Shin Akigi

ILLUSTRATION BY
Shu

Phantom Thief Red 3

School Festival Fever



Phantom Thief Red

School Festival Fever

Level



Shin Akigi

ILLUSTRATION BY Shu



New York

COPYRIGHT



Translation by Richard Tobin ☆ Cover art by Shu

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

KAITO RED Vol.3 GAKUENSAIHA, OISOGASHI ☆ NO MAKI
©Shin Akigi 2010 ©Shu 2010
First published in Japan in 2010 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.
English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

English translation © 2024 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

JY
150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor
New York, NY 10001

Visit us at jyforkids.com • facebook.com/jyforkids • twitter.com/jyforkids
jyforkids-blog.tumblr.com • instagram.com/jyforkids

First JY Edition: June 2024
Edited by Yen On Editorial: Rachel Mimms, Anna Powers
Designed by Yen Press Design: Eddy Mingki

JY is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.
The JY name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Akigi, Shin, author. | Shu (Illustrator), illustrator. | Bird, Winifred, translator.
Title: Phantom thief red / Shin Akigi ; illustration by Shu ; translated by Winifred Bird.

Other titles: Kaito red. English
Description: First Yen On edition. | New York : Yen On, 2023- | Contents: A brand-new heist for a brand-new Red! — | Audience: Ages 8-12 | Audience: Grades 4-6
Identifiers: LCCN 2023031036 | ISBN 9781975378103 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975378127 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975378141 (v. 3 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975378165 (v. 4 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975378189 (v. 5 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975378202 (v. 6 ; trade paperback)
Subjects: LCGFT: Light novels.
Classification: LCC AE3 .W32 2023 | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023031036

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-7814-1 (paperback)
978-1-9753-7815-8 (ebook)

Table of Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright

1. Getting Ready for the School Festival ☆
2. They Call Her the Ice Queen!
3. Our Special Menu
4. The Drama Club’s Savior?
5. You Forgot?!
6. Sneaking into the School at Night!
7. Kei, the Barista
8. Trouble?!
9. President Shiori’s Mysterious Behavior.
10. A Case for Phantom Thief Red?!
11. It’s School Festival Time!
12. Red Café Is the Place to Be!
13. Asuka, the Phantom Thief?!
14. Where Is President Shiori?!
15. The Gymnasium’s Secret
16. Kei’s Brilliant Deduction
17. The Red Monster?!
18. You Feel the Same Way?

Afterword
Yen Newsletter

Table of Contents

1. Getting Ready for the School Festival ☆
2. They Call Her the Ice Queen!
3. Our Special Menu
4. The Drama Club's Savior?
5. You Forgot?!
6. Sneaking into the School at Night!
7. Kei, the Barista
8. Trouble?!
9. President Shiori's Mysterious Behavior
10. A Case for Phantom Thief Red?!
11. It's School Festival Time!
12. Red Café Is the Place to Be!
13. Asuka, the Phantom Thief?!
14. Where Is President Shiori?!
15. The Gymnasium's Secret
16. Kei's Brilliant Deduction
17. The Red Monster?!
18. You Feel the Same Way?

Afterword



Character Introductions



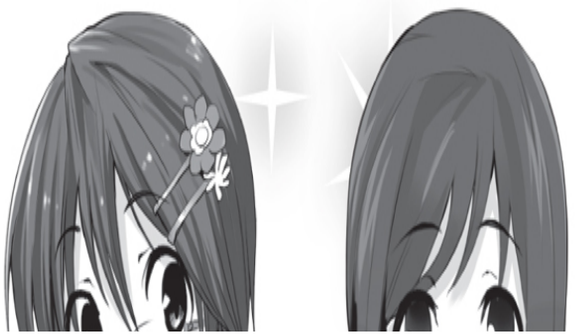
Asuka Kouzuki

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
Asuka's best friend since forever.
Yuzuki
A classmate in the home economics club.
Shiori Orihara
Junior high student council president at Harugaoka Academy. AKA the Ice Queen.
Tsubasa Kouzuki & Keiichiro Kouzuki
Asuka's and Kei's dads, the first-generation Phantom Thief Red.
Hibiki Shirasato
The kid detective everyone is talking about.

1
Getting Ready for the School Festival ☆

"Ugh… I'm pooped…"

I sprawled out on top of my desk. My last class had just finished, and we had a short break before the next one. Most of my classmates were up and mingling among themselves, but I didn't have the energy to leave my desk. My training session with Dad must have worn me out.

"Are you all right?" Misaki asked me. She turned from her seat in front of mine, looking concerned.

"Nope… I feel like I'm gonna die…"

"It was just a pop quiz. It'll take more than a little math to kill you. You'll be fine," Kei bluntly cut in from the seat behind me. He looked bored—but then, he always did.

Duh! I know that!

I glared at Kei.

Even if I wasn't burned-out from training, I still wouldn't have been ready for some random pop quiz anyway. A *math* one! And not just any math, but the kind with formulas: *x*'s and *y*'s and stuff. I had no idea what I was reading…

"You wouldn't have studied even if you knew a quiz was coming," said Kei.

Oof… He wasn't wrong. But it's not like Kei ever studied, either. And yet he always got perfect scores.

I know, I know. He's the smart one; he comes up with Red's strategies and guides me in our heists. But that doesn't mean it's fair!

"Keep your chin up, Asuka. I know you can do it when you put your mind to it. Remember how we managed to get your

homework for summer vacation finished before school?" Misaki kindly remarked while I was pouting at Kei.

Hmm… I don't think any amount of "putting my mind to it" will ever bring me to Kei's level.

And—sorry, Misaki—but honestly, I'd rather just forget *that* stint of homework ever happened. I spent the entire last week of my summer vacation doing nothing but homework. It still makes me dizzy just thinking about it. The only reason I managed to finish it at all was because Misaki helped me, but the entire week felt like a long bout of torture.

Anyhoo! What's past is past! And I'd rather think about the future!

"……Heh-heh-heh."

I lifted my head and grinned, which only made Misaki and Kei act confused.

"What, did thinking too much break your brain?"

Rude! Man, Kei only ever has mean things to say. But I'll let it slide for today.

After all, tomorrow…was the time of year that only comes once! The school festival!!

"Actually, tomorrow's just the start of festival prep," Kei muttered.

"It still counts! Setting things up is all part of the fun! Plus, there's no class!"

"Asuka, maybe you shouldn't get so excited about skipping class," said Misaki. She looked fed up.

But…not having to study at school is the dream, isn't it?

"Asuka…"

Ugh… Don't give me that look! Let's just focus on the school festival!

Our school, Harugaoka Academy, was a combined junior and senior high school. The campus was divided into two buildings: one for the junior high and one for the senior high. Our super-cute uniforms made us one of the more popular schools in the area.

I bet you're wondering how I even got into such a fancy place.

Well, that's awfully rude of you!

I studied my butt off to get in. Sure, maybe I only passed the entrance exam by a few points, but a passing score is a passing

score. Although…I heard the junior high entrance exam is a lot less competitive than the senior one.

Um, point is, I passed that test with my own smarts, thank you!

Which brings us to where we were now. Every year on this weekend, the junior and senior high come together to hold a school festival, and it's a pretty big local attraction.

A lot of people were gonna come, and the preparations were set to start the next day.

It made me excited just thinking about it!

After the quiz, the class gathered for end-of-the-day homeroom, and you could already feel the excitement in the air.

Usually, everyone would head either to their club or home, but not today.

Since we were allowed to start prepping for the festival, the only people who left after homeroom were people who had something to do that afternoon, leaving a little over half of us.

Misaki addressed the class from in front of the blackboard.

"All right, everyone. If anyone is available to stay behind, I'd like to get started on the preparations for this year's school festival. We only have three days, including today, so let's make the most of them."

Misaki was our class president. She was good at getting things done, so our classmates trusted her. That was why she was responsible for overseeing our project for this year's festival.

Class 1-A was going to be setting up a café for the festival. But we didn't want to make it just any old café, which was why we were trying to think of an interesting gimmick.

"Let's get started, then. Could you guys get into the groups I assigned before the quiz earlier? As a reminder, it's the interior design team, fashion team, menu team, and manual labor team."

Misaki had us break up into these four groups. Up in front to the right of the blackboard was the interior design team, and on its left, the menu team, with the manual labor team near the classroom door and the fashion team by the window.

We all collectively shuffled over to our tables.

Most of the boys who did sports joined the manual labor team, and the majority of the girls were assigned to fashion.

Misaki headed the fashion team along with a girl named Yuzuki, who was in the home economics club.

Misaki and I were friends with Yuzuki. We met after getting into the same junior high and had been friends ever since. Yuzuki was on the quiet side, with midlength hair just past her shoulders, and she was really good with her hands. She even made her own clothes. That was why the fashion team decided to make outfits for the festival once they knew they had her working with them.

As someone who doesn't know the first thing about sewing, I think she's just incredible.

"Aren't you gonna get in your group?" Kei asked me.

"Yeah, I'm going right now."

Kei was assigned to the interior design team, which was a little unexpected. I was sorta surprised when I first heard, but seeing as he definitely wasn't suited for manual labor, I guess it made sense. He couldn't cook, either.

And me?

I was on the menu team, of course!

I thought cooking something yummy for everyone would be the most fun. Especially the part where you got to taste test.

"Hey, Asuka. Don't weasel your way outta this one just 'cause you're a girl. C'mon, we've got boxes to move."

That was Ishikawa, from the judo club. He was on the manual labor team, and he seemed to think I *obviously* was, too.

Why would he assume I was on the manual labor team?! It was all guys!

"I'll have you know, I'm on the menu team," I told him.

"The menu? As if you can cook. You're gonna end up giving our customers food poisoning."

Whoa, harsh!

I—I mean, he wasn't exactly wrong, considering everyone knew how bad I was at cooking in home ec. Even just the other day, when we made hamburg steaks, mine came out a burnt, black lump. It tasted bitter, too.

"You're Asuka. Manual labor is totally your thing. I mean, you're the strongest person in our class."

Uh…

Sure, maybe he had a point there, but what was one less girl going to do to the manual labor team? They had more than enough guys from the sports clubs.

“Uh… Can we go now? This doesn’t look like it’s going anywhere.”

“Yeah.”

Two of the boys grabbed their stuff and stood up to leave.

H-hey! C’mon, guys!

“Hold on… We’re still getting ready…”

Misaki tried to stop them, but they didn’t seem so eager to listen to her. I could tell she wasn’t going to convince them.

Aw, geez!

“Hey, you two!” I yelled, striding right over to them.

“Ugh…”

Both boys winced, bracing themselves.

“I’m gonna join the manual labor team, so put your stuff down and get to work!” I said.

“But, uh, we actually wanted to go home…”

They backed up a bit.

Oh, please. I’m not that *scary.*

“I said: *Get. To. Work*.”

I flashed them a big smile and draped my arms around their necks.

“Ow! You’re choking us!”

The two of them struggled to break free from my grip.

Heh. You’re gonna have to fight a lot harder than that to escape my clutches.

“We’re gettin’ things ready for the school festival! And festivals are supposed to be fun! Right?!”

I nodded to the two boys, but they tried to look away.

“…O-okay, okay! Would you just let go of us already?”

I lowered my arms, and the pair returned to the classroom.

Much better!

The festival only came once a year, so we had to enjoy it as a class!

“Thanks for that, Asuka,” Misaki whispered to me.

It was nothing.

With that, I turned around and looked at the boys waiting over at the manual labor team’s table.

“Well, that settles it! Since I’m an official member of the team, get ready to do some real work! I don’t need to tell you what’ll happen if I catch any of you slacking on the job, do I?”

My threatening words of encouragement shut the boys up.

I knew it… They were planning on slacking off this entire time.

Don’t give me that look. Sorry to rain on the parade, but there’s no backing out now!

“It looks like you’ve got a handle on this team, Asuka,” Misaki said with a friendly smile.

“Sure do! Leave ’em to me!”

I’ll have these boys working up a sweat in no time!

“Oh, right. If we finish up early, is it all right if I give you guys a hand with the outfits?” I asked Yuzuki.

“That would be great,” she replied with a nod.

I meant it, too; I did want to help.

I swept my gaze around everyone in the room. “Awesome! Then it’s time for Class 1-A to get ready for the school festival!”





2
They Call Her the Ice Queen!

The class immediately set to work on our respective tasks.

“So, what do you want us to do, Misaki?” I asked.

Misaki was discussing the menu with her team when I approached her.

“Hmm,” she said. “I think if you could ask the school to bring us some curtains, a handsaw, and other tools to borrow, that would be enough for today. We’ll also need you to go buy some things, but that’ll have to wait until tomorrow.”

“No prob. I’ll get right to it, then!” I shot the boys a glance.

“We’re coming, we’re coming. Stop acting like we’re gonna bail,” Ishikawa said, wincing.

That’s the spirit.

With that, I hustled out of the room—or I would’ve, if not for the girl standing right outside.

“Eep!”

“Huh?! Whoa!!”

W-we’re gonna crash!!

I instantly jumped to the side and just barely managed to avoid her. The momentum carried me into a somersault, and I stopped just before I rolled into the nearby wall.

Th-that was close. Who is that girl anyway?

“A-are you all right?” I asked.

I rushed over to make sure the girl wasn’t hurt…and then I recognized her.

Uh-oh!

“Asuka…”

Her voice was low and calm, but it carried across the room as she said my name. I knew *exactly* who it was: third-year student and the junior high student council president Shiori Orihara.

Her long black hair reached down to her midback, and she always had the same cool-as-ice expression on her face. She could be a little strict, but both the student body and teachers alike recognized her tremendous leadership and charisma.

People called her the Ice Queen.

And now she was staring right at me.

Wow, her eyes are so intense. I can't read her at all—it's actually kind of scary.

"How many times have I told you not to run in the hallway?" she asked me.

"I—I'm so sorry!"

I apologized. She was right; I was the one who popped out of the classroom out of nowhere, and this also wasn't her first warning. I knew saying sorry was my best option in this situation.

I'd first met the president not long after the entrance ceremony on the first day of school. I'd met her pretty much exactly like this, in fact—a stern warning after she caught me dashing through the hallways.

And it seemed that after my fair share of stern warnings, I'd left an impression… Ah-ha, ah-ha-haaa…

"Wait. What brings you to the first-year classrooms, President Shiori?"

"I'm here for the festival preparations. And I believe I've already told you multiple times to address me by my last name, yes?"

"Aw… But Shiori is such a pretty name."

"…What was that you just said?"

A chill ran down my spine as her low voice hit my ears.

I stood up straight and shook my head.

"I only ask you refrain from any risky antics, like the other day. The school festival is a hectic time for all students."

By "*the other day*," she was referring to when I brought a stray cat my classmate found to school. It wasn't an issue until the cat got spooked and ran away, which forced me to chase it around campus.

The little guy managed to escape through one of the third-floor windows and get onto the handrail on the small balcony outside of the classroom.

The poor kitty looked so scared and was about to fall, so I inched my way closer, but at the last second, the cat slipped.

Everyone started screaming, and I ended up jumping over the handrail to grab him, which resulted in, well…me falling from the third floor. What was supposed to be a gentle reach turned into a full-bodied, midair grab. Heh-heh…

As scared as they all were, I was fine. Hugging the cat close to me, I kicked off the second-floor balcony to get some distance from the building, did three flips midair, and stuck the landing safely on the ground.

I mean, that was nothing compared to what I did as Red.

All my classmates watching from all three floors were cheering and clapping, save for a few people…

Yeah, President Shiori and my teachers *really* weren't happy.

What's more, Kei made sure I knew how important it was to "*not stand out too much*."

Let's just say, that day wasn't a high point for my junior high school career.

"Asuka? Are you listening?"

I snapped back to the present. President Shiori was staring icily at me.





“Oh, y-yeah. I’m listening. I’ll try to be more careful!”

“Please do.”

As I watched President Shiori walk away, Yuzuki and the others rushed over from the classroom.

“A-Asuka, are you okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s just, President Orihara can be real scary. There’s a reason they call her the Ice Queen, after all.”

“Yeah! I think I would’ve forgotten how to talk if she was staring me down like that.”

“Really?” I said. “I think she’s nice.”

“What?! Nice how?”

Yuzuki and my other classmates looked completely shocked.

What’s there to be so surprised about? I’m sure they’ve got her all wrong.

3
Our Special Menu

The next day was a busy one, with preparations for the school festival starting from the morning.

You could hear hammers pounding away out in the schoolyard, and a lot of the students were so excited as they talked that they were almost shouting.

If this were any other day, the teachers would be going around disciplining each and every one of the chatty students, but today was an exception.

Our class was doing a café—but not just *any* old café.

Before the pop quiz, we'd settled on a theme. First, we were considering a maid café or a gender-swap café, but we suspected the other classes might be thinking along the same lines. So we chose to center our café around *what* we serve, not *how* we serve it. Our goal was to offer tea, coffee, and dishes so delicious you'd forget you were at a school festival!

With this in mind, the interior design of our classroom was going to be important for creating the more mature ambience you'd expect from an actual café.

It was gonna be just like the real thing. So exciting!

"Okay, everyone. Our goal for today is…"

Misaki stood in front of the blackboard, where she led the discussion. She was really good at these sorts of things.

I bet if Kei tried leading the class, it wouldn't go nearly as smoothly. He'd probably just point out little contradictions in everyone's opinions before eventually deciding everything himself.

Maybe he was aware of this part of his own personality, because Kei never really made an effort to mingle with the rest of the class. I mean, he was always the cold, quiet type, but sometimes seeing him be so antisocial got on my nerves. Would it hurt to talk with your classmates every now and then?

It didn't seem to bother him either way, so I'd never go out of my way to point it out.

At the same time, when I ask the girls in our class their opinion of him—

"Your cousin? He looks like he prefers his own company, which makes it hard to talk to him. But I think it also makes him look kinda cool."

—they go and say stuff like that.

Surprisingly enough, he's actually pretty popular with the girls. What exactly they find appealing about that cold and logical guy is a mystery to me, though.

Although, I'll admit I *kinda sorta* see it when we are doing Phantom Red heists…

But at the moment, Mr. Prefers-His-Own-Company was fighting to stay awake, nodding off while standing next to me. He was so not a morning person. Normally, he'd be asleep at his desk right now.

Unfortunately for him, we'd taken almost all of the desks and chairs to the gymnasium. Some classes would need more than others, depending on what they were doing for the festival.

This was today's task for the manual labor team: hauling all that stuff to the gym.

A few of the boys initially grumbled about it, but they got quiet pretty quick when they saw I was hauling twice as much as any of them. With everyone pitching in, we managed to finish the job surprisingly early.

"*Trust is better earned with action than with words*" is something my dad told me before, so I decided to put his theory to the test, and I was shocked by how well it worked. I'm sure if I complained about the boys, we would've gotten into a big argument.

My dad might've been lazy himself, but sometimes he said some pretty useful things.

“…That’s why we need to make sure to get Darjeeling and Assam tea. Darjeeling is good for black tea, and Assam goes well with milk.”

One of the girls who knew a lot about tea was lecturing the class on what kind to use. Evidently, her mom was well-versed in British tea culture—she was something of an enthusiast herself. So we let her do her thing.

“There’s also Keemun, but a proper blend can get pretty pricey… We’ll also definitely want a good Earl Grey, because it has a great aroma.”

The problem was no one could keep up with her. The more she got into the topic, the less she could stop talking about it.

“…Earl Grey is named after Charles Grey, a British prime minister. He was an earl, hence the name, Earl Grey,” Kei whispered to me.

Huh! But why would they name a flavor of tea after some British noble?

“When Earl Grey first drank Chinese tea, he fell in love with its aroma and tried to re-create it,” Kei explained. “To achieve this, British tea manufacturers added bergamot, a citrus fruit from Italy, to tea blends. This was meant to enhance the tea’s fragrance, giving birth to the Earl Grey flavor we know today.”

Wow, that’s a lot of history for a single kind of tea. Learning about the story behind one specific blend was actually pretty interesting.

“That’s right! You sure know your stuff, Kei!”

Our class tea aficionado nodded and beamed. At some point during his explanation, the entire class had tuned in, and all eyes were on Kei.

“That settles it for tea. You were going to ask your dad about coffee, right, Asuka?” Misaki asked as she turned to me.

Uh…

“Wait, you didn’t forget, did you?”

“Sorry! I’ll make sure I ask him before tomorrow, though!”

“If you forget again, Asuka, we won’t be able to serve coffee at all.”

Misaki made sure this was clear to me, and I responded with a hearty nod.

I knew I needed to ask my dad this. I'd do it tonight. The last thing we wanted was a café with no coffee.

"Let's move on to food. Has the menu team come up with anything yet?"

"Well, we talked about it, and we think sandwiches and hot dogs might be a good idea. We should be able to do ham and cheese or egg sandwiches easily enough," one boy from the menu team replied kind of sheepishly.

"Really? That sounds so boring!"

"Yeah! You can get that stuff from a convenience store!"

"What kind of café would sell something so basic? No one's gonna want to come if that's all we have!"

"If you're all so smart, why don't you try and suggest something else then, huh?!"

Most of the class seemed to be against the proposed menu.

They were having a really hard time with this. I couldn't really participate in any of the planning prior to yesterday's quiz because I was busy with our work as Red. The classroom was getting really divided—no one could get their idea across with all the bickering.

"Hey, Misaki… What kind of cooking utensils are available for us to work with?" Kei interjected from the side with a tired look on his face.

"Um, well… The middle school isn't allowed to use the portable gas stoves in the classrooms, so we're limited to the stoves in the home economics room—but there's only a few, and they're holding a lottery to see who gets to use them. I don't think we should count on those. Even if we win, we'd have to carry any food we make there all the way over here, which would be a challenge."

"So it's better we just assume we can't use the stoves…," Kei said. "What about the toasters? They've got toasters in the home ec room, right?"

"We should be able to borrow those. If we ask and rent them out now, it should be okay."

"How about we serve pizza-toast? We can use different pizza toppings on toast."

Pizza-toast? That sounds pretty good!

The rest of the class seemed to agree, with their faces brightening up.

"You're right. Maybe we can't make actual pizza, but all we'd need for that is a toaster."

"And everybody likes pizza!"

"Yeah! What should we do for toppings?"

It looked like pizza-toast was the winner.

Nice one, Kei! I'm glad you're still using your head, even when you look ready to pass out.

With that, the topic of the discussion quickly turned to pizza toppings.

"We should definitely cover the more standard options, with things like ham, sausage, and salami."

Absolutely! We'll need all the classic toppings. There's nothing like a hot, cheesy pizza.

"What about some vegetables? I bet sliced tomatoes, potatoes, and carrots would go good on a slice of pizza-toast."

Roasted veggies tasted pretty different from raw, and I was a big fan.

We could make sweet flavors with carrots, too.

"What do you think about fruits? Like bananas, strawberries, and oranges."

"I wonder if people would like kiwi or pineapple as well."

Fruit on pizza, eh? That's a first for me, but it could be tasty!

The sweet aroma of fruits mixing in with cheesy, melty goodness, with a big crunch when you take a bite…





Wow, it even sounds super yummy in my head! I bet it would sell as a dessert pizza.

"Hey," I said, "if we're gonna do pizza, we should use my dad's sauce recipe. He came up with it himself, and it tastes incredible."

Everyone's faces brightened up with excitement.

"Your dad is a chef at an Italian restaurant, right?! Do you think it's okay for him to share his recipe with you?"

Yeah, he's definitely not the type to say no. He absolutely loves festivals like this.

"All right, then you get his recipe, and we can make a big pot of it all at once!"

"Wow! Cool! Our sauce is gonna blow 'em away!"

The menu team was happy to hear this. Food menu: check.

I turned to look at Misaki, who seemed relieved.

"That said, we should probably keep Asuka away from the kitchen," Kei mumbled. The room was just beginning to quiet down, too, so everybody heard him say it.

The entire class burst into laughter.

Aw, geez, Kei! You never know when to keep your mouth shut!

"Asuka! There's someone outside of the classroom asking for you."

That brought me back to my senses.

Someone outside? Who?

I looked toward the door and saw a tall girl wearing our school's uniform.

4
The Drama Club's Savior?

"Sorry to call you over like this while you're in the middle of a discussion."

The older girl had a warm smile on her face—she seemed easy to talk to.

She was tall and slender, with almost cat-like eyes. Her hair was in a short bob that was very cute on her, and she was pretty mature, but in a different way from President Shiori. Though I didn't have many friends in the higher grades, I felt like I knew this girl from somewhere.

Hmm, maybe I first saw her soon after joining the school…

"…I was right… This just might work!"

She looked me up and down, nodding to herself as she did.

Wh-why's she looking at me like that?!

I took a few steps back.

"Oh, I'm sorry for staring at you so much from out of nowhere like that. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Yukimura, and I'm a third-year student and head of the drama club."

Head of…the drama club…

Ah! Now I remember!!

I saw this girl in the gymnasium when they were introducing all the clubs!

If I recall correctly, she acted out the guy part in a scene from *Romeo and Juliet*.

I remembered thinking how cool she was, which is probably why she left such an impression.

But what did the head of the drama club want from me? I mean, I received invitations to each of the sports clubs back in

April, but not from the drama club. And even if they did invite me, my Red activities were too unpredictable for me to ever join any extracurriculars.

"Here's the thing…" Yukimura took on a stern expression. "Asuka Kouzuki, given your aptitude for physical fitness, there is something I'd like to ask your help with."

"You want…my help?"

What kind of things could I possibly help the drama club with? Did they need extra hands to help lug stuff around?

No—if that were the case, they could just ask the other kids in their class. It's certainly not something they'd go out of their way to ask a first-year student for.

The more I thought about it, the less it made sense.

"For the school festival at the end of the week, the drama club will be performing a play. Unfortunately, one of our lead roles fractured their arm the other day. It's nothing that'll last forever, but the student will not recover in time for the festival, which means I need to find a replacement. The problem is there's no one in our club who can perform the role…"

Huh? Wait—you're not asking what I think you're asking, are you…?

"Please, Asuka! Please be in our play!"

Whaaaaaaaaat?!!! No way!!! I could never pull it off!

I'd never acted or even memorized a single line in my entire life. And there was, what, two days until the play? Uh-uh, no can do.

I shook my head. "There's gotta be someone better. I don't know the first thing about acting!"

"Nope. You're the only person on campus I can ask."

Oh?

"What do you mean by that?"

"I know it sounds crazy, but I don't want you to replace the student entirely. It wouldn't be possible for you to memorize all her lines, let alone the whole play. I just need you to take her place for one scene—an action scene."

"An action scene?"

Huh, I didn't know our drama club did those kinds of plays.

This piqued my interest ever so slightly.

“This scene is the centerpiece of this next play we’re putting on. But the only girl who could pull it off sprained her arm. Or, she was the only girl, until I remembered!”

Hmm? Remembered what?

“Earlier in the school year, you saved that cat! I saw it myself. This scene will be a cinch for someone who can do what you did! In fact, you’re the only person in this school who can do it!”

Oh, she saw that…

It was a third-year classroom balcony I jumped off, after all. It wouldn’t have been strange for her to see me, I suppose.

But my class was going to be busy with the café, and if I accepted the role, I’d want to do it justice…

“Now I’m sure of it—you’re even the same height as the original actor. So please! Do this for us!”

Yukimura bowed to me.

“Hey, c’mon. Stop, you don’t need to do that…”

Her head popped up. “So you’ll take the role?”

Ugh… I don’t know what to tell her…

“……I’m sorry, I just can’t.”

Yukimura lowered her voice to a whisper. “Look, I know how ridiculous this request is, but for a liberal arts club like us, the school festival is the only real opportunity we get the whole year, and with this being my third and final year and all, I really want to make this work…”

She was biting her lip out of disappointment.

I bet she rehearsed a whole lot for this play. I noticed the Band-Aids on her knees and fingers.

“But I understand… This is way too sudden. Sorry for throwing it on you out of nowhere.” Her voice fell to a whisper, and I could only barely make out what she said next. “We’ll just…have to cancel our play for this year’s festival.”

“What?!”

You guys are gonna have to cancel?!

“H-hey, Yukimura.”

“Yes?”

She turned around just as she was leaving the classroom and looked at me.

“Do you really have to cancel the play? You can’t find *anyone* else…?”

“Hmm… Honestly, there’s no one better for the role than you…” She smiled dejectedly.

Argh! C’mon! Why do I have such a soft spot for situations like this?!

“Yukimura!”

I called out to her again, louder this time. She turned back once more, surprised.

“I’ll do it. I’ll be your replacement… I’m serious about not being able to remember any lines, though. All I’ll be able to do is the action part, but if that works for you…”





As I finished talking, Yukimura firmly grabbed my hands.

“Thank you! You have no idea how much this means to us!”

Now she was grinning from ear to ear.

W-wow, talk about an intense vibe shift.

Wait a second…

“Um, Yukimura? You weren’t simply *acting* upset just now, were you?”

“…Uh, I’d better go update everyone! I’ll let you know when rehearsal is! Bye!”

Yukimura awkwardly tore her eyes away from me and ran off down the hall.

Hmm, she might’ve pulled one over on me.

But I was sure that her class was actually in trouble like she said… Eh, that would probably figure itself out.

A café and a play. I’d better do my best to make them both work!

“This’ll be one busy festival!”

5
You Forgot?!

We broke up into each of the teams, where we focused on our respective tasks for the day.

The interior design team was making our counter. They'd sawed up the plywood sheets already, and now they were painting them. It looked like they were using the same wood for the counters to make frames for the sign and corkboards where we'd put the menu.

"Hey, does anyone have a brown marker?"

"Here's one!"

"Thanks!"

Even some of the boys who'd tried skipping out in the beginning were fully involved with their tasks at this point.

The fashion team was working on outfits: black vests and bow ties for the boys, maid costumes for the girls. They were still figuring out how to make the outfits easier to move in.

My team had just gotten back from buying things for the other teams. Whenever our work was finished, we helped the others with various errands they needed.

We kept ourselves so busy, the hours seemed to pass in an instant. Before any of us knew it, it was already dark outside.

"It's about time to go home," Misaki said when she looked at the clock on the wall. It was almost eight PM.

That was our curfew for staying on campus during festival season. If we stayed past that, the school's front gate would lock, which meant you couldn't get in or out. Still, eight PM gave us a lot of extra time compared to when we usually had to leave.

“Wow, today really flew by, didn’t it? Hey, Misaki. Do you think we’ll be ready for the festival?”

A bunch of students were still working away on their tasks. It felt like we didn’t have enough time.

“The fashion team is still slightly behind, but we’re going to take our projects home to finish them. I’m more worried about the interior design. All we need is for the menu team to pull through for us and we should be good.”

Misaki checked her notebook as she updated us. It was jam-packed with memos. She had perfect handwriting, and she’d underlined and highlighted certain words to make the important parts easy to find.

Misaki was really good at taking notes. I first saw them when we were doing our homework for summer vacation, and her school notes were even easier to understand than the ones I took.

An announcement came over the intercom:

“Attention students. The school day has officially ended. If you’re still on campus, please make your way to the exit now.”

My classmates who were still focused on their work looked up from their tasks. All of us were sweaty.

“I know there’s still work to do, but we need to go home now, so anyone who’s finished tidying up may leave.”

Once Misaki let the class know it was time to go, everyone began solemnly cleaning up.

“Asuka, could you gather all the tools?” she asked. “There’s something about the outfits I need to discuss with the fashion team…”

“You got it.”

I turned to the rest of the class.

“All right, everyone! I need the hammers and handsaws over here.”

As I collected the tools, I scanned the classroom. It had undergone a big change, but it still wasn’t a café.

I wonder if we can really pull it off by the end of tomorrow.

It was hard to imagine. But everyone was doing their best, and Misaki said it’d be fine, so I decided to believe her.

“Here they are, Misaki. I double-checked to make sure all the tools are accounted for, so we should be good.”

“Thanks. Let’s get going, then.”

Anyone who'd finished cleaning up their station had already gone home. The only people left in the classroom were me, Misaki, and Kei, as well as Yuzuki, who had been waiting for us. When the four of us left the building, there was a security guard waiting at the front gate.

"You're the last ones to leave. Hurry up!" he shouted over to us.

"Whoops!"

We all exchanged a look before dashing toward the gate.

"We're sorry!" I called, since I was the first one there.

Misaki, Kei, and Yuzuki soon caught up, and the four of us passed through the gate together.

"Be careful on your way home, you hear?" the security guard told us as he shut the heavy gate.

CLUNK!

At that same moment, a blue lamp on the left wall lit up. It meant that the school's security system was active.

I couldn't help wondering… This was a private school, so the security system was probably super intense. Not that it mattered, though—it wasn't like Red would ever infiltrate a school.

Me, Kei, Misaki, and Yuzuki began the trek home. It was already pitch-black outside. My friends seemed understandably exhausted.

You know, I was actually surprised that Kei spent the entire day helping turn the classroom into a café. I figured he would've skipped out because he found it boring or something.

"Hey, Kei. What did you think of today?" I asked him.

"It was intriguing."

"Intriguing? That's how you'd describe prepping for the school festival?"

I guess it's better than what he would've said if he were the same guy he was when we first met, which was a whole lotta nothing. I wonder if I've rubbed off on him. Probably not…

As I was thinking this—

"……"

—Kei was staring at me like he had something he wanted to say.

"What are you staring at me for?" I demanded.

So awkward!

"Never mind… It's nothing." Kei shook his head.

Ugh! What the heck?

"……I just thought that this is kinda nice," Kei mumbled, almost to himself.

Wait, what?

"Hey, are you actually—?"

As I tried to ask him what he meant, Yuzuki, who was walking in front of us, yelped. She turned around, looking like she might burst into tears at any moment.

"I forgot something…!" she whimpered.

"Huh? Forgot what?"

"The outfits… I was supposed to take them home and work on them for the night. What should I do…?" Yuzuki tearfully looked back and forth between me and Misaki.

"So…does that mean they won't be ready in time?" I asked Misaki.

"…We'd be cutting it real close…," she replied, pressing her lips together.

"I see… Well, there's only one thing we can do, then." I smiled at her and Yuzuki.

"Wait, you have an idea?" Yuzuki asked me with a little sniff.

"We're gonna go back to the school and get those outfits. Easy, right?"

"But they already locked the gate…," Yuzuki said hesitantly.

Heh, no sweat.

"I'll just, you know, sneak in and grab the stuff you need."

"Whaaaaaat?! Can you actually do that?"

Yuzuki stared at me expectantly.

Misaki, on the other hand, looked peeved.

"Asuka… You don't need to break into the school. We can just tell the teacher what's going on and have them let us in."

Huh. Well, I thought it was a good idea.

"But if we tell a teacher, they might send us home because it's so late," I argued.

"Y-you have a point…"

Misaki was less confident than she seemed.

"Let's start by going back to the school," I suggested.

"Good idea. We can decide later on whether or not we should sneak in," said Misaki, who was shooting me a dirty look.

“I—I’ll go, too! I’m the one who forgot the clothes in the first place,” Yuzuki chimed in.

I looked at Kei.

“Well, I’m gonna head home. See you guys,” he said nonchalantly before shuffling off.

I, of course, grabbed him by his collar from behind.



“Urk!” Kei looked back at me and scowled. “What’re you doing…?”

“What am I doing? You’re coming with us. You’re not gonna let three girls walk alone at night, are you?”

“You’ll be fine. Besides, Asuka, you don’t even count as a girl—”

Kei stopped himself midsentence. He must’ve noticed my death glare.

Geez, Kei! What exactly do you think of me?

“……Fine.”

He agreed, although he clearly wasn’t happy about it.

Misaki giggled under her breath, and Yuzuki stared at us in confusion.

“I always pictured Kei as the cool, aloof type,” said a wide-eyed Yuzuki.

Oh.

In the classroom, Kei gave off more of a *don’t-talk-to-me* kind of vibe. It made sense that Yuzuki would think this about him.

“There’s not a lot of people as antisocial as Kei. Heck, I used to think he was wearing a mask.”

“Hey…”

Kei glared at me. Meanwhile, Yuzuki was covering her mouth while her shoulders shook from laughter.

There we go! Yuzuki looks best with a smile on her face.

She was about to cry just a few moments ago.

Kei also noticed her reaction and let out a small sigh. It was all he needed to know my intention behind the remark.

“Let’s get going, Asuka,” he said curtly.

You betcha!

I looked at Kei, then Misaki, then Yuzuki, and exclaimed, “All right, let’s go sneak into our school!”

6
Sneaking into the School at Night!

It didn't take long to get back.

The first problem was the front gate. The blue lamp from before seemed to indicate some sort of security—meaning, if we tried opening the gate, a security guard would probably appear out of nowhere.

The gate itself was roughly six and a half feet tall.

"Hup!"

I hopped up, grabbed the top of the gate, and effortlessly pulled myself up.

"Here, I'll help you guys," I said, extending a hand.

"W-wait, Asuka," said Misaki. "You weren't serious about sneaking in, were you?"

"We're just hopping over the front gate. It'll be fine."

"I can't believe we're doing this…"

First I pulled up Misaki, then Yuzuki, and finally, Kei. Once all four of us lowered ourselves into the courtyard, we headed for the school building.

Except for the faculty room on the second floor, all the lights were turned off. No surprise, seeing as the only people left at the school at this hour were teachers.

I crept up to the wall and peered into the building through a window.

All the windows were locked, of course, and I couldn't open them.

"I think I remember one of the older students telling me that if you open the windows after the school closes, an alarm goes off and school security swarms in," Misaki mentioned.

That's what I figured, too…

Since the gate alone had such tight security, it only made sense that the security system inside the school was even tougher.

Hmm.

"I'm sorry, guys. You're only here because I forgot my stuff…," Yuzuki said glumly.

Don't be sad, Yuzuki! This is exactly what friends are for.

"Maybe we should just tell one of the teachers to let us into the classroom. I think they'll let us," Misaki suggested to me.

"But I don't want the teacher to think our class is slacking off and asking for special treatment when everyone's actually been working so hard," Yuzuki insisted. "I'd rather just do my best to finish up the outfits tomorrow. I think I can meet the deadline if I pull an all-nighter."

Absolutely not! This wasn't even Yuzuki's fault. It was an honest mistake.

Not to mention, despite having her own quota to fulfill, she still made time to help people with their sewing and manage the fashion team. She was doing more work than most of our other classmates, so I didn't want to make her work any harder than she needed to!

"No worries. I'll be in and out in a jiffy. Don't look so glum, Yuzuki."

"B-but Asuka…"

"You and Misaki can wait outside of the front gate. Kei and I will go in."

"Are you sure about this, Asuka?"

Misaki looked concerned.

"You know how athletic I am. This'll be a piece of cake," I told her and Yuzuki. "You guys need to leave before a teacher catches you, so hurry on back to the gate."

Then I dragged Kei away.

Misaki and Yuzuki kept looking back at us as they headed for the gate until I flashed them a big grin.

Perfect!

"So, Kei—what's the plan?"

"What do you mean, '*what's the plan*?' You've been acting so confident, I thought you had an idea."

Nope. I just didn't want Yuzuki to blame herself. That was my one and only idea.

Kei heaved a sigh before sizing up the school building. He looked like he was thinking of something.

"What if we search for a window that got left unlocked?" I suggested.

"Even if there is one, the security alarm will go off as soon as we open it."

Well, I guess that's a no for windows.

"Then could we maybe turn off the security system?"

"Hacking the security system is a possibility, but it would be too risky."

He was right. If we messed up, it could lead to exposing us as Red.

I looked up at the school building. The lights were on in the faculty room on the second floor. We definitely couldn't get in through there…

Oh! That's it!

"What about the faculty entrance?!"

I'd forgotten about that option. Unlike the students, who used the front gate to get in and out of the school, the teachers used a separate faculty entrance to go directly to the second floor.

"You finally figured it out."

Kei said this like it was obvious.

Oh, come on! If you knew the answer already, you could've just told me!

"It's better for you to be able to figure out problems as easy as this on your own."

Ugh… He's such a bully.

"The faculty entrance is still open. Obviously, there's no alarm, either," Kei explained. "The problem is, we need to make sure none of the teachers see us. You never know when someone will show up."

True. If we run into a teacher, then this'll all be for nothing.

"So, Asuka, I need you to go in the opposite direction of the faculty entrance and cause a loud commotion to draw attention away from the door. That should keep any teachers away from the faculty entrance. Meanwhile, I'll sneak into the school and

grab the clothes. After that, we'll meet back up with Misaki and Yuzuki outside the gate and run away."

Wait, was Kei going to actually do something this time?! Usually, all he ever did was have ideas and give guidance.

"This plan needs two people, so you've forced my hand."

That's what I like to hear!

…Actually, hang on—this plan is basically using me as bait!!

"There's nothing to worry about. Even if you do get caught by a teacher, you're already used to getting yelled at."

H-hey!

But I admittedly would make better bait than Kei, and he'd agreed to do his own part. I could roll with this.

"All right, I'll head to the gym across the building and try to grab the teachers' attention."

"Wait. You're not going to do it in that outfit, are you?"

Huh? Yeah, I am. Why?

"If you're in your school uniform and you somehow get seen, they'll be able to tell it's you from far away. You're the only student in our school who moves like a wild animal."

A wild animal?!

I mean, he wasn't wrong. If I moved around like I always did, they'd see right through me. But it's not like I had anything else to wear…

Wait—I do!

"Right. So I should wear my Red uniform!"

"…As much as I hate to say it, that's probably our best option. It's better than getting caught."

He didn't seem too happy about the idea, but he gave in to it anyway.

"Let's do this thing for real now."

"Okay. Asuka…there are three teachers still at school."

"Copy that. That means I need to lure all three toward the gym. Be right back!"

I stood up and headed for the gymnasium, being careful not to make any sound as I moved through the darkness.

It didn't take long to get there. I looked around before getting changed into my Red uniform in the shadows.

This ought to keep anyone from recognizing me.

"Now… What kind of noise should I make…?"

Kei hadn't given me any advice on this.

Let's take a look around. There has to be something I can use.

I squinted and surveyed the area, but there was nothing. Everything had been cleaned up and put away.

"Yeah, it's not like the gym door will be open, either… Oh?"

I tugged on the door handle, not expecting anything to happen, only for it to crack open with a loud *creeeaaaak.*

Guess somebody forgot to lock the door.

I peered into the gym. It was pitch-black—no surprise there. Probably not a good idea to go searching in total darkness.

Shoot…

I closed the door, giving up on the gym.

At the very least, it was quiet enough that I probably could've lured the teachers this way just by shouting at the top of my lungs. But then they'd definitely know it was me.

"I don't know what to do… I should've asked Kei for help… But I guess it's bad to always rely on him. I learned my lesson back at the Sky Towers."

We'd only made it out of that mess because Hibiki was there, but we wouldn't always be so lucky. That day, I learned firsthand how important it was to be able to think for myself and help Kei when he needed me.

All right!

I looked around once more for something I could use to make some noise. There was dirt, rocks, and weeds. There were also several trees with thick green leaves.

"Wait… I think I know what kind of tree this is…"

I walked up to one. Each of them was a few feet taller than I was. I pulled one of their branches to get a closer look at the leaves.

"I knew it… This just might work…! Sorry, I'm gonna borrow one of these."

I compared some of the leaves to find a bigger one, then plucked it off. I was going to use a trick my dad taught me when I was little.

All I needed to do was gently hold the leaf between my lips and…

…blow!

Prrrrrrt.

This produced a small, flutelike sound.

My dad called it a leaf whistle. He taught me how to do this when we went camping in the mountains.

I'm not sure why leaves can make that noise. But I needed to be loud, and this would work perfectly.

"All right! I think this'll do the trick."

My dad could play songs with these, but I doubted I could do something like that. It wasn't like I needed to be musical; I just needed the noise.

Now, let's do it for real this time.

I wedged the leaf between my lips and blew with all my might.

PRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRT!

The sound echoed throughout the quiet school yard. It was so loud, it surprised even me. This was definitely gonna catch the teachers' attention!

After I blew the whistle, I hid in the shadow of the gymnasium. It didn't take long before I heard rushed footsteps coming my way.

"What was that?! It sounded like some kind of alarm."

"Yeah, and it came from around here…"

Two male teachers showed up near the gymnasium. They were searching the area.

There should be one more teacher, too.

"Did you find anything?"

That was when a female teacher popped out from behind them.

One of the men shook his head. "Nope… Doesn't look like it."

Okay! That's all three!

Hope Kei can get into the classroom without trouble… I'd better stall for more time. After all, he has to go in, grab the outfits, then get out.

Once more, I wedged the leaf between my lips, and…

PRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRT!

…gave the leaf another blow.

The teachers all turned their heads in my direction. There was no way for them to see me, though, because I was completely hidden in the gymnasium's shadow.

"We'd better go check what it is. We don't want anybody sneaking around in there."

The two male teachers started walking in my direction. I couldn't stay hidden much longer, so I leaped out from the shadows.

"Wh-who's there?!" one of the teachers shouted at me, but obviously, I didn't answer him.

I quickly returned to the gym's shadow, and I ran around to the back of the building as fast as I could.

"Wait!"

The two male teachers chased me.

I definitely had their attention now. But now I had to lose them.

I jumped up and clung onto the chain-link fence that surrounded the entire school. It was probably about ten or so feet tall, but for me, it wasn't all that high.

By the time the teachers finally made it to the fence, I was already most of the way to the top. They both looked up at me from the ground.

When I reached the top of the chain-link fence, I jumped down to the other side, flipping in midair before landing on the ground.

I kinda wanted to see the looks on the teachers' faces, but I quit while I was ahead since it'd be bad if they recognized me.

I quickly dashed back to our meeting spot—after taking a second to change back into my school uniform, of course.

"Ah! There's Asuka!"

Misaki, Yuzuki, and Kei were waiting in a small nearby park.

"Were you okay?" Yuzuki and Misaki both asked me with worried looks on their faces.



“Of course I was! They didn’t see me at all.”

“What did you do? We heard something really loud coming from the school.”

“Yeah, it sounded kind of like a whistle…”

The girls looked really curious.

Heh. Check me out. Looks like I can use the old noodle when I need to, eh. I bet even you were surprised, Kei.

I glanced at him to gauge his reaction.

He was wearing his usual surly expression as he casually remarked, “…It was a leaf whistle.”

Oof. He knew instantly. But how?

“There are a lot of bay trees growing around the gymnasium,” he said.

“Bay trees? Like the herb? Or the leaves you weave into crowns?” Misaki asked.

Herbs? Crowns? Are there that many ways to use that leaf?

“Yep. You can add bay leaves to enhance the fragrance of curry, and there’s something called a laurel wreath where you make a crown out of the branches that have leaves on them. And you can use the leaves to make whistles, too.”

Huh!

Kei seriously knew his stuff. He was like a walking encyclopedia.

“But how does it make such a loud noise? They’re just leaves…” Yuzuki tilted her head, confused.

I was wondering the same thing. Why can a regular old leaf make such a racket? Dad could even play songs with them.

“Pressing your lips against the leaves and using your breath to make the leaf vibrate creates a sound. Leaf whistles have been around for a long time. There’s even an instrument called an oboe that uses the same mechanism. Leaf whistles aren’t usually *that* loud, though.”

They aren’t?

Maybe it’s because I’d occasionally practiced after Dad taught me.

“I’m assuming Asuka could do it that loud because she has the lung capacity of an animal.”

Oh, for the last time, I’m not an animal!

Does Kei not know how to give people a normal compliment, or what?

"That's why I was able to figure out it was a leaf whistle. There aren't a lot of ways to create a noise as loud as that out of nothing."

So it was easy for him, huh?

Sometimes it's annoying how smart he is.

"Wow, Kei! You're so smart! I had no idea!" Yuzuki's eyes sparkled with respect.

Hmm, I don't think anything good will come from respecting Kei… Eh, it's whatever for now.

"Never mind that. Did he get the outfits?" I asked Yuzuki.

"He did! Kei got everything I needed. Thank you, Asuka!"

"That's good. Anyway, we'd better get home before it gets too late."

The four of us started heading home from the park. I turned to Kei, who was walking next to me.

"Hey, I really got the short end of the stick on that last plan. You sure there wasn't anything better we could've done?" I asked him.

"Beats me…"

I could tell from Kei's face that he was playing dumb. This ticked me off.

"Just what do you take me for—?"

He cut me off before I could finish. "But I was sure it'd be easy enough for you, Asuka."

Kei looked at me and smiled ever so slightly.

Ba-dump!

N-no fair! He knows I can't say anything back when he makes that face and says a thing like that.

But I guess he was finally starting to recognize my skills.

7
Kei, the Barista

“Heeey! Bring that plywood over here!”

“Ah! Don’t! We left the sewing supplies on the ground over there!”

“Where’d you guys put the red markers?”

Starting early in the morning, Class 1-A was bustling with loud chatter. It was our final day to prepare for the festival. I could tell everyone was busy trying to meet their tight deadlines.

The classroom was starting to come together. The design for our café sign had been finalized and was already being painted.

The sign said RED CAFÉ. That was the name we’d chosen.

I was pretty surprised at first, but since we were accenting the café’s mostly black-and-white interior with red, we decided to incorporate it into the name as well.

“First test-bake is done!”

The menu team came forward with plates of pizza-toast.

Ooh! It’s ready!

I could smell the fragrance of the browned toast. It was also kinda sweet.

“We’re calling them meat, veggie, and tropical pizzas. What do you think?”

On each of the plates were pieces from each flavor. They’d been cut up small for everyone to try.

“Wow… Look at all that cheese!”

“The meat one seems really filling. I bet it’ll really hit the spot if you’re hungry. And the tomato sauce is perfect on this toast!”

“Ooh, it’s nice and hot! The veggie pizza’s really healthy, too.”

“The tropical pizza tastes like a fruitcake! I bet they sell stuff like this in stores.”

I took a bite of the tropical pizza as well. With a satisfying *crunch*, I tasted multiple fruity flavors filling my mouth in one bite. It wasn’t all sweet, though—there was a little sour in there, too. I could eat a million of these.

“We put a twist on the tropical pizza,” a student from the menu team said proudly. “First, we used thinner bread compared to the other flavors. We warm it up a bit in the toaster, added butter and marmalade, then put on the fruit—sliced thin so it’s easier to eat. Plus, we only add a little bit of cheese to keep it from overpowering the taste of the fruit. Then we toast it one last time.”

“Wow! You guys really put a lot of thought into this.”

“It’s more like we had some really good professional advice!”

The students turned to me.

Heh…

Yeah, it wasn’t like we could’ve come up with something this delicious on our own. The truth was, my dad helped us out.

Yesterday happened to be his restaurant’s day off. So I had him teach me how to make coffee and his famous tomato sauce recipe, and to top it all off, he also gave me some advice.

I guess I should mention that he ended up calling one of the members from the menu team and giving the advice directly. He said things might get confusing if it turned into a game of telephone with me in between.

Honestly, I was kinda offended!

“Asuka, you also had him teach you how to brew a cup of coffee, right?” Misaki asked.

“Uh…” I clammed up.

“Wait—don’t tell me you forgot again?!”

“N-no, it’s not like that. He taught me, but the thing is…”

It’s not as if I’d forgotten *everything* he told me already, but I guess you could say some parts of the process were still hazy…

“Asuka…”

Misaki and the rest of the class were all staring at me.

I—I’m real sorry! I mean it!

“No worries. I have it memorized,” Kei interjected coolly.

Wait, seriously?

I mean, I figured he might've memorized it, seeing as he was there when my dad explained everything.

Nice! Kei really comes through sometimes!

"I knew I couldn't count on Asuka to remember it."

H-he didn't have to add that part! But thank goodness he remembered. That really saved my skin.

"In that case, Kei, can you teach us how to brew the coffee?"

"Sure. I borrowed everything we need from my uncle."

With that, Kei went and got a paper bag that was sitting next to his backpack.

So that bag was for the coffee tools… Wait, I was the one who was supposed to bring those!

C'mon Kei, would it kill you to tell me these things occasionally?

He ignored my sulking and proceeded to teach the menu team how to make coffee.

"It's actually better to start with grinding the beans, but I don't think we can do that, so my uncle said he'll show me a place where we can get coffee grounds. It's cheaper if we buy in bulk, and they might even give us a discount if we advertise their brand."

"Okay! Then our team will go buy freshly ground beans every morning during the festival!" said one of the boys from the menu team. Everyone nodded in agreement.

Ooh, looks like everybody's getting into it now!

"Anyway, as I was saying," Kei began, "these are coffee grounds. My uncle taught me how to make drip coffee. First, you set a paper filter inside of this device called a dripper."

Kei placed a piece of paper in a thingie that looked like an upside-down triangle.

"You then set the dripper into the server and add the coffee grounds into the paper filter. The amount of grounds you add depends on the number of cups of coffee you're making. I'll give you some notes on this later."

Even though you could tell he wasn't used to these kinds of tools, Kei was deliberate and careful with each step. He was trying his best not to mess up.

It was kind of refreshing to see him like this.

"Once the grounds are in the filter, you have to shake them a bit to make the top flat. Next, we're finally adding the hot water. It

should ideally be about ninety-five degrees Celsius, which is around two hundred degrees Fahrenheit."

Ninety-five degrees? Wouldn't it be a little difficult to keep the water at such an oddly specific temperature? We didn't even have gas stoves to work with.

"My uncle said we can use an electric kettle to figure out the temperature."

Guess he already looked into it.

The students on the menu team were all nodding and taking notes. Kei poured hot water from an electric kettle he already had running into a kettle with a long, thin spout.

"When you add the hot water, you need to pour it evenly throughout the ground coffee, then let it steam for twenty seconds."

As he said this, he poured the hot water through the filter in a circle, and the room started sounding delicious.

It smelled so nice! I always thought coffee tasted so bitter, so I was never really a fan, but I love how it smells.

"After twenty seconds, pour more hot water in a circular motion like this a few more times."

Kei poured the rest of the hot water, and coffee began dripping into the server. Before we knew it, the server was full of coffee.

"And that's all there is to it. Want to try some?"

"Yes, please."

Kei began pouring coffee for Misaki and the others to taste. We didn't have enough cups for everyone yet.

"Wow, that smells wonderful!"

"It tastes good, too. I've tried following recipes to make my own coffee, but I've never made anything this good before."

"My uncle said it's important to grind your coffee beans on the day you're going to drink it. You also have to grind it the right way so the flavor comes out the best."



“That makes sense…”

The members of the menu team were all thoroughly impressed.

I knew my dad could make a good cup of coffee, but I never would’ve guessed Kei could copy him so perfectly. Given how smart he is, I doubt he’ll forget anytime soon.

Maybe Kei could learn how to cook, too, if Dad taught him…?

8
Trouble?!

“Attention, everyone!”

Suddenly, a girl from the fashion team called out to the entire class.

Everyone stopped what they were doing and turned to her. Standing next to the girl was Yuzuki.

“C’mon, Yuzuki,” the girl urged.

“Oh, right.”

Yuzuki stood up and unfurled something she had in her hands.

“Ta-daaaa!” the girl announced. “Our first outfit is finished!”

“Whoa!”

“Soooo cute!”

Everyone was thrilled.

Yuzuki was holding a long-sleeved black dress with frills and ribbons. Kind of like a really classy maid outfit.

“Wow! Did you make this, Yuzuki?”

“Yeah, I did… I dunno if it’s any good, though.”

Yuzuki shrunk in on herself under all the attention.

I think Misaki said she was going to make everything from scratch because we only had enough in the budget for the materials—which meant that Yuzuki hadn’t just put together the frills and whatnot, she’d actually made the entire dress by hand.

Yeah… It was probably good I didn’t try to help… I don’t think I could’ve done a single useful thing on her team.

“S-so, Asuka… Would you mind maybe…trying this on…?” Yuzuki asked me.

“Huh? Me?”

Caught off guard by the request, I stared blankly at her.

I wonder if I should. I feel like Yuzuki would look better in it…

Plus, the only thing I did for the fashion team was buy the fabric they needed.

The other classmates began to chime in.

“Yeah, go for it, Asuka.”

“We need someone to wear it to know what it looks like.”

“Looks like it’s unanimous. Here you go.” Yuzuki smiled and gave me the outfit.

I guess I’ll try it on if you’re all gonna insist, but just don’t laugh at me if I look terrible in it.

I brought the outfit to the girls’ bathroom, where I got changed.

“I’m not really used to wearing stuff like this. It’s a little embarrassing…”

I returned to the classroom and announced, “I’m back!” upon opening the door.

Everyone stared.

Ugh, I knew it wouldn’t look good on me.

“That’s so cute! The outfit really suits you, Asuka!”

R-really?

“You can hardly tell it’s her.”

What’s that *supposed to mean?*

“Yeah, since Asuka’s so tall, she looks like a model in something fancy.”

You really think so…?

I didn’t know much about fashion, but I never liked clothes that were too girly. I preferred things that were easy to move in.

“Try giving us a little twirl, Asuka.”

“You got it!”

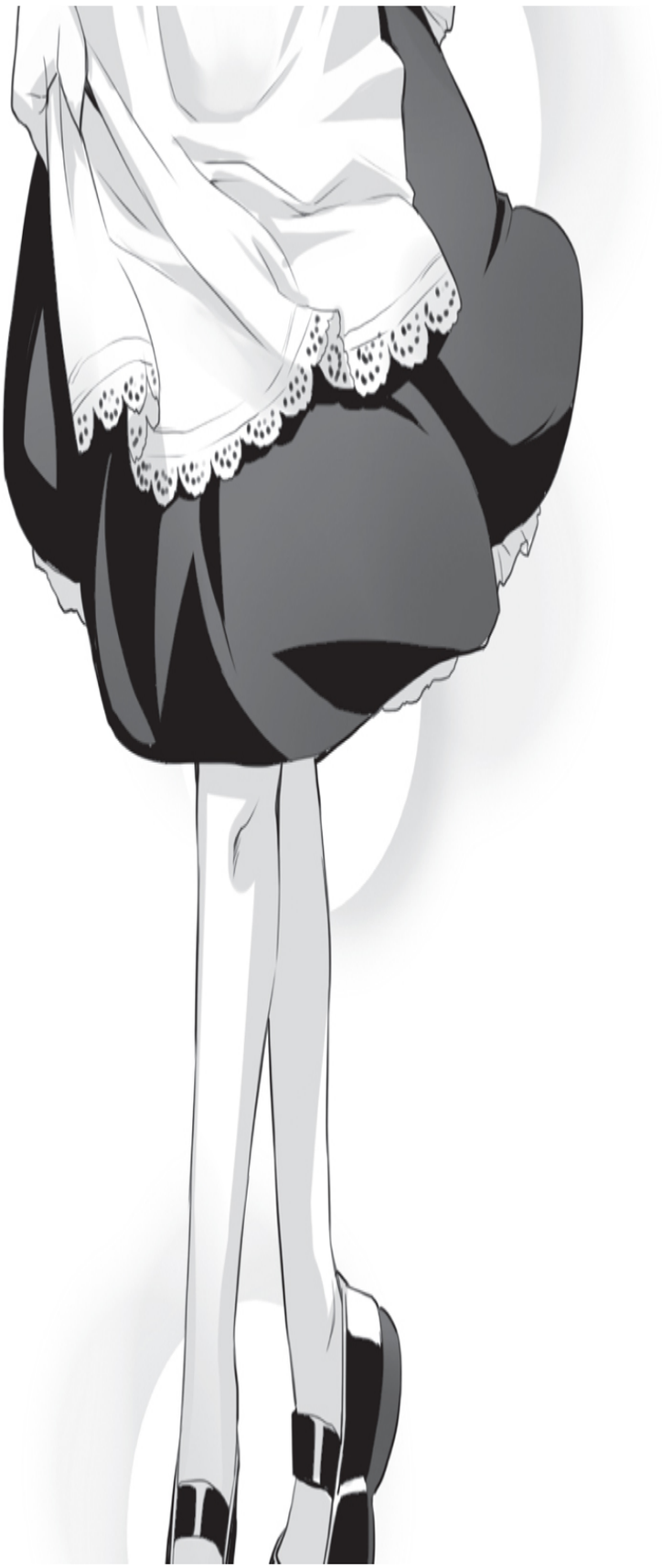
I tried to twirl in place to show everyone the outfit. And maybe it was because I was in the costume that I was being more careful than usual, but either way, the floor was too cluttered for me to find a spot to plant my foot.

Clank.

As I spun around, I tripped on an empty can somebody left on the floor.

“Whoops!”





I leaned back since I didn't want to get the outfit dirty.

Oh no!

But then I lost my balance, and it looked like I was about to fall right on top of the freshly painted café sign.

"Asuka! Watch out!" one of my classmates shouted.

"!!!"

Normally, regaining my balance would be a breeze, but I was trying not to tear the dress. I would just put my foot down and jump over the sign.

There. That oughta do it…

SNAP.

A dull noise echoed through the classroom. I felt something crunch under my shoe.

N-no way…

Slowly, I looked down and saw I was standing on a piece of wood that had snapped under my weight.

"Ack, sorry!"

I quickly pulled my foot away. But I shouldn't have panicked, because the next moment, I ended up moving my foot to where the sign was. And then it was too late.

Crrrack.

"Aaaaaaaaah!!"

The entire class gasped.

I looked down again.

I'd stepped through our café sign, leaving a big hole smack dab in the middle of it.

"I'm so sorry! Wh-what should I do…?"

I turned to the interior design team. They all stared, flabbergasted.

The shock soon wore off, and their expressions turned serious as they got in a huddle.

"Hey, do we have any extra wood for the sign?"

"Nope, we used it all up making that one."

"Can we go buy some more, then?"

"We don't have it in the budget…"

My classmates looked at me.

"I'm really, really sorry…"

I bowed my head. This was completely my own fault. I let myself get distracted.

Darn it! Why'd I have to trip right then and there?! I was supposed to have the best balance in my entire class!

"It's not your fault, Asuka. You only twirled because you were asked to."

"Hey, are you trying to pin the blame on me?!"

"Actually, whoever left that can on the floor…"

One after another, everyone began sharing their opinion on the matter. They all seemed on edge, probably because we'd been working so hard over the past four days. The boys seemed about ready to get into it with each other.

I need to break the bickering up! But how? I doubt anyone will listen to me if I try taking the blame. Maybe it would just make everything even worse.

"A-all right, everyone, let's try to relax. The classroom isn't a place for arguing." Misaki attempted to put a stop to things, but it was getting too heated for anyone to listen.

I looked at Yuzuki. She already had tears in her eyes. She might've felt responsible for this all because she was the one who asked me to model in the first place.

None of that matters, though. We just need to get everyone to calm down!

I was about to shout over everybody when—

SCRRRRREEEEEEEEEEEECH

—suddenly, a spine-tingling noise rang out through the classroom.

"Whoa, what the heck?!"

"Stop that!"

Everyone who was arguing covered their ears, myself included. I looked over to the source of the sound: the blackboard.

"Wait—Kei…?"

Kei had been the one who scratched the blackboard.

With his usual disinterested expression, he gazed over the classroom. Everyone was surprised to see that he'd been the one to make that noise.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?"

“Yeah, why’d you make all that noise?”

Now that he had stopped, all the anger was directed at Kei. Kei, however, seemed unaffected by the attention.

“…Because you guys were getting upset over nothing,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Over nothing?! The sign’s broken. You’re part of the interior design team; you should know what that means!”

“That’s why I can say with confidence that it’s not a big deal. When you’re pushing hard to meet a deadline, it’s easy to make mistakes, or for things to break like they did today. You should expect this. If we started an argument every time something went wrong, we’d never have any time to actually get work done.”

Kei didn’t sound angry. He was completely calm. Strangely enough, that might’ve been why everyone was quietly listening to him.

“That’s true, but what are we going to do about this? Do you have an idea how to fix this?”

“I do. We just need to change the interior a bit, that’s all.” Kei said this like it was a given.

He left the blackboard and walked over to the boy who was leading the interior design team.

“Show me the schematics for the café.”

“Uh, here.”

The boy handed Kei a piece of paper that had the interior design schematic drawn out on it in pen, including all of the pieces of wood that would be needed and their sizes. Kei spread the paper on the ground and hunched over it.

The rest of our classmates formed a circle around him while we watched.

“First…we don’t need these decorations. They create a blind spot for the customers. Instead, we should move the decorations here to open up the classroom more. This will free up the wood we needed for these decorations, which we can use to remake the sign. We can use the broken piece here. While we’re at it, we should…”

Point by point, Kei began to alter the blueprints for our classroom’s design.

While I didn’t quite follow all of what he was changing, his choices seemed very specific. I was a little worried about what

the class would think, though. Hopefully no one would end up having a problem with any of this.

When he finished his explanation, everyone around him stared blankly with awe. With a loud gulp, I watched their reactions.

Guess I'd been worried over nothing.

"Wow…!"

"This works perfectly!"

"How did you figure out we could do this so fast?!"

"You should've made these suggestions from the beginning!"

Everyone was really excited and smiling as they spoke to Kei. I was worried he would get into an argument, but it looked like everything was going to be all right.



One of the boys wrapped his arms around Kei's shoulders, which he didn't seem to like.

"Okay, Kei. Could you draw up a new blueprint for us? We won't be able to read it if you just draw over our old one."

"Sure."

Kei nodded and began to draw the new set of blueprints on a fresh piece of paper. As he got to work, the rest of the class also returned to their spots and started up their own tasks again.

Man, Kei really is something else.

We were on the edge of pure chaos, and he guided us back like it was nothing.

At some point, Misaki made her way to my side. "…Looks like Kei won this round."

She phrased it like she was competing with him, but she seemed genuinely happy watching Kei go.

"Yeah… You know, I always thought he didn't enjoy these sorts of things."

What's more, I never thought he would dive in headfirst.

I wonder if he did it for me…? Nah, doubt it. I bet he just got annoyed that he couldn't make any more progress.

But now everyone realized how incredible Kei is. Which is a good thing, but…I wonder why…?

Why did I feel so torn about it?

"Something the matter, Asuka?" Misaki asked me, looking puzzled.

"Uh, no, not at all! I'm gonna go change, and then I'll get back to helping."

I practically tripped over myself leaving the classroom.

I was just overthinking things! I should've been glad that Kei was getting along with everyone else. And I needed to do my best, too!



9
President Shiori's Mysterious Behavior

As soon as our lunch period finished, I left for the faculty room. Apparently, our homeroom teacher, Mr. Makimoto, wanted me to stop by for some reason…

I doubt they caught me breaking into the school the other day. Also, I have rehearsal right after this.

With a sense of doom and gloom looming over me, I approached the faculty room.

"Excuse me, is Mr. Makimoto there?"

My heart felt like it was going to burst out of my chest.

Ugh…

The room was cool because they had the air conditioner on, but I was still so nervous and uncomfortable.

"Oh, Asuka. There you are. Over here."

Mr. Makimoto was seated in the middle of the room and raised his hand.

He was a social studies teacher who was tall, thin, and wore glasses. A lot of us liked him because he was approachable and had a sense of humor.

"How are things coming along with the festival preparation?" he asked me.

"It's going great! We're all working together. I hope you come and visit."

"I wouldn't miss it for anything. So…about why I called you here today."

Ba-dump.

What was he going to say?

“I wanted to give you this. Someone found it and brought it here for you.”

Oh?

Mr. Makimoto handed me a student handbook. I opened it up, and it had my picture in it.

Huh? When did I drop this?

“Apparently, they found it behind the gymnasium. Were you there recently?”

That must’ve been when I changed into my Red uniform!

Oh snap!

“I, uh, I was, yeah. I had to throw something away. Yeah! That’s it!”

“Oh…?” Mr. Makimoto’s face turned doubtful for a split second, but that eventually gave way to a chuckle. “Listen, I’m not going to get mad at you for dropping your student ID. There’s nothing to get so worried about.”

Looks like I’m not busted. Whew…

“You can go now. Tell everyone getting ready for the school festival that I want them to give it their all.”

“You got it! I’ll be on my way.”

With a sigh of relief, I quickly left the faculty room. I checked the clock and realized it was almost time for rehearsal.

I’d better hurry!

“How about a little short cut…?”

It’d be way faster just to jump down to the first floor instead of going all the way to the stairs, then running down. Although…a teacher would get mad at me if I got caught.

I’ll just turn the corner into this hallway no one ever uses, open a window, and… Huh?

I almost ran into President Shiori as she came out of one of the rooms. Her eyes were darting around the hallway. She didn’t seem like herself. It was kinda like she was sneaking around.

I noticed her turning my way, so I scrambled to hide.

She was being really cautious, looking every which way.

Yeah, something’s definitely off.

What was that room she just came out of anyway? I hadn’t been down that hallway much.

When I slowly craned my neck to peek into the hallway, President Shiori was already gone.

“What was with her? She was acting kind of weird…”

I knew I had to hurry up and go to rehearsal, but I just couldn’t take my mind off President Shiori. So I went over to the room I saw her come out of.

“Huh? This is…”

There was a plate on the door that read PRINCIPAL’S OFFICE.

This was probably the last room in the school I wanted anything to do with. The only reason I’d ever have to go to the principal’s office was if I was in trouble.

But what brought President Shiori here? Did she need something from the principal? That would check out; she was student council president, after all.

“You, there. Do you need something?” someone said to me from behind.

I twitched in surprise, then turned around to see a tall, thin man in a suit—the principal.

He was in his fifties, and he looked like he was wound tight. Those eyes of his always seemed to be watching you.

“N-no, nothing! Nothing at all!”

Panicking, I quickly left the spot.

I don’t know how to deal with the principal. He doesn’t seem very nice.

But now I had a new question.

The principal had just appeared from behind me. That meant he wasn’t in his office when I saw President Shiori leave. What could she have been doing in his office while it was empty?

Hmm. I doubted our straight-edged president was up to any funny business. She probably went to visit the principal, and he just so happened to be out of his office.

Yeah, that’s it. I bet I’m just overthinking things.

“Okay, Asuka, this is when you’ll come out and switch places with the other girl.”

“Got it!”

I emerged from the side stage and ran to the center.

We were in the middle of our last rehearsal, which was being held in the gymnasium. Yukimura was standing in front of the

stage, where the audience would be watching, and giving us directions.

An older boy carrying a sword (just a prop) was already waiting for me onstage. I ran straight toward him.

Swish!

He swung his sword, aiming for my hip. Sure, it was a fake, but it would definitely hurt if it hit me.

Hup!

I jumped up and dodged the blow.

Without even a moment to catch my breath, he swung the sword once more, this time from above. Since he was an older boy, it had some serious muscle behind it!

Um, which way was it again…? Whoops!

I did a backflip. This time, I could actually feel the wind from the swipe.

Th-that was close! I took a little too long to react!

I bet from the audience's perspective, it would look like I was actually dodging the sword, but each of these movements was planned ahead of time. It was stage combat—the way the boy swung the sword and I dodged was all choreographed. We just had to do the movements quickly and smoothly to make it look like a real sword fight.

Yukimura said that fight scenes you see in action movies and historical dramas are all choreographed like this.

I was terrible at remembering lines, but I was definitely good at this kind of physical stuff. I think I had it pretty much down already. Now I just had to do it onstage.

"Great! Keep it up!" Yukimura cheered, and that made me want to do even better as we kept on rehearsing.

Oh, right. There was one thing that surprised me about this play—the plot. It's a love story between a thief and a princess set in the Middle Ages. I got a little spooked when I first learned I was playing the thief, but of course, it was just a coincidence. My cover as Phantom Thief Red hadn't been blown; there was nothing to worry about.

Also, the thief would wear a mask during the play, which is why I could take the actor's place during the action scene.

"Perfect! That's a wrap! Good job, everybody!" Yukimura gave us a thumbs-up.

Whew… I'm beat…

I collapsed on the spot, taking a seat on the ground. The student in the fight scene with me was out of breath as well.

We'd just spent nearly two hours practicing, so it was only natural we were tired. Not to mention, it can wear your brain out do the same movements over and over again. And if you mess up, you might hurt the person you're practicing with (and yourself!)

My body wasn't totally exhausted yet, but my mind definitely was.

"Nice job. You did great," said one of the older girls, whose arm was bandaged up. She handed me a towel.

I was taking over her scene in the play.

She had short hair and seemed on the quiet side. I initially had a hard time believing she was the type to do an action scene, but she took her time with me to make sure I knew all the choreography.

"Thanks a lot!" I said, then started wiping the sweat off my face.

Oof, I'm melting…

It was still September, so not only was it hot outside, but the gymnasium also got really balmy this time of year. I felt like I was being steam cooked.

"We're so grateful that you came through for us, Asuka," Yukimura said, nodding. "You were pretty much perfect! You did well to learn your scene in only two days."

I could tell she was impressed.

Heh-heh-heh.

It was actually kind of embarrassing to be complimented so much. But we still had the actual show waiting for us, so I couldn't get too ahead of myself yet. I would let everyone down if I messed up the real thing.

"Suzuka. It's almost time."

Hmm? I've heard that voice before.

"Ah! President Shiori!"

The student council president was waiting offstage.

Suzuka must be Yukimura's first name.

"Asuka… I didn't know you were in the drama club," President Shiori said. She seemed genuinely surprised.

“She’s not. She’s just helping out,” Yukimura replied. “Shiori, do you know Asuka?”

“I know her, all right. She’s a first-year student who has a knack for breaking the rules.”

“Ooooh.” Yukimura grinned at me.

Ah-ha-ha-ha… I mean, you’re not wrong, but that’s a mean way to put it, President Shiori.

“Do you two know each other?” I asked.

“We do,” Yukimura replied. “We’ve been in the same class all through junior high.”

Huh, they must be really close.





That reminded me: Was this a good time to ask President Shiori about her visit to the principal's office earlier? It was a little difficult to bring up… Plus, I just had the feeling she wanted to keep it a secret.

"This must be a busy time of year for you, too, Shiori," said Yukimura. "You look tired."

"Do I? Well, it simply comes with the job. And my tenure as student council president is almost over."

Oh yeah—since President Shiori was a third-year, she'd be passing the baton to the next president. Maybe she was sad about that.

"In any case, I came here to tell you to clean up now that rehearsal is over."

"Oh wow, look at the time. We'll have this place tidied up in a jiffy. Sorry, Shiori."

"No need to apologize. I'm looking forward to seeing the show tomorrow… Also, Asuka."

"Y-yes?"

I thought my heart was gonna jump out of my chest when she turned to me out of nowhere.

"Break a leg."

"Oh, uh… Yeah!"

With that, President Shiori left the gymnasium. She did seem kind of tired, just like Yukimura mentioned. She was usually way more intense.

I hope President Shiori is all right.

10
A Case for Phantom Thief Red?!

“Mngh… Hmm? Morning already?”

The first thing I saw when I opened my eyes was the sun peeking in through the curtains. Today was the day I’d been waiting for: the start of the school festival!

My heart was already racing with excitement!

I jumped down from the top of my bunk bed and took a look at Kei, who was on the bottom bunk. He was still fast asleep.

Normally, I’d let him get more sleep, but he had lots to do today.

“Wake up, Kei. It’s morning,” I said as I shook Kei through his covers.

“Ugh……”

Oh? Is he awake?

“……*Zzz*……”

He turned over to his other side, then fell back asleep.

Seriously?! How is he sleeping like a log? I woke up, like, fifty times last night ’cause I was so excited for the school festival.

“Up and at ’em!” I yelled in Kei’s ear before yanking the covers off him.

“…Erm…”

He finally opened his eyes, although only just barely.

“Oh, it’s just Asuka…”

C’mon, Kei. Don’t go fallin’ back to sleep on me.

I forced him to sit up.

“……”

He looked like a total zombie. Granted, Kei was like that basically every morning.

“All right, Kei. I’m gonna go now, so don’t you dare fall back asleep!”

I left Kei sitting on the bed staring blankly off into space and went to the living room.

“Good morning!”

“Mornin’! I’m just making breakfast now,” Dad said. He was in the kitchen, frying up some eggs. They smelled so nice and sweet.

RRRUMBLE.

My stomach let out a loud noise.

Ah-ha-ha… Looks like I’m pretty hungry.

“Breakfast’ll be ready in a sec, so just hold tight. Where’s Kei?”

“I woke him up, so he should be coming down soon… Ah, here he is.”

The door opened, and in came Kei. His eyes were barely open, and his legs were still wobbly.

He managed to make it to his chair, where he sat seemingly still half-asleep.

“Here ya go.”

My dad plopped two plates of fried eggs and salad in front of Kei and me. My plate had rice on it, and Kei’s had a slice of bread. Normally, we had to choose between one or the other, but my dad said we’d have more energy if we ate what we wanted, so he gave us both. That meant I got to go a day without fighting with Kei over whether we were eating rice or bread in the morning. Thanks, Dad!

“Lookin’ forward to seeing your school festival today, Asuka.”

“Yep! It’s gonna be a blast.”

“That said…looks like Phantom Thief Red will be on break for a while now, eh? Although there was one case in today’s paper that caught my eye.”

Dad shot me a knowing look.

Wait—is this a job for Phantom Thief Red?!

I started to stand up, but my dad let out a boisterous, hearty laugh.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. You would’ve heard from Kei if you guys had a mission, right?”

Yeah, true…

But seeing as Kei was still in zombie mode at the moment, I didn’t expect him to tell me anything.

“Since you guys are the new Phantom Thief Red, I want you to decide which cases you guys take on—together.”

Really?

“Ever since you two took up the mantle this spring, you’ve solved multiple cases on your own. I think that together, the two of you are more than capable of carrying your own as a unit.”

So basically, he doesn’t think we’re capable enough on our own individually. Also, what was that case he mentioned in the newspaper?

“Right… It’s a counterfeiting incident.”

“Counter…feit?”

Never heard that word before. Does it have to do with counting something? Or, like, Count Dracula?

“…I’ll…fill her in…”

Oh, hi, Kei. Look who decided to finally wake up.

…Or not. He was still nodding off.

“A counterfeit is…when you create a fake version of something…like an expensive piece of art…and try to sell it as real… *Zzz*…”

“Don’t fall asleep during your explanation!” I yelled.

Kei slumped forward, and I didn’t think he was getting up anytime soon.

Argh! He’s so useless in the morning!

“Here, I’ll pick up where Kei left off.”

My dad sat in a chair across from me.

“We’re talking about counterfeit art—fake copies of expensive pieces. It takes a lot of work to make a fake that’s close enough to the original—it can be a difficult process. For example, in order to re-create art from the nineteenth century, a counterfeiter might use a canvas from the same period.”

Wow. But why would someone go so far to make a fake piece of art?

“They do it to sell it off as the real version. Organizations that make counterfeits will find people who are into fine art and say that they just got their hands on a really rare piece they wanna sell. These orgs look legitimate on the outside, and that’s how they get people to trust them.”

“But everything they’re selling is fake, right?”

“Exactly, and that’s what makes them bad. People who want to buy expensive art may not always be wealthy. A lot of buyers spend a long time saving up money for a piece they want, and counterfeiters trick them into buying a fake.”

That’s terrible!

“I’ll take the case! This is what Phantom Thief Red is for, right?!”

“Hold your horses, Asuka. The police and that young man are handling this one.”

I got a little bit too excited, and my dad had to calm me down.

Young man?

“Hibiki Shirasato.”

He’s involved, too?!

We worked with him during the Sky Towers incident because we had to, but I guess I can’t hate him too much since he’s brainy like Kei.

“And besides, you’ve got something more important to focus your attention on right now, don’t you, Asuka?”

That caught me off guard.

“Huh?”

“I’m talking about your school festival—there’s a lot riding on it for you, right?”

Dad was smiling kindly at me.

Oh yeah… He’s right! Me and Kei may be Phantom Thief Red, but we’re still kids! We need to enjoy our festival!

“Okay, got it!” I stood up, smiling from ear to ear. “Off to school we go!”

11
It's School Festival Time!

Yesss… I'm so excited!

I got to school that day two hours earlier than usual. The air was still brisk and cool. And, needless to say, nobody else had arrived yet.

"Wow…"

At the front gate, there was a big sign that read HARUGAOKA ACADEMY SCHOOL FESTIVAL. I heard the high schoolers made it. Next to the gate were huge drawings of anime characters and famous athletes.

Only yesterday, the school building was littered with tools and materials. But now everything had been cleaned up, and the doors to each of the classrooms were all decorated. I even noticed one that was made into a haunted house.

"There's a real festival vibe going on here!" I said.

"That's because this *is* a festival."

Another blunt remark as usual from Kei, who was walking next to me. He was actually awake in the morning for once, probably because I'd gotten him up extra early.

If only he could be this awake every *morning.*

The two of us entered our classroom.

"I bet no one's here yet," I said. "Wait… Huh?"

"Oh, look! The Kouzukis came early, too!"

There were already around ten other students in the classroom.

Wh-why's everyone here so early?!

"Huh? I thought I was gonna be the first one!" said one classmate who followed me and Kei into the room.

“Whoa, even Sasahara made it on time! That *never* happens!”

“Hey! It’s ’cause I couldn’t sleep last night!”

“You too?!”

“I couldn’t go back to sleep even if I wanted to.”

“Same, I was way too excited.”

We all looked at each other and burst out laughing.

“All right, guys! There’s only a little bit left to do before we finish!” one of the boys from the interior design team announced.

Misaki chimed in as well. “Anyone wearing a café uniform for the day can go get dressed now!”

Time went by in a flash, and I watched the class undergo its final transformation.

All right! Everything looks great!

I could tell we were going to get a ton of customers.

We had a simple plywood wall separating the space for the customers and our kitchen. Since we didn’t want people eating and drinking on regular old school desks, we’d pushed our desks together in sets of three and cut out round wooden tabletops for each of them, which we attached to make tables. We’d made five of these tables, and they all had handmade tablecloths on them courtesy of the fashion team.





Between the sign and decorations, everything had a rustic, antique aesthetic, which created a more grown-up vibe.

"Okay, Class 1-A! Let's give it our all today!" I shouted so everyone could hear me.

That must've caught them off guard, because they all looked surprised at first. But then they quickly responded.

"Yeah!!"

"We're gonna kill it!"

"Totally!"

"I bet our customers are gonna be shocked at how delicious the food is."

Everyone chatted excitedly among themselves as we did the last-minute checkups before the café opened for business.

"Asuka."

Hmm?

Someone called my name out from behind me. I turned around and saw President Shiori standing at the door to our classroom.

"Can I help you, President Shiori?"

She seemed tired, too—well, getting ready for today did take a ton of work.

Nevertheless, she maintained her usual cool-as-a-cucumber vibe as she replied, "I'm just checking up on each class to make sure they're on schedule. Does Class 1-A look like it'll be ready in time?"

I turned to my classmates, and they all nodded at me.

"We're good to go, President Shiori! Ready as we'll ever be!"

"Looks like it. A little enthusiasm is a good thing, but try not to go too crazy, all right?"

President Shiori then continued down the hall.

Huh?

I stared blankly as I watched her go.

"What's the matter, Asuka?" Misaki asked me.

"Did President Shiori seem a bit strange to you just now?" I asked.

"I dunno. She seemed like her usual self. I'm sure she's just busy getting ready for the festival. Maybe she's tired."

You think…?

Normally, she'd insist that I had to call her by her last name.

"Maybe she had too much on her mind to correct you today."

I hope that's all there is to it…

Bing, bong, bang, bong.

A chime rang out over the intercom. I looked over to the clock, which had just struck ten AM.

"The annual Harugaoka Academy School Festival will now begin. May all of our guests, and students, enjoy a day of festivities."

With that, the announcements were finished.

All right! It's festival time!

"Let's make this a fun one, Misaki!"

"Y-yeah…"

Misaki seemed a bit nervous. She was the one who helped get the entire class ready for this very moment. I bet she was worried about things going smoothly.

"It'll be fine," I told her. "We just gotta make sure everyone enjoys themselves. Including us!"

"Heh-heh… For some strange reason, hearing that from you almost convinces me everything *will* be fine."

Misaki let out a chuckle. Why'd she say it like I'm being naive?

"Well," I said, "we'd better start by changing this."

I grabbed the sign that said CLOSED that was hanging on the door and flipped it around so it said OPEN.

"Okay, guys! Red Café is officially open for business!"

"Yaaay!" everyone shouted, already in their places.

12
Red Café Is the Place to Be!

“Thank you!”

I bowed to a customer who’d just finished paying their bill.

When I looked out into the hallway, there was a line of people waiting to come into our café.

“What should we do, Misaki? There are five people out there!”

“Don’t worry. I’ll show them in now.”

“We messed up table one’s order!”

“Ack, I’ll go help out!”

“Calm down, everyone. Just follow instructions and it’ll all be fine,” Misaki said, and our classmates nodded from their respective positions.

Two hours had passed since Red Café opened, and it was a huge success! Customers were coming in nonstop, and we even had people waiting in the hallway for a seat. The closer lunchtime approached, the longer the line got.

Misaki made the call to place some chairs in the hallway for customers to sit on while they waited. Out of all the classes that were serving food at the festival, these people chose to visit our café! How awesome is that?

“One of my third-year friends said this class’s pizza-toast is really good.”

“I heard the same thing. The food here is a little different.”

I caught some of the people in line chatting about what others had told them about our café. We were the talk of the town!

“It looks like our pizza-toast is a big hit! Customers are coming in after hearing about it through word-of-mouth,” Yuzuki told

me. She was one of our waitresses, and the maid-style outfit suited her perfectly.

I was a little embarrassed by the clothes at first, since it wasn't anything I'd usually wear, but I'd already gotten used to them by now.

"Asuka! Could you bring this to table two?"

"Yep! I'm on it!"

Yuzuki and I grinned at each other.

The guy working the toaster seemed pretty busy, but you could tell he was having fun from the smile on his face.

I took the paper plate with pizza-toast on it and a cup filled with coffee and placed them both on a tray.

"Sorry for the wait. Here's your veggie pizza-toast and coffee."

I kind of struggled a bit with serving customers at first, but I've got the hang of it now! I'd even say I might be pretty good at this!

I picked up the plate and cup a customer had left and then returned to the kitchen area. The paper plates were disposable, but the cups weren't, so we had to wash them after each use. When enough cups piled up, one of the boys would run them to the designated sink in the home economics classroom. He must've been pretty busy; he was bent over catching his breath.

"You okay?" I asked.

"*Haaah… Haaah…* I—I'm fine!" The boy looked up at me and gave a thumbs-up.

He was clearly exhausted, but I could also tell he was enjoying himself.

"Asuka, it's almost time for a break. Our next shift's already here," Misaki said. She was standing next to several students in their café outfits.

Oh, wow. It's almost lunchtime already.

"If anything happens while I'm gone, just give me a call," Misaki told the students with a bit of a worried look on her face.

We usually weren't allowed to have our phones at school, but the school made an exception for the festival. Good thing, because they were pretty useful for these situations. The campus is so big; it'd be hard finding someone otherwise. Especially during the school festival, when we had a lot of visitors.

"Where do you want to go, Asuka?" Misaki asked me.

She and I left the classroom and walked through the crowded hallways past students in costumes and monster makeup.

"Step right up and let Class 3-C tell your fortune! Love, grades, friendship—we'll tell it all!" called a third-year student wearing a sandwich board sign. There were also people eating stuff like *takoyaki* and ice cream as they walked around.

Ah, those might be students from a different school. And wow, this is completely different from an elementary school festival! Just walking around is exciting!

"I looked up a few classes."

Misaki took out a booklet that listed what each class was doing for the festival. She had Post-it notes marking some of the pages, and when she flipped to one of them, the class was marked with a highlighter.

Seeing her so prepared reminded me of the Sky Towers—Misaki was really organized when it came to things like this. I probably never would've thought to check that thick booklet in the first place, but Misaki had it read front to back.

"Do you want to go check out the third-year classes before going to the senior high school building? Apparently the older kids have some really cool setups!"

"Sounds good to me."

Misaki showed me to where the third-year classes were. We started at a haunted house, then bought some crepes and *yakisoba* noodles before going outside.

There was an impressive crowd outside as well. You could hear everyone enjoying themselves; I'd never seen the school so lively. We listened to the jazz club's outdoor concert while we ate our crepes and noodles under the shade of a tree. The smooth melody made for some great background music.

I got down onto the ground and lay out on my side under the sunny, blue sky.

This feels great.

"Should we get going? There's still some time before you have to join the drama club, right?"

"We should be fine. We've got about another hour and a half left to hang out."

The two of us got up and headed for the senior high school building.

As you might've expected, the high schoolers put even more effort into their festival events than we did. Whether it was the students who set up shops in their classroom or just guests walking around, everyone was so much taller; it was like they were adults. Some of the older girls were even wearing makeup—they looked so cool.

Even though we all go to the same school, the junior high students don't usually get a chance to visit the high school building, so this was quite an experience.

"Hey, check that out." Misaki grabbed my shoulder and pointed, and my eyes widened with shock at what I saw.

Two students were wearing bright red lipstick and thick makeup. Two *male* students. They were wearing skirts, too. Those were girls' outfits.

What the heck are they doing?!

"We're holding a drag contest in one hour! Feel free to join in!" one of the boys called.

Whoa, a drag contest?! So a bunch of boys dressed like him are all gonna be onstage together? Huh… That could be fun!

"Look over there. A band is putting on a concert."

I followed Misaki and felt the drumbeat resonating in my stomach accompanied by some great guitar and bass. We took a look inside the classroom where the music was coming from and saw a large curtain with a stage set up in front of the blackboard; the class had made a music stage.

There was a drummer, a bassist, a guitarist, and a piano player, with the vocalist standing center stage.

The most surprising thing about the band was that it was all females.

It's an all-girl band!





“She has such an incredible voice!”

Everyone was swaying side to side to the rhythm. Me and Misaki listened to one song before leaving. Honestly, I could’ve listened even longer, but we still wanted to see what the other classrooms had going on.

We visited a few more classrooms before checking out where all the club rooms were. It was mostly liberal arts: the literature club, the home ec club, the photography club, the drama club, the science club…

Wow. There sure are a lot of liberal arts clubs.

“You can read about each of the clubs in the booklet. The literature club wrote short stories and compiled them into a magazine, the home ec club is cooking some snacks and will be holding a sewing workshop, and the photography club is doing themed photoshoots around the school. And it says here that a few members have won photo contests. Also, it looks like the science club will be performing some experiments. The booklet says they recently made a cloud.”

A cloud? You can make clouds?

The high school clubs are really out there.

“Looks like there’s a computer club, too.” Misaki was reading a name plate as she said this.

Oh, there is. I bet Kei would be interested.

“Apparently the computer club has something set up for the festival as well. Wanna check it out?” she asked me.

Misaki was obviously really interested in this club. How was I supposed to say no to her? I guess I could tell Kei about it later, too.

We opened the door to the computer club room and were hit with a wave of cool air.

Gah, it’s chilly in here. What’s this about?

A high school boy wearing glasses popped out and said to us, “Oh, customers? Please close the door if you’re going to come in.”

“Ah, sorry,” Misaki said as she hurried to shut the door behind us.

There were five computers inside the room, one of which was surrounded by several people. The main thing I noticed was how chilly the room was, though. They really had the air conditioner cranked all the way up.

Actually, I recalled Kei mentioning something about this—that computers tended to overheat during the summer, so it was important to keep the AC on.

"So, what are you guys doing for the festival?" I asked, looking around the room. I wasn't really getting festival vibes.

"We teamed up with the mystery studies club to make a short computer game."

Mystery studies? Did we actually have that kind of club? I didn't remember seeing a name plate like that over any of the doors…

"It's not an official club. More like a group of friends that meets after school," the boy with glasses replied with a shrug. "They don't have a designated room or budget, and it didn't look like they were going to be able to do anything for the festival this year, so we decided to team up."

"What kind of game did you guys make?"

"It's a murder mystery. The mystery studies club came up with a murder case that takes place in a locked room. We re-created the crime scene on the computer for players to try to figure out what happened. There's a time limit, and the person who solves the mystery the quickest during the school festival will receive a prize."

A prize, huh? That actually sounds kinda cool. I dunno if I can solve the mystery, though. Maybe if Kei was here.

"Who's solved it the quickest so far?"

"Hmm… We actually messed up and forgot to ask his name," the high schooler said with a disappointed look. "The mystery was supposed to be really difficult, but one guy managed to solve it in less than a minute. The second fastest person was a second-year senior high school student who took fifteen minutes. I think the boy who did it the quickest was probably in junior high, but he didn't tell us his name or year, so we won't be able to give him his prize."

I bet I know who it is…

Misaki and I looked at each other.

"Was he kind of short and standoffish?" I asked.

"Hmm? He was, actually. Wait, do you know him?"

"Uh, he's my cousin…"

Why would Kei stop by a place like this?! And he even had the quickest time.

I almost felt a little sorry for the computer club, but the high schooler wearing glasses didn't seem to mind.

"Oh! I'm glad we met someone who knows him! Could you tell him to come get his prize after the festival is over? I'm pretty sure no one else is going to beat his time."

"You got it."

I just couldn't believe Kei visited one of the classrooms.

Looks like somebody *is finding time to enjoy the school festival.*

"There's some real geniuses out there, huh? I thought I had a pretty good handle on games myself, but that kid was on another level. I hope your cousin will consider joining our club."

Kei would probably give the members a hard time. That said, this senior high boy was a little unusual. He didn't seem upset that someone beat his game in less than a minute. I bet he's a good person.

He invited us to try the game as well, but we declined and went back out into the hallway. It was so hot compared to the club room that it made me feel a little dizzy.

"Well, I'd better head over to the gymnasium," I said.

It was almost time for me to go onstage.

"What are you going to do, Misaki?"

"I'm gonna go watch you, of course. I won't have time tomorrow, so I made sure I won't need to go back to the classroom until the afternoon today."

"Really? Then you're in for a treat! I just appear in one action scene and don't have any lines, though."

It was almost time for the play. I was actually getting a little excited.

13
Asuka, the Phantom Thief?!

I stood waiting in the wings of the stage. The set was fully prepared and ready to go. The curtain was still down, but the play would start as soon as it went up.

“The audience is pouring in. We’ve even got some standees,” Yukimura said to me after peering through a small crack in the curtains.

Th-that many people showed up?!

I was starting to get a little nervous… Whenever I did Phantom Thief Red stuff, there were always moments of suspense, but being in the spotlight with so many people watching was way more nerve-racking.

My heart was beating so fast, it was beginning to hurt.

“Doesn’t look like Shiori’s here, though,” Yukimura added.

Oh?

“Was she supposed to come?”

“Yeah, she said she would. I guess she must be busy.” Yukimura frowned.

“President Orihara? Now that you mention it, someone from the student council was looking for her earlier. They said they couldn’t get in touch with her,” a boy from the drama club recalled.

“Really? Shiori isn’t the type to skip. I wonder if something happened?” Yukimura said, looking concerned.

“What do you think could’ve happened?” I asked without really thinking too much about it.

“Hmm? Nothing comes to mind, but I know Shiori wouldn’t drop everything in the middle of the school festival for no reason.

I could just be overthinking things, though. She's been really, really busy lately, so maybe she decided to take a little break somewhere."

"Yeah… Maybe."

It wasn't as if something had definitely happened. Still, there was something strange about the whole situation. It was the same feeling I had ever since I saw President Shiori in front of the principal's office—something felt off.

I wondered if she really was just taking a break. Maybe she nodded off in a corner somewhere?

Ring, ring, ring! Ring, ring, ring!

Ah! That's the bell for the curtain! The play's starting already?!

My pulse, which had calmed down a bit, began thumping a mile a minute again.

And then…

"Asuka."

"Y-yes!"

I felt Yukimura place her hands on my shoulders. She was dressed like a boy, since she was playing the knight who fought me during the action scene.

Seeing her up close like this, the armor looked way better on her than any of the boys.

"Listen. You may not have any lines, but I want you to really be in character when you're onstage. The audience will be able to tell if your heart's not in it. I need you to *be* a phantom thief, okay?"

"O-okay…!"

Yukimura looked straight at me. I gulped and nodded at her.

"You have nothing to worry about. You can do this!"

"Right!"

She flashed me a grin, and I grinned back.

The play was proceeding smoothly. The phantom thief successfully snuck into the castle where he met and fell in love with the princess. But love between a princess and a thief, of course, was absolutely forbidden.

The thief learned that the princess was set to marry a knight, so he issued a warning: He was going to kidnap the princess and throw the castle into disarray.

The thief easily slipped past the guards before making it to the princess's room, only to be confronted by the knight she was set to marry waiting there for him.

This is my cue! I swap places with the actor playing the phantom thief for the battle against the knight!

My character wore a white mask, so the audience would have no idea that we switched.

The girl playing the phantom thief came over to the wing of the stage, and I entered center stage wearing the exact same outfit and mask as her.

This was the climax. The fight scene between the phantom thief and the knight.

The knight slowly drew his sword. He stood in front of the princess, protecting her.

Yukimura—the knight—was glaring straight at me.

I will not hand the princess over to you! her eyes said.

"Have at thee!"

The knight rushed forward and swung his sword. I dodged by leaping away.

Without a second to catch my breath, the next attack came—a slash from the side. I dodged once more, this time by doing a backflip.

I could hear the crowd go, "Ooh!" in response.

"Is your only talent running away?! You coward!" Yukimura shouted.

The hatred in her voice gave me goose bumps.

I glared at the knight through my mask.

I cannot die here! I must whisk the princess away!

"Take this!"

The sword came lunging toward me again, but I narrowly dodged it by a hair.

I felt the wind from the swing brush past my cheek.

"I've got you now!"

The knight swept at my legs, and I fell backward onto the ground. He then held the tip of his sword at my throat and kept it perfectly still.

“This ends here. You’re finished.”

The knight then lifted his sword high and swung it down.

Ugh! Is this it for me…?!

But before the blade got any closer, the princess jumped between us.

What are you doing?!

The sword was already midswing—there was no stopping it.

Princess!! I cried out in my heart before embracing the princess and pulling her out of the sword’s reach.

Instead, the blade struck my back. The lights then went dim.

When the lights came back on, the princess was holding the phantom thief in her arms. She propped up his head; he was hardly breathing.

“Princess… Do you remember?” the phantom thief asked.





“Remember what…?” the princess said between sobs.

“…The day we met…when we were children…”

He removed his mask.

“It’s you…!”

The princess’s eyes widened at what she saw.

“I’m…so glad…you remembered me…”

The phantom thief breathed his last in the princess’s arms. She wept as she held him close.

The knight, who watched the entire scene unfold, turned around wordlessly to give them their moment.

The stage slowly faded to black.

And then—

CLAP, CLAP, CLAP, CLAP, CLAP!

—the audience burst into thunderous applause.

“Woohoo! We did it!”

The members of the drama club were all jumping up and down backstage in celebration.

I had only just switched with the girl playing the phantom thief while the lights were dim, so I was still near the curtain.

Huh? What?

Unable to process what was going on, I stared blankly at Yukimura. She looked back at me, nodding, with a big smile on her face.

W-we did it!! It went off without a hitch!

Though it took me a second to process everything, I joined the drama club in their celebratory huddle.

“Bravo!”

“That was so beautiful!”

I could hear two people shouting over the rest of the audience; I think they were high schoolers.

“Thank you, Asuka! You did a great job,” Yukimura said as she placed her hand on my shoulder when she came backstage. I could see tears glimmering in the corners of her eyes. That made me want to cry, too.

“If it hadn’t been for your help, it would’ve been curtains for our play. I can’t thank you enough.”

The rest of the drama club members nodded.

“Oh, no… All I did was play one tiny role.”

I’m sure it would’ve been even better if the girl playing the phantom thief hadn’t broken her arm. Although I can’t join the drama club due to my Red duties, I’d love to be in another play if I ever get the chance.

“All right, let’s go take a bow!”

The lights came back on, and the curtains rose again. We all lined up on either side of Yukimura at center stage.

The crowd erupted in applause once more.

“Asukaaa!”

I heard a deep voice that didn’t quite fit with the dramatic atmosphere.

Ack. That’s Dad…

He was easy to find in the back, standing a head taller than the rest of the audience. I could see him waving vigorously at me.

Next to him stood Uncle K, who was smiling awkwardly.

Ugh, I’m so embarrassed!

14
Where Is President Shiori?!

“Oh, there she is!”

Dad, Uncle K, and Misaki were waiting for me outside of the gymnasium. I ran over as soon as I saw them.

“Do you need to help out with the cleanup at all?” Dad asked me.

“No, the drama club said they would handle it.”

I did offer to help, but Yukimura told me, “You already helped us out—we can’t ask for anything more! Besides, you have your own class to get back to! You’re free to go!” so I left early.

“Asuka! Your performance was incredible!”

Misaki tightly grabbed my hands. She wasn’t the type to get emotional, but even she had tears in her eyes.

I can tell the play really got to her… That kinda makes me…really, really *happy!*

“Thanks! I was so nervous. I’m just glad I didn’t mess it up for everyone.”

“I knew you would do well! Especially after all those rehearsals.”

Of course, a whole lot of practice went into my one scene, but it was nothing compared to the work Yukimura and the rest of the drama club put into it. Although Yukimura never mentioned anything, I was sure I’d messed up somewhere.

“Yep… You’ve still got quite a bit to learn.”

Dad?

“But your friends in the drama club really pulled off something incredible, bringing together so many people of different ages to

put on the show. It's clear the production made no compromises in their script. I loved that passion!"

Dad placed his hand on my shoulder as he gave an impassioned speech of his own.

"I'm so happy you were part of their play, Asuka. There might be more you wish you could have done, but I'm sure it was a valuable experience either way. I'm just glad the drama club provided you with this opportunity to learn and develop."

"Y-yeah…"

I didn't expect him to put so much thought into this. I wanted to experience so much more… There were tons of things I still had to learn, including Red stuff! That was how the play left me feeling.

"You can say some pretty nice things sometimes," Uncle K remarked.

"What do you mean by *sometimes*, Keiichiro?" Dad scowled at him.

"Relax. You're raining on Asuka's parade."

"Hmph… I guess you have a point. But still, Asuka."

"Y-yeah?"

Hearing Dad say my name one more time caught me off guard.

"Your maneuverability needs work. Like that backflip—you've gotta spin much faster or you'll get caught off guard, and…"

D-Dad… You're correcting my acrobatics now *of all times?*

"…when you're dodging a blade, you need to—"

"*Okay*, Dad! I'll listen to everything I did wrong later. You're confusing Misaki!"

"Hmm? Oh… Sorry."

My dad snapped out of whatever possessed him and seemed genuinely sorry.

Geez! He can be so intense sometimes!

Misaki looked at us and chuckled.

See? Now she's laughing at us.

"Well, while we're here, I think we'll go check out your school festival," Dad said.

"If you visit our class now, you'll see Kei waiting tables."

"Oh, yeah…? Can't miss that. How about it, Keiichiro?"

"Kei…? A waiter…?" Uncle K looked puzzled. I could tell he was having trouble picturing that.

I totally get it, Uncle K! If I had the time, I'd go with you to see Kei actually doing some real work for once. But…

"Okay, we'll see ya later," Dad said.

"Yep. Bye-bye."

Misaki and I split up from my dad and uncle.

"Asuka, are you sure you don't want to go with your family…? You seem a bit tense right now."

"Yeah… There's something I need to go investigate." Even I could tell that I looked concerned.

"Investigate?" Misaki cocked her head to the side.

"It's just something I heard before the play started. It sounds like the student council was having a hard time finding President Shiori. They can't get in touch with her."

"You mean…she's missing?"

"I don't think it's anything quite that serious, but I am worried about her…"

President Shiori wasn't the type to not answer her phone.

"Hmm, it's a little odd that they can't get in contact with someone as on top of things as the student council president."

"Right?! That's not all I'm worried about, either…"

What business did President Shiori have with the principal that day? What I saw back then still bothered me.

"Do you want to go to her class and see if she's there? If she's not there, maybe someone will know something. Was that what you meant by investigating?"

That's exactly it, Misaki! You know me so well.

"Um… I believe President Orihara is in Class 3-B."

"Let's go!"

I tried not to get too ahead of myself as we made our way to President Shiori's class.

We arrived in front of the student council president's classroom.

"This is…"

"…A soba shop?"

Misaki and I looked at each other.

THWAP!

We heard a sudden, loud noise, which prompted us to peek into the room.

One of the third-year boys was using a big wooden stick to roll the soba dough out nice and big.

They're making soba noodles by hand?!

"Whoa! I never would've thought to make soba noodles for the school festival…"

Misaki watched in shock as the boy got to work.

"You guys here for some soba?" an older girl asked us. "'Cause if you're not, I'm gonna need you to not block the door."

"Uh, um! We'll have some, please!"

One thing led to another, and me and Misaki took a seat at one of the tables. At a glance, it didn't look like President Shiori was in the classroom. I wanted to ask one of her classmates if they saw her, but…

"Here you go. Two bowls of soba."

The girl placed two small bowls filled with soba noodles on the table for each of us.

We don't really have time for this, I thought as I took a bite.

Mm?!

"This is delicious!"

"Wow, yeah. It tastes even better than an actual soba restaurant!"

The noodles were nice and firm, and they tasted great with the sweet broth.

"Thanks! Those are the last two bowls for the day. You guys are lucky," the girl who brought us the soba said with a smile.

She seems nice. Maybe we can ask her about President Shiori.

"Um… Did Shiori…or, uh…President Orihara stop by here today?"

"Shiori? No, I haven't seen her all day. We know she's busy with student council stuff, so she got permission to not participate in the soba shop. That said, she's the type who would find time to help even if she didn't have to. Now that you mention it, she only came by once in the morning to check on us."

"Did she seem different from usual?" I leaned toward the girl as I asked.

"Hmm, I guess when you put it that way, she did seem a little bit strange. But you know how busy the student council can get."

It didn't sound like this girl knew the student council was looking for President Shiori.

“I see… Thank you,” I told her.
With that, the girl soon went back to work.



After we finished our soba, Misaki and I left the classroom.

“Something’s not right… She never showed up to her class again. I wonder where she went.”

My pulse was starting to race from nerves.

“We still don’t know for sure what’s going on, Asuka. Let’s try going to the student council room and see if she’s maybe there.”

I nodded in agreement. I noticed I was walking a lot faster than usual, too.

The student council room was on the same floor as the rest of the third-year classrooms—the third floor.

“W-wait up, Asuka.”

I had to stop for a moment and let Misaki catch up. She was out of breath. I must’ve left her behind at some point.

“Sorry,” I told her. “I’m just really antsy for some reason.”

“I understand, but let’s try to calm down a bit.”

“Okay…”

Misaki was right; we didn’t know for sure that anything had happened to President Shiori. For all we knew, she was chilling out in the student council room.

“Hellooo,” I called out as I knocked on the door. An older boy wearing glasses opened it.

“Oh, hey, kids,” he said. “You need something?”

The boy must’ve been busy, because he went straight back to organizing some papers at a desk.

“Um…is President Shiori here?” I asked.

“Shiori…? Oh, you must mean President Orihara… Come to think of it, I remember her telling me about a first-year student who kept calling her by her first name after she kept asking them not to.”

Ah-ha-ha-ha, yeah, that’s me. Looks like word gets around.

“So, what do two first-years like yourselves need with the student council president?”

“Um, well… We were just wondering if you’ve managed to get in touch with President Shio— Er, Orihara.”

“No, actually. It’s a bit of a problem. As vice president, I fill in for her while she’s away, but there’s so much I don’t know about the job. I guess that isn’t your problem, though…” The boy shrugged, letting out a sigh.

“So what you’re saying is, President Orihara disappeared without telling anyone?”

“*Disappeared* is a strong word. We just can’t reach her cell. She could’ve dropped it somewhere, or maybe its battery died.”

“That’s true…”

But even then, isn’t it really strange for her to vanish into thin air without telling a soul on the student council? That’s not like her at all.

“When did you last see President Orihara?”

“Uh, well, I saw her this morning, and she was also here for the announcements when we kicked off the festival… We split up after that.”

So he hasn’t seen her since the morning? That means she’s been missing for over five hours! How is he not worried?

“I mean, this is the school festival… It isn’t out of the realm of possibility for her to take a little time for herself. Some of the other student council members did just that.”

But President Shiori isn’t like them! You know how strict she is when it comes to rules! And she definitely isn’t the type who would hold herself to more lenient standards than others.

“Um, would it be all right if you gave me a call when you manage to contact President Orihara? We’re just worried about her.”

“Hmm? Yeah, I guess I could do that for you. But if you find her first, would you mind telling her to come see me here in the student council room?”

“Of course!”

After exchanging phone numbers with the vice president, I left the room with Misaki. We walked a short distance before I turned and faced her.

“Hey, Misaki. I’m starting to think something might’ve happened to President Shiori.”

“We don’t know that just yet. Like the vice president said, maybe she just lost her phone or whatever.”

“But if that was the case, she’d definitely go to the student council room or her class to let people know!”

“Well…maybe she’s still looking for her phone.”

Misaki didn’t sound too confident about that.

Where on earth are you, President Shiori?

Me and Misaki explored pretty much the entire campus that day, but we didn't run into President Shiori even once. Sure, there was a chance we may have missed her in the crowd, but that didn't explain why no one else—not her classmates, her vice president, or Yukimura—had seen her, either.

"Asuka… Are you okay?"

Misaki leaned over to get a better look at me as I sank into deep thought. I must've looked really concerned.

I'm sorry, Misaki. I hate making you worry.

"It's just… I can't get this off my mind!"

"Hey, wait! Asuka!"

I dashed down the hallway at top speed.

15
The Gymnasium's Secret

Maybe Kei would be able to deduce where President Shiori was and clear my concern in a cinch.

The hallways were still crowded, but I wove my way through without bumping into anyone. I rushed down the stairs and arrived at our class, where I burst through the doors, surprising both my classmates and the customers.

"Asuka?!"

One of the guys on kitchen duty looked at me in shock. But I just ignored him and scanned the classroom.

…There he is!

Kei was in the middle of bringing food to a customer. He had a white shirt on, with a black vest and bow tie.

"…Sorry for the wait… Here's your, uh…veggie pizza-toast."

He awkwardly placed the plate on the table, moving all stiff like a robot. This was probably due less to nervousness and more to him not being used to this kind of thing.

I had to stop myself from chuckling at seeing him so out of his element.

"Kei!" I called out after he finished waiting on his table.

"Asuka? What do you want?"

His response was even more blunt than usual. Maybe he was upset that I saw how awkward he was serving a customer.

"I need to borrow Kei for a little bit," I told my classmates before dragging him out of the room.

"What's going on all of a sudden?"

Kei seemed annoyed. I didn't have time to apologize, though.

“We can’t find President Shiori. Do you have any idea where she might be?”

“How should I know…? She’s probably just busy with the—”

“No, she’s not! Listen to me…”

I filled in Kei on what I learned in the student council room and the third-year classroom, and I also told him about how I saw President Shiori in front of the principal’s office. He went from annoyed to dead serious as I explained.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll look into it right now.”

After quietly listening to me, Kei returned to the classroom, grabbed his laptop, and came back out to the hallway. He then sat down and began clacking away on his keyboard at breakneck speed.

W-wait a sec! You don’t have to do that here, do you…?

People glanced at Kei as they walked by. Some even stopped to watch him for a moment, surprised at how fast he was typing. Maybe they thought this was part of the school festival. Kei remained focused on the screen, though, and paid no attention to the passersby.

I almost never saw Kei look this intense.

Clack, clack, clack, clack, clack, clack…….. Clack.

His fingers stopped, and he looked up at me.

“Did you figure something out?” I asked.

Kei stared straight into my eyes and replied, “The student council president might be in trouble…”

“What kind of trouble?”

“I can’t tell you here. We need to go somewhere private.”

Kei stood up and began to walk away. He was the only one I could trust to solve this problem, so I swallowed any doubt I had and followed him.

We ended up leaving the school building and going to an open area where there weren’t many people around, eventually stopping near a flower bed.

I couldn’t hold back anymore, so I asked Kei to share what he knew. “Hey, Kei! What happened to President Shiori? I know you figured something out!”

With a calm look in his eyes, Kei turned around and asked me, “Asuka, do you remember that talk we had about people who fall victim to counterfeiting?”

Counterfeiting? That thing Dad was talking about this morning?

“Yeah, but what’s that got to do with anything?! I’m more concerned about President Shiori at the moment—”

“There’s a possibility that our school is tangled up with that counterfeiting incident… Specifically, the principal might have something to do with it.”

The principal?! But why?! I mean, he did seem kinda cold when I last saw him, but…

“While there may be a connection, it’s only a small one, which is why I never picked up on it until I did some digging. But I had my doubts about the principal, and I was able to deduce something after a bit of careful investigating. There’s a serious chance that the counterfeiting ring may have approached the principal.”

But why would he be connected with a criminal organization like that? What could they gain from working with a school principal?

“I suspect there’s a reason behind this…”

Kei seemed to have a hunch, but he didn’t say anything else. He must’ve not had concrete evidence yet. I knew he wasn’t going to go into more detail, so I switched gears.

“Then how does President Shiori fit into this?”

“I think she may have learned about the counterfeiting ring by accident. That could explain why she was snooping around the principal’s office. I don’t know how the principal got her attention, but President Orihara’s dad is chairman of our school’s board, so it’s certainly possible that she’d have access to information beyond our reach.”

President Shiori… Why would she go and get involved with something so dangerous on her own? She was usually the one to stop others from doing stuff like that…

“So, what, do you think the criminal organization kidnapped her?”

“Probably.”

“B-but surely you can figure out where they’ve taken her, right? Let’s go rescue her!”

“I’ll need more info in order to locate where she might be. If only we knew a little more…”

Kei bit his lip in frustration.

“No way…”

If Kei doesn’t have a solution, what are we gonna do?

…I know! We should just ask the principal himself!

“Where are you going?” Kei called out to me as I got ready to run off.

“You know where! The principal’s office!”

“Don’t do that.”

“Why not?”





How else are we gonna get the information we need?!

"If the principal is behind the kidnapping, then confronting him about it might put President Orihara in danger."

Th-that's true. I dunno why I thought Kei wouldn't have considered that option. So, what are we going to do, then…?

Kei didn't seem to have any leads; he stayed quiet.

Just then:

Ring, ring, ring!

My phone suddenly went off.

Who could possibly be calling me at a moment like this?

I took out my phone to see who it was.

"Oh, it's the vice president?" I rushed to answer. "Hello?"

"Hi, is this Asuka?"

"Yes! Did you learn anything about President Shiori?"

"Yeah, she actually just called me."

"Huh…?"

"She said she wasn't feeling well and had to go home. She was at the doctor, which was why she couldn't call us earlier. She said she's sorry for causing a commotion."

What's that supposed to mean? And here I thought she got kidnapped…

"We'll be able to manage without her today, but it could be a problem if she's not back by tomorrow, so I hope it's nothing serious."

"H-hey, are you sure it was really President Shiori on the phone? You don't think it might've been someone else, do you…?"

"Someone else? Nah, it was her number, and that was definitely her voice. We've been on the student council for two years together, so I think I'd recognize her voice when I hear it."

I was starting to get confused, but I did my best to hide it.

"Did she say anything else? Like, did it sound like she was in trouble?"

"Not really… Although now that you mention it, she did say something kind of weird."

"Weird how?!"

"Oh, uh, I don't think it's anything to be concerned about, but she asked me to keep an eye on the drama club. I guess I thought it was

a bit strange because the drama club hasn't caused any problems."

"I see… Thanks for letting me know."

I hung up the phone and looked at Kei.

"The drama club, huh…?" he murmured.

It looked like Kei was already considering what we just heard, staring at the ground in deep thought.

"That's gotta be a hint," I said. "The student council president doesn't work with the drama club, after all!"

"The drama club held their play in the gym, right?"

"Yep!" I nodded enthusiastically.

"Then let's go there. We might learn something."

Kei had that intensity in his eyes that he had when we worked together as Red.

When we arrived at the gymnasium, I peered in through the door.

"Oh, that's Yukimura."

Yukimura and the rest of the drama club were still there. They were practicing their lines and fixing some things on the stage.

"Oh, hey, Asuka. Is something the matter?" Yukimura asked as she came this way.

"There's just something I wanted to check… Have you guys been rehearsing this entire time?"

At least an hour had passed since the play ended, and it definitely wouldn't take that long to tidy up.

"Oh, no! The school band had a concert that only just ended. Since tomorrow's play is going to be in the morning, we figured we'd get everything ready now. Ah—don't get the wrong idea, though. We're just doing the basic setup, that's why I didn't tell you."

"I wasn't worried about you hiding anything from me."

I knew Yukimura wouldn't do that. I mean, she and the rest of the drama club were such good people, and President Shiori knew that better than most. She seemed to be good friends with Yukimura, after all.

Then why did the president go out of her way to tell her vice president to keep an eye on the drama club?

"So…you didn't happen to see President Shiori, did you?"

I thought I'd ask Yukimura, just to make sure.

“Nope. You still haven’t been able to contact her?”

Yukimura looked concerned, and I shook my head.

“No, we heard from her! The student council vice president got a call from her cell phone. He said she left early because she wasn’t feeling well.”

“I see. Shiori’s been so busy getting the school festival up and running. Maybe she worked a bit *too* hard. It’s a shame because I know how much she was looking forward to this,” Yukimura said sadly before looking over at Kei.

Kei, I should mention, had been investigating the gymnasium ever since we came in, touching the ground and checking the walls.

“What’s he doing?” Yukimura asked, raising an eyebrow.

Yeah, I’d wonder what the heck he’s up to, myself…

Of course a first-year snooping around the gymnasium would come off as a little sus.

That said, it probably wasn’t a good idea for me to explain why Kei was doing that. If I told Yukimura about the principal’s shady business, it could get her and the rest of the drama club mixed up in this whole mess. Not to mention, I definitely wouldn’t have an answer if she asked how we knew any of this.

“That’s, uh…my cousin, Kei. I know he’s kind of a weirdo, but he’s not a bad person or anything.”

“Your cousin, huh? He does seem a bit strange, but people say that about members of the drama club all the time. Makes no difference to me.”

Thank goodness. It would’ve been a problem if she asked us to leave. Not that Kei actually cared about those kinds of concerns.

He stood there in deep thought with his arms crossed before suddenly turning to Yukimura.

“Mind if I ask you a question?” he said, not even introducing himself or anything.

“Huh? Oh, sure…,” Yukimura replied, clearly thrown off.

Seriously, Kei…? This is your first time meeting her! At least tell her your name or something!

“Where do you usually keep all these chairs?”

Kei motioned to the metal folding chairs used for the play’s audience, blatantly ignoring me staring dumbfoundedly at him.

He did have a point, though. There were about fifty chairs set out. Sure, you could fold them up, but the school still needed a lot of space to store them.

“The chairs can go under the stage. See over there? You pull that out and it opens up like a big drawer. Wane me to show you?”

“No, that’s all right. Thank you.”

Kei sank back into deep thought.

He’s always so inconsiderate.

“I’m sorry, Yukimura. We’re just looking into something right now, and he might be a little too focused on it…”

“It’s fine, really. I think he’s about to leave, though. Shouldn’t you go with him?”

Huh?

I jumped and looked around to find Kei heading into the hallway, just as Yukimura said.

Hey, wait! Don’t just disappear on me!

“Sorry! I have to go, but I’ll see you guys again tomorrow!”

“Sounds good!”

I said a quick good-bye before sprinting after Kei.

When I caught up, which didn’t take long, I found Kei walking slowly with his head down. Honestly, I wanted to tell him off about minding his manners, but I knew he’d just ignore me.

“Did you figure something out?” I asked him quietly.

Kei looked up for a moment and said, “I think I see what’s going on here, but doing anything right now would be risky.” Then he disappeared into his own head again.

As much as I wanted to ask him every question I could think of, I knew Kei wouldn’t say a word until he figured out all the details for himself.

Besides, if doing anything right now was risky, then that meant we were safe as long as we did nothing, right?

If that was Kei’s take on it, then I had to trust him.

16
Kei’s Brilliant Deduction

The school was dark once the sun went down. It was late enough that the lights in the faculty room were all turned off.

There I stood, dressed in my Red uniform.

It was strange; only a few hours ago, our class’s café was bustling with customers.

This wasn’t a museum or a skyscraper like before; this was just my regular old school.

“Ready, Asuka?”

I could hear Kei’s voice through a custom earpiece I had on.

“Ready and willing!”

“How’s the gymnasium look?”

I squinted to get a better view. “Everything seems fine… But are you sure this is the right place? There was nothing there when we searched this afternoon.”

“No… There’s one spot we haven’t checked yet. If my speculations are accurate, there’s gonna be something particularly troublesome hidden there.”

Troublesome?

“You don’t have to worry about that now, though. I want you to head into the gym, but keep your guard up. If you see anything strange—anything at all—let me know. There might be some traps, too.”

Traps, eh…?

I remembered how Hibiki caught us back in the museum. We should’ve been more concerned with the fact that there was no security that day. I definitely didn’t want to make the same mistake again!

“Roger that!”

Hiding in the shadows, I ran toward the gym.

“I’m gonna open the door.”

“Be careful.”

I know, I know.

Slowly, I slid open the steel door. It made a loud *creak*, but the gym was empty.

Looks like no one’s here.

I turned on my night vision sunglasses before slipping inside. Kei had specially designed them for me, and they sent everything I saw and heard to his computer.

“Where do you think President Shiori is?” I asked Kei as I looked around.

“I want you to open the spot under the stage where they keep the chairs.”

Under the stage? You mean the place Yukimura told us about earlier? What do you think will be there?

I went up to the stage and felt around its surface.

“There should be a handle for you to grab onto.”

“Hmm… Oh, I think this might be it.”

There was a small groove in the wall that I could fit my hand into.

“Pull it as hard as you can.”

Okay… Would it kill ya to say please?

I probably would’ve talked back to him if President Shiori’s safety weren’t on the line.

Planting both feet firmly on the ground, I set my hands into the grooves and pulled.

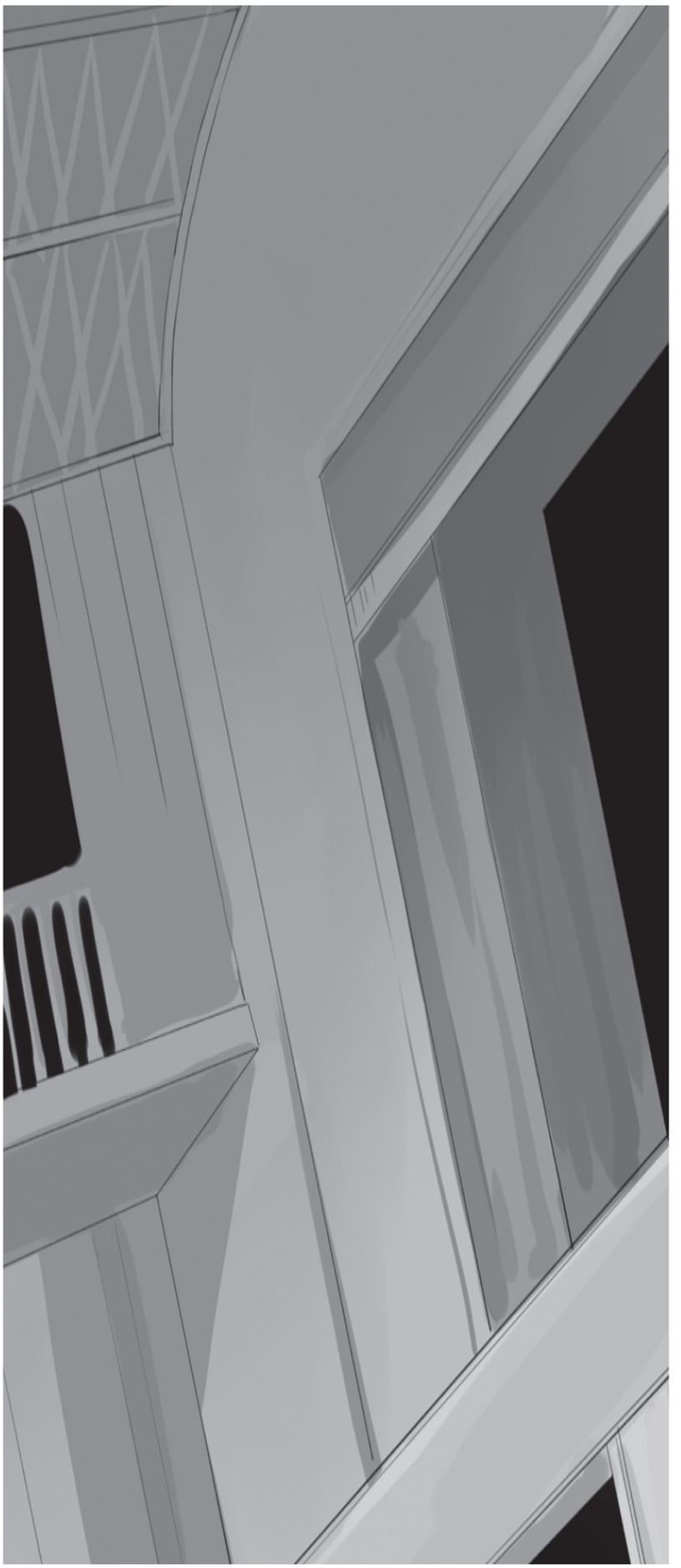
I heard the *clack, clack, clack* of wheels spinning as I pulled out a section of the stage. It revealed an opening under the stage.

“Huh! So that’s how that works.”

“Don’t just gawk at it. I want you to go in there.”

What?! Me, go in there*? It’s probably all moldy and gross… Ugh! I don’t have a choice! I need to save President Shiori!*

I squatted down and took my first step into the opening. It was made of concrete, which made it a little colder than the rest of the gym.





“Once you reach the back, I want you to check the floor.”

The floor?

I wasn’t sure what I was going to find, but I carefully felt around on the floor as I moved further into the opening. There was nothing but concrete—

“Huh?!”

“What is it?”

“I think I found a hatch!”

“That’s what we’re looking for! Try opening it—but be careful.”

I get it already! You don’t have to keep telling me to be careful.

Is it just me, or does Kei seem really on edge today? It’s not like there’s any guards or security around. I doubt I’m in danger at all.

I crouched down and slowly opened the hatch.

“Whoa…!”

That revealed a big room down below. The square-shaped room was only a bit smaller than the stage itself, about fifteen feet in each direction.

“A basement… I knew it.”

Apparently Kei had expected this.

“What’s going on here?” I asked.

I had no idea our school gymnasium had a secret basement.

“I don’t know why the room is there. It would’ve been put there when they constructed the school, so I doubt anyone at the school today had anything to do with it. It was probably originally used for storage, but now, it’s where the principal is hiding counterfeit art.”

Whaaat?! Why would there be counterfeit art in here?!

“Because the principal is in cahoots with a counterfeiting ring. The police have been amping up their search for counterfeit art lately. So the criminals needed a safe place to stash their stuff, which is where our principal came in. He knew he could keep the art hidden here, since a school is the last place anyone would think to look for it. Not only that, but even if you did search the school, you’d have to remove all the chairs to find the basement. There was little to no chance a student would stumble across it, either. This was the perfect location.”

Or, it was, until President Shiori accidently found it.

“What the principal didn’t expect was how long it took to clear out all the chairs to reach the basement hatch. I’m guessing he hid

the fake art in there during summer vacation, when there was tons of free time. He might have had people from the counterfeiting ring come here pretending to be maintenance workers. But once the school year started and the students were back, he couldn't let just anyone onto school grounds. This made it difficult to get the art out of the basement. And that's where the school festival came in."

Wait, what did that have to do with this?

"That's when the chairs would be removed from under the stage. And that meant the principal wouldn't have to take them out anymore. Plus, with all the guests visiting the school during the festival, it would be easier to slip people from the counterfeiter ring in and out. He could make up an excuse like, 'Oh, the lights in the gym are broken. We wouldn't want the gym to be dark for the play, would we? Here, I have someone who can get the job done quickly. They might have to work during the night to fit it into their schedule, but that shouldn't be a problem'… Or something like that."

Ah… Yeah, no one would suspect a thing!

"There was one more thing the principal didn't see coming… President Orihara. As student council president, she's frequently in and out of the gymnasium. And since her dad's the chairman of our school's board, she may have heard about the basement before. I suspect President Orihara noticed that something was going on with the principal, and given how astute she is, I wouldn't be surprised if she uncovered the counterfeit art on her own."

Wow, President Shiori's a genius!

I had to save being impressed for later, though, because she was probably down there right now.

I got onto the ladder attached to the hatch. As I climbed down into the basement, I noticed a dim light inside. It was hardly bright enough to make much of a difference, though; the basement was still really dark.

I squinted to get a better look at things when I heard something moving around.

No way…

"_____!!"

I had to stop myself from yelping—over by the wall was President Shiori. She was tied up with a rope and had a gag in her mouth.

I wrapped my scarf around my face and stepped off the ladder into the basement. President Shiori looked up; she must've noticed me.

"…Mmph?" She eyed me cautiously.

I changed my voice and said to her, "You're Shiori Orihara, president of the student council, right? I've come to save you."

Telling her it was Asuka probably would've helped calm her down, but I couldn't blow my cover.

As I slowly approached, her eyes widened. I went ahead and removed her gag and untied her hands. She rubbed her wrists. When I took a closer look, I saw the ropes had left a mark, but knowing President Shiori, she would never whine or complain about being in pain.

"You're…Phantom Thief Red, aren't you?" she said.

President Shiori seemed to stare right through me. Even in a situation like this, she remained calm and tried her best to assess the situation.

"I am," I replied, "and I'm here to save you like I just said. And…I'm also here for these."

I pointed at the nearby paintings wrapped in cloth. These were the first things I noticed upon entering the basement. There must've been at least a hundred of them. All of them were fakes, and it would be a disaster if they were sold off to unsuspecting buyers. But I wasn't going to let that happen!

Phantom Thief Red can sneak through any security without getting caught. And *this* Phantom Thief only steals from bad people who bring others sadness and pain.

We need to stop the bad guys!

"I see…"

President Shiori's face relaxed just a little, though her usual poised expression quickly returned.

"Right. So how did you find out about these counterfeit paintings?" I asked her. "It looks to me like you were investigating the principal."

"You knew? I'm impressed. I heard my father talking about how the principal had been acting strangely lately. I had my own suspicions, so I did some digging and found this room."

"So that's why he kidnapped you. What happened to your phone? Did he take it away?"

“You knew about that, too? Yes, he made me call the vice president to tell him I was okay. The principal warned me that if I said too much, he would hurt the students…” President Shiori bit her lip in frustration. “Maybe I should’ve just stayed out of it if you were going to handle things…”

Underneath her calm exterior was the slightest hint of sadness.

That’s not true! If you hadn’t looked into this first, neither Kei nor I would’ve realized what was happening!

Not that I could actually tell her this, though. Gah! So annoying!

“What are you going to do now, Red?”

“First, I’ll set you free. Then I’m going to steal these counterfeit paintings and bring this crime to light.”

My dad said the police were already looking for the counterfeit paintings, so I couldn’t let this go on for any longer!

“Hey, Red…I have a request.”

“What is it?”

“I know I shouldn’t ask this of you, but I need to try. Could you wait one more day before going public with this incident? If news of this gets out, we’ll have to cancel the second day of the school festival tomorrow…”

President Shiori looked upset as she said this.

“I…”

I felt the same way. The last thing I wanted was for the festival to be canceled. Not after all the hard work everyone did.

That went for the drama club, too. I knew how much effort they put into getting ready for tomorrow’s performance.

I didn’t want to just put a stop to everything! But did I have a choice? Letting the festival play out meant allowing the bad guys to run free for another day.

I didn’t answer President Shiori, and the two of us climbed up the ladder and out of the basement. I heaved a sigh of relief when we emerged from under the stage.

I’m just glad she’s safe… Now I need to figure out what to do about these fake paintings.



“You go home, President. I’ll handle things from here.”

“…Understood.”

She looked like she still had more to say, but she must’ve kept it to herself. I did my best to hide how conflicted I felt.

Then, something happened.

THUD!

We heard a loud noise, and the door to the school swung open.

17
The Red Monster?!

Seven men dressed mostly in workwear stormed into the gymnasium. One of them was in a suit—the school principal.

The gymnasium lights turned on. We didn't have time to hide.

Sh-sheesh! Talk about bad timing!

"Orihara! How did you escape?!" the principal yelled.

I reflexively jumped in front of President Shiori.

"You, there! Who're you?!" one of the men shouted angrily at me. He looked ready to come at me any second.

Now what, Kei?!

"Get President Orihara out of there first."

Good idea. Question is, how hard are they going to make it?

"Get out of here, President. I'll take care of these guys."

"B-but…"

President Shiori looked between me and the large men. They were all way bigger than me; she must've been worried if I could take them.

"I'll be fine. They don't call me Phantom Thief Red for nothing!" I announced.

"Phantom Thief Red?!" one of the men shouted.

"What's that little red monster doing here?!" another said.

Oh? My reputation precedes me. Guess that means I'm famous. "Red monster," though? Seriously?!

But this was our chance. If I could get President Shiori out of there while I still had these goons' attention, that would solve my biggest problem.

Handling them would be easy enough after that. What's more, I wanted to keep the police out of this if I could. If they showed up,

that would definitely spell the end of our school festival.

I got myself into gear.

"You heard her right," I said. "I'm evil's worst enemy, Phantom Thief Red, and I know exactly what you guys are up to!"

"Argh…"

The men all looked at each other.

"Don't let her get to you!" one of them called out from the back of the group. "I was wondering who we'd be dealing with after hearing about everyone that got busted by Phantom Thief Red… but it's just a kid! And she has another little girlie to worry about. Bet if we catch Red, we'll be world famous!"

"Y-yeah!"

"Ha, so much for the great Red! There's only one of her, and seven of us!"

Yikes. They managed to stop freaking out.

"That one guy who got the others to calm down must be the leader. He's sharp, too, so don't let your guard down."

You don't have to tell me twice. I've gotta keep President Shiori safe!

"President, when you see me rush them, I want you to run as fast as you can toward the door, okay?" I told her.

"Got it."

The president must've been nervous, but she replied calmly.

Wow, President Shiori sure is something. It's amazing that she can keep such a cool head even up against all these scary men.

"Now!" I yelled.

I ran straight toward the group of men. I could tell that President Shiori had started running off, too.

"Don't let the hostage escape!" the leader shouted, and two of the men in workwear went for President Shiori.

Argh!

I changed course to rescue her. I slid into a low kick, sweeping at the legs of the two men charging at the president. One of them fell down, but the other managed to get in front of the exit and block it off.

Shoot! Now President Shiori can't get out!

"Asuka! Incoming!"

Kei reminded me of the most immediate problem. Three men were coming right at me, and one other was standing at the door.

“President! Get back!” I shouted.

“O-okay!”

Once President Shiori did what I told her, I faced off against the three men. I dodged a punch and tried to grab the attacker’s arm, but then another man reached for me. I jumped backward and avoided him.

Aw, geez!

There were too many of them; I couldn’t fight back. Not only that, but these guys clearly knew how to hold their own. I was going to need a way to slow them down if I wanted to use my sleeping gas capsules.

The most difficult part of all this, though…

“Fending off these men and protecting President Shiori at the same time might be too tough.”

Kei read my mind. Normally, this would be a walk in the park for me, but I couldn’t go on the offensive while I had President Shiori to worry about. The men were all much bigger than me, so the only way I could put up a fight was to use my speed and acrobatics, but if I did that, I would leave President Shiori out in the open.

Ugh, what am I gonna do?!

“Red, I take back what I said—call the police! You can’t beat these men!” President Shiori called out to me from behind, except she wasn’t her usual calm and collected self this time. I could see her from the corner of my eye, and she was biting her lip so hard that it was turning white.

Her expression alone was enough for me to tell that this was a heavy decision for her to make—but that just made me even more determined!

“No! Remember what you said before—you don’t want your school’s festival to get canceled. If we call the police, that’s what’s gonna happen. Don’t worry, I’ll figure something out!”

Now that I was ready to fight again, I faced the bad guys once more. I also noticed their expressions change as soon as I said the word *police*.

“No one’s callin’ the cops! It’s just one little girl we’re dealin’ with here—get her, you dolts!” the leader barked angrily.

Don’t get cocky! I wanted to shout—but as determined as I was, I couldn’t think of any way out of this. And the men were

gradually getting closer.

"Why, you little—!" one of them shouted.

He lunged at me, but I swept his legs and knocked him over. Then I grabbed another attacker's arm.

"Yowwww!"

I twisted his arm and got ready to throw him when I sensed someone coming at me from the side, so I reflexively let go and put up both hands to block.

WHAM!

A heavy *thud* rang out, and my arms tingled with pain.

"Ow!"

I leaped away from the attackers.

"Asuka!"

"I'm all right. It was just a little punch."

The spot where I got hit was already red. I rubbed it and glared at the men. Things weren't looking good.

"…See? She's just a little girl. We're gonna be so famous after this," the leader sneered with a smug look on his face.

The gymnasium's size put me at a disadvantage. These guys could attack me from any direction. I needed to turn the tables somehow…

Suddenly, President Shiori whispered behind me, "Red… Do you think you could buy me some time?"

"Sure, but—"

"I only need a little bit."

She seemed dead set on her plan, which put me in a difficult spot. But maybe, just maybe, she had a good idea.

"Okay," I said. "I'll distract them."

The next moment, President Shiori ran off. This time, she didn't head for the door, but the tool closet.

"Don't let her get away! After her!"

The men scrambled to chase her, but I wasn't letting them.

"You're not going anywhere!" I shouted.

"Argh!"

One man began kicking the folding chairs out of the way to come at me. Those chairs made great obstacles.

Now's my chance!

I grabbed a capsule of sleeping gas and flicked it at him when he got his leg stuck on a chair. The capsule bounced off his

forehead, and he fell fast asleep.

Finally—first one down. Just six left, including the principal.

"Red!"

I heard President Shiori shout my name from behind me and turned around.

That's…

"Good thinking, President Orihara! Jump, Asuka!"

I quickly leaped up and grabbed the basketball hoop. That was when President Shiori threw a large container onto the gymnasium floor. A white liquid poured out and quickly spread. She then did the same with several more containers.

A powerful smell hit my nostrils.

Is that…soap?

"Argh! What the heck is this?!"

The men slipped and fell over, unable to keep their balance.

"Now!" President Shiori shouted to me.

This just might work!

Thanks, President Shiori!

I jumped down and landed on one of the folding chairs. Most of the men were on the floor; the ones still standing needed a chair to keep themselves from falling.



I doubt any of those big guys can balance on a chair like me. I've got this in the bag!

I flicked another capsule of sleeping gas.

TAP!

A direct hit—another one of the men fell fast asleep.

"Asuka, on your right!"

I looked to my right and saw one man tripping over himself to get closer to me.

"Don't even try it!"

I jumped to a different chair, and the man crashed into the one I'd just been standing on.

Ooh, bet that hurt…

"C'mere, you!"

The rest of the men came rushing at me.

"Too slow!"

I jumped from chair to chair; they were scattered about by now. The attackers tried chasing me, only to fall flat on either their butts or their faces. One even managed to knock himself out cold.

"*Haaah… Haaah…* Now we've got you."

However, the leader managed to stay on his feet using one of the chairs. He glared right at me.

I looked around and realized the men hadn't been stumbling over aimlessly. Now that I'd hopped to the first row of the audience, I had my back to the stage. To make matters worse, all the chairs had been pushed away and were either knocked over or upside down… I had nowhere to go.

The men started closing in. If any of them got a hold of me, there was nothing I could do. They were way bigger than me.

I stared them down and gulped. I could feel my palms getting sweaty.

"Red! Run awayyy!" screamed President Shiori, her usual calmness completely gone.

"You're not goin' anywhere! Get her!"

On their leader's word, the three men surrounding me came at me all at once.

Just before they reached me, I jumped up from the chair. I may have been out of chairs, but I wasn't out of space to jump. There was roughly nine feet between me and the stage.

I leaped backward, spun in midair—

BAM!

—and landed right on the stage.

The men stared blankly up at me. By the time their boss yelled, “W-watch out!” I’d already launched my sleeping gas capsules.

TAP! TAP! TAP! TAP!

The capsules broke open against each of their foreheads before they all fell over.

“Phew…”

I let out a big sigh of relief. That was pretty close, but I got through it thanks to President Shiori.

“It’s not over yet, Asuka.”

Kei’s warning made me realize there was still one person left—our principal.

Me and President Shiori approached the principal, careful not to step on any of the soap. He was sitting on the floor with his expensive suit drenched in soapsuds.

“Are you sure about this, Orihara?” he said, staring haughtily at President Shiori despite the mess he was in.

“What do you mean?” she replied, her voice even icier than usual. “I don’t believe there’s any way for you to get out of this predicament.”

“I’ve left a trail of evidence that paints your father, the school board chairman, as the one behind this whole operation. If news of this goes public, your father will go to prison, and you and this school will be a laughingstock. You’ll never live it down.”

President Shiori’s eyes widened. “You wouldn’t…!”

Seriously?! He’s gonna try pinning the blame on the chairman?! Ooh, now I’m really *angry!*

But maybe he was bluffing? I had no way of knowing…

“Asuka.”

Kei, who had barely said anything for the last several minutes, finally spoke up.

I know you were listening to the principal just now, Kei! What should I do?!

“…You know what I’m capable of. There’s no way I’d let the principal get away with a plan as dumb as that. I’ve already corrected all the falsified evidence and data to show that the principal is behind this, not the chairman.”

Kei?! Is that what you were doing when you were on silent mode?

“So you can tell him off all you want, Asuka.”

You bet I will!

I took a step forward and glared at the principal.

“Wh-what do you want…?” he stammered.

The principal still didn’t realize the situation he was in, so I pointed right in front of his nose.

“I’ve already undone all the lies you’ve put in place to pin the blame on the chairman. If committing crimes wasn’t horrible enough, you really were going to try and shift the blame to an innocent person, you monster! And you know what? The only thing people will be making fun of is a terrible principal like you!”

“…Argh…”

The principal’s shoulders slumped.

I tied him up with the rest of the sleeping men before approaching President Shiori. She was staring at me pretty intensely.

Huh? N-now what?

“I don’t know what it is, but something about you reminds me of a certain first-year student at my school…”

Ack! Sh-she’s totally talking about me…right?

But President Shiori didn’t press the topic any further.

Which brought me to my next challenge: What was I going to do after this? We caught the criminals, after all.

“I’m sorry, Red. I know I asked you to wait a day before going public with this, but given everything that’s happened, we should probably call the police.”

Me and President Shiori were on the same wavelength. That said, if we did call the cops, the school would definitely have to cancel the second and final day of the festival.

“Is there anything we can do, Kei…?” I whispered, hoping he would have a good idea. Instead, he instantly shot me down.

“I already called them.”

“Seriously?! Are you out of your mind?! Did you not hear what the president said earlier?!”

I accidently shouted this out, which caused President Shiori to stare at me in shock.

“Oh, uh… Sorry, I need to take care of something…,” I told her, and took a step back. “What were you *thinking*, Kei?! I know you don’t want the school festival to get canceled, either!”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean we can let criminals go scot-free.”

“Y-you got a point there…”

I just wish you’d at least tried to come up with another option!

“Is something the matter, Red?” President Shiori asked.

I turned to face her. Breaking the news was difficult, but there was no way around it.

“I already called the police…so they’ll be here soon,” I said. “I’ll be leaving now—can I leave the rest to you?”

“I see… Yes, I can take over from here. I’ll tell the police everything they need to know. I’m used to things like this.”

Though President Shiori didn’t show it on her face, I could still hear how sad she was.

Augh, Kei, you big dummy! I can’t believe you!

18
You Feel the Same Way?

The next morning came. I should've been filled with excitement for the second and final day of the school festival, but instead…I spent the entire walk to school staring daggers over my shoulder at Kei, who was a short distance behind me.

"Ugh… After all our hard work…"

"……"

"Y'know, I was really looking forward to the closing ceremony tonight."

"……"

"There were so many things I didn't get to eat yesterday! And so many classes I still wanted to see!"

"……"

"I wanted to try President Shiori's class's soba one more time, too."

"……"

"And! Not to mention our café, for cryin' out loud!!"

"……"

Kei didn't respond, which only annoyed me more.

What, so this doesn't bother him at all? Was he always like this? Argh, whatever!

I stormed off as we got closer to the school.

I bet there's a big commotion over what happened last night. Everyone's probably bummed out that the festival's been canceled… And the news crews'll be here, too.

I started walking slower and slower. Eventually, Kei sailed right past me like everything was normal.

C'mon! You've gotta feel at least a little *bad about all this!*

He turned the corner before I did.

The school's just up ahead…

As depressed as I was about the whole thing, I still needed to go to class. I got myself together and turned the corner, where I saw the school's front gate down the road.

"Wait. What?"

I froze in place, blinking repeatedly.

There were no journalists or anything, just students having fun. It definitely didn't look like the school festival was called off.

Wh-what's going on?!

Kei turned around and looked at me.

"I just called in a favor…," he said.

"What favor?"

"You know: the one a certain detective owed us after the Sky Towers…"


HOOL
TIVAL



He means—!

"Wait—you called Hibiki Shirasato last night?!"

"Yep."

But what did Hibiki do to pull this off? It's like nothing ever happened…

"I just asked him to wait an extra day before going public with the crime."

And he listened?!

"Yep. He probably didn't like that he owed Red a favor. He's really full of himself. Also, the police owed him a favor, too."

Sure, but this was a huge ask. I'm surprised you tried at all!

"Except now that he doesn't owe us anything, he'll probably be even more of a pain in the neck."

Ugh… I bet he's right about that.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?!" I demanded.

I've been treating you like dirt since last night!

"I had no idea whether he would come through for us… Also, I didn't want the school festival to get canceled, either."

Oh? What did you just say? You also *didn't want the school festival to get canceled?*

Nice! Glad to hear he felt the same way I did.

"Good morning, Asuka."

President Shiori was standing at the school's front gate when we arrived. Apparently, she'd had a long night telling the police everything that happened, although you wouldn't be able to tell just by looking at her. She was the same cool, calm, and collected president as always. The Ice Queen.

"Good morning, President Shiori!"

"How many times do I have to tell you not to use my first—? You know what, I'll let it slide. Just for today, though."

She grinned ever so slightly.

Oh—I think this is the first time I've ever seen her smile!

I was so happy that I grabbed Kei's arm and dragged him through the gate.

"H-hey…"

He wasn't exactly thrilled about this, but I didn't care.

One arm in the air, I shouted, "We're gonna make this day a good one!"





Afterword

Hello there! Shin Akigi here, secretary for Phantom Thief Red.

With summer vacation having come to an end for Asuka and friends, it was one quick pop quiz before it was time for the school festival! And when it comes to school festivals, you can't go wrong with *yakisoba* noodles, *okonomiyaki* pancakes, shaved ice, and crepes…

"You've only mentioned food so far."

Huh? Wagh! That white jacket! And those glasses!! It's the junior high detective, Hibiki Shirasato! What are you doing here…?

"It appears I've gotten a bit lost. By the way, what's that paper you have there for?"

Oh, this? It's just something I got from K— Er, hold on a second.

(I still haven't figured out the code Kei gave me last time. I know, I'll have Hibiki decipher it.)

Actually, this is a secret code Phantom Thief Red left behind.

"A code from Red?! Do you mind if I take a look?"

Be my guest.

"Hm…… Surely this is some sort of joke. There's no way Red would leave behind a code as elementary as this."

Elementary? I can't even make heads or tails of it…

"It's easy. Try typing 5yqhiw r94 43qe8ht, but shift your fingers one key down and to the right."

Hm? That's all? Let's see, there's a *T* under the five key…

"The *y* is *H*, the *q* is *A*, the *h* is *N*, the *i* is *K*, and the *w* is *S*."

You're right! If we do the rest, it's…*f, o, r, r, e, a, d, i, n, g*… "Thanks for reading!!"

"Precisely. I highly doubt Red would come up with anything so simple. Whoever gave this to you was clearly an impostor. Oh?

I’m getting a call about another case. Looks like I need to go now.”

There he goes, running off. No rest for a junior high detective, it seems.

I’m sure he and Phantom Thief Red will face off again someday. For better or for worse.

Until then, everyone, please keep on cheering for our Red duo!

Finally, I should say that Asuka did some dangerous things in this volume. Please don’t try any of that at home!

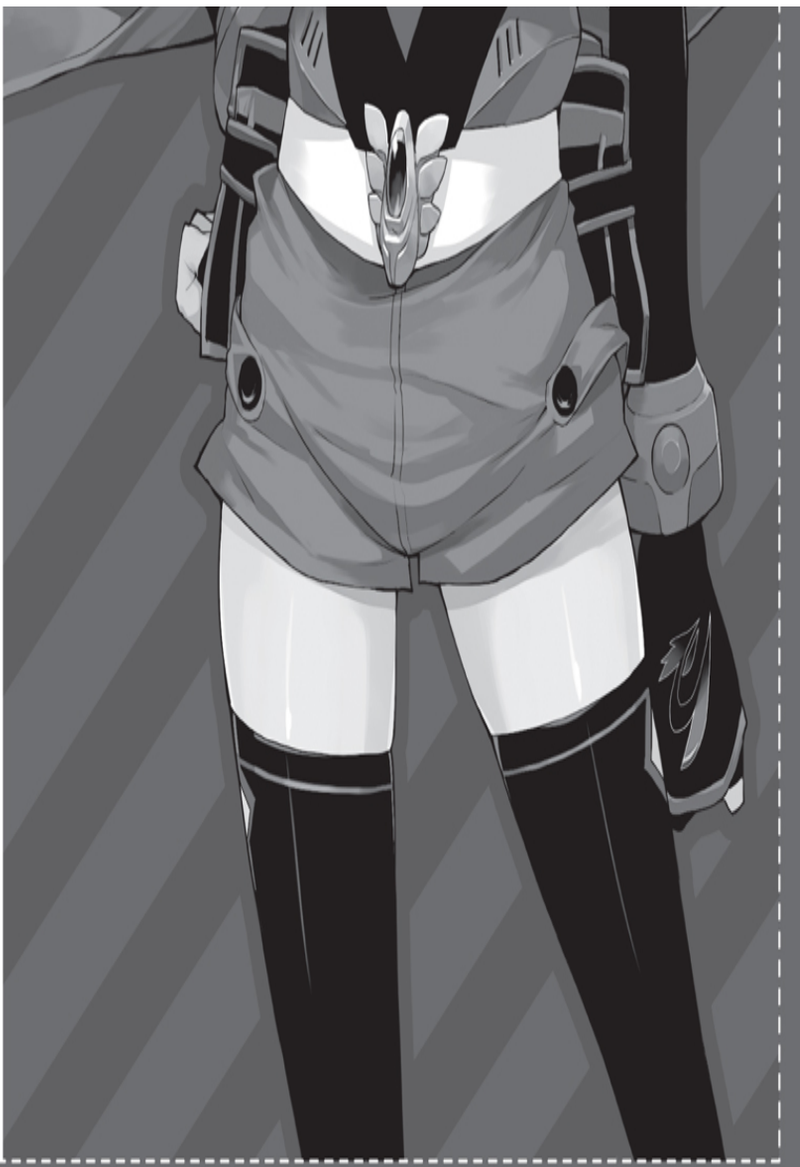
I’ll see you again in Asuka and Kei’s next adventure!

Shin Akigi

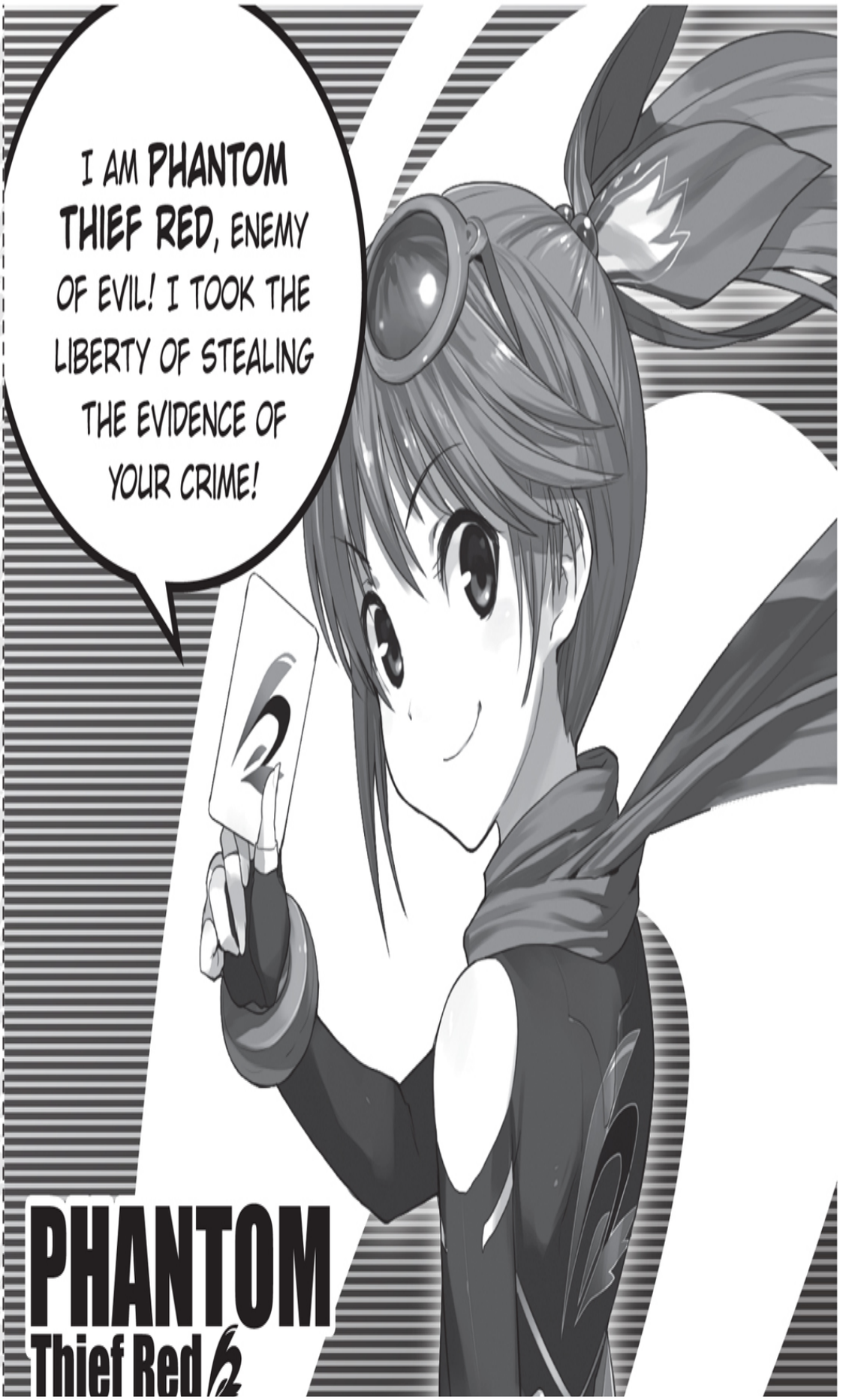
PHANTOM

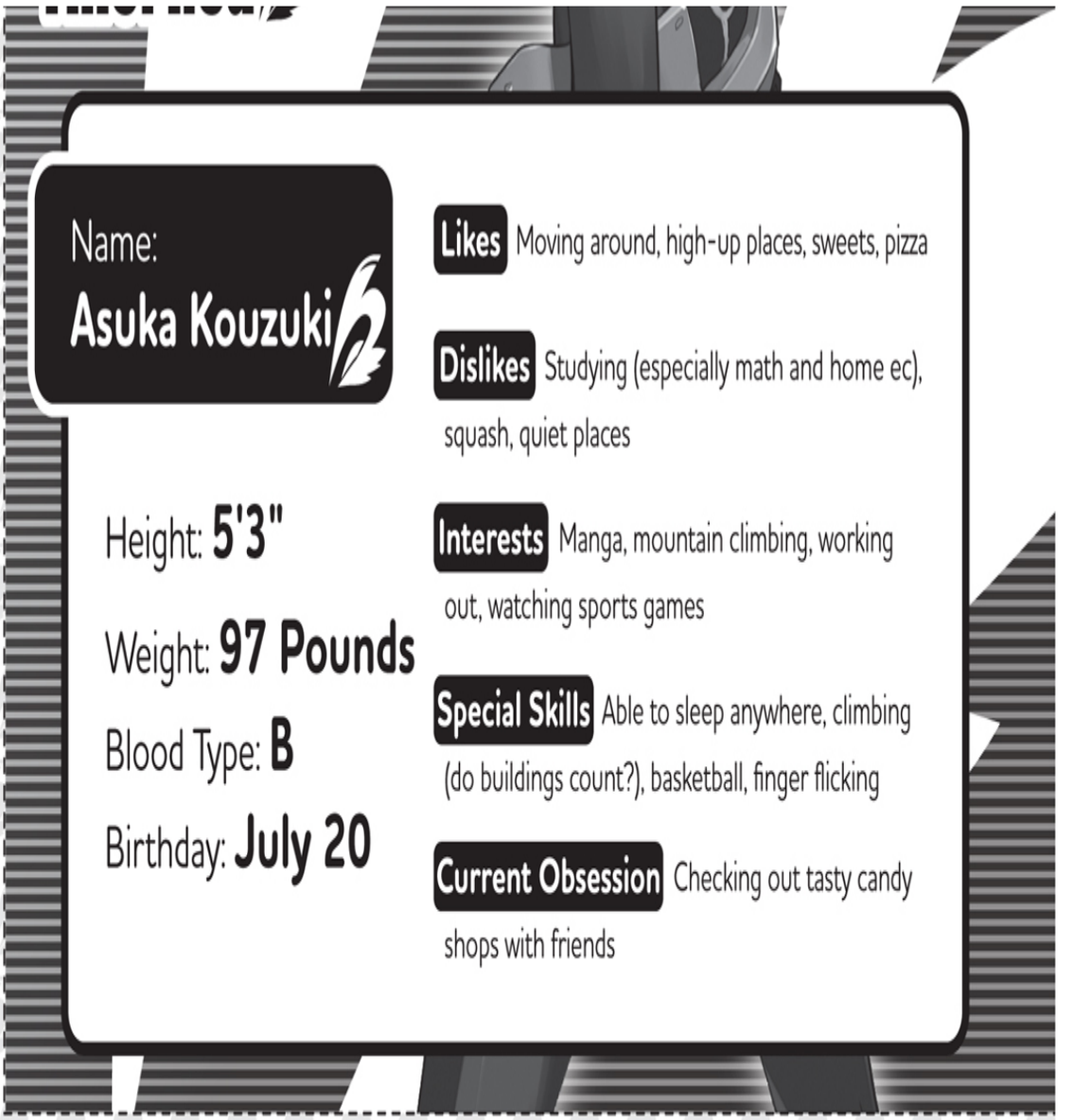
Thief Red

Presented by Shin Akigi & Shu



PHANTOM THIEF RED ③


I AM PHANTOM THIEF RED, ENEMY OF EVIL! I TOOK THE LIBERTY OF STEALING THE EVIDENCE OF YOUR CRIME!
PHANTOM
Thief Red


Name:
Asuka Kouzuki
Height: 5'3"
Weight: 97 Pounds
Blood Type: B
Birthday: July 20
Likes Moving around, high-up places, sweets, pizza
Dislikes Studying (especially math and home ec), squash, quiet places
Interests Manga, mountain climbing, working out, watching sports games
Special Skills Able to sleep anywhere, climbing (do buildings count?), basketball, finger flicking
Current Obsession Checking out tasty candy shops with friends

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink