesturing for me to go in.

"Oh, right!" I said, hurrying after her. "Mmm, it's so cool in here. I'm coming back to life."

The air-conditioning was blasting inside. My sweat turned cold.

"We're looking for the special exhibit, so…this way, I think," Misaki said, examining the pamphlet she picked up at the front desk.

"What's that?" I asked, not familiar with the lingo.

"Museums have two types of exhibits. Permanent exhibits are where you can see the museum's regular collection, and special

exhibits are where you see artwork from other museums and stuff that's only on display for a little while."

"So it'll go away soon?"

Maybe that was why most of the people inside were walking toward the SPECIAL EXHIBIT sign. The place was full of families and high school and college students on dates, too. That's summer break for you.

I was glad I was there with Misaki. How embarrassing would it have been if people thought Kei and I came here as a couple?!

We followed the crowd down the hallway to a large sign that said, THE ART AND JEWELS OF THE NETHERLANDS. This was what we came for. Kei, Misaki, and I walked in.

Inside was much quieter than the hallway. Paintings of many sizes covered the walls of the room.

"Wow, there's all kinds of stuff," I said.

"Asuka, you're supposed to go this way," Misaki scolded. She was standing in front of a sign with an arrow on it.

"How come?" I asked.

"The people who work at the museum want you to see the paintings in a specific order. They organize them by era, by style, stuff like that."





“Huh.”

Misaki knows a lot. Not as much as Kei, but still a lot. She gets good grades, too. So does Kei, for that matter, even though I’ve never seen him doing schoolwork at home. I could study for the rest of my life and not get his test scores.

I’m jealous of both of them. If I had a tenth of their brains, I wouldn’t have such an awful time during tests.

“Wow!” Misaki said. She had been slowly walking from painting to painting, but something had gotten her attention.

“What, did something happen?”

“They have a Rembrandt! Can you believe it, Asuka? A Rembrandt!”

What the heck’s a “Rembrandt”?

I had no idea what that meant. It sounded like someone’s name—maybe a famous painter?

I looked at the painting she was standing in front of. There was a man in old-fashioned clothes, with a turban around his head. What struck me most was the light in the picture—it was like a spotlight was shining right on his face. The effect was so realistic that I instinctively glanced up.

“Oooh, this is so cool,” I said. “Is the painter famous?”

“Oh, right, you’re not really into art. I guess you wouldn’t have heard of him,” Misaki said.

She looked disappointed, and I felt kinda guilty. I hardly know the names of any artists—unless we’re talking about manga artists, of course.

“I bet you’re thinking you know the names of manga artists,” Kei muttered.

It’s like he can read my mind.

Still, you don’t have to *say* that stuff! Especially Kei!!

“So what? Manga’s cool, too!” I snapped.

“A-Asuka, keep your voice down!” Misaki hissed.

“Oops, sorry.” I slapped my hand over my mouth. People were glaring at me.

Ugh, I hate places like this. You have to be so quiet.

“Rembrandt was a Dutch painter in the seventeenth century,” Kei explained in a whisper, glancing at the painting. “He’s famous for paintings that look like light is shining into the darkness, as I

think you noticed. He's so good at it, people call him the 'master of light.'"

As usual, his expression was so composed, you'd never guess we just butted heads. Ugh, this guy.

"Do you like Rembrandt, Kei?" Misaki asked.

"I don't really have strong opinions on art. Although, I do think Vermeer's blues are beautiful."

Ver-who? Another name I didn't know.

"Oh, wow, me too! He used lapis lazuli, right?" She smiled.

"Yes. It was expensive back then, but he used it generously to striking effect. It's interesting how different Rembrandt's paintings are from Vermeer's, even though they were both Dutch artists in the same era," Kei said.

He was as cold as always, but he was talking more than usual.

I suddenly felt like the odd one out.

If I asked another question, Kei would probably make fun of me. And I don't care enough about art to remember much of what he tells me, even when he does explain.

Whatever. At least Misaki seemed to be having fun.

I figured I'd take this chance to go look at the Red Star by myself.

3

Asuka Gets Mad

I was pretty sure the gem display was up ahead.

Stepping out of the river of people, I sped through the exhibit. Kei and Misaki were so absorbed in their conversation, they didn't seem to notice me leave. Actually, it's amazing Kei found someone his age who he can have a conversation with. I'm not sure who his "friends" are, but my impression is they're all grown-ups at universities and research centers in foreign countries. Misaki's pretty impressive, honestly.

"It must be around here…," I muttered.

After passing through three rooms, I came to a room full of sparkling gems in glass cases. There were accessories decorated with multicolored jewels, along with crowns and swords. The colorful, twinkling light lifted my spirits.

Wait, I wasn't there to gawk!

Where's the Red Star? Is that it?

A crowd was gathered around a glass case in the center of the room. Nearby was a sign reading, THE RED STAR, THE DISCOVERY OF THE CENTURY!

The jewel must have been past all those people, but they made a wall so dense, I couldn't see anything.

Now what?!

I could easily leap over a crowd this size, but that would draw way too much attention to myself. Kei had warned me to never do anything too "flagrant."

As I was pondering what to do, I suddenly caught sight of a familiar face.

"Huh?"

A boy in a white jacket was standing in front of a group of men in suits. Now where had I seen him before…?

Oh yeah! That's Hibiki Shirasato!

No doubt about it. He was identical to the guy I saw on TV. And just like when I saw him on TV, I noticed how handsome he was. He looked more like a model than a detective.

But why was he…? Oh, right. He was handling security for the Red Star. Of course he was here.

I wasn't prepared for this!

And then he looked at me.

Oh no!

Our eyes met.

I tried to turn around, but it was too late. He smiled and walked away from the men in suits, toward me.

Wait, what? Why's he coming over here?

"…Is something the matter?" he asked kindly, standing right in front of me.

"Um, with me? N-n-no, nothing in particular…," I managed to answer.

"Oh, that's good. I noticed you watching me."

His smile was so friendly. Maybe he was genuinely concerned?

At least he didn't seem to suspect anything.

I sighed with relief. Then anger welled up in me.

It was this guy's fault that everyone assumed we were having some big showdown!

"You're Hibiki Shirasato, the junior high detective, aren't you?" I asked, trying to keep it cool.

"Yes, I am. I'm surprised you recognized me. Did you see me on TV?"

He smiled awkwardly, scratching the back of his head.

"Yes, but shouldn't you be guarding that jewel? Red might steal it while you're not looking, you know," I said, pointing at the Red Star. Maybe it was a little mean.

Of course, Red would steal it no matter what this guy did.

I mentally stuck my tongue out at him.

He gaped at me for a second, then smiled. "Red? I'd never let that hypocritical Robin Hood wannabe steal the Red Star."

"Robin Hood wannabe?!" I yelped.

I knew everyone was staring at me, but I couldn't let him call Red names like that!

"Oh, are you a fan? I'm sorry to tell you this, but I'm going to catch that thief one day."

How could he be so sure?!

He was infuriating!

“Red won’t be that easy to catch!” I snapped.

“We’ll just have to see,” Hibiki answered.

His smile vanished, and his face suddenly turned serious. His eyes were full of determination. I squeezed my hands into fists.

“Red can make excuses all day, but a thief is a thief,” he said. “A common criminal. As a detective, I cannot sit by and watch.”

“B-b-but…!”

You don’t understand what Red really does! I wanted to say that, but if I wasn’t careful, I might give away my identity. I bit my lip and stared at him. He gazed back at me, then smiled a little. It was like he’d come back to reality.

“…I’m sorry. What am I saying? None of this has anything to do with you,” he said gently.

What the heck?!

His sudden attitude shift took the wind out of my sails.

“I’m sorry to detain you for so long. It looks like your friend is here, and I’d better get back to guarding the Red Star,” he said.





He raised one hand and then, before I could say a word, strode back to the men in suits.

He just came over, ranted at me, and left!

But what did he mean about my friend?

As I was puzzling over that, I heard my name.

“Asuka, there you are! I was looking for you.”

I turned around to find Misaki staring at me reproachfully.

No way! How did that detective know?!

“Misaki?! When did you show up?!”

“What do you mean, ‘show up’? I was looking all over for you! You just disappeared, and I was so worried. But Kei got your message, so I was able to find you.”

Misaki huffed in frustration.

My message? I didn’t send Kei any messages.

He must have said that because he wanted to look around by himself. Of course, I was grateful he’d kept Misaki from worrying any more.

“I’m so sorry! I saw you two were having fun, so I decided to go on ahead by myself,” I said apologetically.

She gave me a look. I bet she was thinking, *You’re hopeless*.

“It’s partly my fault for not noticing when you left,” she said.

“By the way, where’s Kei?” I asked.

“He said he wanted to look at the Red Star. Anyway, wasn’t that Hibiki Shirasato you were talking to? Are you friends?” she asked, leaning in.

“N-no. He just started talking to me.”

I would never be friends with *him*! I wished I had told him off, even a little.

“You know he solved that kidnapping recently, right? And he said he was going to provide security at this museum. Isn’t he amazing? *Plus* he’s only two years older than us! You gotta respect someone like that.”

Whaaat?!

“Misaki, what are you saying?! Don’t respect *him*!” I blurted, waving my hands frantically at her.

“Why not?” She looked at me suspiciously.

“Because! He’s, like, the grossest guy ever!”

4

The Secret of the Red Star

"So, Kei, why do you want to steal the Red Star? You never did tell me," I said.

I was lying on my bed while he pounded away at his computer.

"…"

His fingers kept flying over the keyboard. He'd been like this ever since we got back from the museum almost two hours ago. When he gets hyperfocused on what he's doing, he probably won't talk to me until he's finished. It was almost dinnertime, though.

Just then, his hands stopped. "…Done," he mumbled.

I stuck my head over the edge of the bed. "What's done?"

"I can tell you my reason for stealing the Red Star now."

"Oh, okay. I'll come down." I leaped off the bed and walked over to Kei.

"…Look." He pointed at his computer screen.

"What?"

I peered at the screen. There were two pictures of differently shaped red jewels next to each other. They were more 3D than regular pictures, though. One of the jewels looked familiar… because I'd just seen it at the museum.

"That's the Red Star, right?" I asked, pointing at the picture on the right.

"Strictly speaking, it's a 3D-CGI based on a photo I took today."

Uh…what?

"*3D-CGI* is short for *three-dimensional computer-generated imagery*. Simply put, they're virtual 3D images."

Virtual 3D images? How the heck is that simple?

I was totally lost, so I figured we could move on.

"Today at the museum, I took photos of the Red Star from various angles," he explained.

"You're allowed to take photos at the museum?"

I felt like I'd seen a sign saying, PHOTOGRAPHY PROHIBITED.

"The reason they say not to is that a camera flash emits powerful light that contains ultraviolet rays, which can cause damage to a painting. I adjusted the digital camera I used today so that it can take high-resolution pictures inside without a flash. Also, no one saw me," he said.

Um, that wasn't really the issue. Still, this was a Red job, so we could probably afford to bend the rules a little.

"Okay, but why did you need a 3D image?" I asked.

"The image on the left is a similar model of a jewel that was stolen a year ago from a millionaire in England. When you lay it over the image of the Red Star…"

Kei clicked his mouse, and the two images slid to the middle of the screen.

"…Hey, they look alike!" I said.

At first glance, I would have said they were pretty different, but with the images together, I saw they matched up perfectly in a lot of places.

Could it be a coincidence?

"They do. Because they started out as the same jewel."

"What?! Yeah, it kinda matches, but the shape is still different."

"Precious stones mined out of the ground are cut in ways that take advantage of their natural shape, especially when they're this huge and valuable. Each one has distinctive qualities. Typically, it would be impossible for two large jewels to match up this closely."

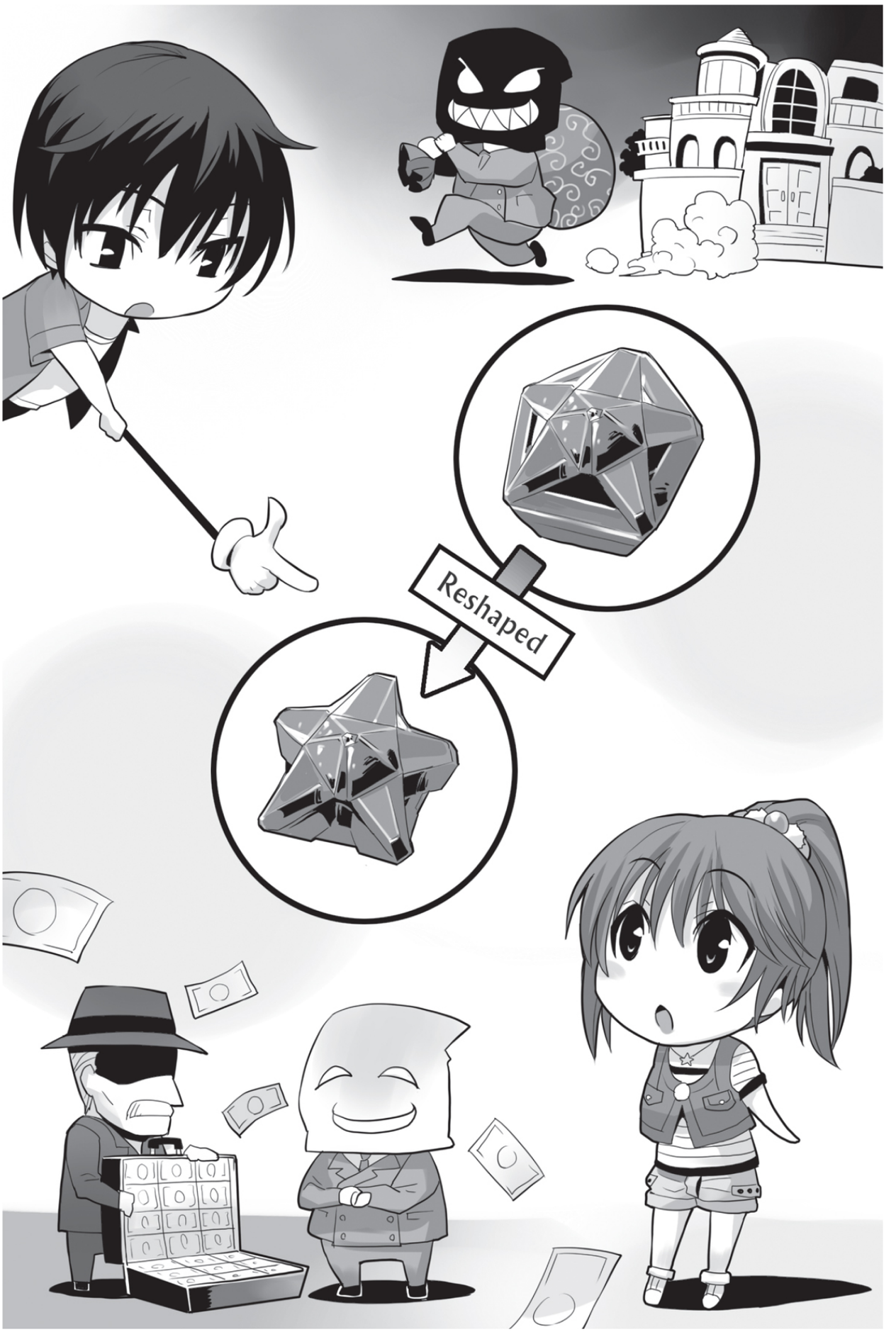
"What are you saying?" I asked, though I had already guessed the answer.

"The Red Star is the jewel that was stolen from England a year ago and then reshaped. Someone has agreed to buy it from the current owner for an even higher price when this museum exhibit ends."

"So…"

I looked at Kei. He nodded.

"It's time for Red to step in," he said.


Reshaped

Yesss! That meant we could accept Hibiki's challenge, right?!

We were going to run circles around that kid!

I started skipping across the room, but Kei was less than excited. "Asuka, can I ask you something?"

"…What?"

I had a bad feeling about this.

"You talked to Hibiki Shirasato, didn't you?"

Yes, but how did he know…?

I hadn't mentioned it, since I thought he'd be mad.

"Misaki told me."

Misaki!

"It was pure coincidence! I didn't go looking for him—"

"I'm not mad."

He wasn't?

"Of course, I'm not going to say it was a good idea."

Yeah, me neither.

"But there's no use crying over it now. What I need now is information. What is he like?"

"I only talked to him a little…but he said some awful things about Red. He said they were a hypocrite. It made me so mad!"

"A hypocrite, huh? What else?"

"Let's see… Oh yeah! Something strange happened."

"What?" Kei narrowed his eyes.

"He said my friend was there, and then he walked off. We were in the middle of a crowd, but then Misaki showed up. How could he know we were friends?"

"Maybe he saw you with her before he talked to you?"

Oh.

That did make sense…but no, that couldn't be. I was sure I would have noticed him if he was near me before I went into the room with the jewels in it.

"Knowing you, you probably would have," Kei admitted. "You've got the senses of a wild animal when it comes to things like that."

Hey, I don't appreciate the comparison!

I snorted, but Kei ignored me and turned back to his keyboard. He was in thought mode again. If I interrupted him, he'd get super grumpy. I knew him well enough by now to wait until he was done.

“…Now I get it,” he said after a few minutes, raising his head. He was smiling slightly, which is very unusual for him.

“What do you mean? Mind explaining it to me?” I asked.

I don’t usually like hearing his explanations, but this time, I was extremely curious.

“There are several possibilities. The most likely one has to do with Misaki’s actions and eye movements,” he said.

Did she not move like a normal person?

“Misaki was looking for you. When she came into the room, the first thing she probably did was glance around. When she saw you, she likely headed straight for you. Anyone who noticed her would be able to deduce she was your friend.”

True, but we were in the most crowded room in the museum. People were going in and out constantly. Was Kei saying Hibiki had been monitoring all of them while he talked to me?

I would never be able to pull that off, and neither would Kei.

“They don’t call him the junior high detective for nothing,” Kei said.

I hated to admit it, but anyone doing detective work in junior high probably wasn’t your average kid.

Kei and I will be fine, r-right?

We won’t let anyone beat us!!

5

Something Seems Strange

It was the dead of the night. Aside from the streetlights, everything around the museum was pitch-black. I stood in front of the museum wall, dressed in my Phantom Thief Red uniform. I was on the back side of the building.

I'd asked Kei and Uncle K to change the skirt on my uniform to shorts. Last time Red snuck into a building, the skirt got caught on something. It was cute, but I like the shorts, too.

As for my trusty partner, Kei, he was waiting on the roof of a building about half a mile away. When we do Red jobs, we each have clear roles. Kei takes charge of strategy and guidance, while I'm the one who actually steals stuff—the boots on the ground, you could say.

I was wearing a pair of sporty sunglasses equipped with a digital video camera Kei designed to send him video and sound.

"…All set?"

Kei's voice came through the special receivers in my ears. The sound quality was great.

"Yup," I answered.

"Use the break-in route we talked about."

"Got it. Let's give that kid detective a good scare!"

I took a few steps away from the wall. It was about fifteen feet high. Even I wouldn't be able to jump onto the top without a little help.

"Can you make it?" Kei asked.

"Of course!" I answered.

I ran toward the wall and kicked off the ground as hard as I could, but I was still a few feet short of the top. That was all part of the plan, though. Mid-jump, I shoved my foot toward the wall. Kei had made me a special pair of shoes with antislip soles designed to stick to walls.

"Here goes!"

I kicked the middle of the wall and launched myself up again. This time, I easily reached the top. I grabbed it with both hands and vaulted over. Dropping to the ground on the far side, I was about to do a quick scan of the area when I sensed someone nearby.

I looked up. A guard was standing about ten feet away. He noticed me right away, and his eyes widened.

Uh-oh!

"Ph-Phantom Thief…Re…"

That was close! If I hadn't flicked a capsule filled with sleeping gas at him just before he started shouting, he would have alerted the other guards.

"Asuka, do you see anyone else?" Kei asked sharply.

I glanced around anxiously. Luckily, I didn't. I'd expected the place to be crawling with guards, but that didn't seem to be the case.

"Even if you don't spot anyone, stay alert," Kei warned.

"I know that… Oh, there's the back door."

I spotted the staff entrance as I walked along the base of the wall. The door was steel and locked with an electronic key card. According to Kei, this kind of lock was hard to pick, and the key cards were hard to copy. Also, thanks to Hibiki Shirasato, the doors were programmed to only open from the inside, key card or no.

That left just one way to get in.

I checked my wristwatch. It was one minute to midnight.

"Here goes," I said.

"Don't screw this up," Kei said.

Of course I wouldn't!

I took out the small device he'd given me. According to his research, during the five-minute interval where the guards switched out, someone opened the door from the inside when a signal was given outside. But why did they go with that method when an electronic key card would have been more secure?

"To make it harder for Red. Our usual pattern is to steal a key from a guard, like we did with the Green Sea, so they assumed we'd do the same thing this time."

Okay, that made sense. They were tailoring their defense specifically to us. But that wouldn't stop Red. I took a deep breath

and knocked on the door three times, then twice, then four times.

"Who's there?" a voice asked from inside.

I pressed PLAY on the voice recorder in my hand.

"Takasaki. It's time to change shifts," said a man's voice. Kei had rigged this up.

"Okay, I'm opening the door," came the answer.

I stepped back. The heavy-looking door swung slowly outward.

"Hey, that's strange. No one's— Oof!"

As soon as the guard stuck his head out, he sank to the ground as the capsule of sleeping gas I'd flicked at him exploded.

"Night night," I said to the middle-aged man, peering inside.

I didn't see any other guards nearby. Heaving the sleeping guy out, I stepped in and shut the door. It was summer, so he wouldn't catch a cold, right?

…Still…

"Isn't it weird how few guards there are?" I asked Kei.

"…Yeah. It bothers me, but you can't stop now. Keep going."

"Okay, got it."

Still uneasy, I walked through the museum. The floor was carpeted, so I didn't have to worry about the sound of my footsteps. On the other hand, that meant I couldn't hear anyone else, either, so I had to be extra alert.

I made my way along, dodging the security cameras. I ran into a couple more guards, but I put them right to sleep.

So far, there was no sign of Hibiki. Did he go home at night? He talked the talk, but maybe he didn't walk the walk. They'd never catch Red with this few guards!

"That's the room," Kei said.

I nodded and slipped into the room with the Red Star. Nobody was even in here. Now this was bizarre.

"Kei?"

"I know. But we've never messed up yet. Keep following the plan."

He was right. We hadn't failed at any previous mission. We'd be fine this time, too! Maybe I was worrying too much.

Before approaching the glass case with the Red Star inside, I covered the security camera with a red handkerchief. That would buy me a little time. The guard monitoring the security area

would probably come to check, but I'd have the Red Star before anyone got here.

I was finally in front of the case.

According to Kei, it was designed to shock you if you tried to force it open.

I pulled on the custom-made rubber gloves that blocked electricity and took out the tool Kei had made to cut a hole in the glass case. He told me to think of it like a math compass with an even sharper tip. It worked like one, too.

"Be careful, or you'll still get a shock," he said.

Hey, don't scare me!

"If the glass case moves, an electric current will be emitted, and an alarm will sound. If you press too hard and move the case, it's over," he added.

That only made me more nervous!

I fearfully applied the compass needle to the glass.

Hands, do not shake!

I rotated the compass tip around the needle, and it cut a hole about a few inches across in the glass.

"Whew…"

Carefully, I removed the circle of glass and placed it on the floor.

"Good. Now you just need to take the Red Star. The guards are probably on their way, so hurry."

Yeah, yeah. I know.

Talking to people was not Kei's forte.

I put my arm through the hole in the glass, being careful not to touch the sides. Slowly, I reached out and grabbed the Red Star.

"Got it. Now that kid detective—"

Weeeeeooooooweeeeeooooooweeeeoooo!!

An earsplitting alarm rang out.

"Wait, what?!"

It happened so suddenly, my mind went blank. I had no idea what was happening.

"Asuka!"

What did I do?

What do *I do?!*

"Asuka! Stay calm!!" Kei shouted.

I flinched.

“Wh-what’s going on?” I asked.

“Looks like the Red Star was rigged.”

“Rigged how?”

“An alarm was set to go off if you touched it! Argh, I only knew about the case…,” he groaned.

Kei had never fallen for a trap before. Was this that detective’s fault?

“Just get out of there! Take the Red Star with you,” Kei said.

“Got it!”

The Red Star glittered in my hand. It was gorgeous, but this was no time to gawk.

“First, you need to escape that room. Ideally, you’d leave through the back, but most likely…”

I dashed out of the room, listening to his instructions.

“Look, there’s Red!!”





Four or five security guards came racing down the hallway toward me. Unfortunately, they were coming from the direction of the back exit.

"Shoot!"

I spun around and ran in the opposite direction.

"Head for the front entrance!" Kei commanded.

I did as he said, but three security guards were blocking the door.

"Why are there so many guards now? There were hardly any a few minutes ago! What do I do?!"

"…"

"Kei?" I said, growing nervous at his silence.

"…Your only option is up," he answered.

"Got it!"

This was no time to hesitate. I raced up a nearby staircase. There were guards on the second and third floors, so I kept running toward the roof. Almost twenty guards were following me.

"Where were they all?!" I moaned.

"…Probably hiding," Kei muttered.

"Seriously?" I asked, slamming open the door to the roof.

"Took you long enough, Phantom Thief Red."

Lights blinded me.

"Ah!" I gasped.

Quickly putting on my sunglasses, I looked toward the lights. About a dozen police had circled around, and in the middle of them all—

"I was getting tired of waiting."

—stood Hibiki Shirasato. He stepped toward me. He was wearing his trademark white jacket. Just like Kei said, I'd walked into a trap. Had the kid detective planned it all?

"…He had us dancing in the palm of his hand." Kei wasn't hiding his frustration. *"He intentionally used that old-timey knock system at the back entrance to narrow down when we could break in. We were only able to do it during the changing of the guard. Then he lightened up security so we'd let our own guard down, and he put out false intel that the Red Star itself wasn't hooked up to the alarm system. He got us!"*

I felt as frustrated and humiliated as he sounded. I clenched my fists and glared at Hibiki.

“This was all part of your trap, wasn’t it?” I said, disguising my voice.

“Thanks for stepping right into it. Oh, shall I introduce myself?” Hibiki asked. Even now, his tone was falsely cheerful.

“I know who you are. Hibiki Shirasato, the junior high detective,” I said.

“I’m flattered to be known by someone as famous as you.”

Yeah, right! He was the one who started this fight!

“I never imagined Red was female…”

He pushed his glasses up in surprise.

He knew!

Then again, how could he not know when I was wearing a uniform like this? Shoot. *I have to think of something!*

“Who knows? Could be a disguise,” I said.

“…True. I wouldn’t put that past Red. How about letting us capture you so we can solve that mystery once and for all?”

Why’s he acting like he’s inviting me to go get takeout?

He sure was having fun humiliating me.

I was furious, but I couldn’t do anything about it right then.

“No thanks,” I said. “But do you know the truth about the Red Star?”

I figured I could buy a little time by extending the conversation. Meanwhile, maybe Kei would think of an escape plan.

“My theory is it’s a jewel stolen from England a year ago and reshaped,” Hibiki replied. “Isn’t that why you tried to steal it?”

“So you knew about it. But you still agreed to guard it? A real detective would be ashamed!” I found myself shouting.

Even if Red went about things in a different way than detectives, I’d thought our goals weren’t all that different. We agreed that the bad guys couldn’t be given free reign—that we had to stop them! Right?

“There’s no evidence. You can’t get a search warrant on a hunch, you know,” Hibiki said frostily.

“That’s just an excuse! There are people out there who need help!” I shouted.

His expression changed, and his eyes were piercing. Resisting the urge to flinch, I glared back at him.

"You're saying that means Red is needed? I'm far from convinced. Either way, I'm about to get some evidence. When we arrest you, we'll confiscate the Red Star."

"Why, you…!"

"…He set us up. He planned to use us from the start," Kei said, his voice shaking with anger.

I bit my lip.

"Get out of there, Asuka! You can't let him arrest you."

"But how?"

The roof was packed with police, and the museum was crawling with guards. No way could I fight my way past them.

"Well…," he began.

He explained his idea, though I still wasn't sure.

"But that means…"

"There's no other way. We've learned this guy's not easy to outsmart."

"…You're right."

If they caught me, it was all over.

"Give up, Red," Hibiki said, taking another step toward me.

I scanned the positions of the other people on the roof. I had this.

"Even you can't get away this time," he declared confidently.

I gathered my courage and looked up at him. "…All right. I'll accept that Red lost this fight…!"

With that, I lobbed the Red Star at the police. For an instant, all eyes—including Hibiki's—shifted from me to the jewel.

"Now!" Kei shouted.

I ran with all my might toward the fence around the roof.

"Red's getting away!" Hibiki screamed, but he was too late.

I jumped up, grabbed the top of the fence, which was about six feet high, and flew over it.

"You're on the roof!" Hibiki yelled in shock.

Ha! Three floors is nothing for me!

I sailed toward the ground. I kicked the wall partway down to slow my momentum, did a flip, hit the ground, and started running.

The guards and police must have all gathered on the roof, because the grounds outside were abandoned. I vaulted over the wall, vanishing into the darkness.

Panting, I raced into a deserted alley, where I changed into my regular clothes.

"…I think you're safe," Kei said.

"Yeah."

That was all I could say. My mind was full of fury and frustration. I hated that the kid detective had beat me. I wanted to be strong enough to win. I hated it!

Holding back tears, I headed toward home.

6

Red's "Beginner's Mind"

"Phew…"

I collapsed over the living room table and let out another huge sigh. I'd lost count of how many times I'd already sighed that day. I was drained.

"Oh, come on, you're too young to be sighing so much!" Dad said as he efficiently prepared dinner. He gave me a look.

It was still early for dinner, but Dad was working at the restaurant later. On nights he worked, he made dinner before he left. All I had to do was pop his handiwork in the microwave, and I had an incredible meal. That alone was enough to make me glad I had him for a dad.

But today, even the delicious smells from the kitchen weren't enough to cheer me up.

"This looks like a serious case of the blues," Dad said, putting down his knife and walking over to me. "Are you in shock because that kid beat you?"

Ouch.

He knew how to hit where it hurt. I slumped lower on the table. All the TV shows and newspapers were shouting about Phantom Thief Red's botched heist!

Or as the headlines put it, *Junior High Detective Wins Sweeping Victory in Showdown of the Century!*

Heck yeah I was blue. How could I not be?

"But this Hibiki Shirasato boy proved the Red Star was stolen. The leaders of the criminal organization behind the transaction were arrested, which probably means the rest of the organization is done for, too. That's a good thing, isn't it?"

"…I mean, yeah, but he used Red and got all the credit for it! They should be praising *us* right now! Argh!!"

I sighed again. Dad stared at me solemnly.

Uh, Dad…?

He’s almost always in jokester mode, so that look makes me nervous.

“…What?” I asked fearfully.

“Asuka.”

His right hand moved.

Was it time for a fight?! Now?!

I closed my eyes reflexively, but his big hand landed softly on the top of my head.

“Huh…?” I looked up at him.

He was gazing kindly at me.

“…Asuka, why do you think Phantom Thief Red exists?”

Why?

To stop bad things from happening in the world, of course! To help people in trouble—people being hurt by criminals.

Dad and Uncle K were the ones who told us that in the first place!

“Then what are you upset about? The bad guys got their dues, right?” he asked.

“B-but it’s so frustrating!”

Kei and I had been so certain we’d never let anyone beat Red!



“Asuka, never lose your beginner’s mind. Red’s goal isn’t to win, or to get credit for good deeds, or to be famous…right?”

He winked.

“Beginner’s mind”…

Interesting…

Suddenly, the clouds over my heart vanished, and everything felt clear. After all, the reason I stuck with this job, even though I was worried at first, was that I knew Red was on the side of justice.

Red didn’t stand for evil. Red helped people who were suffering.

I agreed to take up the mantle because I knew that.

Yes!

It was so obvious, but somehow, I’d forgotten!! I didn’t have time to be depressed!

There were still too many bad guys in the world, and too many people who needed help!

“Thanks, Dad!” I stood up.

“Any time… Oh, I almost forgot,” he said as I headed for my room.

“What?”

“You’re gonna be training twice as much during summer vacation.”

“Huh?”

Whaaaaaat?!

“Oh? Are you happy with your current skills?”

Um, no…but I’d already started working out more since becoming Red. Now he was saying I had to double that? Maybe he was mad at me after all.

On the other hand, I hated that I’d just let someone beat me.

“Okay, I’ll do it!” I said.

“That’s the spirit. Get ready to sweat tomorrow.”

Sure hope I can survive this.

Back in my room, Kei was working intensely on his computer, as usual. The incident at the museum hadn’t noticeably affected him. I thought he’d be more upset or blame me for it, but he didn’t.

I doubted that meant he was okay with failing. Still, I always had a hard time reading his expressions.

"You got a call," he said without looking at me.

That's what I'm talking about. He was the same as always. I had no idea what was on his mind.

…Anyway, I had to check my phone.

"Thanks for telling me," I said, grabbing my pink cell phone from my bunk.

Dad bought it for me at the beginning of summer vacation. I have the transmitter for Red work, but I can't use that in normal life, and I've been wanting a phone for a while.

Our budget is tight, so I figured Dad wouldn't get me one, but he said he wanted to reward me for all my hard thief work. Plus, Kei wanted to be able to get in touch with me more quickly.

Of course, Dad did tell me a million times not to be on it all the time.

At first, I was worried that Kei might want one, too. Little did I know, he already had his own phone! He said it was on loan from one of the research institutes he works with. Unfortunately, he wouldn't tell me any more details about whatever was going on there.

"Oh, it was Misaki," I said, checking the missed call.

She'd received a phone when we started junior high, too. She said she needed it because she gets home late when she goes to her test prep classes after school. I don't go to test prep classes, of course. I called back.

She picked up after a few rings. *"Hi, Asuka, what's up?"* she said.

"Nothing! I saw you called," I answered.

"I was just wondering if you were free tomorrow. Want to hang out?"

"Sounds great! I have absolutely nothing going on."

"Asuka, have you been doing your homework?"

"…"

"Don't pretend you didn't hear me!"

Aw, come on! I did open the math workbook, but I had no clue how to do the problems. I don't get how those equations with all the symbols end up with a number as the answer. How does that work anyway?

“Oh, fine, I’ll do the homework with you. Otherwise, I bet you won’t get it done at all,” Misaki said.

“Really? You’re my savior!”

“You could ask Kei, you know. His grades are better than mine, so he’d probably make a good tutor.”

No. Way.

I never understand anything when Kei tries to explain. Our brains are just too different, and mine starts to overheat. Also, he’s just not very nice. I doubt I could make it through an hour of tutoring with him.

“Okay, we’ll do homework next time. Tomorrow, I want to go somewhere,” she said.

“Where? I’ll go with you.”

“Have you heard of the Sky Towers? It’s a new entertainment complex about half an hour away by train.”

“Yeah, I saw it on TV. There’s a lot of stores inside, right?”

“Yes! Want to go?”

Of course I did. I like checking out new stuff. Plus, I heard the building is really high, which is exciting.

“You think Kei would want to go?” she asked.

“You want to invite him?”

He probably wouldn’t even say yes.

“It was super fun when he came to the art museum. Of course, if he doesn’t want to…”

Since she sounded so enthusiastic, I figured I’d ask him later, but I didn’t want her to get her hopes up. It was hard to imagine the Kei I knew coming along just because, if we weren’t checking out a job for Red.

“By the way, you seem a lot more cheerful today,” Misaki said. *“You’ve been really down lately.”*

So she noticed. That’s not too surprising. I knew I’d been acting depressed since the museum fiasco. But I was over that now!

“Yeah. I’m excited about tomorrow,” I said before hanging up.

I looked at Kei. He’d stopped typing and was staring at the screen. This should be a good time to talk to him.

“Kei, can I ask you something?”

“…What?” he said after a pause.

“Tomorrow, I’m going to the Sky Towers with Misaki. Wanna come?”

“The Sky Towers?”

For once, he registered interest and turned toward me. I still couldn’t read his expression, but his eyes looked a bit sharper than usual.

“Yeah, it’s a new entertainment compl—”

“I know. I’ll go.”

Huh?

What did he just say?

He’s gonna go?

No way. Kei doesn’t do things for fun.

It wasn’t supposed to rain or something the next day, was it?

He must have noticed my skeptical expression. “Something’s been bothering me about that place,” he explained.

Something was bothering him?

Kei’s hunches were usually right, which made me nervous. But tomorrow was just for fun. If anything came up, I’d leave it to him.

7

Off to the Sky Towers!

My fears about the weather were unfounded—the next day was clear and blazing hot. Misaki was walking next to me, and slightly behind us was Kei. He'd left the house two hours before I even got up to walk here. When Misaki and I arrived by train, he was already sitting on a bench near the station with his laptop open.

He must really hate getting carsick. He pretended not to care when we went to the museum, but I know he did.

"Wow!" I said. "It's even better than the pictures!"

Three huge skyscrapers loomed above us. So these were the Sky Towers, completed a month ago.

They were really, *really* tall. I tilted so far back to see the top that I felt like I was gonna flip over.

"Look, the right one is blue, the middle one's red, and the one on the left is yellow," Misaki said, pointing at them.

"Yeah, it's so fun!" I answered.

Each tower had enormous patterns on it, one for each color. They looked like circles that had been twisted in a cool way.

"I think there was something about that in the pamphlet…," Misaki said.

"They're Möbius strips," Kei said, before she could open the pamphlet.

"Oh, you're right! Möbius strips," Misaki said, nodding excitedly.

Mobile strips? I could see the strip part, but what made them mobile?

"They're named after the German mathematician August Ferdinand Möbius. Simply put, they're nonorientable two-manifolds," he said.

Um, what? Are we still speaking the same language?

"Kei, could you put that in layman's terms?" Misaki said.

I don’t think she understood, either. Of course she didn’t. His “explanation” obviously wasn’t meant to explain anything!

He sighed.

“Okay, if I leave out most of the details, it means there isn’t technically a front and back. Do you notice anything strange about the pictures on the towers?”

They were just weird loops—what else was strange about them?

“If you trace it mentally, you’ll see,” he said.

Trace it mentally? Pouting, I followed the loop with my eyes. Misaki did the same thing.

“…Hey, the front became the back!”

As I followed the front of the loop, it twisted around so that I was suddenly on the back.

Which side was the front?

“That’s what makes a Möbius strip unique. Anyway, did you want to tell us about the towers?” he asked.

“Oh, right!” Misaki said.

Hey, since when was he the leader?

“Let’s see,” she said. “They’re called Sky Blue Tower, Sky Red Tower, and Sky Yellow Tower. Each one has a different use.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Blue Tower has restaurants and clothing and accessory stores. The Red Tower has movie theaters, art museums, and other things to look at. The Yellow Tower has cutting-edge video games and activities to get people moving—things like that.”

“You sure came prepared, Misaki,” I said. She hadn’t even been looking at the pamphlet when she reeled that off!

“I read up before we came. Otherwise, we’d never get through this huge place in a day.”

That made sense. These towers were way bigger than the building with the Green Sea in it. And there were three of them! No way we could see everything in one day.


SKY
TOWER



“Where to first?” I asked.

“I thought we’d start with the Yellow Tower, if that’s okay with you,” she said.

“Of course! That one has the video games, right?”

“Right. I found some I thought you’d like. Kei, is that okay with you?” she asked.

Kei was lost in thought behind us. “…Sure, that’s fine,” he mumbled.

He sounded distracted. What was up? He tended to be snippy or lost in thought, but something seemed different this time.

“Asuka, are you okay?” Misaki asked, bringing my head out of the clouds.

“I’m fine. Let’s go!”

Side by side, we walked toward the Yellow Tower.

After standing in a line for a few minutes, we were allowed to go inside the Yellow Tower. It was bustling with families and groups of teens and tweens.

“Wow, this is amazing!” I said.

I’d imagined the inside of a skyscraper would be more cramped, but this one sure wasn’t. Wide, straight passages led past stores and famous fast-food restaurants.

“Wonder where the elevator to the top floors is… Oh, I’ll ask her!” Misaki said, pointing to what looked like a life-size doll standing by the wall.

I called it a doll, but with its realistic-colored skin and stylish clothes, you could mistake it for a real woman from far away. I wondered if it was a mascot, but from what Misaki said, that seemed unlikely.

“What do you mean, ‘ask her’?” I asked.

“Just watch,” Misaki said with a knowing smile. She turned to the doll. “What floor are the fitness activities on?”

Uh, Misaki? You’re talking to a doll.

I tried to stop her, but before I could, the doll answered.

“You’ll find minisports areas on the twenty-fifth through thirtieth floors. There are also attractions involving physical activities on the thirteenth, fifteenth, and thirty-seventh floors,” it explained fluently.

The doll sounded just like a young woman.

What the heck was this?!

“Ha-ha! Surprised?” Misaki asked me.

Uh, yeah! That thing just started talking to us—and it answered Misaki’s question!

“This must be the new artificial intelligence system. I heard about this,” Kei said, examining the doll with deep interest.

Artificial what? Was he going to say something confusing again?

“It’s a computer program that can think like a person. You could call this one a humanoid robot. You like that stuff, right, Asuka?”

He was right that I’d seen things like this in anime and manga, but I didn’t know they really existed! I wondered if you could be friends with them.

“They’re not that versatile. Giving directions is about the most they can do. Still, it’s a revolutionary development,” Kei explained.

“I heard this was the showpiece of the Sky Tower,” Misaki said. “They’re only on certain floors, so we were lucky to find one!”

“Huh. If they’re so useful, why not put out more of them?”

“That would be way too expensive. Each one costs millions of yen.”

Millions?! This thing was worth that much money?

I glanced at the doll again. It looked like an ordinary mannequin. Yeah, this stuff was definitely beyond anything that made sense to me.

8

Are You Afraid to Fail?

“Ahhh, that was so fun!” I said, plopping down on a bench to catch my breath.

“You need to chill out,” said Kei, who was sitting on the bench grumpily.

But moving your body is such a blast!

I’d just finished trying out all the fitness games. I did minisoccer, three-on-three basketball, climbing, and some other stuff. I especially liked climbing. There was a wall covered in fake rocks called “holds,” and you could put your hands and feet on them to climb.

I did what’s called “bouldering,” where you climb without a rope. The wall was only about ten feet high, though, which wasn’t nearly enough for me. There were various routes according to difficulty level. I had the computer show me a special super-hard route. Of course, I sped right to the top!

The instructor was really surprised, by the way, and asked how long I’d been climbing. I couldn’t exactly tell him my dad was a very special coach, so I just smiled and said, *“A while.”*

“Where’s Misaki?” I asked.

“She went to get a drink,” Kei answered.

“Oh. You know, I was surprised you came with us today. I was sure you wouldn’t want to.”

“…Whatever, I just felt like it.”

I know Kei well enough to know he doesn’t do anything without a reason.



“Something was bothering me about this place,” he added.

Something like what?

That reminded me, he said the same thing before. What in the world could it be?

“I might be reading too much into this. Don’t worry about it,” he said.

I decided to drop it. I looked at the shop selling drinks. The line was long, and Misaki was still near the end. This could take a while.

…Which meant this might be the perfect moment.

“Kei, there’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you.”

“What?” he answered with his usual poker face.

“…You know what happened at the art museum? How do you feel about it?”

The second I said it, I felt anxious. I’d made up my mind to work hard at being Red, but Kei was a perfectionist. I’d been afraid to ask his thoughts. What if he said he was going to quit?

Instead of answering right away, he stared off at a little boy who looked around seven or eight and was playing catch with a jerky, stereotypically robotic robot. Apparently, this ability was a big achievement. Earlier, I saw Kei watching it closely.

“I have a friend I call Professor Y. O.,” he said out of the blue.

“Kei, I was asking you about…”

“She wrote the program for that robot.”

…What?

Whaaaat?!

That’s, like, super impressive?

“Her research is known around the world. Robotics engineering isn’t her specialty, but she was invited to be part of the design team.”

When Kei said things like that, I realized all over again that he wasn’t an ordinary kid. He probably had tons of things he wanted to do aside from being Red—research and stuff.

“…Do you want to quit working as Red?” I asked fearfully.

My heart was pounding way harder than when I climbed that wall earlier. But Kei just threw me a suspicious look. “What are you talking about?”

“I just figure you have a lot of other research and stuff you want to do. Isn’t that why you said that about your friend the

professor?”

“No, that’s not what I meant at all,” he said, sounding slightly annoyed. “Professor Y. O. said something to me once. She said, ‘Mistakes are a part of research. That’s why there’s no need to be afraid. What’s scary is not being able to learn from your mistakes.’ I’d never give up after messing up once.”

“Not learning, huh?”

After the museum fiasco, I’d been so hung up on the fact that Hibiki beat us that I hadn’t paused to reflect on what happened. Meanwhile, Kei had been working away on his computer. Was he…?

“I simulated the museum break-in multiple times. I’ll never make the same errors again…but what about you, Asuka?” he asked, still watching the robot.

“You mean, do I still want to be Red?”

“Yeah.”

That was an easy one! “Of course I do!”

“Really? …I’m glad,” he mumbled.

Huh? Did he just say he was glad?

“Um, Kei…?”

“Sorry to keep you guys waiting!”

Just then, Misaki walked over, carrying three cups.

“Am I interrupting something?” she asked.

“Nothing special! Sorry I didn’t help you carry that,” I said.

It wasn’t easy with three cups and two hands.

“No worries. The one in the middle is yours. You wanted orange juice, right?”

“Thanks!” I said, taking the juice.

“Here’s your iced coffee, Kei. And this is my iced milk tea.”

She handed a cup to Kei. I can’t believe he likes that bitter stuff. He drinks it all the time at home. I have no idea what about it tastes good.

“We don’t have much time, so should we go to the next tower?” Misaki asked.

Kei and I stood up.

“Where to?” I asked.

“I was thinking of checking out the little shops in the Blue Tower.”

“Ooh, fun. You okay with that, Kei?” I asked.

I gave him a look that said, “You’re not allowed to protest.” He gave me one that said, “Agh, fine,” and nodded.

The Blue Tower was full of shops selling clothes, accessories, and random cute stuff. Misaki said there were restaurants on the upper floors. The vibe here was totally different from the Yellow Tower. The crowd was mostly made up of teenage girls and grown-up women.

“This is so cute!” I said.

We were browsing in the shops that sold knickknacks and household items. A lot of them had cheap stuff that even I could probably afford with my allowance. Kei was standing in the hallway, staring at nothing.

“Maybe we shouldn’t have made Kei come with us,” Misaki said, glancing worriedly at him.

“Don’t worry about him. It does him good to space out occasionally. When we’re home, he’s always on his computer. He only rests when he eats and sleeps.”

“Wow, really? So the fact that he came today…”

“…is a miracle,” I said, finishing her sentence.

“Asuka, you’re exaggerating.”

But it was as rare as a miracle!

Of course, he seemed to have his own reason for coming…

I wandered around the store, lost in thought. There were various purses and cases with characters on them.

…Huh?

Looking up, I noticed that Kei was frowning at something in the hallway. What could it be? When I followed his gaze, my own eyes narrowed, too.

“…Hibiki Shirasato…!”

He was walking down the hallway. Behind him were two buff men in street clothes. Probably police.

“What’s he doing here?” I wondered.

Was he on another case? I couldn’t imagine he had come to arrest us. Whatever he was here for didn’t have anything to do with us. Or so I told myself. When I looked at Kei, he was still tracking Hibiki with sharp eyes.

…Could Kei have come today for the same reason that Hibiki was here?

“Isn’t this case cute, Asuka?” Misaki asked suddenly.

“What?” I turned around, surprised. “Oh, which one?”

“You haven’t been listening at all! Did something happen in the hallway?”

“N-no, I don’t think so…”

I was here to have fun, not think about Hibiki Shirasato. I could worry about him when I got home.

“Okay, then what do you think of this?” She was holding a red cell phone.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Ha-ha, you can’t tell, right? It’s got buttons you can push and everything. But…”

She squeezed it, and it popped open to reveal pink felt.

“No way, is that a glasses case?”

“Yep! Isn’t it neat? If you didn’t look closely, you’d think it was a phone.”

Evidently, she liked it. It was unusual for her to get excited about something like this. The case was kind of expensive, but ultimately, she decided to buy it.

“I better not spend any more money this month,” she said, happily clutching the bag with the case in it.

I glanced at Kei. His frown had been replaced by his usual antisocial expression. I didn’t see any sign of Hibiki Shirasato. What was that all about? Well, no use worrying about it now.

“Next is the Red Tower. There’s an art exhibit,” Misaki said excitedly.

Not art again! We just went to an exhibit!

Of course, I could hardly complain, considering I’d just gone wild on the fitness games all by myself.



9

Trouble Ahead!!

The Red Tower was much quieter than the other two towers. It had movie theaters and exhibit halls and stuff like that, so most of the visitors were grown-ups.

“I’ve been wanting to see this exhibit ever since I decided to come here!” Misaki said. Apparently, she had an ulterior motive for this trip.

“They’ve gathered famous paintings from all over the world. An exhibit like this just never happens,” she explained.

“Wow.”

I didn’t know much about art, but getting paintings from all over the world sounded hard.

“It’s a little weird. Usually, foreign art museums do shows focused on a certain era or country, but this show has everything from da Vinci to Picasso. Another strange thing is that they didn’t even advertise it until the last minute,” she said.

That was a little strange. I mean, how would they get people to come?

“Then again, maybe they didn’t know what paintings they’d be able to get until the last minute. Who knows?” Misaki said.

Hmm. That was kind of suspicious. I glanced at Kei. He must have heard us talking, but he showed no sign of joining in. His face was as cold and blank as ever.

“Misaki, I think I’m going to skip the museum,” I said.

“What, why? Is it boring for you?”

“Honestly, yes.”

“Then should we do something else?”

“No way. You wanted to see it, right? You and Kei should go together. I’ll wander around while you’re at the exhibit. When you’re done, you can give me a call, and we’ll meet up.”

“Yes, but…”

She looked uncertain.

“You just said it was super unusual for so many famous paintings to be together in one show, right? You’ll regret it if you don’t visit. Don’t worry about me.”

“Okay, fine. I’m sorry. I’ll call you afterward.”

“You don’t need to apologize. I’ll see you soon. You’re going with Misaki, right, Kei?”

“Yeah, I’ll go with her,” he said so firmly, I was a little surprised.

“Uh, okay,” I said.

Misaki was blushing. But that blockhead Kei probably didn’t mean anything by it.

After leaving Kei and Misaki, I decided to head back to the Yellow Tower. What can I say? I’d rather get some exercise than look at paintings in an art show.

Following the maps posted around the tower, I found the connecting passageway. There was one on each floor leading to the neighboring tower. I headed down the path to the Yellow Tower.

“I guess they both enjoy looking at art,” I muttered to myself.

Even if I think some paintings are pretty or impressive, I wouldn’t go out of my way to spend a long time staring at them.

By then, I was almost at the Yellow Tower. *Now, what should I —?*

Abruptly, the cheerful background music switched off.

What was going on?

“Attention all visitors to the Red Tower,” a gravelly male voice said at full volume over the intercom.

What was up? There hadn’t been any announcements like this earlier. As I was puzzling over it, the man went on.

“We have taken control of systems in the Red Tower. In ten minutes, all gates will close. Please exit the Red Tower immediately. This is not a drill. Let me demonstrate.”

Huh?

What?

What was he talking about?

Was this some kind of performance?

Everyone around me was stunned. But a second later—

Boom! Boom!

—there was a loud noise in the distance. I realized right away that it was the sound of the gates between the Red Tower and the Blue Tower shutting.

“We cannot guarantee the safety of anyone remaining in this building in fifteen minutes,” the voice said. *“Hurry, if you want to get out in time. However, we request that all guests in the exhibit hall on the fifteenth through seventeenth floors stay where you are. We are taking the liberty of using you as hostages.”*

The announcement abruptly ended. For a few seconds, everyone was silent.

“What’s happening?”

“We need to get out of here…”

“Run!! We’ll be trapped!!”

That was when the stampede started from the Red Tower toward the Yellow Tower. I saw them barreling toward me with the force of an avalanche.

“You gotta be kidding!” I shouted.

Misaki and Kei were in the Red Tower. And—





“They’re in the exhibit hall!”

I tried to go back to the Red Tower, but the flood of people sent me in the opposite direction.

“Wait! I want to go that way!” I screamed.

But the tide only grew, pushing me deep into the Yellow Tower.

Boom! Boom!

The gates separating the Red and Yellow Towers slammed shut before my eyes.

“No…”

I sank to the ground in a daze. What should I do? More importantly, what was going on? My mind was a hopeless jumble.

What would Kei do in this situation?

Oh yeah! My cell phone!

I pulled it out and called him. He picked up after two rings.

“Kei!”

“Asuka?”

“Are you safe?!”

“I’m in the exhibit hall right now. Misaki and I are both unharmed. We’re fine, so don’t even think about coming to rescue us by yourself—”

“Hey, you! Who are you talking to?!”

I heard a man yelling in the background, and then the call ended.

“Kei?! What happened?!” I tried calling back, but I got a message saying the number was unavailable.

“Now what…?!”

I had no idea what just happened. But I had to save them! Kei had told me not to come, but there was no way I couldn’t go.

“Um, f-first, get information. If I don’t know who I’m up against, I won’t get anywhere… Oh!”

Just then, Hibiki and the policemen ran by. I followed instinctively. They had to know something.

Pushing past the throng, they went into an area blocked by a STAFF ONLY sign. A policeman was guarding the entrance, with a crowd around him. I couldn’t go behind the sign because I’d stand out too much. But I had to talk to Hibiki…which left just one option!

10

Power Team

I slipped into a nearby women's bathroom, checked that no one else was inside, and hung the CLEANING IN PROGRESS sign on the door.

"Sorry, this will only take a minute," I muttered.

Inside a stall, I quickly changed into my Phantom Thief Red outfit. I'd gotten Kei to compress it way down so I can always carry it with me.

"Now all I gotta do is…"

I peeked out of the bathroom. No one was nearby. I was good to go.

Everyone seemed distracted by the chaos.

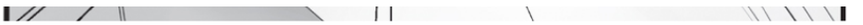
I shot a wire straight up to the air vent on the hallway ceiling, and it hooked on the grate.

"Nice!"

Reeling in the wire, I hoisted myself almost to the ceiling. I pulled off the vent cover and climbed into the space above the ceiling.

"Blech, it's so dusty!"





Covering my mouth with my scarf, I crawled down the air shaft. It was like a narrow pipe. It was made for air to go through, not people, so it was hard to squeeze through. I stretched out on my stomach and crept forward, trying to remember the route I'd taken through the hallways below. But walking upright feels different from crawling on your stomach, so that's probably why I didn't end up where I meant to.

"Argh! If Kei was here to navigate for me, this would be so easy!"

Unfortunately, Kei was a hostage. I didn't know who was behind this, but there was no way I could leave the rescue to the police!

After getting lost a bunch of times, I managed to make my way to the ceiling above the staff room. I peered through the grate, and I could see about ten frowning grown-ups gathered around. At their center was a boy in a white jacket.

Him again! Hibiki Shirasato!!

He was glaring sternly at a middle-aged man.

"I told you to beef up the security after they sent the threat!" Hibiki shouted harshly.

"We didn't know it was real! If we responded to every letter we got, we'd be bankrupt. Forget about that. Just hurry up and catch these criminals! You're a great detective, aren't you? The exhibit in the Red Tower is full of world-famous paintings! If anything happens to them, I'll hold you personally responsible!" the middle-aged man shouted back.

He must be the owner of the Sky Towers. He had a big belly and real attitude problem.

Even if Hibiki was famous, wasn't this guy embarrassed to talk to a kid that way?

Hibiki glared at him, took a deep breath, and spun on his heel.

"I'll catch the criminals, and I'll save the hostages. The artwork, too," he said over his shoulder before walking out of the room. A policeman tried to follow him, but I heard him say, "Please let me work alone for the time being."

I stayed in the air shaft and followed him. There was a history here—and Hibiki definitely knew what it was. A threatening letter had been sent. Did that mean Kei and Misaki had been pulled into some kind of crime?

I had to do something!

Hibiki bought a can of coffee from a vending machine in the hallway behind the staff room, then stood by a window at the end of the hall and looked outside.

I stuck my head out of the vent and cautiously scanned the hallway. No one was near Hibiki, and I didn't sense anyone coming.

I buried my face more deeply than usual in my scarf. It was dangerous, but I had no choice. This was my only chance for a breakthrough!

I gathered my courage and dropped from the air vent into the hallway. At the soft *thump*, Hibiki swiveled around.

"—Red?!" He braced himself, eyes wide. "What are you doing here?!"

He was ready to pounce.

Was this a bad idea after all?!

No! I hadn't come to fight. I stood casually before him, intentionally keeping my stance from being threatening.

"I want to talk to you about what's going on here," I said, disguising my voice.

His eyes were piercing. I was completely vulnerable. If he lunged at me, I might not be able to get away. But this was the only way I could think of to talk to him.

"Why are you here?" Hibiki asked. He sounded cautious, but willing to talk.

"Why does that matter? I need to know what's happening. What is going on in the Red Tower?"

"What will you do if I tell you?" he asked. He was getting suspicious.

"I'll decide after I hear."

We glared at each other. But after a second or two, he sighed and glanced away.

"…Fine. After all, I could say the whole thing started because of you."

Really? How?

"Before today, the owner of these buildings received a threatening letter in the mail. The police and I were on high alert. But the owner didn't want a lot of police wandering around the place, so he limited the number allowed here. Apparently, he was

confident his security system would work. Only fifty officers were allowed inside, and only in street clothes. I told him there was no way fifty people could protect a complex this big, but he didn't listen. And then, as you know, someone took over the Red Tower's control system."

Now I had a general idea of what had happened, but how was Red involved?

What was an incident like this called anyway? A towerjacking?

"The owner said the criminals didn't make any demands in the letter, but I think he was hiding something. I just don't know what… My guess is that the people behind this are members of the criminal organization that was broken up after the Red Star incident."

How could he know that?!

"The organization's hacker hasn't been caught yet," said Hibiki. "I'll bet he could pull off something like this."

"Even if he could, what's the point? He'll never get away with it!"

Hibiki frowned. "I don't know. But they've got hostages. The police have to be very careful."

That was true, but…did that mean they were just going to sit back and watch? Misaki and Kei were in there!

"…I see. You mean the police are going to be useless," I said, getting ready to climb back into the air shaft.

"Wait! What do you plan to do?" Hibiki asked before I could leave.

"That's obvious, isn't it? I'm going to save the hostages."

I mean, that's a no-brainer, right?

We couldn't save anyone just by sitting back and watching. I, at least, was going to their rescue.

"But what stake does Red have in this? Are you worried about the art?"

"What a stupid question! Do I need a reason to save people?"

I glared at him as hard as I could. He looked straight back at me.

He had a powerful gaze, just like when I saw him on TV. His eyes were completely clear. He was totally committed to solving crimes—a person who believed in justice.

"…I understand. I'll go with you," he said.

“What are you talking about? You’ll just get in the way!”

“You need someone to guide you, don’t you? I’ve got the entire blueprint of the Red Tower in my head.”

No way!

He sounded like Kei.

But if it was true, he would be a huge help…

If I was by myself, I’d have to search the building from top to bottom.

On the other hand…could I really team up with a detective?

I wasn’t sure, but I thought back to what Dad said to me the other day.

This wasn’t about winning or losing!

“Okay! I’ll agree to a truce. Let’s work together on this,” I said.

“Then it’s decided. By the way, how were you planning to break into the Red Tower? All the gates are probably shut by now.”

So even detectives don’t think of everything.

That made me a tiny bit happy.

“Gates don’t block every way in. Like that one,” I said, pointing up.





11

A Tightrope Across Certain Death

The wind was howling. Hibiki and I stood on the roof of the Yellow Tower.

Obviously, the door to the roof was locked. Hope no one minds that I picked it with a wire. Everything else aside, doors are often a weak spot in security.

“I knew the wind would be strong, but not this strong,” I said.

“It’s because there are three towers in a row. It makes the wind tunnels worse. Air gets especially turbulent when it hits skyscrapers… Anyway, do you really plan to cross here?”

“Of course! Do you have a better suggestion, Mr. Detective?”

“No…I do not.”

He pouted. Yeah, he *was* a lot like Kei—both his logical mind and competitiveness.

“Are you sure you want to come?” I asked. “The police might miss you.”

“Nah. They’ll do just fine without me. Also, I told a captain I trust that I was going to break into the Red Tower alone. I asked them not to rile up the criminals in the meantime.”

“Okay. I’ll take your word for it.”

I got the rope ready. I was planning to get to the adjacent building with a line between the two roofs. At their closest point, the roofs of the Red and Yellow Towers were about thirty feet apart. The pedestrian passageways were about sixty feet long, but the roofs were closer because they jutted out like plates.

Still, I knew it wouldn’t be easy to cross thirty feet on a rope. The fierce wind would probably swing it back and forth a lot.

I picked up the rope, which had a grappling hook at the end, and stood at the edge of the roof. The wind from below whipped against my cheeks.

“Taking the wind into account, you should throw it at an angle of about sixty-three degrees. Aim for one step to your right, and

you'll be good," Hibiki said.

"Sixty-three degrees? You mean you calculated the wind direction?"

"Yes. It's obvious, isn't it?"

Um, no! First Kei, now this guy. Why was the world littered with so many smart people? And why did they all gravitate toward me?!

"I'm going to throw it, so can you move back?"

He nodded and took a step away. I began spinning the end with the hook above my head like a lasso. It was one of the techniques Dad taught me, so I had some experience. I'd never done it on a roof, though. Plus, the conditions weren't exactly ideal. But if I failed now, we wouldn't be able to save Misaki and Kei!

"Go!" I shouted, throwing it as hard as I could.

The rope left my hand and flew straight toward the Red Tower. The wind buffeted it, but just as Hibiki had calculated, it went right where I hoped.

Bam!

The claw hooked onto a post on the Red Tower!

"Yes!" I crowed.

"Nice!"

I grinned at Hibiki—then quickly looked away.

Oops!

We'd agreed to a temporary truce, but he was still my enemy.

"I'll go first. Watch how I do it," I said.

"Will you be okay? The rope is moving around a lot in the wind."

He was right. It was bouncing in every direction. I definitely would not call this safe.

"You don't have to come if you don't want to," I said.

"I didn't say that!" he snapped.

He sounded kind of offended.

Come on, no need to get angry!

I pulled the rope, testing to make sure it was hooked securely to the post. I'd tied my end tightly to a post on this side.

"Okay, looks good! Here I go."

"Be careful," Hibiki said.

"So you're worried about Red's safety now?"

“If you mess up, the hostages won’t get rescued. That’s the only thing I’m worried about!”

“Yeah, yeah.” I laughed, tying a rope with a pulley on it around myself.

Hibiki was more emotional than I thought. Interesting. Nothing like Kei.

The pulley was already attached to the rope between the two buildings. This was my lifeline. I’d like to say it meant that I’d be fine even on the off chance that I fell…but I didn’t know how long it could hold my entire body weight.

If I was left dangling in midair, rescuing me would be impossible, and in this wind, I’d get blown all over the place. And I didn’t even want to think about what would happen if I got slammed into the tower itself.

“Phew…”

I exhaled, trying to take slow, even breaths.

I was already over the fence. One more step, and I’d be in midair. I think Kei said it was almost eight hundred feet to the ground.

If I fell, I was done for.

A chill ran down my spine—but I had to go. Screwing up my courage, I wrapped both hands and both legs around the rope and pushed off the roof.

The pulley carried me smoothly toward the Red Tower.

A gust of wind pushed me back and forth.

Just a little farther.

…Almost there…

…Did it!

I was at the Red Tower roof. I reached out one hand, grabbed the fence, and hoisted myself up.

“Smooth sailing, Hibiki! I’m sending the pulley your way. Do it just like I did,” I hollered, trying to outshout the wind.

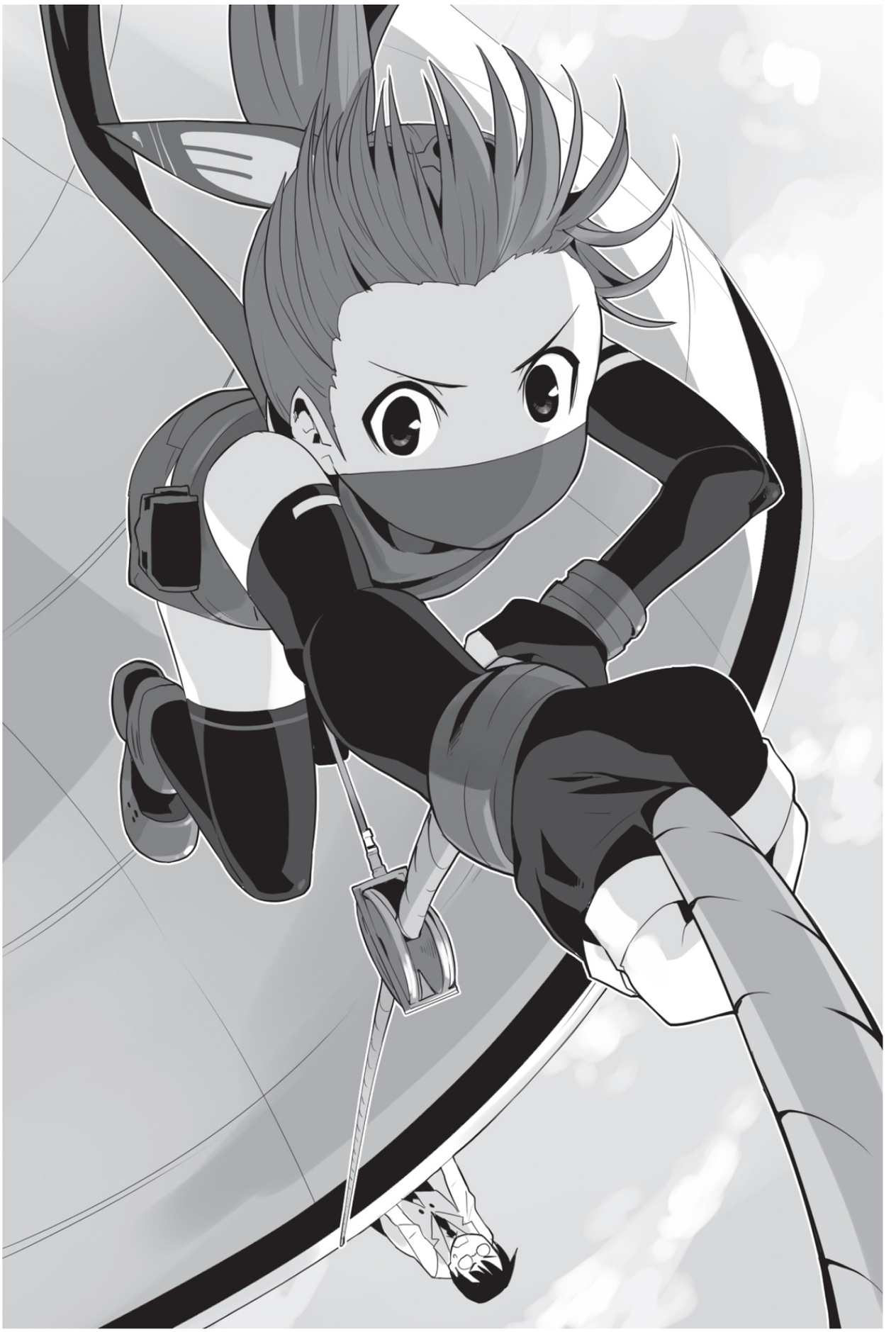
I could see him nod. He grabbed the pulley, awkwardly wrapped himself around the rope, and started crossing like I had. The wind was getting worse, swinging him back and forth in great arcs.

“Just a little farther!” I shouted.

He was about ten feet from the Red Tower. Only a little more, and he’d be able to touch the fence.

“You’ve made it this far, so— Ah!”

Just as he reached out toward the roof, the strongest gust of wind yet blasted up from below.





“Argh!” he grunted.

The timing couldn’t have been worse. With one hand away from the rope, he was off-balance when the wind hit him full force.

“…I’m gonna fall…!” he cried.

“No, you won’t!”

I reached out with my left hand and grabbed his free hand. “Oof!”

His full weight was hanging from me. I managed to hold on by clasping my right hand over my left.

“Red! You…” He looked up at me in surprise.

Did he just realize I was a girl?

I didn’t have time to worry about that! I hoisted him up with all my strength, and he grasped the fence. He was okay.

We both collapsed on our backs on the roof, panting.

That was a c-close call!

If I’d reached out a second later, he could have ended up hanging in midair.

If I wasn’t in such good shape, I would never have been able to pull him up. I would have fallen with him.

This is one of those times I’m so grateful to Dad for training me hard.

After Hibiki caught his breath, he sat up. “You really are a girl,” he said.

Shoot.

He did realize. I couldn’t pretend this was a disguise anymore. Now what?!

“…But you saved me. Thanks,” he said as I panicked.

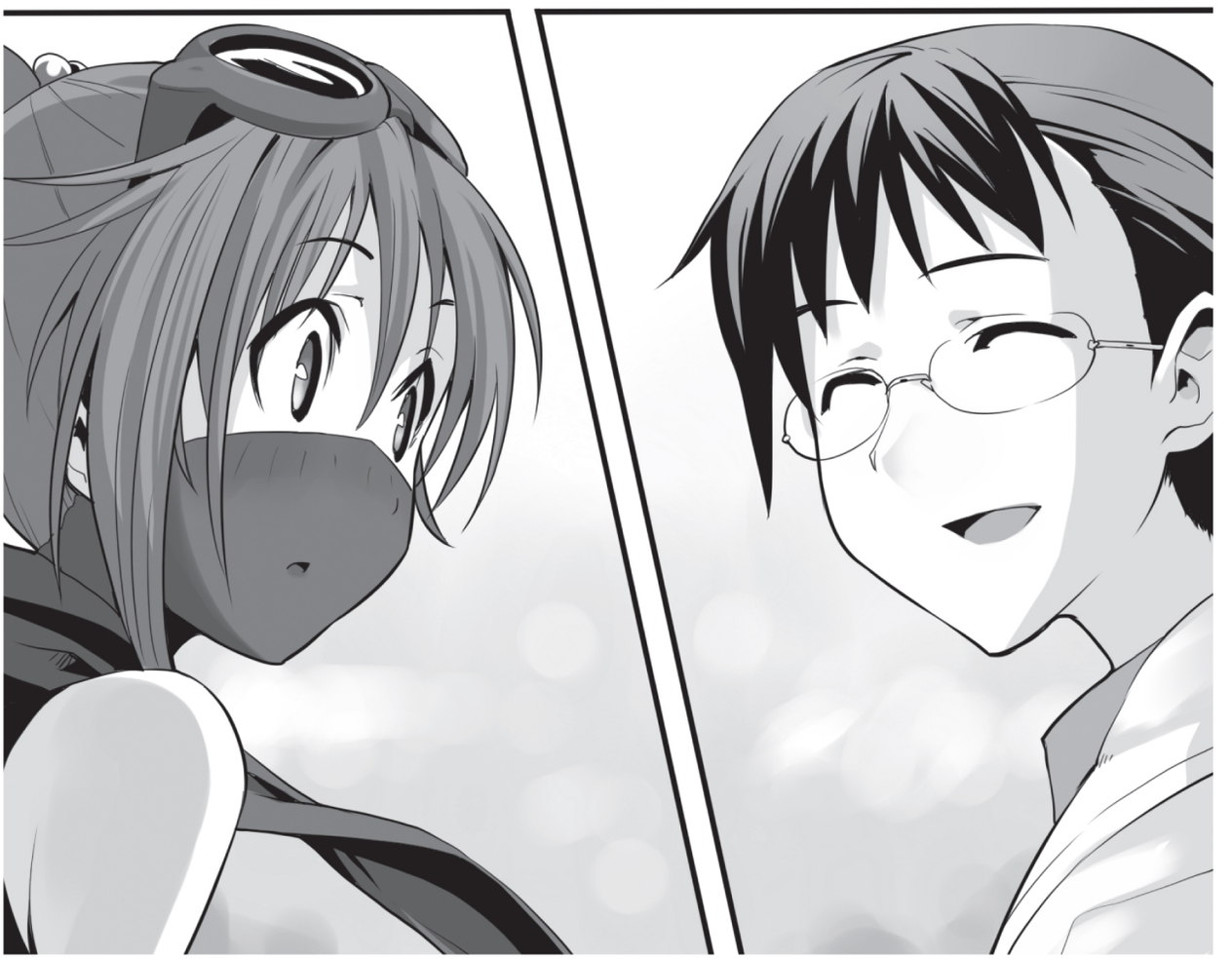
All of a sudden, he grinned.

I’d never even imagined that emotion on him before. He always seemed deep in thought or angry.

“N-no worries! Anyone would have done the same,” I said.

Who wouldn’t be embarrassed by such honest gratitude?

Anyway, we were still enemies.



12

A Strange Enemy

“First, let’s go to the control room,” Hibiki said, heading down the stairs.

I’d already opened the rooftop door to head inside the Red Tower. The security camera might have captured me, because according to Hibiki, it was impossible to avoid the cameras in this building. Given he was in charge of security, he probably knew what he was talking about.

“Why the control room? Shouldn’t we rescue the people in the exhibit hall first?” I asked, following him.

“As long as they have the control room, we won’t be able to safely free the hostages. We’ve got to capture the culprits first.”

That made sense.

He really does think like Kei. I bet they’d get along.

“What floor is the control room on?”

“The twentieth. Don’t you think you should at least know that much, Red?”

Oh, shut up.

Kei probably knew, but I didn’t. What could I say?

Naturally, we didn’t see anyone else in the building.

“This place was packed earlier. It feels a little lonely…,” I said.

“I know,” Hibiki answered with surprising ease.

I was starting to wonder if he was one of those people who was impossible to hate. Of course, Kei would probably call me a softy for thinking that.

…Click.

I stopped walking.

Did I just hear something?

“A sound? I didn’t hear anything,” Hibiki said.

Click-clack!

This time, there was no mistaking it. Hibiki and I exchanged glances.

“Maybe someone’s hiding in there!” I said. “Not everyone made it out.”

“Wait! It could be a trap!” Hibiki shouted.

Pretending not to hear him, I burst out of the stairwell. We’d only made it to the thirty-third floor. There could be bad guys around, so I was cautious, of course. But I didn’t see anyone.

“Maybe I was wrong… All I see around here is a guide robot,” I said.

“Let’s hurry up and get to the control room,” Hibiki answered.

“Fine.”

The robot standing against the wall didn’t move. Had it been turned off or something? I walked casually past it.

“Watch out!” Hibiki warned.

I jumped back. It was a conditioned response—I didn’t have time to ask what to watch out for.

Something slammed right where I had just been standing.

What the heck?!

I only figured it out after stepping farther back. The guide robot had suddenly swung its arm down.

“So this thing’s on after all!”

It was standing on its own two feet—and it started moving!

“…Red, we’re surrounded.”

“What?”

I glanced around. Four guide robots, including the one that had tried to hit me, plus two small round machines had circled around us.

“What are those little things?” I asked.

“Cleaning robots. They’re basically the janitors around here. I heard it’s a trial deployment,” he said.

“Fine, but they’re also designed to attack people? Isn’t that dangerous for visitors?”

“I doubt they were designed that way! Whoever took over the control room probably rewrote the robotics program. That’s the criminal’s strong suit, after all. In other words, this is a trap.”

Computers aren’t my thing, but rewriting a robotics program sounded pretty impressive. Couldn’t those people use their brilliant minds for something better?

“So, Red, what’s your plan?”

“Escape. I don’t want to fight those robots. Let’s get out of here quick!”

Punching one of them would probably hurt, and I bet submission holds wouldn’t work on them, either. Plus, they cost tens of millions of yen each. I’d hate to pay for breaking one.

“We can’t,” Hibiki said.

“Why not?”

“They move extremely fast. They’ve got two legs like humans, but there are wheels and motors on the back.”

“That’s not fair!”

Did that mean we’d have to fight them?

“Nope, it’s not. So what’s our strategy?” Hibiki asked.

“Why are you asking me?”

“You’re the fighter, aren’t you?”

“I guess so, but…”

I was nervous without Kei’s guidance, but at least combat was my area of expertise. Just dive in, I guess!

“Mr. Detective, can you fight a little?”

“I’m a black belt in judo.”

Judo, eh? Kendo would’ve been better. Those robots wouldn’t be easy to pick up and throw. I guess judo was better than karate, though. A karate chop wouldn’t do much to a robot.

“Then you watch out for yourself!” I told him.

“Hey, what about the plan?”

“I’ll think about it while I fight!”

I dived toward the closest guide robot. I couldn’t strategize without seeing how they responded in a fight. As I approached, the robot’s fist shot straight forward. I jumped back and… *Uh-oh!*

The robot charged me.

Dang, it’s faaast!

I was jumping back, so I couldn’t dodge to the side. The robot’s arm was still extended. It was going to hit me!

I clenched my teeth, getting ready for the pain.

“I told you they were fast!” Hibiki landed a kick on the robot’s stomach, pushing it toward the wall.

“Hibiki Shirasato!”

He was standing where the robot had been.

“Didn’t you say you did judo?!” I called.

“I do, but I can still manage a kick or two! What were you doing, diving at it like that? They look human, but they’re not. If you treat them like humans, they’ll crush you!!”

“Sorry…”

He was right. I’d been reckless.

“…Anyway, I’ve paid you back now,” said Hibiki.

“For what?”

“For the roof.” He pushed his glasses up.

When I caught him? He thought he owed me one? I hadn’t thought of it like that at all.

“Anyway, there are still five left. Be careful, but be quick. We can’t waste much more time here,” he said.

“I know,” I replied. “That’s why you have to think of a strategy.”

“What? Why me?”

He looked surprised.

“Because you’re better at that stuff! I’m counting on you!”

With that, I turned to the robots. This time, I was more careful and didn’t dive at any of them. Gotta learn from your mistakes.

A robot approached, arm out. I pushed its arm to the side and grabbed it with both hands. At the same moment, I swept my heel under its feet from behind, and it crashed to the ground.

“How’s that, robot? Betcha can’t flip someone… Whoa!”

The robot stood back up like nothing had happened. What did it think it was, a roly-poly toy? I scuttled away from it.

“Looks like a throw isn’t enough to harm them,” Hibiki noted.

This was no time for cool analysis!

“So?” I asked. “You got a plan?”

“They’ve probably got under an hour left of battery power. Also, they’re waterproof.”

“That’s some lousy intel, Mr. Detective!”

“I never said we’re out of options. There’s an off switch at the back of their necks. If you flip it, they stop moving.”

So there *was* a way! Why didn’t he say so sooner? This is no time to play your cards close to the chest!

“…Do you think you can flip the switch when they’re moving that fast?”

Oh…

No, probably not. They’re just too quick.

“I have a plan. First…”

He explained it, but I wasn't sure. *Really? You think that's gonna work?*

But we were after the same thing right now, and I didn't think he would lie. Time to give Hibiki Shirasato's plan a try!

13

A Double Trap in the Movie Theater

“Hey, robots, over here!”

I burst through the circle. One of the guide robots thrust out its hand, but I twisted away, avoiding it by a hairbreadth.

That was close!

And my reflexes aren’t exactly normal, either.

The robots swiveled toward me and charged. I was the one making a run for it, so they were choosing to go after me instead of Hibiki. Good. I ran down the hallway at top speed, glancing behind me.

“One, two, three, four robots. Darn, I was hoping to draw away all of them.”

Maybe I was getting greedy.

“Man, they’re fast! No fair!”

Since they had wheels, they could keep up with an average bike. I’m fast myself, but they were on my heels. I veered down a hallway to the right. They probably couldn’t make sharp turns at that speed.

Yes!

As I predicted, they slowed down just before the curve.

…Still, I didn’t have many options. If I was in the Blue Tower, I would have had all sorts of knickknacks to work with, but this was the Red Tower. It was full of exhibit halls and movie theaters, which didn’t give me much.

“If I don’t do something, they’ll catch up with me…” I glanced around. The entrance to a movie theater was just ahead. “There it is!”

I dived into the theater. The lights were down inside, so it was pitch-black. I switched to my infrared goggles and kept going. Inside the theater, I took out my rope and tied several seats together, pulling the rope taut along the aisle. Good thing I decided to bring it with me after we got across the roof.

“Just one more thing…and done.”

I hoped it would work. I was nervous about setting a trap without Kei, but I couldn’t afford to worry. I had to save him!

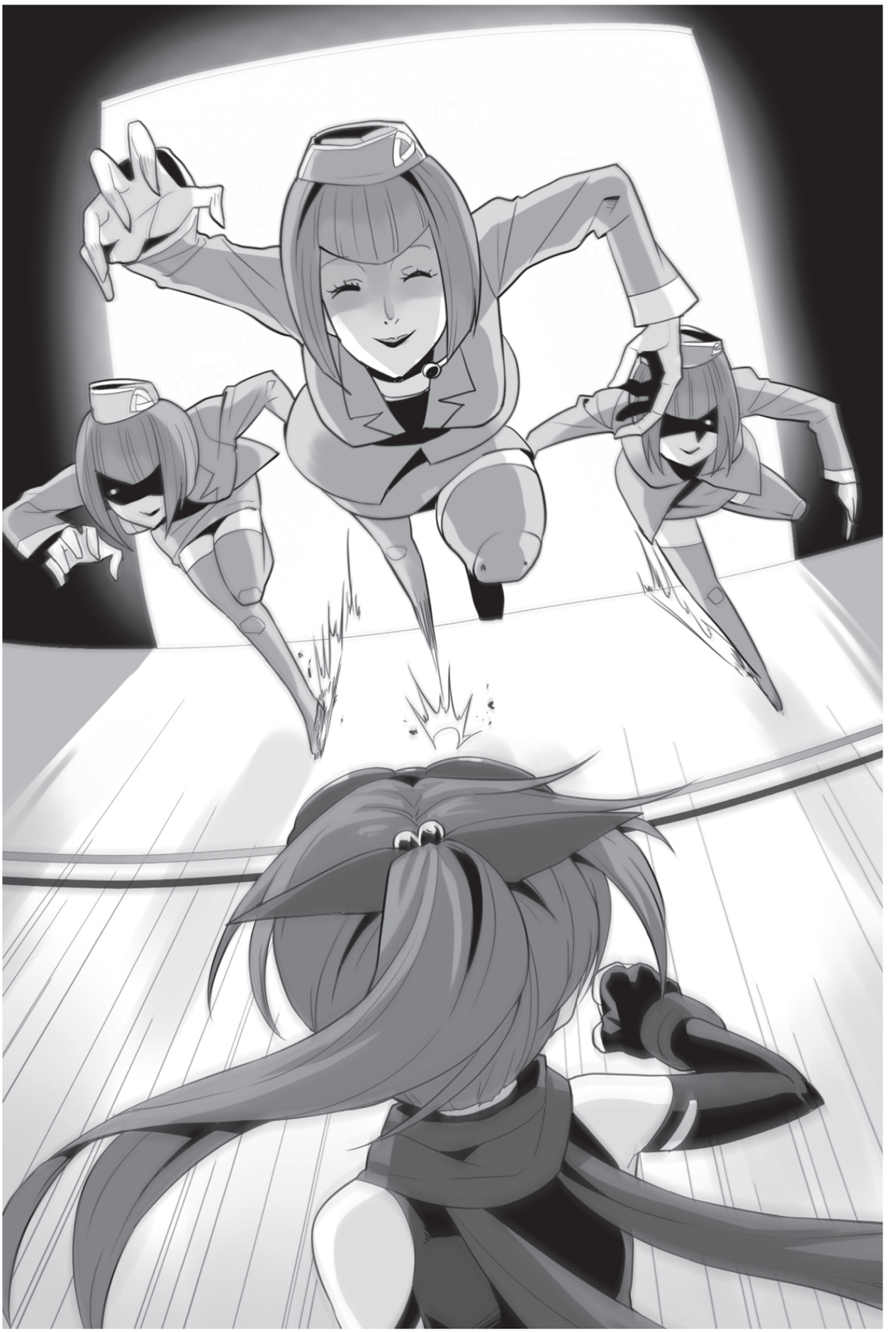
The robots filed in from the entrance, and I stood in front of the screen. If they wanted to get to me, they’d have to cross the rope.

Come on, guys…

I watched them hopefully. They started moving. They were heading straight toward me.

It’s working!!

And as soon as that thought crossed my mind, one of the guide robots leaped into the air in front of the rope.





It noticed the rope?! And it can jump*?!*

I hadn't heard anything about that!!

It was heavy, so it didn't seem able to get very high. Still, it managed to get over the rope. It charged toward me—

Bam!

—and fell flat on its robot face.

"Yesss! It worked!!"

The double trap was a success!

Kei was the one who taught me about double traps. First, you set an obvious trap, and then you follow up with one that's harder to detect. In this case, I strung wire a few steps ahead of the rope.

I'd been on pins and needles waiting to see what would happen, but at least so far, the plan was succeeding. The other guide robots were falling on top of one another, too. I might be able to flip their switches, but if they caught me when I got close, things could get nasty. No—I'd better follow Hibiki's plan. I ran into the hallway.

"Ack!" I almost bumped into him outside the movie theater. "Watch where you're going!" I snapped.

"You're the one who came bursting out. I was looking for you!"

We glared at each other for a second before remembering this was no time to fight.

"So did you find anything?" I asked.

"Yeah. We can put these over their faces," he answered, holding out some superhero masks.

"…" I stared at him scornfully.

"This was all I could find! Plus, they work. Look!"

He pointed to a cleaning robot spinning around nearby in one of the masks. Guess they really did work. But how?

"The robots get their information from a main camera. It reads the basic shape and movements of whoever they're facing so the robot can respond accordingly. Which means if the camera can't see, the robots can't move. Since they weren't originally built to fight, there's no backup plan if the camera stops functioning," Hibiki explained.

In other words, if you covered their eyes, they couldn't move.

Still—couldn't he find anything better to do the job?

Our trump card was superhero masks. What a joke!

“Don’t complain. It wasn’t easy finding these. There’s not much around to use for a weapon in a place like this.”

Yeah, yeah. Can we start our counterattack now?

“The guide robots are the only ones that will give us real trouble, so just put the masks on those three.”

“Got it. You wait there, Mr. Detective.”

I took the masks and went back into the theater. The guide robots had just stood back up. Sure would have been nice if they were still on the ground!

“Sorry about this,” I said, leaping on top of a seat.

Two of the robots circled around to either side, trying to trap me. *Geez, they’re smart!*

“Not so quick, you two!” I said, hopping to the next chair.

From there, I dashed toward the guide robot by the entrance. It thrust both arms toward me at lightning speed, but I jumped back out of the way. The robots couldn’t fit down the narrow aisles between the rows of seats, so they couldn’t get as close to me as before. Pushing off the back of the seat in front of me, I planted one foot on the extended arm of the robot and did a handstand.

“I win!” I crowed, fastening the mask over the robot’s face.

So…would it work?

I waited for the robot to react. I didn’t notice anything different…

“Eek!”

Suddenly, the robot’s arm swung down, throwing me off-balance. I curled into a ball just before landing atop the chair.

“What the heck?! It doesn’t work! …Wait, does it?”

The robot stood frozen in front of me as I braced myself. Well, not frozen—it was shaking its head like it was confused.

Was the mask working after all?

Quietly, I reached around to the back of the robot’s neck and flipped the switch.

This time, it stopped moving completely.

Success!

Nice job, Mr. Great Detective. Now to get the other ones! I turned toward the robot on my other side. It tried to punch me, but I just jumped to the next row of seats.

“They’re way too predictable,” I muttered.

Circling behind it, I slipped the mask onto its face and flipped the switch. I didn't wait to see what happened to this one before turning to the last guide robot.

At first, I'd been too freaked out to observe them carefully, but now I realized they moved in straight lines. They were fast, but it wasn't hard to avoid them. Also, they didn't kick, probably because they'd fall over if they did. Timing my movements was way easier with them than with a human.

After dodging a punch, I grabbed the robot's arm and pulled with both hands. Once it was off-balance, it toppled toward me. Putting on the mask was easy.

Once it started acting clumsy, I flipped the switch.

Click.

"Whew…glad that's over."

I looked around at the three robots. None of them were moving. I went back to the hallway, where Hibiki had just put a mask on the last cleaning robot.

"I'm done," I said.

"You mean you turned off all three of them?" he asked, looking surprised.

"Yeah. It wasn't that hard."

"It was for you earlier."

"I wasn't used to how they move yet."

He gazed at me with arms crossed, lost in thought. What? Did he just now realize how amazing Red is? Kinda late for that, mister!

"…Well, now's not the time. Let's get going!"

Oh, I guess he was thinking about something else. I swear, this detective!

14

One Chance in a Hundred

We returned to the stairwell and headed down toward the control room on the twentieth floor. I was on alert for more problems, but we didn't run into any. I mean, there didn't seem to be anybody left in the place.

"You think the bad guys didn't bring many people for this job? They must've seen us on the security camera footage, but they haven't sent anyone to intercept us," I said.

"Probably not. I'd say five people or less. More likely two," he answered.

"Two?! And they did all this?"

I couldn't believe it. Just two people to take over an entire tower?

"The control system's completely computerized, but that backfired. If you seize hold of that system, the rest is easy. You can close every entrance at once, and if you take hostages, the police can't do much. Even if someone breaks in, all you have to do is reprogram the robots to attack. Still, there's one thing I don't understand."

"…What they're after?"

"Yeah."

I'd been wondering the same thing. Why would they hole themselves up in this tower?

"Normally, when someone does this, they've got a demand of some sort. And these guys took hostages. But I haven't seen any demands. They've refused all contact from the police, too. The only time I heard their voice was during the initial announcement," Hibiki said.

This was getting stranger by the second. I had a bad feeling. Which reminded me—Kei had been worried about something earlier. Could this be connected to that?

"We're here. The twentieth floor," Hibiki said, stopping.

“So this is it…”

It felt more open than the other floors. There probably weren’t any exhibit halls or movie theaters here. Posters for art exhibits and movies hung on the walls. The lights were still on.

“The control room is down this hallway, on the left,” Hibiki said, walking ahead of me.

I followed. We were both on high alert. At the same time, I doubted they would attack us again. If they’d wanted to, they would have done it sooner.

“Can I ask you a question?” I said.

“What?”

“Why did you decide to team up with me? Doesn’t this go against your beliefs?”

“I’m not sure myself…but I figured it was okay since we both want to save the hostages. That’s all.”

Huh. I could understand that. The first time we met, at the art museum, I thought he was a horrible person, but now…

“…Maybe we’re like a Möbius strip,” I said.

“How so?” he asked.

“You’re a detective, and I’m a thief. At first, I thought we were on opposite sides, but now it seems like the two sides are connected.”

Suddenly, I wasn’t sure what I was saying.

“…Don’t put me in the same category as you,” he said.

Ugh, this guy!

By then, we were standing in front of the control room.

Hibiki looked at me. “I’m going in,” he said.

Pressing myself against the wall, I nodded.

Click.

The door wasn’t locked. It swung right open.

“It’s over!” “Surrender!” we shouted as we dived into the room.

Whoa…

I mentally gasped as I looked around. Toward the back of the room were dozens of monitors. Below them was some kind of machine. Kei would probably know exactly what it was, but to me, it just looked like a big computer. Sitting in front of it was a young man, turned toward us.

Was this him…?

He was thin, with a mop of dyed brown hair. He looked like your average dude—except he was grinning at us after we just busted into his control room.

Was this the last free member of the criminal organization Hibiki had mentioned? I glanced at Hibiki. He nodded. Apparently, my guess was right.



“Nice job getting this far. Of course you did—you’re that detective, Hibiki Shirasato… And that girl must be Phantom Thief Red?”

He clapped his hands together in a goofy way.

What the heck?! He was making fun of us!

I pouted and was about to yell at him when Hibiki tapped my shoulder.

What?

“Look,” he muttered, gesturing toward the shadow of the door.

A muscular man in a black suit was lying on the floor.

He wasn’t dead, was he…?

“Don’t worry. That guy got in my way, so I made him take a little nap. I needed him to get some things done, but once the plan was in motion, he was more trouble than help,” the man said, guessing my thoughts.

Whew. Thank goodness he wasn’t dead. But why was this guy so relaxed? I glared at him.

“You can’t escape now. Let the hostages go!” I ordered, stepping forward.

He still didn’t budge. “I don’t plan to escape. The second you two showed up, I knew it was over. But I don’t intend to be the only one who loses this game.” He shrugged.

Huh?

“What do you mean?” Hibiki asked sharply.

“Nothing, just that there’s a bomb in the exhibit hall. Now let’s see…” He looked at his watch. “…We’ve got about ten minutes till it explodes.”

A b-bomb?!

This couldn’t be real.

Kei and Misaki were in there!! What was wrong with this guy?!

“You disarm it right now!” I shouted, lunging at him and pulling him up by his collar.

“Red, stop!” Hibiki shouted, but I ignored him.

The man didn’t resist. He just stood there with my hand on his collar.

“Disarm it!!”

I stared straight into his eyes.

Hibiki’s reaction was completely different. His eyes looked dead.

The man snickered. “No can do. The bomb can’t be remotely controlled. Oh, and if you force open the door of the exhibit hall, it’ll go off. The only way to save the people inside is to directly disarm the bomb.”

“You monster!”

Before I could stop myself, I punched him. He flew backward, collapsing on top of the machine.

“Calm down, Red. I think we can figure this out,” Hibiki said, stepping between me and the man.

I glared at him. “How?!”

He knew a way out of this? Why didn’t he tell me?! I’d do anything!

If I didn’t…the exhibit hall would blow up in ten minutes! Kei and Misaki and tons of other people were trapped there!!

And then…then…

“Well…” Hibiki bit his lip, frowning.

What, he didn’t have an answer?

There wasn’t a way?

He was a great detective! He had to do something!!

I staggered backward and leaned limply against the wall. I felt like I would slide straight to the floor if I wasn’t careful. My eyes were hot, but I forced the tears back. This was no time to cry.

I had to save them somehow…

…but how could I do it without Kei’s help?

I couldn’t think of anything. I’d have to force this guy to disarm the bomb…

Just as that thought crossed my mind, my phone—which I had turned down—started buzzing.

Of all times to get a call!

I considered ignoring it, but I was too curious. I checked the display.

“What?!”

The call was from Misaki. How?! Why?! I’d tried calling her a bunch of times with no luck!

I picked up, and a familiar voice greeted me.

“Asuka, is that you?”

“K-Kei! How did you…?” I whispered, since Hibiki was nearby.

What’s going on? I glanced at Hibiki. He was watching me.

“We can hear everything you’re saying.”

“You can?”

“The PA system seems to have been turned on somehow.”

Oh…maybe when the guy fell onto the machine? That makes sense!

But how did Kei have a phone? I’d assumed their phones had been confiscated, since my calls weren’t going through.

“We’ve got Misaki’s quick thinking to thank for that,” Kei said.

Misaki?

“They took our phones, but Misaki gave them the glasses case instead—the one she got at the shop earlier.”

So that’s what happened. The case was pretty convincing.

“Then why didn’t you pick up before?!” I asked.

I could have been getting his help all along!

“There was a security camera, and I figured I’d only have one chance to use the phone. I was waiting.”

It was amazing that he’d been calm enough to think about that even while being held hostage. Well, it was the kind of thing he’d do. But if that chance never came, what would he have done?

What if I hadn’t tried to save them?

“I know you well enough to know you’d come. That’s why I told you not to rescue us by yourself.*”*

I remembered him saying that, but I’d assumed he meant I shouldn’t come at all.

“You’re with Hibiki Shirasato, aren’t you?” he asked.

He’d even predicted that. I was annoyed by how completely he saw through me, but right now, I was grateful, too.

“Yeah, I am.”

“Good work. Tell me what’s going on. We don’t have much time, do we?”

“No! This guy said there’s a bomb in the exhibit hall that’s going to explode in ten minutes!”

“…I know. Can you go?” he asked calmly.

“Go where?”

“To disarm the bomb. Where else?”

“B-but I don’t know where it is…”

If we thought we could disarm it, Hibiki and I would have been there already!

“Asuka.”

Wh-wh-what?

My heart skipped a beat at Kei's suddenly forceful tone.

"Just who do you think you're dealing with here?" he asked, his voice bursting with confidence.

My heart was pounding.

When Kei navigated as Phantom Thief Red, his personality changed completely. Instead of his usual antisocial persona, he became totally self-assured and clear.

That was how he sounded now.

No matter how many times I witnessed it, I never got used to Kei's transformation. But for some reason, when Kei was Red, I trusted him completely.

"Got it! Let's go disarm that bomb!!" I said.

If Kei said we could do it, then we could. I believed in him!

"Wait a second, Red. You're going to disarm the bomb? That's reckless. You don't have enough time," Hibiki said, staring at me sternly.

I knew we didn't have time. But refusing to save everyone wasn't an option for Phantom Thief Red!

"Asuka, can you put me on speaker?" Kei asked.

Really?

I hesitated, then pressed the button.

"Can you hear me, Hibiki Shirasato?"

"You must be Red's partner. I suspected there were two of you," Hibiki answered.

I looked at him in surprise. *So he knew…*

This was not a detective to underestimate.

"You're right," Kei said. *"But we're short on time, so I'll get to the point. We're going to disarm the bomb. I'll leave the arrest of the criminals and the evacuation of hostages afterward to you."*





“You don’t genuinely think you can disarm it, do you?! Your chances of success are slim to none!” Hibiki answered hotly.

“We can do it. If there’s a one-in-a-hundred chance of success, we’ll nail that one percent. That’s what Phantom Thief Red does!”

15

Red or Blue?

I left the control room and started running down the hallway. I never expected Kei to say something like that. He left Hibiki speechless. It felt good!

"Where to now, Kei?" I asked over the phone.

"The fifteenth floor. When you get here, get into the ventilation shafts."

I wondered if that was where the bomb was.

"I'm almost sure it is," he answered. He sounded as confident as ever, but based on what? *"The security sensors in the exhibit hall are very sensitive. The bomb's not in here. I've checked. That leaves the air shafts or some other place people can't usually see as the most likely possibility."*

Interesting. But how did he know it was on the fifteenth floor?

"If the bomb is rigged to explode when the door opens, it has to be within a certain range of the door for any remote signals to reach it," Kei continued. *"I'm guessing the criminal is confident in the bomb's precision. He wouldn't put it in a place where it might malfunction. They probably confiscated our phones to keep electromagnetic waves from affecting it, which is another reason I doubt the bomb is far from the door. Using cell phones is prohibited near the art, but if they let people keep their phones and they all happened to get a call at the same time, that could have caused problems."*

Wow.

He sure did deduce a lot from a tiny bit of information. I was so impressed, all I could do was sigh.

I glanced at my watch as I ran. Only eight minutes left!

"Also, I know why they went after this building," Kei said.

He knew that, too?

Even Hibiki couldn't figure that out, and he met the mastermind!

“There’s a reason the Red Tower was the one they went after. The criminal has a connection to the owner of the building.”

“He does? But how do you know that, Kei?”

It was like he knew it from the start.

“I’ll bet Hibiki Shirasato recognized that guy.”

“You’re right, but isn’t that because Hibiki is connected to the police?”

“He doesn’t have any more information than me. A lot of the paintings in this exhibit are suspicious. Some have been stolen and recovered. Some of the thefts were solved only recently, and very suddenly.”

What did he mean? How was that related to the current crime?

“When I looked into those thefts, a familiar name kept coming up —the organization that Hibiki Shirasato broke up after the Red Star incident.”

No way! So that’s how everything was connected?

“It seems Shirasato couldn’t dig up any evidence, but the owner of these towers used to be connected to that organization, and when it went down, he stole their profits.”

Very sly.

Oh, that was the man who had yelled at Hibiki. So he was a bad guy!

“Normally, when a criminal organization is broken up, the stolen artwork typically isn’t retrieved right away because it’s put on the black market. The owner of this tower sold the works back to the museums they had been stolen from for a high price. As a condition of those sales, he forced them to loan the artwork back for this exhibit. That’s why the content of the exhibit wasn’t decided until the last minute, and the advertising wasn’t done sooner. My theory explains everything. The criminal’s goal was to get revenge on the owner of the tower. As long as he achieved that, he didn’t care if he was arrested.”

That must have been why he didn’t resist when we broke into the control room. He’d already done what he needed to do. He was just waiting for the bomb to explode.

Kei sure is amazing…

He figured out the truth so quickly!

“I’m on the fifteenth floor. Where should I go now?” I asked.

“Come to the door to the exhibit hall. From there, get into the air shafts,” Kei answered.

“Got it.”

Five minutes left!

I headed for the exhibit hall where the hostages were being held prisoner.

“Kei and Misaki are in there…”

But I didn’t have time to go in.

It was so frustrating!

I checked out the ceiling, then used a wire to get into the crawl space, like before. I switched on my light and looked around. I didn’t see anything that seemed like a bomb.

“I’m up here,” I said to Kei.

“I have an idea of where it might be. There’s one painting in particular that’s getting a lot of attention. It’s supposed to be a newly discovered Vermeer.”

“Isn’t Vermeer the painter Misaki was talking about when we went to the other museum?”

“Yep. But I’ve seen this painting before. I’m friends with a Dutch mathematician who knows a lot about art, and we went to see it together.”

So…?

“At that time, I was told it was painted by someone else.”

“You mean this is a fake?!”

“Maybe. But that’s not the issue right now. Even if it is fake, everyone thinks it’s the most valuable painting in the Red Tower. The criminal included.”

“You’re saying the bomb is over that painting?”

“Exactly. We don’t have much time. Hurry!”

“I know that!”

Four minutes left!

I followed Kei’s directions through the crawl space. I shone my light around as I went, inspecting everything carefully.

“Aha!”

To the left in the distance, I caught sight of something that looked mechanical. I approached.

“This is it. I found the bomb, Kei!”

“Good. Is there a timer on it somewhere?”

“Yeah. It says just under three minutes!”

“That’s how much time is left. Send me a picture on your phone.”

“Okay.”

I hung up, snapped a picture, and sent it to Misaki’s number. Kei called me back right away.

“I’ll tell you how to disarm it. Can you do it?”

Disarm a bomb? My heart was pounding, and my hands were shaking, but it was either me or no one. I was the only person who could save all those hostages!

“I can do it.”

“First, take off the outer box.”

“Okay…”

I took a deep breath, then touched the bomb.

It was cold. When I took off the outer box, I saw a big mess of wires inside.

I took another photo and sent it to Kei.

Two minutes left!

Kei started giving me rapid-fire instructions. I cut and moved the cords he told me to.

I let out a breath. We were short on time, but I had to get this right. My nerves were going crazy!

I wiped the sweat from my forehead.

There were only two wires left.

Red and blue.

One minute left!

“Which one should I cut?” I asked.

“…”

For the first time, Kei was silent.

“Kei? Quick, tell me!”

“…I don’t know.”

What…?

“Whaaaaat?! W-wait a second. Why not?”

Everything had gone so well until now!

“Only the person who made the bomb knows. It’s a classic move, but the most effective one possible in this situation.”

“You mean…there’s really no way to tell?”

“Normally, you’d freeze it with liquid nitrogen.”

That was obviously impossible! I didn’t have any liquid nitrogen on me. Plus, we were almost out of time.

“Wh-what do I do, Kei?”

“…It’s up to you,” he said decisively, after a pause.

Thirty seconds left!

“Up to me? But I have no idea!”

Everyone’s life depended on this!

If the bomb exploded…of course there was no way I’d survive. Kei and Misaki probably wouldn’t, either. Not even Hibiki, who trusted me in the end, would get out alive.

“I asked Misaki to move all the other hostages to the seventeenth floor. On the off chance it explodes, they might survive.”

That couldn’t be true!

If it was, Kei would never have told me to come disarm the bomb.

“Then where are *you*, Kei?”

“I’m right below you,” he said, like that was natural.

…Did he believe in me?

If he did…I was glad.

“Ten seconds left, Asuka.”

I reached out my shaking hand.





“Do it,” he said.

I rested the blade on one of the wires…and cut.

Outside the tower, a crowd of over a hundred reporters and bystanders had gathered. I waited, blending into the crowd.

The bomb had been safely disarmed.

But Hibiki and I couldn’t very well join the hostages as they exited the building. Instead, we’d returned to the roof, crossed to the Yellow Tower by rope, and emerged ahead of everyone else.

“The hostages held in the Red Tower are now being escorted outside by police officers!” a TV reporter announced excitedly.

People filtered out of the Red Tower’s main entrance.

Where were Misaki and Kei?

I pushed through the crowd to the rope the police had put up. As I watched, a policewoman led Misaki and Kei out of the building. The second I saw them, I started running.

“Hey, you!” shouted a police officer who was holding back the crowd in front of the rope.

I twisted away from him and made a beeline for Misaki. She grinned when she saw me.

“Misaki!!” I cried, throwing my arms around her.

The policewoman had to prop her up from behind to keep her from being knocked over.

“Asuka, what are you doing?!” Misaki asked, flustered. I didn’t let go.

“I’m so glad!” I said, tears spilling from my eyes. *Agh, what now?! They won’t stop!*

“Asuka…I’m sorry I made you so worried,” Misaki said.

“I’m just happy you’re safe,” I answered.

The policewoman patted my shoulder, then led Misaki, Kei, and me to a police car. They said they were going to interview us.

…Of course, I wasn’t worried at all, because I knew Kei would never give away the truth.

“I’m glad you’re safe,” said Hibiki, who was standing by the police car.

His white jacket was dirty in places, and his hair was a mess. But mostly, he just looked tired. Of course he was, after all that happened!

After Kei and I disarmed the bomb, he'd explained the situation to the police and worked with them to evacuate the hostages and arrest the criminal.

But why was he here now? My heart was pounding. Could he have guessed my identity? The place was crawling with police, so if he had, it wasn't likely we could escape.

"Th-thank you!" said Misaki, who didn't know any of this.

Hibiki flashed a smile at her, then turned to me and Kei.

My heart kept pounding, but I silently bowed my head, trying to act natural. When I raised it, he was still looking at us.

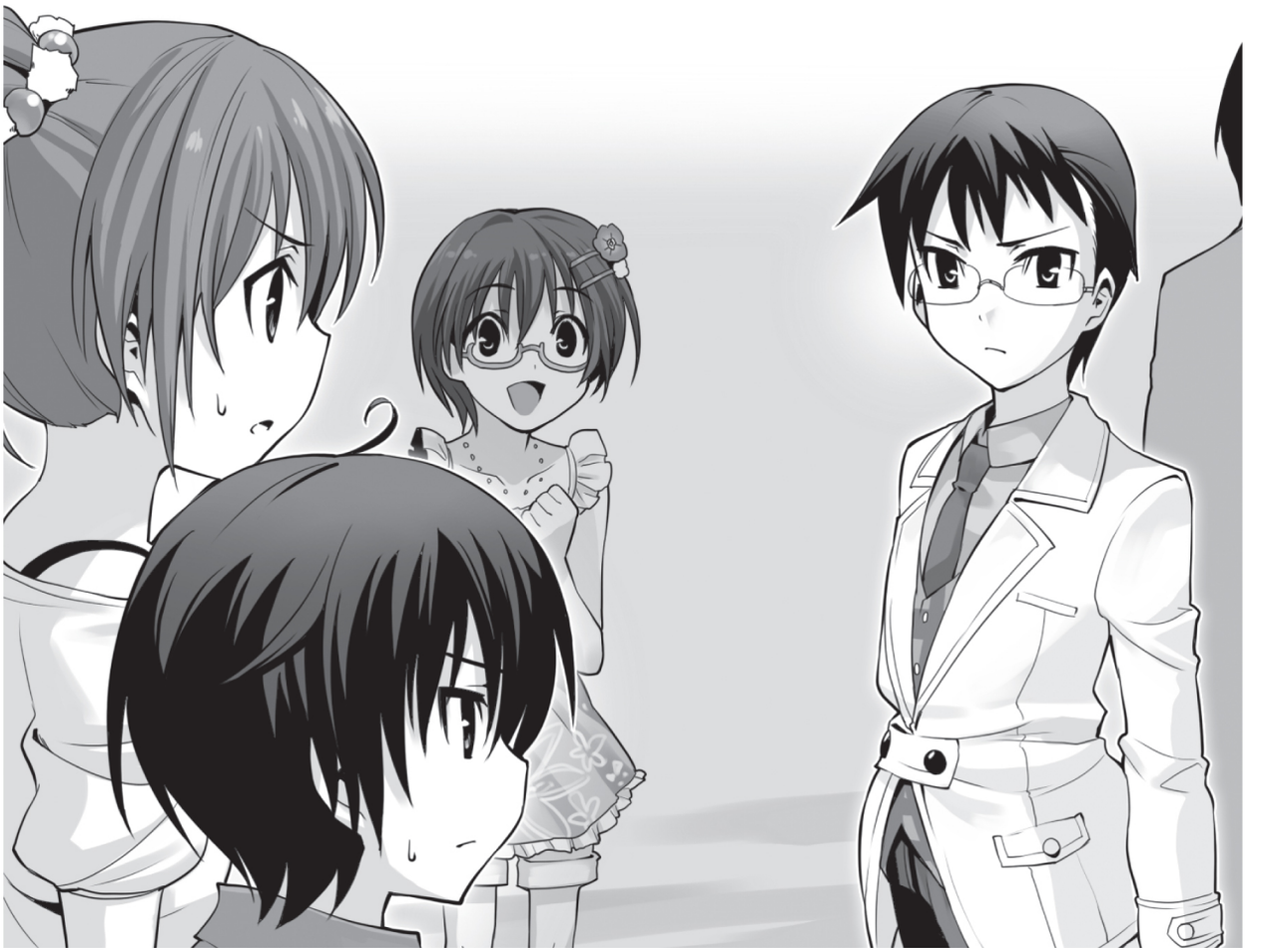
I could hear my heart thumping.

Wh-what?!

But the look in his eyes wasn't so much his usual strong determination as hesitation…or was I imagining things?

Just then, Hibiki shook his head slightly, as if to chase away his doubts.

"…Well, I'll be going," he said, turning on his heels and walking toward a police detective.



Wh-what the heck was that?!

Boy, was I scared!

"Get in, you two," Misaki called to Kei and me from inside the police car.

We piled in. After the car had been driving for a few minutes, Kei suddenly whispered, so Misaki couldn't hear, "Asuka?"

His usual antisocial voice was back.

"What?"

"How'd you know it was blue?"

I'd cut the blue wire—and it was the right choice.

"How do you think?" I asked.

"I don't know; that's why I asked. Or did you not have a reason?"

"I had one."

I looked up at the sky. It was clear blue.

"…Because I didn't want to cut my ties with Red," I said.

I think I saw Kei nod slightly.

16

The Famous Detective Confesses

The next day, I was lying on my bed reading a manga. As usual, Kei was on his computer.

"By the way, I've been wanting to ask you something," I said to him without getting up.

"What?"

"Did you know the whole time that something bad was going to happen at the Sky Towers?"

After all, he seemed to have researched the owners of the towers before our visit. Plus, it was awfully strange that he'd come along with Misaki and me for no reason.

"I suspected something might happen. But since the likelihood was under five percent, I didn't see the need to tell you."

Meaning he was being considerate?

And he'd been worried about me, too?

That must be why he came with us. Kei, of all people! It made me all warm and fuzzy.

"Hey, guys, Shirasato's on TV," Dad called from the living room.

He couldn't be challenging us to another showdown, could he?

I jumped off my bunk. For once, Kei stood up and went into the living room with me.

"Oh, you joined me! The reporters are just about to interview him."

Why so pleased, Dad?

"Think he's gonna say something mean again?" I asked.

"Nah. They're talking about the incident at Sky Towers yesterday," Dad answered.

"I'll bet everyone is giving him all the credit. No one has any idea what Kei and I did!"

"Stop sulking," Dad said. "Remember, Phantom Thief Red…"

"…doesn't do things for public praise, right? I know, Dad."

Still, it was frustrating to never get any recognition. Especially when Hibiki Shirasato got all the credit!

"…It's not true that no one knows," Kei said without taking his eyes off the TV.

What did that mean?

"The police aren't idiots. They have to realize Shirasato didn't do it by himself. Also, Shirasato doesn't seem like the type who enjoys taking credit for other people's work."

Interesting. Kei doesn't praise people often.

"I'm not praising him. I'm analyzing his personality," he said.

Really now?

"The police probably told him to keep quiet about Red," he went on. "I bet they're scared people will think they're incompetent if they find out we were involved."

What the heck? Why would they care if we were involved? The point was that lives were saved!

"Oh, there he is!" Dad said, shifting his gaze to the TV.

Hibiki was surrounded by reporters. He was wearing his trademark white jacket. But was it just me, or was he looking kind of glum?

"Mr. Shirasato, once again, you saved the day," a reporter said, holding the mike toward him.

"It wasn't just me…," he began.

"No need to be modest. Everyone knows we have your talent to thank."

"That's not true…," he said awkwardly.

"He's acting weird," Dad said, cocking his head.

Yup, he sure was. Just then, Hibiki raised his eyes and looked straight into the camera.

"Viewers, I need to tell you something."

"What is it? Another crime?" the reporter asked suspiciously.

"It's about the incident at the Sky Towers. I'm being given credit for everything…but it wasn't me."

"It wasn't?! B-but you went alone into the Red Tower to free the hostages…"

"I wasn't alone."

"You weren't?! Then who was with you?!"

"…I was with Phantom Thief Red."

"Ph-Phantom Thief Red?! Really? Red was there?!"

The reporter was blinking in surprise.

Uh-oh. He said it. Now what?

"We ran into each other by chance, and Red was the one who suggested we sneak into the Red Tower. It was also Red who ultimately disarmed the bomb and saved the people locked in the exhibit hall. I don't know if I could have done it alone."

"But this could be taken as an admission of defeat by you and the police," the reporter said.

Hibiki looked at the reporter and shook his head. *"You're wrong. If I meet Red again, I will arrest them. You have my word as an agent of justice."*

His eyes glinted behind his glasses. The reporters cheered.

Oh boy. At this rate, I wouldn't be surprised to see a headline run across the screen saying, *Hibiki Shirasato vs. Phantom Thief Red.* I switched off the TV.

"Think he'll get in trouble for saying that? I thought you said the police probably hushed him up, Kei," I said.

It's not that I was worried about him, but I couldn't help wondering what would happen to him for telling the truth about us.

"He said it so confidently, the police won't have any choice but to admit it. If they criticize him, the media will be all over them. I'm sure he took that into consideration."

Interesting. So everything was part of his plan. He and Kei really did have similar personalities.

"The more important point is that he called Red 'them.' He could at least have said 'her' since he was with you!" Kei said.

"Do you think he was covering for us?"

"I'm not sure. He may intend to keep the information to himself. Whatever the case, there's no question that we're up against someone tough."

He was right. Hibiki did seem tough. But didn't that mean he accepted Phantom Thief Red as a worthy opponent? After all, in the past, he hadn't acted like we were on his level. The thought energized me.

"Then we better up our game!" I said, leaping up from my seat.

"Very true, Asuka," Dad said. "I was planning to give you the day off from training, but on second thought, let's do it!"

Shoot.

“W-wait a second. That’s not what I meant! I think I could use a day of rest. Hey, Kei, why are you running back to our room?!”

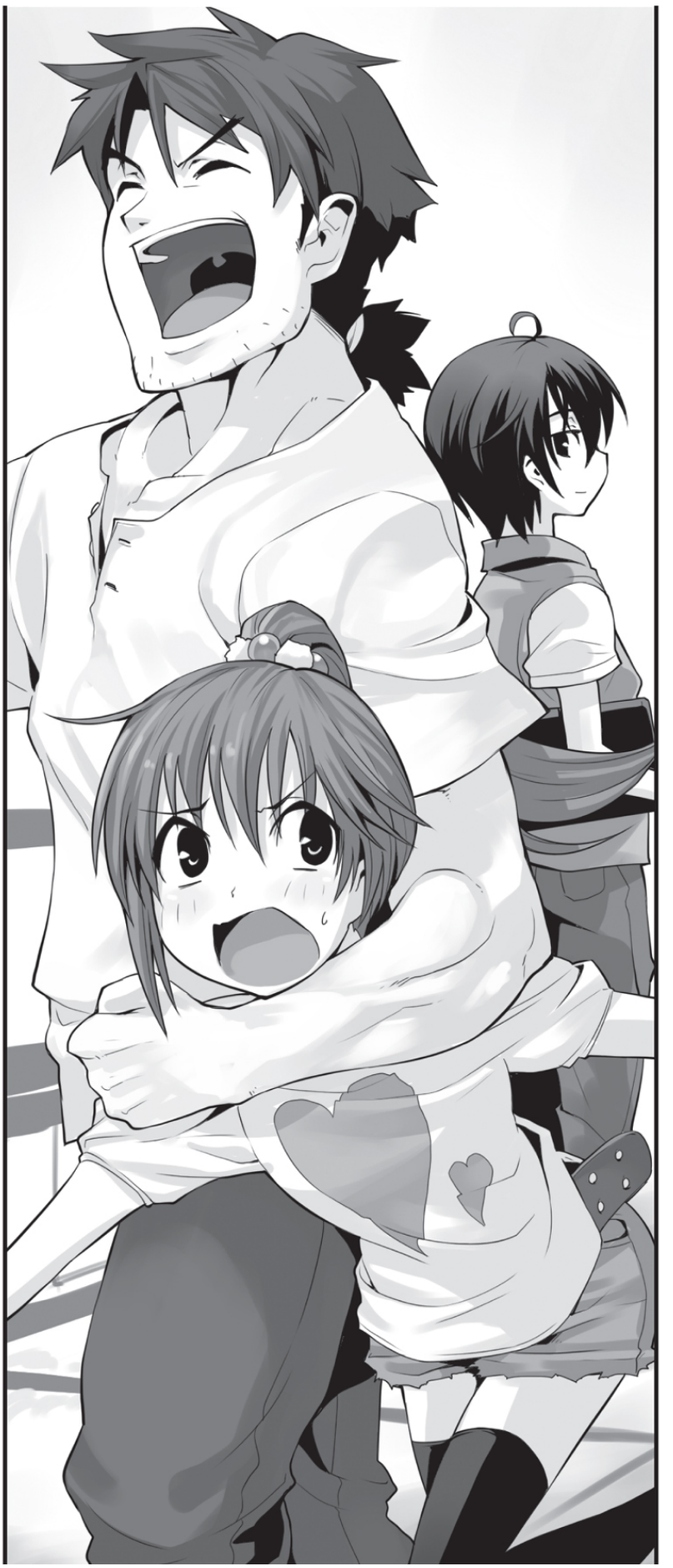
“I’m going to investigate our next target.”

He disappeared into the bedroom.

Have you no heart?!

“Let’s get out there!” Dad said, dragging me along.

“What did I do to deserve this?!” I moaned.





Afterword

Hello! Shin Akigi here, secretary for Phantom Thief Red.

In this volume, Asuka and Kei butted heads with a junior high detective—who's said to be one of the greats! As their secretary, I'm on fire.

I think it's true that phantom thieves shine brightest when they're up against a rival. Yes, I'm sure of it!

Phantom thieves always have great detectives for rivals. Just think of Arséne Lupin and Herlock Sholmes or Kaitou Kid and Detective Conan.

...Asuka is giving me the evil eye. Hey, why so upset?

Wait, I think she's saying something.

"...T...r...ai...tor?"

What? No, never!

I would never expect Red to lose!

Darn it, she just went off in a huff. She's got such a short fuse.

I'd better bring her a chocolate cookie later to make up. Sigh...

But this is no time for sighs! I've got an appointment to interview someone today. Who do you think it could be?

If you guessed Kei, strategist and navigator for Red, you're right!

I'm going to ask him how he polishes his skills as a phantom thief. Let's get started!

Kei, do you have a training routine? Something that would make a person instantly brilliant?

"That's a dumb question..."

Ouch.

"The first thing you have to do is constantly expand your knowledge. You'll need to read the news both offline and online, but if you avoid more specialized publications because you think they're too hard, you'll never learn that information."

I see. So some topics are hard, even for you?

“Of course. For instance, those papers on particle physics that the research institute in the United States sends me…”

W-w-wait a second! I’m already lost. What I really want to know is how to train to be a phantom thief. Any tips you can share?

“…How about starting with secret codes? I’ll give you one to figure out.”

Great! But don’t be upset if I figure it out right away.

“*If* you figure it out. Here it is. 5yqhiw r94 43qe8ht. Let me know when you’ve got it.”

Wait, that’s all? No hints? Kei, that’s no fair… Kei?

He left. What am I supposed to make of that nonsense string of letters and numbers?

I’m stumped.

How about you? Personally, I think I’m going to lose some sleep over this one. (I promise I’ll ask Kei for the answer before the next volume.)

Anyhow, I hope you keep cheering for our two eccentric heroes!

Finally, I should say that Asuka did some dangerous things in this volume. Please do not attempt to copy her!

I’ll see you again in Asuka and Kei’s next adventure!

Shin Akigi

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