
Phantom Thief
Red
A New Rival and a Shipboard Showdown
4
Shin Akigi
ILLUSTRATION BY
Shu

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A New Rival and a Shipboard Showdown

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New York

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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 Himuro

Asuka's best friend since forever. Knows her stuff.



Yuzuki

A classmate in the home economics club.



Kotone Hanasato

Heir to the Hanasato Group. Kind, but skilled at what she does.

Kyouya Orito

The attractive young man who keeps showing up around Asuka. Very conceited





Tsubasa Kouzuki & Keiichiro Kouzuki

Asuka's and Kei's dads. The original Phantom Thief Red duo.

1
A New Secret Move!

“Ow!”

I got up, wincing in pain. I’d just landed on my rump at an aikido dojo near my house, and boy did it hurt. I was there for training with my dad.

The aikido teacher was a friend of his and would lend out his dojo to us on Sundays, when the school had its day off. So the two of us had the entire dojo to ourselves.

I know that must sound pretty sweet, but, well…

“Finished already, Asuka?”

Dad was standing over me, staring me down like he was a hawk and I was a mouse. It sent a shiver down my spine.

My dad never went easy on me during training—not one bit. He was in battle mode.

“No way!”

Springing to my feet, I quickly caught my breath and hopped rhythmically side to side.

Here I go!

In an instant, the two of us met smack-dab in the center of the dojo room. Dad was throwing punch after punch and kick after kick.

One, two, three……!

I tried to fake him out with little feints and glances in the wrong direction, all the while weaving in attacks of my own.

Then, a burst of air brushed against my cheeks.

Womp! Whoosh! Tap!

“Waaaagh!”

I got knocked off my feet by that strike and almost landed on my butt again—but I managed to hold out this time. I had blocked that last one instead of evading, so my arms felt a little numb. A high roundhouse kick is no joke.

I dodged ten times but only got to hit back twice.

We then changed spots. The pause lasted for just three seconds before my dad lowered into a fighting stance. He wasn't gonna be easy to beat with his center of gravity so close to the ground.

If there isn't an opening, then I just need to make one!!

I rushed my dad, thrusting my palm up toward the bottom of his chin, but he dodged by bending his neck away ever so slightly.

Exactly what I expected you to do!

Clap!

I clapped my hands together with all my might, right in front of my dad's face. That move is called an eye clap—it's a move sumo wrestlers use to surprise their opponent and force them to close their eyes.

It worked!

I pulled my hand back so I could drive my elbow right into my dad's stomach.

Gotcha this time!

Or…so I thought, but I felt the impact of a large hand grabbing my elbow.

Uh-oh!

He took my arm and flung me away with overwhelming force, sending me flying. I reoriented myself just before I hit the ceiling.

Hup!!

With my feet under me—or, I guess, above me—I launched myself off the ceiling straight back down toward my dad.

This must've caught him off guard, because he didn't have time to react.

This time for sure!

Thump!!!

A loud, heavy *thud* rang throughout the dojo when my dad's arms completely blocked my kick.

Aw, c'mon… That didn't work, either?

I kicked off him, backstepping before he could grab me again.

Wh-whoa!

Uh-oh!

Before I could get far enough away from my dad, he lurched forward, grabbing both my legs and tackling me.

A two-handed reap!

The momentum took me to the ground.

Wham!!!

Even though I was braced for the impact, it still hurt a whole lot. I wasn't going to be able to get up very quickly after that one.

"Whew… Let's take a break."

My dad let out a deep breath. Even after all that, he wasn't even winded.

"You okay, Asuka? I couldn't hold myself back on that last move… Oh no! You're bleeding!"

Any intensity in his gaze immediately disappeared as he reverted to his usual dad mode.

You know, the gap between your personality in and out of training is way too big!

Like my dad pointed out, there was some blood on my elbow.

With all that moving around, I must've scuffed it against something. It was no big deal, though.

"We need to disinfect it. And look, you have a bruise here! Where are those cloth wraps I brought…?"

My dad began rummaging through the medical kit he brought with us.

"It's fine! I got it!"

I'd been treating my own little nicks and bruises like this since I was in kindergarten.

"Can't let you do that! You need to bandage injuries properly if you don't want them to get worse," said Dad, giving me a look.

I gave up.

You're the reason I'm all dinged up in the first place…, I thought, but I kept it to myself. I knew if I told him that, he'd get depressed. It would only be a joke, of course, but he'd be down in the dumps for at least a week.

I also knew the only reason I had to go through such intense training was because he cared, so it didn't really bother me in the first place.

This difficult training was why I could perform so well as Red when it really mattered.

“That oughtta do it! Now that you’re all fixed up, would you like to grab something to eat? I brought lunch.”

I hopped to my feet. Eating my dad’s home cooking was always something to be excited about!

“Calm down, the food’s not gonna run away. Here it is.”

He placed a big, three-compartment lunch box on the table. I opened it up, and it was jam-packed with colorful sandwiches, quiche, and roast beef.

“Wow! This looks delicious!”

“I made the quiche with last night’s leftover soup.”

I immediately picked up a slice of quiche and took a big bite, and my mouth was filled with creamy eggy goodness.

I could just melt into a pile on the floor…

Ever since I was a little girl, lunch boxes were always the best part of these training sessions.

Tasty food is what makes life great!

I wolfed down the rest of the meal in a flash.

“*Sigh*… I bet it’d taste better if I could win against you just once,” I said.

This was a big goal of mine—one that I’d never accomplished before.

I felt like I got pretty close today, though.

“It’s nothing to be hard on yourself about, Asuka. You’re as strong as they come. All you need to remember is that just because Phantom Thief Red is relentless against villains, it doesn’t mean we want to hurt them. That’s why we need to be stronger than them.”

“I know, I know. Like you always say during training: ‘No one gets hurt, friend or foe,’ right?”

“Exactly. Looks like you’re starting to get it. You threw some pretty good punches today, too. You almost got me with that attack from above. You’re definitely getting better.”

Really?! I sure hope he means it!

“You know what? I think it’s about time I teach you a certain move.”


PERSEVERANCE
EFFORT
WILLPOWER

Oh? That sounds interesting.

"Here, hold out both your arms in a defensive position."

"Uh, okay…"

I did as my dad said and crossed my arms like an X in front of me, getting ready for whatever was to come.

"Okay, Asuka. You know how you're mostly up against people bigger than you? Sometimes, they're just gonna be stronger than you, and you won't be able to get away. Think about my two-handed reap from earlier. That got you good, right? Those types of techniques are effective against you."

He was right about that, but I'd always covered my disadvantage with my speed up until now.

I knew I could outrun them when muscles wouldn't work. This was why I was learning the aikido style of fighting. I could focus on hitting smarter, not harder.

"Right, so aikido doesn't need strength to be effective. You use your opponent's strength to throw them. It's a way for smaller people to hit enemies where it hurts. It's worked on your opponents so far, but that may not always be true. What if their weak spot is protected? What if they're faster than you? How will you fight them then?"

Well…maybe I could get close and throw them aikido style?

Ah, no, that wouldn't work. They could just tackle me like my dad did.

"I'm going to teach you a special move you can use when that happens."

Ooh, what kind of move?

"It's not something you can use over and over again since it is easy to read, but it is strong enough to take out a big tough guy."

Really?! C'mon, hurry up and show me!

"Get ready…"

"O-okay."

My dad dropped into a low stance, holding his right hand out with an open palm, which he brought close to my crossed arms. There was almost no space between his hand and my arms, so he wouldn't be able to generate much power with whatever he was about to do. Finally, he took a deep breath in and out.

"Huuuff… Haaah…"

There was an electrifying intensity that buzzed in the air around my dad. I braced for his attack.

Here he comes!

“Haaaaaaagh!”

My dad shouted so loudly that people outside could probably hear him.

WHAAAAAM!

I felt him hit both my arms, which jolted my entire body.

“Aaaah!”

CRASH!

I couldn’t stand my ground against that. I flew backward, slamming against the wall, then slid down slowly onto my butt again.

What was that…?!

“You okay? I actually went easy on you.”

Th-that was going easy…? I bet he would’ve blasted me through the wall with a real one…

“That technique is called *fa jin*. It’s a Chinese martial art that uses as little movement as possible to create a blow like what you just saw. I bumped into this older man who was a master of the art when I went to train in the mountains a long time ago.”

“You went to train in the mountains…? That sounds less like a phantom thief and more like some martial artist.”

“I-it’s just something I did when I was younger. And he was the one who taught me how to flick pellets at people, I’ll have you know.”

Wait, really? The finger bombs have come in super handy. Now that you mention it, Kei did say it was a really rare skill.

“The good thing about this technique is it’s difficult for your opponent to realize how strong it will be. You can really catch ’em off guard. So what do ya say? Wanna give it a shot?”

“Obviously! Being able to do that would really give me a leg up.”

“Okay. Let’s start practicing after a short break.”

Whoo-hoo! I can’t wait to learn this. Kei’s gonna be so surprised.

I went over to my bag, which was sitting in the corner of the dojo. I grabbed my sports drink and started chugging, and then I checked my phone, too.

Hmm? It looks like Misaki called me.

Ah, my phone was on silent. I must've missed it.

Just as I was about to call her back, my phone started ringing and startled me.

It was Misaki again.

"Hello, Asuka? Can you talk right now?"

"Yeah! Sorry I missed your call earlier. What's up?"

Misaki only ever called me when there was something important to talk about. Since it costs money to call on our phone plan, we usually keep everything to texts.

"I was just wondering what you were doing for Christmas this year. Are you going anywhere with your family?"

"Nope. My dad has to work on Christmas for the restaurant."

Christmas was a big day for my dad's Italian restaurant. There's even a special dish he only serves on that day. I want to go and try it for myself someday.

"Oh, okay. Well, are you interested in spending it with me? I actually just ran into Yuzuki, and she has special museum tickets for Christmas Day. She said you were welcome to join us, too."

A museum...? I guess it's better than spending Christmas at home on the couch!

"Yeah, that sounds like fun! It's not like I had plans anyway."

"All right! I'll text you the details later."

"Okay, I'll see you later, then."

I ended the phone call and turned around toward my dad.

"I've got plans on Christmas."

"Yeah? I always feel bad that I'm too busy to spend time with you around that time of year. Your Red schedule should be fine, too, right?"

"We just did a job last month, and I haven't heard anything from Kei about the next one, either."

Now that you mention it, I wonder what Kei has going on for Christmas? If there are any extra tickets, maybe I could snag one for him. Though, I doubt he'd be interested in going unless it was for Red research.

As I thought it over, my father waited for me in the center of the dojo.

"All right, Asuka. Let's get back to training."

"Okay!" I called back.

I had Christmas on the brain, but I'd have to save it for later. Right now, I needed to focus on my training. I mean, this new technique might allow me to do even more as Red.

2
Why the Change of Heart?

“Whew, that feels better.”

Wiping my hair off with a towel, I went into my bedroom. By the time my dad and I wrapped up our training session, it was seven o’clock at night. I’d just finished taking a shower after we got home. It was nice to finally rinse off all that sweat.

Kei was where he always was: at his desk, clacking away at his keyboard. He was still in the same exact position he was in when I left for training.

He’s moved at least once since I left, right? Right?

“Hey, Kei. You have any plans for Christmas this year?” I said, sitting down on the bed.

No response…

I thought the school festival might have made him a *little* more social, but I guess I was wrong.

Ugh, geez…

Welp, I wasn’t gonna get an answer out of him—or so I thought.

“Nope.”

He still hadn’t turned around.

Well, at least I know he’s alive. Would it kill you to answer me a bit faster, though?!

“Then do you want to hang out with me and my friends? Misaki invited me somewhere. Better than sitting around the house all day doing nothing.”

“Nope.”

Oof. I mean, that was the answer I expected, but he could’ve at least pretended *to think about it.*

“Fine. I only invited you because Misaki asked me to anyway. I’m sure we can find someone else. We got these special Christmas tickets to go to this Hanasato Puppet Museum place. The tickets are hard to get, too.”

“……”

As soon as I said this, Kei turned his head around and looked at me.

Uh, what?

“What did you just say…?”

“Uhhh, I think it’s called the Hanasato Puppet Museum…? We got special tickets to go there on Christmas…?”

“You know what? I’ll go.”

Huh? Did you just say yes?

It was rare for Kei to change his mind on things like this.

“Does this mean the Hanasato Puppet Museum is actually a really cool place?” I asked.

“Maybe.”

“Hey! I know you just don’t want to go through the trouble of explaining it to me!”

I stared Kei down until he gave in. He let out a small sigh.

“Fine, I’ll tell you why.”

See? Wouldn’t it have been easier to do that from the start?

Kei spun his chair all the way around so that he was facing me.

“The Hanasato Museum of *Karakuri* Puppetry, owned and run by the Hanasato Group, showcases a wide array of historic puppets, ranging from both Japanese and western puppets to animatronics and mechanical clocks.”

“Uh-huh. So what about any of that has you so interested, Kei? It’s all old stuff, and you know everything there is to know about new stuff.”

“It’s good to know how to make mechanical devices without modern technology. Everything we use today is built on top of the foundation that’s been made by the past.”

Kei was getting excited while he spoke, something that was rare for him. Guess he really wanted to go to this museum.

But that was weird—if he was that interested, why didn’t he go himself? Even if I didn’t invite him this time?

“You said you had Christmas tickets, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Does something special happen on Christmas?”

“So you don’t know…” Kei had a look of disbelief on his face. “They were talking about it on the news— Oh, wait, there’s no way you’d ever watch the news.”

Hey! Well, you’re not wrong…

“The Hanasato Museum of *Karakuri* Puppetry is going to display their secret collection this year.”

Their secret collection?

“The Hanasato Group’s famous enough for you to have heard of them before, right? They’re a megacorporation and they have a long history.”

“Ah, I think I have heard the name before. They’re that national bank, I think. But why would they have a special display?”

“The Hanasato family is well known for art-collecting. The newest head of the group, Ou Hanasato, has added his massive personal collection to what he inherited, creating a collection of historic proportions. That is what will be on display.”

“You don’t say. So they must have some pretty cool art, then, huh?”

“Yeah, one of their main pieces is a two-hundred-year-old golden clock made by a French craftsman.”

“Two hundred years old?! And the clock still works?! I break wristwatches like they’re made of glass.”

“The Hanasato Group has business connections all over the world, and they commissioned the clock. The artist who crafted it was unknown at the time, but the Hanasato Group considers it their family treasure and has handed it down throughout the generations. This is why it’s never been on display before, and if we miss this chance, they might never show it again.”



“Wow, so it’s really rare, huh. I wonder what makes it so unique.”

“It’s a fully mechanical, spring-loaded table clock. You have to wind it up to make it run.”

“You need to wind a spring? That kinda sounds like a pain in the butt. I guess they didn’t have batteries two hundred years ago, though. Either way, it sounds pretty special.”

“The craftsmanship that went into it is currently being reevaluated. It uses the artisan’s original clockwork mechanisms, which have been lost to history and are said to be impossible to recreate. The golden clock is supposedly the artisan’s greatest masterpiece, and the Hanasato Group has passed it down as a family heirloom.”

If Kei says so, then it really must be an incredible clock. Me, I don’t get the hype.

“I’ve been trying to get my hands on a ticket ever since they announced it, but they sold out instantly. I’m actually curious how you got them in the first place.”

“Yuzuki had some. She said she got them through her dad’s work.”

“That makes sense. Harukawa’s father must be a client of the Hanasato Group…” Kei seemed satisfied with the explanation. (By the way, Harukawa is Yuzuki’s last name.)

In any case, we were lucky to get our hands on something so rare!

This year’s Christmas is gonna be fun!

Oh, but there is one thought lingering in the back of my mind.

“Kei, your interest in this clock has nothing to do with Red stuff, right?”

After what happened at the Sky Towers, this was just to be sure. Kei liked to keep his secrets.

“No, it’s something I’ve always been interested in. There’s nothing illegal in the Hanasato Museum of *Karakuri* Puppetry.”

Okay, good. That means we can focus on having a good time. How exciting!

3
My Cover's Gonna Blow?!

"Mmm, hmm-hmm-hmmmm."

I was in the living room, humming to myself while I stared at all the decorations we had put up.

Finally, Christmas is here!

We didn't always decorate, but I'd wanted to do something Christmas-y this year, seeing as we had more people living with us. Since we didn't have enough room for a tree, I stuck some Santa and reindeer stickers on the window. Nothing permanent, of course. The stickers would be easy to remove.

I'd also hung red and green ribbons with blinking lights from the windowsill.

I turned off the lights in the room, and the ribbons were so bright, I could still see the stickers.

"All right, looks good!"

Even simple decorations like these helped to build up the Christmas spirit.

"What do we have here? Christmas decorations?"

My dad stuck his head into the living room. He wasn't in his usual baggy loungewear; he was dressed up in a nice outfit to go out.

He had to head to work early today. The restaurant wouldn't open until nighttime, but the special Christmas dish took a while to prepare.

Wow, I bet that extra time means it's extra good.

Unfortunately, I never had the opportunity to try my dad's restaurant on Christmas Day—not once. I always spent the day alone at home, which was, well, lonely.

Although this year, I bet I could go if I brought Kei along. Actually, never mind! I can already picture him being all grumpy and ruining everything.

"You ready to go, Asuka? Nothing else you need to do?" my dad asked, interrupting my thoughts.

"It's fine, we're not meeting until ten-thirty."

Bing-bong.

That was the doorbell.

Hmm? Who could it be?

I went over to the intercom.

"Hello? Who is it?"

"Hey, Asuka! It's Misaki. What's up? Why aren't you answering your phone? I called you like fifty times."

"Huh? You've been calling me? But there's still twenty minutes until we meet up…"

"What are you talking about, Asuka? I told you we moved the time to ten o'clock. You're ten minutes late."

"What?! No way! I got things mixed up!

"Aaah!" I yelped. "I'm so sorry! I'll get ready right away!"

I ran to my room, where Kei was sitting in his chair, dressed and ready to go.

"Kei! You gotta tell me if you knew I had the time wrong!"

"……"

He didn't say anything.

Ugh… Save it, I don't have time to grumble about Kei!

"Get out! I need to change!"

Kei stood up from his chair to leave when…

"Thanks for letting us in."

Hey! Those are Misaki's and Yuzuki's voices.

"Hey, Asuka!" Dad called. "I didn't want to make your friends wait outside so I let 'em in."

Daaaad! What'd you do that for?! If Kei leaves now, they'll find out we share a room!

"Y-you know what, Kei. Just wait in here," I whispered so they couldn't hear my voice outside the room.

"……" Kei just stared at me with this face that said, "Come on. What do you want me to do?"

Aw, geez!

“J-just turn around and look the other way! Now!”

I waited to make sure he wasn’t looking, then grabbed whatever I could out of my closet.

Better double-check the mirror! Okay, good!

I grabbed my bag and turned to Kei.

“Don’t come out yet, okay?!”

Without giving him time to respond, I opened the door and darted to the living room, where Misaki and Yuzuki were waiting on the couch.

“Ready to go, Asuka?”

The two of them stood up from the couch as soon as they saw me.

“Huh? Where’s your cousin?”

“K-K-Kei’s, um, gonna catch up with us later. He needs a little more time to get ready.”

“Oh? That’s strange. He’s usually so punctual,” Misaki said with a look of surprise.

“Um, yeah, but I think he was on his computer too late last night and ended up sleeping in! Either way, let’s skedaddle!” I grabbed both of their hands.

“Wait, Asuka, there’s no need to rush—”

Pretending I couldn’t hear them, I pulled them outside the house.

Whew…

With the door finally closed, I was safe.

But…thinking back on it, that was pretty mean to Kei… What am I gonna do if he decides not to come?

Ka-chack.

The front door to the house opened. It was Kei; he looked at the three of us.

“Um, uh, here’s the thing, Kei—”

“Sorry to keep everyone waiting.”

Kei cut me off before I could say anything. I reflexively glanced at his face, but he was just as flat as always. It sounded like he was going to match his story with mine.

“Oh, wait a second.”

Yuzuki said this before rummaging around her bag.

“Did you forget something?”

“No, it’s not that.”

She shook her head as she answered and proceeded to pull out two Christmasy bags.

“Here. These are your Christmas presents.” Yuzuki handed me a bag with a red ribbon on it.

“Whoa, really? But I didn’t get anything for you!” I said.

“Neither did I!” said Misaki.

“It’s fine, I just wanted to get a little something for you since it’s a special day. Here, this one’s for you, Kouzuki.”

“You got one for me, too?” Even Kei actually acted surprised.

I know, right?! I really didn’t expect that!

“Is it okay to open it up now?” I asked.

“Of course!”

I untied the ribbon and opened the bag.

“It’s…a scrunchie! You didn’t make this yourself, did you?”

It was a scrunchie made from green cloth with a red line running through it. Looking closely, I could see the red line was actually embroidery of Santa Claus and his reindeer. They were all cartoony—what a cute scrunchie!

Misaki’s was similar, but the embroidery was in blue.

“Does it match the one you’re wearing right now, Yuzuki?” Misaki pointed to the scrunchie in Yuzuki’s hair. *Oh yeah, it’s a set!*

“Hee-hee, yep! Mine has yellow.” Yuzuki lifted her hair so we could see her scrunchie.

“Let’s put them on, Misaki!”

“Yeah!”

The two of us tied our hair up with our scrunchies. We then looked at each other and shared big smiles.

It’s fun matching with friends.

“What’d you get, Kei?”

“This.”

Kei showed us a beanie knit from white yarn and embroidered with red and green.

“Did you make this by hand, too?!”

“Yup. I knew he wouldn’t use a scrunchie, so I gave it some thought and figured he might wear a beanie,” Yuzuki responded with a smile. Surely, it was enough trouble just to make presents for me and Misaki, but Kei’s, too?

“Thank you so much!”

“Thank you, Yuzuki! I’ll cherish it forever.”

Your turn, Kei.

“Thanks…,” Kei mumbled as he put the hat on.

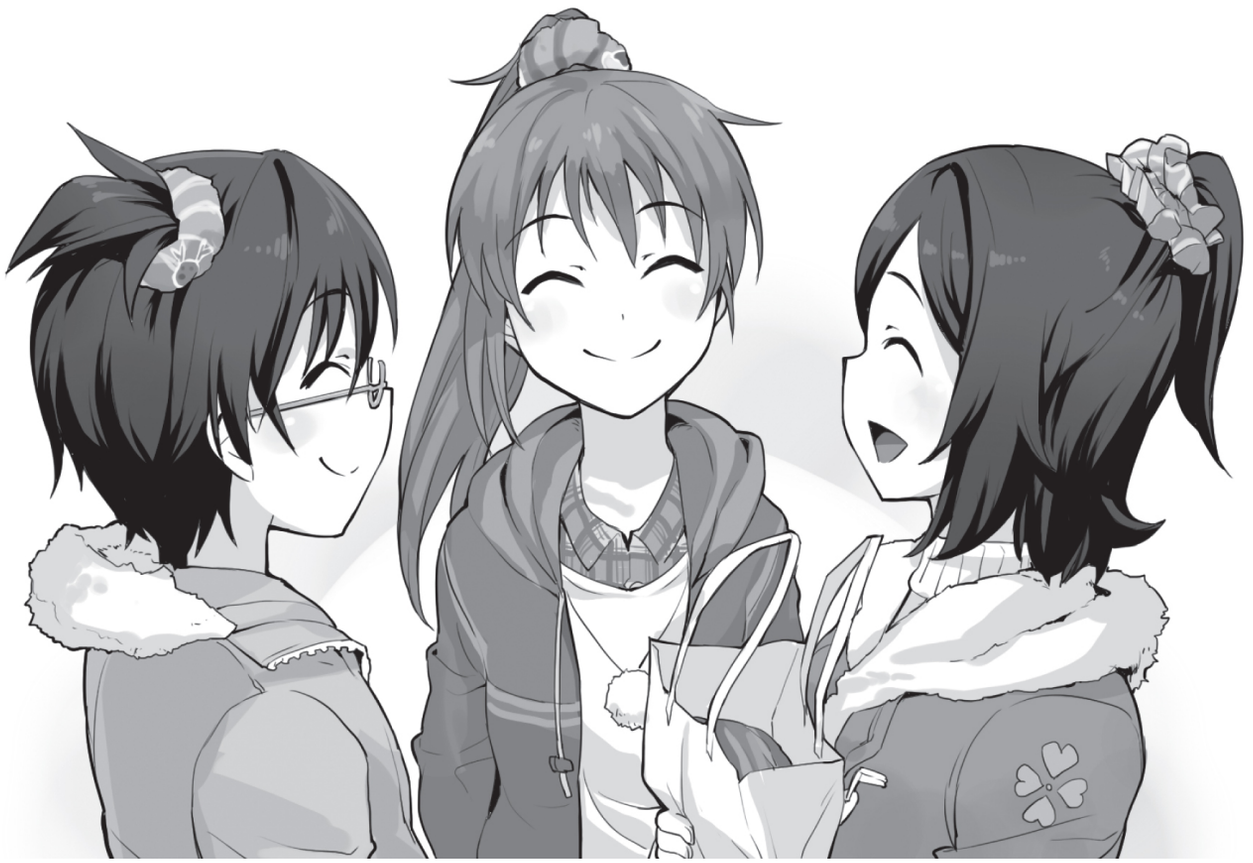
You know, it actually works for him.

“Aw, it’s nothing. I’m glad you like it.”

“Yeah… I’ll take good care of it.”

Ever since the school festival, Kei has started talking to other kids in our class, not just Misaki and me. Although, it sounds like most people still found him difficult to approach.

Misaki glanced at her watch.



“We should get going soon. It’s almost time for the train.”

She, Yuzuki, and Kei began to walk toward the elevator.

My eyes followed Kei as the rest of the group went ahead.

Now that I think about it, why did I even want to hide the fact that Kei and I share a room in the first place? I guess I’m embarrassed about it, but why…?

Hmm…

Eh, it doesn’t matter why! Sometimes, you’re just embarrassed about stuff!

“Asuka!”

Before I knew it, the other three were pretty far ahead of me.

“Whoops! Coming!”

Calling to my friends, I ran and caught up to them.

4
Asuka's One Lucky Girl!

"Brrr, it's windy!"

I shrank into myself, shivering in the cold wind.

Bet Kei's nice and warm in his hat.

The shops in the downtown area we usually went to had been displaying red and green Christmas decorations for a while now. "Jingle Bells" was playing on a radio somewhere, and there was a man dressed up as Santa Claus selling cakes outside the bakery. Seeing the town have so much Christmas spirit felt so festive and exciting!

In the center of the street, there was a big Christmas tree decked with lights. It was very pretty at night.

"Oh, hey. It's Asuka."

"You headed somewhere?"

Hearing familiar voices, I turned to find the older man who worked at the fish market and the woman who sold vegetables.

Er…huh?! What's with those outfits?!

Instead of their usual work uniform and aprons, they were both dressed from head to toe in bright red.

"Are you supposed to be Santa and Mrs. Claus…?"

"Who else would we be?! It's Christmas! We look pretty Santa-y, eh?"

"Y-yeah…"

I nodded awkwardly.

"You know, I don't think Santa would wear a sushi-chef bandana…?"

"Hmph! I have to wear this if I'm going to make good fish!"

“If you weren’t so stubborn, maybe the customers would come here instead of the grocery store!” The older woman scolded the man.

“What’d you say?!” he shot back.

“You heard me!”

Sparks flew between the pair as they engaged in a stare-down.

“H-hey, c’mon, you two. Let’s not fight,” I said. “By the way, what’s are you guys doing out of the store anyway?” Maybe changing the subject would help them calm down.

“You can’t tell? We’re having a raffle!”

Behind them there was a long table with one of those spinny raffle drums.

“Let us know if you or your friends have any tickets left, because today’s the last day to draw.”

Tickets? Oh, you know what, I remember getting something with my receipt the other day when I bought some pens at the store.

I checked in my wallet, and there were two slips of paper.

Hmm?

“I have a ticket…voucher?”

“Oh, you’re gonna need five of those for one draw,” said the fish seller. He sounded disappointed.

“If that’s the case, I have one of those vouchers, too.”

“Me too, I think.”

Misaki and Yuzuki each produced a single voucher from their bags.

“I didn’t think I’d get to actually use this since we need five, but I’m glad I held on to it,” Yuzuki said with a smile as she handed me her extra voucher.

“That makes four. Just one more…”

And it’s not like Kei’s gonna have one, I thought as I looked at my cousin, when…

“Here…”

…he handed me a piece of paper that had the words *Raffle Voucher* on it.

“Wait, what?! Why do you have a voucher?!”

“Remember when Uncle Tsubasa had me pick up some eggs for him the other day? Well, I forgot to give him the voucher.”

Huh, how about that.

“Hey, you get one pull. Okay, who’s gonna spin the wheel?” the man asked.

“I think Asuka should!” Misaki responded without hesitation.

“Asuka, eh? She has a habit of winning all the best prizes.”

“Yeah, she’s super lucky.”

“Really?! You mean she wins lotteries?” Yuzuki asked eagerly.

“No! I wish we were talking about the lottery! Then I’d be rich. I just got a salad-dressing combo set last year, and a beer case the year before. I never win anything I actually want!”

“Well, you’re luckier than me, Asuka. The most I’ve ever won is some tissues.”

“I guess… My dad sure is happy whenever I win.”

“Don’t forget you always pull the best kind of fortune every New Year when we visit a temple for the first time that year.”

“What, no way! Wow, Asuka! You’re super lucky!” Yuzuki’s eyes were sparkling.

“So it’s not just your physical fitness and dexterity,” said Kei. “You must have animal-like instincts when it comes to these things…”

Hey! Don’t compare me to animals just because everyone else is surprised!

“All righty! Sounds like Asuka’s the luckiest out of the four of you, so you’re up! Give ’er a spin!” the man said, and I walked up to the raffle drum. There were some prizes next to it: a set of different seasonings, a box of mixed soaps, stuff like that.

Nothing worth calling home about again this year, huh…

“Win something nice, Asuka,” said Yuzuki.

Y-yup.

I nodded and grabbed the handle on the drum.

But I only get to do this because we all had vouchers. Well, even the worst prize is some tissues, which are always nice to have on hand, I guess.

I gripped the handle tightly.

I’ll win something, all right! Sixth place, at the very least! The snack pack looks good!

“Here goes nothing.”

I began spinning the raffle drum, and you could hear the contents begin to jumble inside.

Halfway through the spin, only halfway more to go…

C’mon, gimme something!

Clink.

A silver ball spilled out of the drum.
“We have a big winner!”
The man rang a hand bell loudly as he exclaimed this.
Oh?



“You won the special prize—a New Year’s countdown overnight cruise! You’re getting two pairs of tickets, for a total of four people!”

Huh?

I blinked rapidly as I processed his words.

“Asuka! I knew you’d win!”

“Wow, Asuka! Wow!”

Misaki and Yuzuki held each other’s hands, jumping up and down in glee.

“Wait… Whaaaaaat?! So I actually won something?! And it’s not salad dressing?!”

“That’s right, Asuka!”

The older woman leaned onto the table.

“A company actually came forward and sponsored this prize for us this year. The tickets are for a luxury cruise ship called the SS *Flower Song*, where you’ll get to spend New Year’s night.”

A luxury cruise ship?

I couldn’t process what I’d heard.

“You’ll get to participate in a countdown party on a super-fancy boat. Lucky you, Asuka!”

The woman was beaming as she handed me an envelope.

“You said I had two pairs of tickets for four people?”

“That’s right.”

“Then that means we can all go!”

I looked at Misaki and Yuzuki.

“What do you say about the four of us going together?”

“You sure? But you were the one who won.”

“Of course I’m sure! I only got to try thanks to everyone’s tickets!”

My two friends smiled back at me.

“I definitely want to go if I can! I just need to ask my parents first,” said Misaki, and Yuzuki nodded in agreement.

It made sense. If we were celebrating New Year’s on a boat, we would be spending the night there.

Oh, right. What about Kei?

I turned around to look at Kei, who was standing quietly behind me.

He shook his head.

“I’m not going.”

Ha-ha-ha… Yeah… I know how carsick Kei gets. I don't want to imagine what would happen if he spent the night on a boat. Not much you can do about that!

I'm looking forward to spending New Year's on a boat with my friends, though! Maybe this is the world's way of giving me a Christmas present!

5
So Why's Kei So Excited About Puppetry?

"Are you all right, Kouzuki?" Yuzuki asked Kei—she seemed concerned.

"Ugh…"

Kei held his hand to his mouth, his face pale. He could hardly walk straight.

We'd had an hour-long train ride, so his car sickness—or train sickness, in this case—was worse than usual.

The four of us were standing in a long, long line in front of the entrance to the Hanasato Museum of *Karakuri* Puppetry.

"I guess people really wanna see that two-hundred-year-old clock. If it's really that popular, they should show it all year long instead of just one day."

"It's for…a special occasion… It's the only granddaughter…of the head of the Hanasato family's…birthday… Eugh…," Kei explained—he still didn't look too good. Trying to talk apparently made him even sicker.

"So that's what that's for, huh." Misaki pointed to a large banner hanging from the museum.

Hmm? What's it say?

THE HANASATO PUPPETRY COLLECTION IS ON DISPLAY TO COMMEMORATE KOTONE HANASATO'S BIRTHDAY.

Whoa, all this for a birthday? I bet that's embarrassing… Kotone Hanasato must be the granddaughter Kei was talking about.

"They were talking about the Hanasato Group the other day on TV. They're involved with imports, anything from cars and computers to food, which is why they have influence around the

world. It sounds like even world leaders would be champing at the bit to meet the head of the Hanasato Group."

"Wh-whoa. They must be super rich, then."

"That's right… The head of the…Hanasato Group…is one of the world's wealthiest people… And he's also a fervent collector…of art and cultural handicrafts… But he's also famous for…being eccentric…and always said…he would never show this collection…" Kei was making sick faces the whole time he was explaining.

You really don't have to push yourself so hard. But it's always helpful to know what you know.

"Get this, Asuka," said Misaki, reading a pamphlet. "It looks like there'll be an outdoor event in the afternoon. They're going to control a giant puppet."

A giant puppet? Sounds cool!

The four of us continued our conversation until, before we knew it, it was our turn to enter the museum.

It's so crowded! I need to pay attention so I don't bump into people too much. Looks like everyone's supposed to flow in one direction.

"Kei, we're finally here. It's the museum you were so excited about. I just wish you were feeling a little better…"

I turned around to speak with Kei, but he and his pale face were nowhere in sight.

Huh?

I looked around and around until I saw him glued to one of the exhibits.

He was still white as a sheet, but his upset stomach wasn't going to stop him from enjoying the museum.

What're you looking at? A Japanese doll?

A doll with a bright-white face and a topknot was holding a bow.

"It looks pretty neat and all, but where's the clockwork?"

"Inside. This puppet is the work of Hisashige Tanaka."

"So what's the big deal with it?"

"Back during the Edo period, adding clockwork mechanisms to dolls was a fad. This was one of those dolls, and it was made by a genius inventor."

“I’ve heard that name before,” said Misaki, wandering up next to Kei. “They were talking about him on TV the other day. He’s the person who founded Toshiba, right?”

I know Toshiba! Wait, so that company’s been around for that *long?*

“Technically, it used to have a different name, but more importantly, Hisashige Tanaka is an inventor who came up with multiple innovative ideas, many of which he worked into these clockwork dolls. And this *Arrow-Shooting Boy* happens to be one of his most famous works.” Kei was getting into one of his rare, excited moods, and a tiny bit of color was even coming back to his face.

I never thought Kei would take such an interest in something like this, or anything for that matter. What a surprise.

“Look, Asuka,” said Misaki. “They’re using some of the clockwork devices over there.”

As soon she said it, a surge of people came from behind us.

H-hey!

A giant crowd surrounded the clockwork-doll display in an instant. And everyone seemed very serious.

Th-this is kind of creepy…

“We will now activate Hisashige Tanaka’s *Arrow-Shooting Boy*,” said someone in a uniform—probably a museum employee.

“Hold on, this thing still moves?”

“Of course it does. As long as it’s well maintained, obviously. It’s a testament to how well-built it is, even for its time,” Kei stated.

“You don’t say.”

The museum worker started fiddling with the back of the doll.

“Here we go…”

The entire room went dead silent. You could almost hear people swallowing with anticipation.

Ever so slowly, the doll began to move. It tilted its head, glancing at the arrows in the quiver on its back, before grabbing one in its right hand while lifting its bow with its left.

Whoa!

Each of the tiny movements it made seemed so humanlike; it was like watching a tiny dwarf in Japanese clothing.

The doll nocked the arrow to the bow before drawing it back, tilting its head to aim and focusing on a target.

THOOP.

The fully drawn bow was released, letting loose an arrow through the air. The arrow hit its target with a loud *THUD*—bull's-eye!

"Oooh…"

The crowd was impressed.

The doll wasn't finished yet, though, quickly drawing its second arrow.

WHOOSH!

It fired once more, hitting another bull's-eye.

I noticed that the doll was sitting on top of a small box.

"I can't believe it moves because of everything in that tiny box! It's almost like there's a computer in it…"

"……"

"I—I know there's not, duh! It's from over two hundred years ago, right? You don't have to look at me like that!"

After four arrows, the museum worker said, "Thank you. And that concludes our demonstration."

He collected the fired arrows before returning them to the quiver and closing the curtain.

"I can't believe they could make dolls do that back then!"

"It's not just the *Arrow-Shooting Boy*. There were geniuses with a passion for inventing back then, too, and their work was incredible. It's why we have the technology we have today," Kei said.

I guess people who have their name written down in history books are just built different, huh.

"But…I imagine those people may have also been very lonely…"

Huh…? Lonely?

I thought of asking Kei what he meant by that, but there was a hint of sadness in his mostly expressionless face.

Oh… Kei's always called a genius, too, isn't he? Is this why he wanted to come see the karakuri *museum?*

I stared at his back as he walked ahead. I could only wonder what kind of loneliness he'd felt until now.

Continuing through the museum, we leisurely enjoyed each of the displays. Besides the many *karakuri* puppets, the collection

contained a bunch of European automatons—that's a fancy word for mechanical dolls—and clocks.

These are all so interesting. I'm not getting bored of this museum like I do with paintings in art museums. Probably because they move around and make you wonder how they work.

"I need to get through!"

As I was thinking about this, an older gentleman forced his way through the crowd, passing behind me.

He bumped into me pretty hard, but I was able to steady myself.

Hey! You gotta be more careful in a crowded place like this.

"Ah!"

Huh?

I turned around and saw a little boy stumbling backward. The man must have hit him, too.

If he falls, he's gonna crash into the display!

Instinctively, I reached out to catch the boy and help him stay balanced. Pushing him slightly back to where he'd been did the trick, but it was hard to keep my own footing in this crowd—and now I was the one off-balance.

Oh snap! Now I'm *gonna fall!!*

But just then, I felt a hand whip out and grasp my arm.

"Ah…!"

With a strong grip, the hand held me firmly in place, allowing me to catch my balance. I turned around and saw a boy who seemed to be in high school.

He looked to be over six feet tall, and I could tell by the strength of his support that he was in good shape.

"You all right?" His voice was so deep.

I looked up—

Ba-dump!

My heart started beating faster.

The boy had long hair with a slight wave to it, and I could see his sharp eyes staring straight at me through his bangs. His eyes were an interesting color—light brown, but with a hint of green in them.

Whoa… This guy looks like a celebrity, or maybe a supermodel. I've never seen a person this good-looking in the flesh before!

"Um, thank you."

Snapping out of my initial stupor, I thanked the boy. I could sense Misaki and Yuzuki were behind me, shocked.

“I’m glad you’re all right. The human race would be worse off if a girl as cute as you got hurt.”

And then he winked.

D-did he just wink?! I’ve never seen someone do that in real life…

At first, I thought he might be teasing me, but he seemed entirely serious. I was still trying to figure out what to do with this whole situation when he patted me on the shoulder.

“I’ll see you around then, cutie.”

He gave me a friendly wave as he walked away.

Wh-what just happened? He seemed cool, but there was something strange about it, too.

“Hey, Asuka! Wasn’t that guy so hot? You think he’s a high schooler?” Yuzuki exclaimed with excitement.

“Hmm, yeah, probably… He kind of had a weird vibe, though.”

“Really? He made me think of a prince! Gosh, he was *so* hot.”



“Oh? Is that your type?” I asked, and Yuzuki went red in the face.

She shook her head rapidly.

“Th-that’s not what I mean! I just thought he was good-looking, that’s all.”

“Ha-ha-ha, sorry.”

“Check it out, Asuka. It looks like that clock display over there is less crowded.”

I looked in the direction Misaki was pointing.

That’s the clock that Kei was so excited about.

“Ke—”

As I went to call Kei, I noticed he was already halfway to the clock display.

He’s practically running! I guess he really wanted to see that thing.

Well, let’s see what’s so exciting about this clock!

6
A Random Magician

The glass case was full of clocks.

So all these tick without any electricity or batteries, huh. And not only that, but they also still work after such a long time. That's crazy.

"These clocks were all made by Abraham-Louis Breguet," Kei explained.

Abracada-who? What a name.

"It's said that clock technology was advanced forward two hundred years thanks to Breguet's contributions. He was a genius clockmaker."

"He's the person who made Marie Antoinette's watch, right?" Misaki asked.

"That's correct, Himuro. You sure know your stuff. To be more precise, she ordered the world's best watch at the time, but she died during the French Revolution before she could receive it."

"I heard the watch wasn't completed until long after her death…"

"Breguet's disciples took over for him. They spent over forty-five years perfecting the watch."

F-forty-five years?!

Why would it take so long to make a single watch?!

"Breguet used brand-new mechanisms that no one at the time could've even imagined. That's why the watch took so long to make."

You say that like's it's a given, but I could never imagine spending over forty-five years making one thing…

"Is this the clock you wanted to see?" I asked him.

“Nope. The clock I’m interested in was made by someone who lived at the same time as Breguet. He was definitely a genius of the same caliber, but he never had his chance to be in the spotlight, which is why nobody knows his name. It’s only recently that people have rediscovered his works… Oh, there it is.” Kei pointed at a separate case, which already had a crowd around it.

When we finally made our way to the front, we saw a glass case with a medium-sized floor clock.

Though it wasn’t huge or anything, there was something about it that made it hard to look away.

“It’s so pretty…”

The clock was a hexagon, with gold designs on the frame and body.

The hands of the clock that showed the time also glimmered with pure gold.

“Now that’s one fancy clock. Oh? There’s a symbol on its plaque…”

“That’s a tree peony. It’s the Hanasato family’s crest.”

You don’t say!

I took a closer look at the clock. There definitely was a peony finely carved into it.

“But I thought the person who made this wasn’t from Japan? Do you think he’d ever seen a tree peony in person before?”

“I imagine when he received the order, he put tremendous work into research knowing that it was the client’s family crest. It goes to show how passionate he was about his craft.”

I mean, he must’ve been good to get orders all the way from Japan. I bet that would get my creative juices flowing, too.

“It’s not just the outer appearance that’s so impressive. This clock is filled with entirely different mechanisms from Breguet’s. Take, for example, how accurately it keeps time. During that time period, it was common for clocks to run a little slow or fast after a while. Breguet had his own method of combatting this, but this clock uses an even more precise method. It was all the creator’s original idea. The technology is so intricate that nobody can tinker with the clock now.”

Uh-huh… Honestly, I only understood about half of what Kei just said, but if he’s this into it, it’s one heck of a clock.

I watched Kei study it.

It's almost like he's trying to memorize it so he never forgets… I bet Kei has a lot of respect for inventors from two hundred years ago.

Yeah, but he'd never say that.

"We should probably move on to the next spot," Misaki said, and I noticed there was a line of people forming behind us.

You could probably watch the clock all day, but I think people would start getting annoyed at us if we did that.

"Let's go, Kei."

"Yeah…," Kei responded, but he sounded disappointed.

Just as the four of began to wade back into the crowd and away from the display, it happened—

Click.

The lights suddenly went out. The entire room was pitch-black.

RRRRRRING, RING, RING, RING.

A loud alarm started blaring at the same time.

"Aaaagh!"

"What's going on?!"

"Was there a blackout?!"

You could hear people shouting out as confusion erupted throughout the museum.

Wh-what just happened? Wait, this isn't what I think it is…is it?

Instinctively, I'd closed my eyes the moment the lights went off. I was focusing on my ears, trying to listen.

The alarm, people going nuts…and among all the chaos, I heard a tiny *tick*…

Isn't that where the golden clock was?!

I opened my eyes. I'd closed them quickly enough that I could already see a little bit in the dark. I looked around.

Huh…? Who's that next to the golden clock?!

"Hey…!"

I tried to run toward the display, but there were too many people around me, and none of them knew what was going on!!

"The lights will be back on soon. Please stay where you are and remain calm!" a security guard shouted, doing his best to soothe everyone's nerves.

And just as he said, the lights snapped back on.

You could hear everyone in the room calming down a bit—but not for long.

“Hey… Hey! Where’s the clock?!”

“Oh no! The golden clock is missing!”

“But how?! The glass case is completely sealed!”

—It must’ve been that person I saw!

I began to scan the room. I managed to see a shadowy figure moving around.

It seemed I was the only person there who realized this.

Looks like it’s up to me to chase down the criminal!

I glanced over to my side. Misaki and Yuzuki were holding one another with shocked looks on their faces.

Kei!

I switched over to Kei and signaled to him with my eyes. He didn’t ask any questions and nodded quietly.

He gets it. I’ll leave these two with you!

I spun around and made my way through the crowd, following the thief through the door into the hallway.

The floor was carpeted, which made sneaking easier. I darted into a nearby bathroom and changed into my Red outfit.

Usually, I was the one being chased, so it felt a little strange to be on the other side this time.

But Phantom Thief Red’s not gonna let anyone steal anything from under our nose and get away with it!

I quickly reached the end of the hallway, where there was a staircase.

“Up or down…”

Kei would be able to think of with a logical theory, but that’s not exactly my strong suit.

It’s time to see how lucky I really am, then!

“Up!”

I ran up the stairs. When I reached the top, there was a sign that read, STAFF ONLY—this floor must be for the museum workers.

Oh! Over there!

There was a coat discarded in the hallway.

“You’re not getting away from me!”

Slipping past the sign, I dashed down the hallway. Our target was probably hiding out in the room farthest down the hall.

I stopped right in front of the door, which was slightly open already, and peered in.

And there he was, a man standing by the window. He called out to me first.

"—Oh, I'm not hiding. Come on out, my little mouse."

The man suddenly turned around and called out to me.

I—I guess he was on to me? Welp, no point in lurking, then.

Still cautious, I slipped into the room through the cracked door, only for the man's outfit to catch me completely off guard.

This was because his outfit was entirely out of place.

He was a thin man in a black satin tuxedo that had a shine to it. On his back, he wore a large cape, and in his hand, he held a short stick. And to top it all off, he wore a black silk top hat, like a magician.

His face was concealed by a mask that covered the area around his eyes.

What's with the getup? Are you a cosplayer??

"Well, well. I thought I had a mouse on my tail. But it seems it was actually a tiger, even if only a cub."

A tiger…? What's that supposed to mean!

"You are *the* Phantom Thief Red, after all. Are you not?" the man said like it was nothing.

What… What are you saying?

"I—I saw you steal the golden clock. I was watching!" I glared at the man.

Don't let him get in your head! Just focus on getting him.

"That's right. Would you like to take a peek?" he offered as he produced the golden clock from out of his cape. You could see the gold shine even in the dimly lit room.

I knew it!

"Yes… That's it… That's the intensity I like to see. I'm only surprised by how easy it was. You think the Hanasato family would guard their hidden treasure a bit more, wouldn't you? What a letdown. I'm happy you're here, to keep me entertained," the man said with a friendly smile.

You don't think I have a chance at stopping you, do you? Well, we'll see about that!

"Who are you?!"

Ready for whatever was to come, I took a step closer to the man. I still wasn't close enough to land an attack, though.

There was also something off about the man's appearance. He was slim—he didn't look like someone who exercised, but I could tell he wasn't ordinary.



My sixth sense was telling me not to get too close without a plan.

"My name… Yes, I suppose my personal aesthetic dictates that I ought to give you one."

The man removed his silk top hat with one hand while grabbing his cape with the other, flapping it out in an over-the-top manner.

Wh-what's this guy gonna do now?!

I braced myself as he gave an elegant, deep bow. He was like a famous magician answering the call for an encore.

"Allow me to introduce myself, ma'am. I am Phantom Thief Fantasista, a magician who inspires awe and glee in people."

"So you're a magician…?"

I blinked a couple of times. It was strange to hear the words come from his mouth.

While I was taken aback by his intro, I suddenly heard some white noise buzzing in my ear, followed by a voice.

"—Phantom Thief Fantasista is a world-renowned thief that operates out of central Europe."

"Kei! Why are you here? What about the others?"

"I'm with them. We were escorted outside by museum security after having our things searched. The police will be here soon, so you don't have to worry about us."

"That's good! So that means now we can work together like we always do! So this phantom thief is from Europe?!"

"If he's the real Fantasista, then he's responsible for the Great Disappearing Act, the Florence Miracle, and a number of other thefts that were supposed to be impossible."

"Wait, so he's really famous?!"

"On an international level, probably even more well-known than Phantom Thief Red."

"Really?!"

I looked over at the Fantasista, who was grinning back at me. He had changed his stance to face me now.

"I believe that's enough for salutations. With that, I must bid you adieu."

"Wh-where do you think you're going?!"

"You want more?"

With the grin still stretched across his face, Fantasista snapped his fingers, and a cloud of colorful flower petals erupted from the silk hat he had in his hand.

Wh-what's going on?!

The flower petals swirled around the room, shielding him from view.

"Asuka!"

I—I know!

"Hiyah!"

I swiftly burst through the floral cloud and kicked the silk hat, stopping the surge of flower petals.

The hat made an arc through the air before landing softly on Fantasista's head.

"Give back the golden clock you stole!"

"Well, those are words I never expected to hear from the mouth of a fellow phantom thief."

We're not the same! Red steals in the name of justice!

"I suppose it doesn't matter. Challenge accepted. I have a bone to pick with Phantom Thief Red, so I'll do this especially for you."

A bone to pick? What bone? I have no idea what he's talking about…

"Let's play a little game," Fantasista said gleefully. "I will tell you my next target. If you can stop me from stealing my mark, you win. If I elegantly pilfer the goods, then victory is mine. A simple game, yes, but don't you think it'd be so much fun?"

"No…! I'm not gonna play games with you!"

"Oh? Are you sure about that? The Japanese police will have not the slightest chance of stopping me… Though, I suppose the same goes for you."

Argh! Why's he acting all high-and-mighty?! He's making me mad!

"—Asuka."

I heard Kei speaking quietly in my ear.

What?! You better not tell me to back out!

"Accept his challenge."

He was keeping his voice down, but his words were crystal clear.

That's what I like to hear!

I turned back to Fantasista, stared him down, and then pointed right at him.

“Fine, I’ll play your game, but…you’ll need to get away from me here first!”

The threat didn’t have much of an effect on Fantasista. He just smiled back at me. “I’m glad to hear you’re up for the challenge. I look forward to the next time we meet, Red.”

Ugh, this is so weird!

I rushed toward Fantasista, closing the gap between us. He didn’t move a muscle in response.

I’ve got you!

And like that—

—Fantasista took a light step back while waving his wand. With a *pop*, some sort of fluid came flying out of the tip. It didn’t matter, though, because it wasn’t going to touch me.

“What’s that supposed to—? Huh?!”

I felt a chill run down my spine and reflexively leaped back.

And in the next instant—

KABOOM!

—a loud explosion rang out, and a pillar of fire erupted from the ground high enough to brush against the ceiling.

“Whoa!”

What the heck is that?!

The pillar of flame shot up in an instant, only to disappear in the next. Fantasista, however, was nowhere to be seen.

“He…he got away!” I peered out the window, and he wasn’t there. “But where did he go?!”

“Asuka… There’s a card on the wall.”

Just as Kei said, there was a letter-sized card stuck into the wall. I pulled it out.

“What is this?”

A poem?

On the night of the full moon, where you can hear the blossoms.
The black charcoal will disappear when the 108 is over.
And eternal bonds will be lost.

Is this supposed to be his hint for his next heist? I have no idea what it's trying to say…

"Does he really think he can fool us with such a simple riddle?"

I was surprised to hear Kei so angry.

"Have you already figured out the answer?"

"Yeah… I'll explain it later. For now, I want you to examine the area on the floor where the fire came out."

"Oh, sure. Why not?"

There were burn marks and flower petals all over the floor.

This is going to be a pain in the butt for the janitor later.

"That's what I thought," Kei mumbled.

What exactly is there to think? Why would a big pillar of fire burst out of a regular old floor?!

"There's something on the floor, all right. My guess is metallic sodium. He must've used the flowers as a distraction to plant it."

"And metallic sodium is…?"

"Metallic sodium reacts to water. It creates a small explosion, like the one you saw before."

"Aha! So it was water he shot out of his wand!"

"Did you hear that? It came from over there!"

I could hear people coming from down the hall.

"We'd better get out of here, too."

I peeked out the window to make sure there was space to land and jumped out. As I fell through the air, I kicked off the wall, did a flip, and landed on my feet.

Phantom Thief Fantasista, huh…? I'm not gonna let you win next time! I'll stop you from stealing, no matter what!

7
Avenging the First Red?!

The next morning, which was a Sunday, us Kouzukis all sat around the living room table.

Kei hadn't spoken a word about Fantasista since the encounter. He'd gone completely quiet, lost deep in thought—until today, when he gathered us in the living room out of nowhere.

"Kei! Would you hurry up and tell me what's up with that riddle on the card?! And about Fantasista, too."

I've been thinking about it all night!

"Don't get riled up, Asuka. Here, drink this. It'll help you calm down a bit." My dad set a teacup down in front of me.

Hmm? What's this?

There was a pleasant fragrance that rose from the cup. It smelled nice, and I felt like I was growing calm just by smelling it.

"It's sage herbal tea," Kei said after glancing at the cup.

Sage? Isn't that what you call a wise old wizard or something?

"Sage is a perennial grass from the Lamiaceae family," Kei explained. "It's often used to soften the gamy taste of meat. You can also dry the leaves to turn it into an herbal tea, like this, to drink. It's capable of calming anxiety. Eastern medicine still does this now, but people used to mix this along with other flowers, minerals, and animal parts to make medicine. Though in the past, they used to base their recipes off experience as opposed to scientific evidence, many of its uses from that time are still practiced today."



“That’s our Kei. You sure know your stuff.”

Look at that. So you even know about herbal teas, huh. But… that’s not what we’re here to talk about!

“Just give the tea a try, Asuka. I made it with honey, so you can drink it, too.”

Hmph.

I obediently took a sip of the tea he prepared for me. Though it was a little bitter, I could taste the sweetness of the honey.

Wow, that’s pretty good!

“I could tell you were worked up about this, so I made it to calm you down a bit before we get into the details.”

Uh-huh! My dad’s a big, strong guy, but he has a way of paying attention to little details like this.

And he was right. I did seem to calm down after drinking the tea. I’d been caught off guard by the magic from the day before, and that shock turned to anxiety over time.

There was just no telling what Fantasista was capable of, after all. Would I really be able to compete with him in a game?

Not that I’d ever lose, of course!

“Kei. It’s your job as her guide to help calm Asuka’s nerves when she needs it. I’m sure you’ve already done the research for her, right?” said Uncle K, and Kei nodded back.

“Phantom Thief Fantasista operates primarily out of central Europe. His age and nationality are unknown, but he is an Asian male. That’s all I know after a night’s worth of research.”

“Huh? That’s all? That’s practically nothing. What does that name mean anyway?”

“*Fantasista* is originally Italian for someone who can do anything, though it is usually used for soccer now.”

“Soccer? What does soccer have to do with thievery?”

“In Italy, they use the word for players who can pull off wild plays that no one would ever think of and make them work. That was how this phantom thief earned his name. Evidently, people started calling him it after his heists, which no one saw coming.”

So it’s a name he didn’t give himself. Although, he seemed happy to drop it yesterday.

“One of his most famous heists was the Great Disappearing Act, when he made every painting in an entire museum disappear in a single day.”

“That’s the one you mentioned yesterday!”

“Yeah, and this isn’t just any museum we’re talking about here. It was the Musée d’Orsay in France, one of the world’s most prominent museums. And he stole every single painting out of it, including works by Millet, Van Gogh, Cézanne, and a litany of other famous painters. If you were to put a price on it, it would cost hundreds of millions, no…maybe even billions of dollars.”

“Billions?! Why would he need to steal if he had all that money?!”

“That’s actually part of why they call him Fantasista.”

Go on?

“Evidently, he steals for fun. He’s not going out of his way to hurt people, but he doesn’t have a greater purpose, either, like how Red steals for what’s right or to return things to their original owners. He enjoys treating the public as an audience to dazzle and charm. He’s an artist.”

What?! So he’s stealing for no reason? That makes no sense!

“Judging by the scale of some of his heists, I doubt he’s working alone. Either he is a part of a team…or maybe even an organization. I’ve looked into it, but it’s still unclear.”

If even Kei couldn’t find an answer, it must be really something…

“That’s pretty much all I can say about the matter for now,” Kei said before looking to Uncle K, who was tying up his long hair. He always had a mellow look on his face, but he was the original shot caller behind Phantom Thief Red. He was the one who had supported my dad all through Red’s history, and he’s Kei’s predecessor.

“All you know is that there isn’t much to know, I take it?”

Kei shrugged.

“There’s one more thing, and it’s that Fantasista said he has a bone to pick with Red. But we’ve never met him before, which means any business he has is with you.”

Wait, what? Does that mean Dad knows about Fantasista?

Uncle K nodded.

“That’s correct. It happened ten years ago, when Red was traveling to Europe. We learned of a location where a large quantity of stolen goods was being kept. Diamonds, gold bars, and the like. Your uncle and I traveled there to investigate the

scene, but when we arrived, all that was left was Fantasista's card."

But that would mean…you guys lost—?!

"Ah-ha, how long has it been now?" My dad let out a boisterous laugh.

Hey! It's no laughing matter, Dad…! Why didn't you tell us something that important?!

"You two are Red now. You've gotta practice putting in the work to learn these things; we can't just hand everything to you. That being said, Kei is looking for answers that only we have now. Right, Kei?"

Is that true, Kei?

"I'll tell them, since I was working as the navigator back then," said Uncle K. "When Tsubasa entered the storage facility where the stolen goods were supposed to be, everything was already gone. What was left were the people who worked for the crime ring that'd stolen everything—and they were battered and bruised."



My dad took over the conversation from there.

“I managed to shake one of the semiconscious workers awake, and the only thing he kept repeating was *‘They sent him. They sent Fantasista.’*”

“Who’s they?”

“We don’t know—if they were an organization or what. But one thing’s for sure: That Fantasista is no ordinary phantom thief. Keiichiro looked into it, but we came up with nothing. It was the one and only time someone left us in the dust.”

Somebody left you guys in the dust…? Both me and Kei both know that’s definitely not easy.

“But…hmm? Wait. If he was active ten years ago when you guys were Red, that means he’s probably a lot older. Does that make him a veteran?”

“That’s pretty likely. He’s definitely no newbie thief like the two of you still are.”

Hrmmm… I only got to see him in the dark, but he looked and sounded a lot younger.

I tilted my head to the side in thought.

“But whatever the case may be, he was able to beat the original Red. And now we’re gonna go up against him!”

“Exactly.”

“Why are you two so calm about this?!”

My dad shrugged. “What’s past is past. But if you guys manage to win against him, we would feel pretty good about it.”

“Don’t egg them on too much, Tsubasa,” Uncle K said with a friendly tone.

“Kei…”

I looked at my cousin, and he was already looking at me.

His eyes were glimmering.

Seems like we’re both thinking the same thing. We’re gonna stop that Fantasista—no matter what!

“But first, I need you to tell me what that secret message was all about.”

“That? It was almost insulting with how obvious it was.”

“Ah! That’s why you sounded angry when I first checked the card. I have no idea what any of it means, either way.”

“To start, let’s look at the first line. *On the night of the full moon, where you can hear the blossoms.* The full moon part is easy—it

takes approximately fifteen days from a full moon to a new moon, then another fifteen for a full moon to appear. The next full moon is on December thirty-first. Now, the next line: *where you can hear the blossoms.* Blossoms? A song? There's only one place that comes to mind."

"And where's that?"

"The SS *Flower Song*."

"Wait… Seriously?! Isn't that the boat we won tickets to go on?"

"That's right." Kei grimaced.

"But what if he's talking about a full moon after the New Year? And there's gotta be other spots that have to do with flowers and noise."

"The answer to that question is in the next line: *The black charcoal will disappear when the 108 is over.* 108 is the number of times the New Year's bell rings every year. It's tradition to ring it 108 times to get rid of suffering—based on the four and eight kinds of Buddhist suffering, called *shikuhakku*."

I know that bell! They usually ring it when I'm eating New Year's dinner!

"So…why do they ring it 108 times for suffering?"

"It's a mathematical breakdown of the concept of *shikuhakku*. The *shi* means 'four,' and the *ku* means 'suffering,' but it's also a homonym for 'nine.' *Hak* means 'eight,' and the second *ku* is the same; both 'suffering' and 'nine.' 4 times 9 plus 8 times 9 is 108.'"

Four times…nine plus… He's right! I guess that means December 31 is the right day.

"And finally, the other two aspects: *The black charcoal will disappear…and eternal bonds will be lost.* Diamonds are a form of carbon, just like charcoal is. Eternal bonds are something associated with diamonds, and black diamonds are some of the most expensive. I'm guessing he's after one now."

Hold on now! This is starting to sound like a stretch.

Kei must've guessed what I was thinking.

"Alone, each association does sound like a stretch, but they all fit together perfectly. December thirty-first, the SS *Flower Song*, and a black diamond. With these three pieces of information in mind, it paints a picture of what Fantasista's aim is."

"Well, what is it?"

“The Black Tear. It’s a necklace that’s been passed down for generations by the Hanasato Group, the same family who owns the Hanasato Museum of *Karakuri* Puppetry we went to yesterday. It’s part of a set with the golden clock he stole. I have it on good authority that the granddaughter of the family will be on the ship that night, wearing the necklace. With this many circumstances in line, it’s hard to call it a coincidence.”

True…

“Thanks, Kei,” said Dad. “Well, there you have it. So what are you going to do, Asuka?”

What am I gonna do…? That should be obvious!

“We already have tickets for the SS *Flower Song*. We’ll go with Misaki and Yuzuki, and we’ll whip that old Fantasista’s butt while we’re at it!”

“You make it sound like it’ll be easy.”

Well, sheesh! What am I supposed to do…?

“Since Asuka’s animal instincts did win us those tickets, we should use them well. Being able to sneak onto the ship as official guests will make things easier,” Kei said.

Animal instincts… I’m starting to think you actually believe I’m part animal. Hmph! The plan sounds good, though!

“Wait. Doesn’t that mean Kei is going to have to come with me to the SS *Flower Song*?”

“It does…”

Oh? You don’t say?

Now I see why Kei’s in such a bad mood—he has to ride a boat! And for over half a day…? And there’s no getting off the ship once it sets sail.

“We’ll just have to make it work,” Kei said, with an angry tone that was unusual for him.

I-is he really going to be all right?

8
Helping a Passerby

“I think we should be able to see it soon!” I said, looking over my shoulder. Behind me was Misaki and Yuzuki, and farther behind them was Kei, pale in the face and swaying as he tried to keep up.

Today was December 31, and the four of us were walking down the main street toward the port. The reason for that should be obvious: We’re on our way to ride the SS *Flower Song*!

It took us an hour and a half and two transfers to get far enough by train that we could walk the rest of the way to the port. That was enough to make Kei dizzy.

Will he really survive the cruise? I won’t be able to do much without him.

Our goal for the day was to spend New Year’s Eve on the ship!

Although…Kei and I had one more important goal in mind.

We’d been walking for five minutes after leaving the subway station. Right next to us was a large park, with the open sea on the other side of it.

“You can smell the sea salt in the breeze! It really lets you know you’re near the ocean.” Yuzuki took a deep breath.

Now that I think about it, this is my first time coming to the ocean during the winter.

“We’re almost there, Asuka. That tower is a landmark.” Misaki pointed to a large steel tower on the side of the road. Once we passed that and turned—

“Whoa! Are we gonna ride that?!” I yelped.

Even though we were still pretty far away, you could see the giant ship parked in the harbor.

The white cruise ship glinted in the sunlight. On the deck, there was a large smokestack with white smoke coming out of it, and on the side of the ship, there were the words *Flower Song* written in yellow paint.

That's the ship for sure!

"Let's go!"

Misaki and Yuzuki called to me, snapping me out of my captivation toward the sheer scale of the big boat, and we walked closer to it.

The size of the ship was even more overwhelming up close.

I mean, it looks like a ship, but is it really? There's a four-floor apartment complex and hotel built on top of it. Those are probably guest rooms, but it seems like there are about twenty of them surrounding a big balcony—that goes up so high! How many people does this thing hold? I can't even imagine!

"And oh? What are those?"

Near the back of the boat, there were small orange boats piled up.

"Those rafts are probably for an emergency if we have to get off the boat. I saw them in a movie once." Misaki answered.

Wow. So this boat's even got its own boats. Pretty strange, if you think about it.

As we got even closer to the ship, I could hear a lower *brrr* kind of sound.

That must be the engine.

"It really is massive…" Yuzuki looked up at the ship with wide eyes.

There were a lot of ships in the harbor, like fishing boats and tankers, but all of them paled in comparison to the *Flower Song*.

"It must be over three hundred feet long. Maybe even more…"

"It's seven hundred twenty-five feet long overall…and weighs forty-two tons…with a capacity of fifteen hundred passengers… It is definitely…the largest luxury cruise ship in Japan… Eugh…" Kei stood behind us, pale in the face. Just seeing the ship in person seemed to make him sicker.

I started to turn around. "All right, let's find where the—"

"Stop! Thief!" I heard someone yell.

Wh-what's going on?!

I turned to see a man carrying a woman's bag, running away at a full sprint. He was being chased by a man in a black suit.

"Outta the way!" the man yelled, and he was so forceful that people were automatically stepping aside just to avoid him. At this rate, he was going to pass right in front of us.

Hmm—how about this?

"Outta the way, girlie! Comin' through!"

I felt a tiny bit of spit hit me as he yelled, charging toward us.

I took a step back to get out of his path, or at least that's what I pretended to do…but as soon as he passed in front of me, I stuck out my leg.

"…Oof!!"

The man stumbled onto the ground.

Ouch, that's gotta hurt…

In the next instant, the man in the black suit jumped on top of the thief's back and wrestled the bag out of his hands.

"Noooooo!"

"Got 'im!"

"I saw that girl trip him."

The surrounding crowd began to clap and cheer.



Whoops… I was hoping not to get caught, but it looks like someone saw me.

I looked over at Kei, and he was already giving me a look.

He did say not to draw attention…

“Are you all right, Asuka?” Misaki asked.

“Why are you always doing such dangerous things?” Yuzuki looked at me with worry.

“I’m fine. All I did was stick my foot out a little.”

“And thank you so much for that! I owe you.”

A girl in expensive-looking clothing was standing nearby.

She seems too mature to be in high school, so she must be in college.

The girl had fluffy, wavy brown hair and an emerald-green dress (that looked great on her). Her face was also very pretty, and she had a soft air about her.

Behind her was another man wearing a black suit, just like the one sitting on top of the thief.

Are these her bodyguards?

“I’m grateful for your bravery. Thank you,” the girl said with a warm smile.

“Aw, it was nothing.”

I really only did move my foot out a little, after all. She was making such a big deal out of it that I started to blush.

“Here you go, miss.” The man in the black suit handed the girl’s bag back to her. She then turned to face a woman who seemed to be around thirty standing nervously behind the second bodyguard.

“Sorry for the wait, but we got it back.” She handed the bag to that woman.

“Th-thank you!” The woman took the bag with a little bow of appreciation.

“Huh? That’s not yours?” I asked the girl.

“If you’re going to thank someone, it should be that girl over there. It was with her help that we were able to catch the guy.”

The woman bowed to me this time.

Uh-oh, now we’re really starting to stand out.

“Asuka, we better get in line,” said Misaki, and I checked my watch.

Oh, whoops! There’s only fifteen minutes before it goes!

“Well, we gotta go! Bye-bye!” I nodded to the girl, and the four of us rushed the rest of the way to the boat. We arrived at the gangway, the ramp that connected the ship to the harbor. Everyone waiting in line was adults, and they were all dressed fancy.

The men were in suits and tuxedos, and the women had their hair done up, wearing expensive-looking dresses and jewelry.

Uh-oh… Do we kind of stick out like a sore thumb…? I came in what I wear every day. And we’re the only middle schoolers!

“Do you think they’ll let us on like this…?” Misaki said with an anxious look on her face. Yuzuki was looking around, and her shoulders were a little hunched.

“I-it’ll be okay! We’ve got our tickets, after all.”

But I was getting worried myself, and I checked the tickets again.

They were printed on expensive-looking red paper, with a golden stamp on them. They sparkled when I held them against the light; it was so pretty.

Yup! It’ll be fine! It says SS Flower Song *right here, so we’re on the right ship.*

“Let’s stop worrying so much and focus on having fun!” I said. “Look, it’s our turn.”

The person in front of us walked up the gangway, and I was next in line.

“Show me your ticket, please.”

A man who worked on the ship wearing white slacks and a green jacket was there to check our tickets.

I handed him mine, and he ran his eyes over it.

Whew, I’m getting nervous! He’s not gonna say no because we’re kids, is he? Or ask us where we got our tickets…?

The man looked up at me and smiled. “Ah, you’re the raffle winners. I heard you would be coming today. We’ve prepared two rooms specially for you. Please enjoy your cruise.”

All my tension melted away.

Whew…

I could hear Misaki and Yuzuki give sighs of relief as well.

Kei, on the other hand, was still standing hesitantly in front of the gangway.

I went back and grabbed him by the arm.

“H-hey, st-stop…,” Kei mumbled.

I ignored him, though, bringing him up the gangway to where Misaki and Yuzuki were.

“All righty! Time to board the SS *Flower Song*!”

9
It’s a Hotel on the Sea!

We climbed the gangway onto the deck of the ship.

“Whoaaa!!”

The first thing we noticed about the boat was how high the ceiling was. There was a fluffy red carpet on the floor that covered the room. There were wooden pillars everywhere, all in pristine condition, but you barely even noticed them with how much space there was to walk.

On the ceiling, there was a big chandelier that was designed to look like it was full of candles, and the lights all along the walls were warm-colored.

There was also a large circular staircase that led up into an atrium in the center of the room. The handrails were golden, and they even glimmered.

To our right, there was what looked like a restaurant, and to our left, a long walkway.

“Are we really on a boat right now? It feels like a luxury hotel. And you can’t feel the boat swaying at all. It’s like we’re not even at sea!”

“Oh… It’s swaying, all right… Just a little, but still…,” Kei mumbled through his hand that he was using to cover his mouth. He was leaning on the wall with the other hand; you could tell he was feeling sick already.

“Are you okay, Kei?” Misaki said with worry.

“Yeah… Ugh…”

We hadn’t even left the port yet, and this was the worst I’d ever seen Kei.

“Well, let’s head to our rooms first. Maybe you can get some rest there,” I suggested.

“Yeah. Um, let’s see. According to the map, this is the second floor, and our rooms are on the third.”

Misaki was looking at a map of the boat she received from the ticket checker.

It’s always great to have Misaki around at times like this! If it was up to me, I’d go without using the map and probably get lost.

The moment we reached the third floor, the four of us all looked at each other, speechless.

The third floor was a giant hallway that had rooms on either side.

Uh, we are on a boat, right? This really is just like a luxury hotel!

“Let’s see… Our rooms are 311 and 312.”

We walked down the hall until we reached the room with a plaque that read 311.

“I’ll use this room…”

Kei was now green as he took the card key to the room from Misaki.

He swiped the card, the door opened, and he swiftly entered the room.

I motioned to follow him, but Yuzuki stopped me. “Asuka, you’re staying in this room.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Even if he is your cousin, Kouzuki is still a boy. I think it’d be better if he has his own room.”

Oh…yeah! I’m so used to sharing a room with him anyway… Silly me!

“Ah-ha-ha. Y-you’re probably right… Whoops, I must still be a little out of it…”

I shrugged it off with a chuckle as I followed Misaki and Yuzuki to room 312.

“Let’s go in! I wonder what the room is like.”

The two of them started to notice how strange I was acting, but I pushed Misaki into taking the card key out.

With a *ka-chak*, the door opened up, and in we went.

“Whoa! It’s huge in here!”

I dropped my bag and took in the room. The wallpaper was a cream color with musical notes painted over it; it was so cute!

And the curtains were a tasteful light pink.

In the back of the room, we could see two fluffy beds waiting for us.

“Hey!” Misaki called. “Come get a look at this!”

I followed her voice to the bathroom.

Even the bathroom is ginormous!

The sink had a giant mirror on the wall with seats at the counter.

I bet you’d feel like a princess if you did your makeup in front of this mirror… Not that I wear any makeup.

“This bathtub is so big!”

Hearing Yuzuki’s voice, I took a peek around the corner to see the tub.

“Whoa…”

It looked big enough for all three of us to get in at the same time—it was like a pool or something.

There was a glass partition separating the bathtub from the shower.

I’ve never stayed in a luxury hotel before, but I bet it’s just like this.

We went back into the room and continued our tour.

There was a big desk, a fridge, an LCD TV, a teapot… The room had everything.

Just under the window, there was a big, fancy-looking, fluffy sofa.

And best of all…

“Look at that…”

…the view from the window was all ocean!



“I didn’t expect the room to be this fancy,” Yuzuki said with surprise as she continued to look around.

“I heard it takes around three months for this boat to sail the whole way around the globe. So I guess it’s important to keep the passengers comfy for the voyage,” Misaki told us.

Wow, three months. That’s a whole semester of school. I guess if you had to spend three months on a boat, you’d wanna spend it here, huh.

Now that I think about it…I think the bathroom may be the same size as my bedroom back home. Yeah, spending three months here would be like paradise, I bet.

So does Kei get his entire room to himself? No fair! Though, I’m sure if I said anything to him, he would do his usual unbothered thing and say something like:

“Well, you’re free to sleep here, too, if you want.”

Or something like that.

“We’re not here for the rooms, though. Let’s go explore the boat.”

“Sounds good. But what about Kei?”

Hmmm. I mean, it’s not like he’s gonna want to move around at all, so I think he’d want us to leave him alone. At the same time, he’s not actually sick-sick…

“Um, Asuka…”

Hmm? What’s up?

“…what if you tried giving Kouzuki this?” Yuzuki timidly handed me a plastic container.

“You want me to give this to Kei?”

“I thought he might have trouble with seasickness, so I asked my mom if there was anything that could help, and she gave me this.”

“Huh, I didn’t know there was food for seasickness. Let’s drop by Kei’s room before we go to explore, then.”

We went over to his door, and I rang the little doorbell. “Kei? You awake in there?”

……

No response.

Um?

I gave it another ring, but this time, I heard some rustling.

Another minute passed before the door eventually opened.

“What…?”

Kei didn’t look so hot. Even with one hand on the wall, he couldn’t stand up straight.

“Hey! Are you sure you’re gonna be okay?!”

“It’s just…seasickness… Eugh…,” Kei said before immediately covering his mouth and running back into the room.

The three of us looked at each other before we decided to follow him in.

We stepped inside and found him lying flat on the bed. He must’ve thrown up, because he seemed utterly exhausted, almost lifeless.

Kei’s only response was to shoot me a glance. I could guess what he meant: “What do you want?”

“Yuzuki said she brought something for you.”

“Something…?” Kei’s voice was dry and raspy.

“Go on, Yuzuki. Give him what you showed us earlier.”

“O-okay…” Yuzuki sheepishly walked up to the side of the bed before holding out the plastic container. “I, uh, brought this for you…”

Her voice trailed off quietly toward the end.

Still pale in the face, Kei pushed himself up and took the container.

He opened it up to find…pickled plums and…

“Is that…ginger?”

“Yeah! It’s good for seasickness, apparently.”

Like the kind you get with sushi, eh? I’ve never really had it before.

“Pickled plums…contain picric and citric acid…which are said…to help with…seasickness. Ginger is also…something that’s… been used for a long time on boats…to fight seasickness. Chinese sailors…used to chew on ginger roots…over three hundred years ago… Eugh!”

You don’t have to explain everything when you’re in such bad shape! But I guess it’s good that you’re still thinking straight even when you feel sick.

Kei turned to Yuzuki. “Thank you, Harukawa…,” he said quietly.

“All right, Kei. We’re gonna go explore the rest of the trip. Feel better, okay?”

Misaki and Yuzuki left the room. I went to follow them, but Kei called out to me in his raspy voice. “A-Asuka…”

He wasn’t fully facing me but he turned enough to look straight at me.

I know, I know! We’re not here to have fun! Right?

“We haven’t even left the harbor yet, so I thought I’d get the lay of the land. I’ll tell you what I learn when I get back later, okay?”

Kei clearly didn’t believe me, but I think he was too tired to argue. He closed his eyes and nodded to me.

Once that was over, I exited the room back into the hallway.

“Is Kouzuki going to be all right?” Yuzuki asked me worriedly.

“He’ll be fine. It’s just some seasickness! I bet he’s chewing on those pickled plums you got for him already.”

“I hope that’s the case…”

“So where do you guys wanna go first?” I changed the subject. I knew Kei didn’t want Yuzuki and Misaki to have a bad time because of him.

“Oh, hmm. I want to see the deck.”

“Yeah! Me too.”

As the three of us began to walk, I looked back at the door to room 311.

Seeing as Kei mentioned all that about pickled plums and ginger, I’m guessing it’s something he already knew. And yet he didn’t say anything when Yuzuki brought it up—I think he’s changed a little.

Before, he would’ve been all like, “I know that.”

That said, it doesn’t look like he’s gonna leave that room any time soon, huh… I wonder if we’ll be able to beat Fantasista?

“Is something on your mind, Asuka?”

Both Misaki and Yuzuki were staring at me.

“Nope! It’s nothing!”

I shook my head and ran to catch up with my friends.

10
The Hanasato Family Treasure

We went to the stairs that led to the deck. Near the staircase, there was a small dance floor and an entrance to a café.

Everyone who passed us was dressed up in super-fancy clothing!

There were waiters and waitresses, as well as hotel workers wearing white suits and helping people find where they wanted to go.

"According to the pamphlet, there are restaurants, a beauty salon, movie theater, and an arcade on this ship."

All on a boat! And they've got staff for each one of those places. I bet the number of people on this ship who aren't passengers is crazy… There's no way we're gonna find Fantasista hidden among them.

"Asuka? Where are you going? The deck is this way." Misaki called to me.

"Oh, whoops." I rushed back to meet with her and Yuzuki.

"It says it's just up here," Misaki said as we climbed the stairs. At the top of the stairs there was a door, which opened to reveal the sky.

"Whoa!" I shouted. "Look at how wide-open it is out here!"

The deck was even bigger than our school's gymnasium, with a perfectly polished wood deck that was shining red in the sunset.

I held up both my arms and spun around. I didn't need to worry about hitting anyone with all this space, after all.

I bet I can jump around and do flips all I want out here. Not that I will or anything.

"Haaah… It's a little chilly, though."

Misaki and Yuzuki were both breathing on their hands to keep them warm and huddling up.

It was true; though the view was incredible, the salty sea breeze was pretty cold. It may have been why there was only a handful of other people out on the deck other than us.

It's kinda lonely with no one here…

"It's freezing out here. Let's go to the café downstairs."

A middle-aged couple shuffled their way from the deck back into the hull.

Actually, I bet that café we passed by earlier had a good view of the sea, too. I bet most people are down there, drinking something nice and warm while they watch the sun set.

BOOOOOOOUUUURRRRRTTTT!

The ship's foghorn suddenly blared out. It was a massive sound that I could feel in the pit of my stomach.

Wh-wh-what's going on?!

I looked around in confusion as a man's voice came over the PA.

"It is now five o'clock, so we will now depart. Please relax and enjoy your time until the party."

Oh! It's time already?

I ran over to the edge of the deck and watched as the ship slowly began to drift away from the harbor.

The moment it started to move, you could sense a slight shift in the boat's weight for a second, but nothing else after that.

I bet Kei can feel whatever swaying is happening.

"Actually, just where is this boat headed for again?"

"It says we're supposed to head out to sea, where we'll spend New Year's," Misaki answered, reading the pamphlet.

Oh, so we're just ringing in the New Year out on the ocean, huh.

"Hmph! So much for the 'Hanasato Group'! You call this a boat?"

The three of us were surprised by a loud voice behind us.

Standing there was an older, heavyset man who seemed very unfriendly. He was wearing an expensive-looking suit and smoking a cigar. Judging by the look of him, he seemed to be in his fifties.

He had streaks of white mixed into his hair, with a chinstrap beard and big, bulbous lips. His fingers each had expensive looking-rings with large jewels on them—I guessed he was super wealthy.

“Everything’s ready, Boss.”

“Can it, ya doofus! Don’t call me ‘Boss’ in front of people.”



The man smacked his companion, who was wearing a black suit.

What's up with those two…? What did that one guy mean by 'ready'…? He's not Fantasista, is he? No way, Fantasista wouldn't have been able to hide a big beer belly like that.

"Huh? What's going on here? I thought this was a luxury ship for VIPs, so what are a bunch of kids doing here?"

The man's belly swayed as he said this.

Mph. You don't gotta be mean about it!

I wanted to give him a piece of my mind, but I stopped myself. Well, more like Misaki and Yuzuki stopped me by tugging on my arm.

"Bo… Company President. You probably shouldn't do anything to draw attention."

"I know that!" the man yelled, hitting the man in the black suit again.

Well, I've definitely got my eye on him after that.

"Let's get outta here."

The man and his suited underling turned around and went down the stairs.

"What was up with that guy?!" I said angrily as soon as they were gone.

"He definitely didn't seem like a nice person…but I was more worried you were going to go and say something to him," Misaki said.

Oh… She knows me too well.

"Th-that was scary…," Yuzuki said, still clinging onto my arm.

"Everything's all right now, Yuzuki."

"Y-yeah… Thanks, Asuka."

"We should probably head back down, too," I suggested. "It's starting to get even chillier out here."

My friends both nodded.

We walked back toward the stairs, and just as we were about to pass through the door, we saw a figure coming up.

It's not that old guy again, is it?!

I braced myself, but only for a moment, as the silhouette clearly wasn't his—too skinny. When I saw who it was, I let out a sigh of relief.

"Oh, it's that girl." Misaki saw who it was, too, it looked like.

“Hmm? You’re the girls who helped me back in the harbor…?”

It was the girl we met earlier that day! And behind her were the same bodyguards who’d apprehended the bag thief.

“I’m glad we had the chance to meet again. I thought I might see you on this boat.” She smiled softly at us.

“Yes! We won the tickets for this cruise in a raffle.”

“Was it the one held downtown, by any chance?”

Huh?

“Yeah, it was…”

Why does she know about that?!

I blinked repeatedly.

“I knew it! I was the one who donated the ticket to the town raffle.”

Wait, really…?

Misaki and Yuzuki were as surprised as me.

“Right, I should probably introduce myself. My name is Kotone Hanasato. I’m a junior in college.” Kotone continued the conversation at her own pace.

I guess it’s only polite to introduce ourselves in return.

“Uh, I’m Asuka Kouzuki, and these two are my friends…”

The three of us each introduced ourselves.

Wait a sec…?

Kotone Hanasato?

I didn’t react to the name when she said it, but I feel like I’ve heard her name somewhere before…

Aaaaah! I know!!!

Misaki and Yuzuki had already figured it out, looking at how shocked they were.

“Your name was on that banner at the puppet museum on Christmas!”

It said the display was to celebrate your birthday!

“Oh, you were at the museum display. Did you enjoy yourselves? I asked my grandpa to open it up to the public.”

Your grandpa…

One of the bodyguards standing behind Kotone answered my question for me. “Ms. Hanasato is the granddaughter of the current head of the Hanasato Group and its planned future successor.”

I knew it! I mean, I'd figured you were wealthy, but talk about rich!

"That doesn't have the be the first thing you tell people!" Kotone scowled at the bodyguard for a moment before turning back to us. "Even if I take over the group, the management will be left in the capable hands of my father's closest employees. I'm pretty much a regular old college student, so you don't have to mind my family." The warm smile returned to her face.

She seems like a friendly person.

"This boat is full of people who are a lot older than us; it's so much easier to be together with people a little closer to my age. If you like, would you mind becoming friends?"

The three of us all looked at each other.

There's no reason to say no!

"Of course! We had no idea what to do on such a big boat, so it'd be nice to have someone around who knows it better."

"Wonderful! Most people tend to shut themselves off a bit when they learn I'm a Hanasato, so it's refreshing for someone to treat me like a normal person."

Is that right? I guess having a ton of money isn't all good.

"Oh, would you look at that? It looks like we've almost reached the open sea." Kotone walked over to the edge of the deck, and we followed her.

"Whoa…"

We hadn't even noticed when the land disappeared, but now there was nothing but ocean in every direction.

Far off in the distance, we could see the sun setting on the horizon.

It almost feels like we've been sucked into a fantasy world!

I glanced at Kotone from the side of my eye.

The warm light of the sunset illuminated her face—she was so pretty and mature-looking.

What's this…?

I spotted a glint of black on her chest; it was a necklace.

"I like your necklace," I said to Kotone.

"Oh, thank you. This is called the Black Tear, and the eldest daughter of the Hanasato family gets to wear it."

Did she say Black Tear?! That's the necklace Fantasista is after!

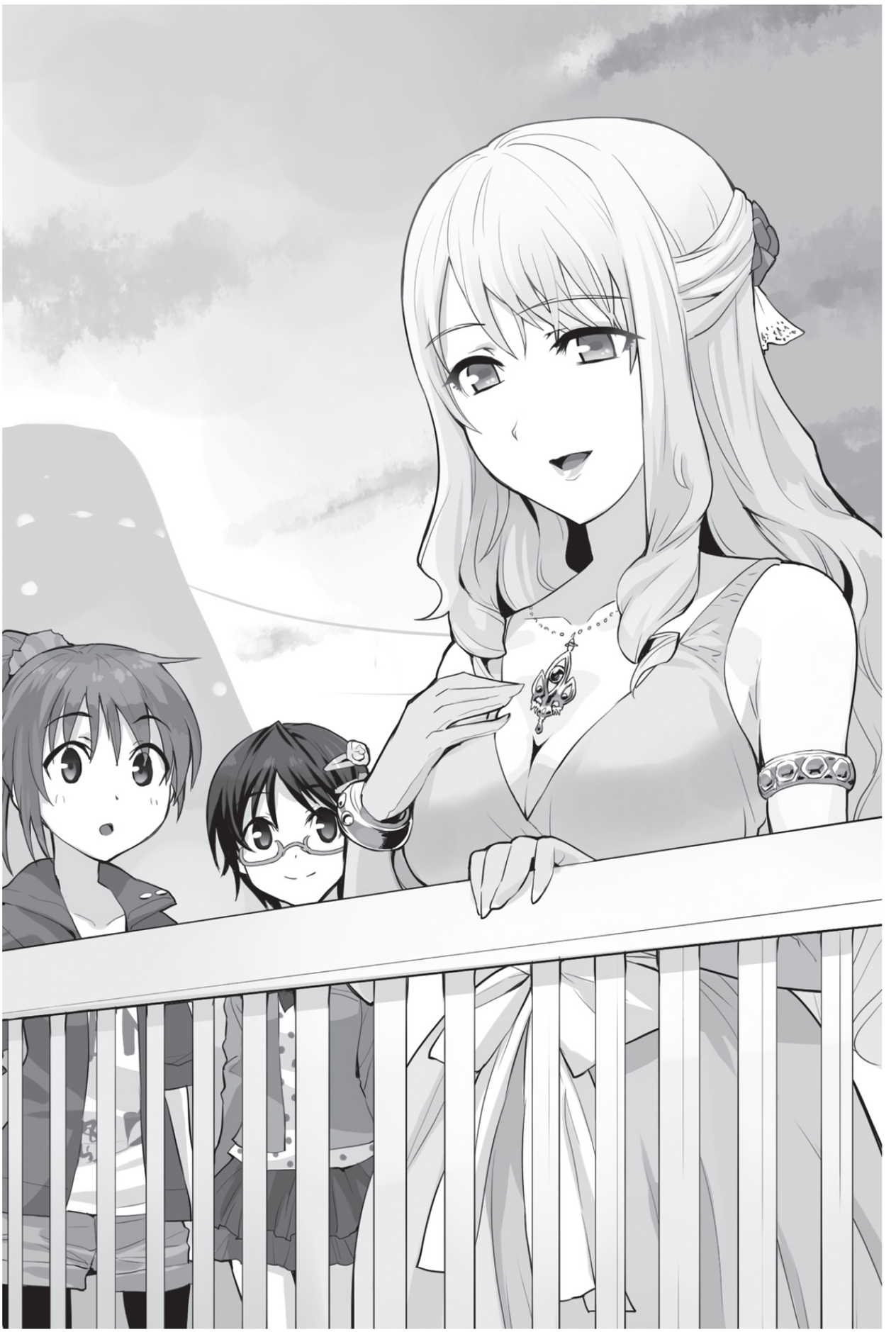
I never thought I'd get to see the real thing in a place like this.

I looked around the surrounding area.

Fantasista could be anywhere, waiting for his chance to swipe it as we speak!

“It was actually part of a set with a clock that was stolen the other day. It was taken from the display at the museum you three went to…”

“We were actually there right when it was stolen,” Misaki said to Kotone.



“Oh my! Well, I’m just glad you three didn’t get hurt,” Kotone said, and her face fell. “That clock was highly valuable, yes, but… it was so much more than that. It was a treasure to our entire family.”

“Um, do you mind if I ask you a question?” Misaki said to Kotone.

“What could that be?”

“We saw the clock in the display, but how is it a set with the necklace?”

You’re right, Misaki! I would’ve never thought to ask that, but it is kind of interesting, isn’t it?

A clock and a necklace. There’s nothing set-y about them!

“Yes… I see what you mean. For someone who doesn’t know, they are probably a strange pair. To be more precise, it’s actually a set of three. The Golden Mechanical Clock, the Black Tear, and a ring.”

A ring? This is my first time hearing about that.

“Back when my family first ordered the mechanical clock to be made, the Hanasato family procured our own gold for the project. When they did, they found this black diamond inside the gold mine, which is why they made an accessory together with the clock.”

So the gold and the diamond came from the same place.

“The clock has our family crest carved into its golden stand, and the Black Tear has a golden chain to go with the black diamond. The ring is also a golden ring with a black diamond,” Kotone explained. She looked down at the necklace. “Ever since, the set of three has been a precious treasure for the Hanasato family, passed from generation to generation. The Golden Mechanical Clock is something that has value from a research standpoint as well, and it always made me so sad that we were never allowed to show it. So I begged my grandpa that just once, for my birthday, he would let the public see it, but… I never meant for this to happen.”

She looked down at her feet.

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be so negative.”

“It’s fine! It’s all that thief’s fault for stealing it!” I said, and a smile returned to Kotone’s face.

“Thanks. For cheering me up.”

“So, uh, where is the ring? Are you keeping it safe somewhere else?”

We wouldn’t want that getting stolen, too!

This question just seemed to upset Kotone again, though.

“No, the ring was…lost seventeen years ago.”

Wait, it was lost?

“Yes, but…it’s fine. We still have the necklace,” she said, raising her head. I got the sense she was trying to end the conversation.

I wanted to ask a bit more about the ring, but it seemed like a touchy subject, so I decided to just leave it there.

Either way, it’s gonna be dangerous if Kotone’s wearing the Black Tear around her neck like that.

“I don’t mean to be a worrywart, but don’t you think it’d be a good idea to maybe not wear something so valuable around? What if another thief comes?”

Ugh, I wish I could just tell her that Fantasista is planning on taking it. I’d have to tell her I was Red, though, and I definitely can’t do that.

“It’s only for today. It’s a family tradition to wear it to large events like this. I just finished greeting all the VIP passengers, so I was about to put it back in its special safe.

“Yeah, that sounds like a good idea. Maybe we should hurry…” I scanned the surrounding area.

I can’t focus knowing that Fantasista could pop up at any moment.

“I should be fine with my bodyguards here. I appreciate the concern, though,” Kotone said with a smile.

I guess she’s right…maybe?

“You three are coming to the party, right?” she asked.

Oh yeah, the tickets did say something about a party. Would it be okay to go dressed like this, though? Everyone else is wearing fancy outfits and whatnot.

“If you’d like, there’s something I’d be happy to do for you as a thanks for what you did back in the harbor.”

“You don’t need to…”

“It would make me feel better if you let me.”

Misaki, Yuzuki, and I exchanged looks. We all nodded in agreement.

“Great! Then you can follow me right this way…!” Kotone exclaimed with excitement before beginning her explanation.

11
Dresses Out of Nowhere

“And so now you’re friends with the granddaughter of the Hanasato Group…”

“Yup! Easy-peasy. It should make protecting the Black Tear a whole lot easier, huh?”

“……”

Kei closed his eyes in thought.

We were in his hotel room, each sitting on one of the two beds facing each other.

He was still pale in the face; his condition hadn’t gotten any better, either.

I guess lying down to get some rest isn’t enough to get over seasickness when the bed itself is swaying.

“If Fantasista is going to steal the Black Tear while it’s on Kotone’s person, then the party is when she’ll be the most accessible.”

“Yeah… But, Kei, are you sure you don’t need to lie down some more?”

“I don’t have time to do that now… We came here to stop Fantasista.” Kei answered with a sickly expression. He almost looked like he’d lost weight somehow. That said, his eyes were still sharp as ever.

“Yeah…you’re right. Okay, then before we head to the party, I want you to come with me!” I hopped off the bed.

“Where to, exactly? I think there’s some time before the party starts.”

“You’ll find out soon! Misaki and Yuzuki already went ahead.”

I grabbed Kei by the arm and dragged him out of the room. Though he gave me a dubious look, he hobbled along with me.

Guess he doesn't have the energy to fight back.

We went up the stairs and down the hallway before I could eventually see our destination.

"There it is!"

We stopped in front of a door that said, LADY'S FASHION SHOP.

"Is that what's about to happen…?" Kei figured out what we were doing.

You betcha! This was the "thanks" Kotone was talking about.

"She offered to help us dress up for the big party tonight."

We initially tried to say no, but Kotone insisted.

"You go over there, Kei."

The neighboring store was for men.

Kei and I went into our respective shops.

Whoa! Look at that!

There were red, pink, blue, purple, and white dresses of every color arranged in a multicolored gradient throughout the storefront.

It's like I'm looking at a rainbow made of dresses!

I was standing there with my jaw on the floor until a woman in a suit approached me.

"Hello. Ms. Kotone told me everything." The woman bowed deeply.

Huh? What?

"This way, please."

I followed her, just like she asked.

"What took you so long, Asuka? We're over here!"

Misaki and Yuzuki were sitting at a far table in the room drinking some tea.

Whoa, your outfits!!

The two of them were already wearing dresses, and their hair had been done.

Misaki was dressed in blue with flowers embroidered around her waist. She had a white bolero covering her shoulders as well.

She looks so good in blue and white; I like the contrast of colors!

Yuzuki was wearing an all-pink dress. There was a white shawl draped over her shoulders that she had tied around her waist. It looked so natural, almost like it was a part of the dress.

Yuzuki has great fashion sense!

"You guys both look incredible!"

"Thanks, Asuka! You can pick out an outfit, too."

"Who, me? I'm fine in this."

There's no way cute clothes like that would ever suit me! I like dresses, but I can't imagine myself wearing one. It'd feel so embarrassing.

"Ms. Kotone has already made the arrangements for you, so there's no need to be shy."

"But I…"

The lady prompted me to move over to where the dresses were hanging. "One moment, please."

She took a step back and sized me up from head to toe.

Wh-what's she doing?

After a moment of this, she whispered something to a group of nearby staff.

The staff dispersed all at once, each person going to their section of the store.

Only a little later, the staff brought back five different dresses. Each was a different style and color, but they were all super cute!

"But…how did you know my size?"

"I measured you just now," the woman said, like it was nothing.

You can tell someone's size by looking at them…?

"Do any of these dresses catch your eye?" she asked.

"Um, they all look so nice… Let's try this one!"

"Okay. The changing room is right this way."

We entered the spacious changing room, and the woman followed behind me, carrying the dress.

She helped me get changed in a flash. I pretty much just stood there while she did everything.

I almost feel like a princess! If I ever tried to put something this fragile on by myself, though, I'd probably rip it.

The woman tightened the fastener on my back, and I started walking out of the changing room.

"Don't move yet, please."

Oh? We're not finished yet.

She then placed some earrings on my ears.

"There, now we may go."

She opened up the curtain for me, and outside were two sparkling white shoes.

Wow! Are these for me?

I put on the shoes and gingerly walked out of the changing room, where Misaki and Yuzuki were waiting.

“H-how do I look?” I asked my two friends nervously.

“Whoa, Asuka! That looks amazing on you!”

“It’s a bright red, but it suits you so well! You’re bold enough to pull it off!”

Misaki and Yuzuki were visibly excited as they complimented my dress.

Eh-heh-heh… Aw, shucks. You guys are embarrassing me!

“Excuse me.”

The woman walked around in front of me and began applying lipstick. She quickly slipped behind me once more to undo my tied-up hair, which fell down my shoulders with a *floof*.

She used a flat iron to straighten out the kink left by my hair tie, which only took a few minutes. A silver hairpin, and…she was done, it seemed.

I was still frozen in surprise as everything happened, but after the woman put the pin in my hair, she looked at me.

“Do you like your outfit?”

Y-yes, of course! I love it!

The three of us couldn’t help but smile as we looked at each other’s outfits.

We look like princesses!

Knock, knock.

We heard a knock at the door, and a staff member opened it up.

Oh! It’s Kei!

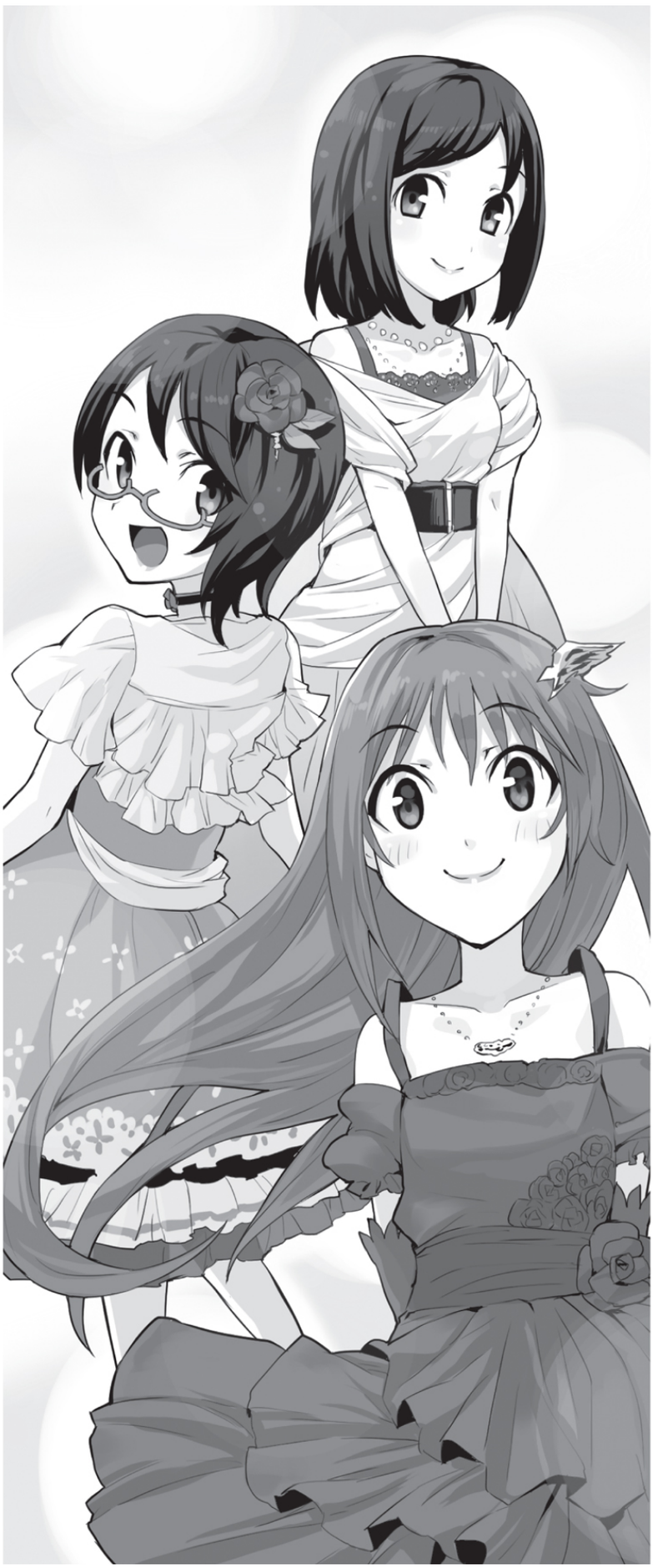
The staff member brought Kei over to our room.

“Wow, Kei! You look great!” I blurted out, surprised by how Kei looked all dressed up.

“She’s right! Those clothes look good on you, Kei.”

Kei was wearing a black suit that fit him perfectly and a kind of weird tie. He still had his usual disinterested look on his face, which was still pale, too.

“Ah, is that an ascot?” Yuzuki asked Kei.



An ascot? You know, I don't think I've ever seen a tie like that before.

"Yeah, it's what the outfitter suggested."

Yeah, Kei definitely just went with whatever the tailor said, I bet. I like that he chose red, though.

"So, Kei. What do you think? We're three girls wearing fancy dresses; the least you could do is say something."

Indifferent, Kei looked me up and down.

"You've…transformed."

What am I, a werewolf?!

"It's almost time to go," Kei said, before leaving the room.

Sigh. He's always so aloof… We do need to head out, though.

"Thank you for everything!" we said to the woman before leaving the room.

"Have a nice time," she said, before bowing deeply as we left.

We could see Kei walking down the hallway ahead. We caught up to him and all went together to the party.

It feels a bit funny wearing such fancy clothes like this; it makes you want to walk a bit slower and stand up straight.

We'd better thank Kotone when we see her! Hee-hee, this is fun!

I looked at the other three.

"All right! Party time!"

12
Surprise Super Magic!

The event hall for the party was on the fourth floor. There were people spilling out of the door into the hallway. We managed to navigate the crowd and entered the event hall.

“Wow, look at all these people!”

There were at least one thousand? Maybe even more!

Everyone was wearing dresses and tuxedos, and they were all laughing as they chatted with each other.

You could hear the hubbub coming from all corners of the event hall. The venue itself was so big, I couldn’t see everything with one glance. What I *could* see was a big stage.

When I looked over to Misaki and Yuzuki, the three of us were looking at each other.

“W-wow, look at all this… Is it really okay for us to be here?”

The two of them were obviously anxious.

Yeah, it’s definitely a big surprise, but we’ll blend right in with so many people here! It’ll be fine!

We wove past the groups of people eagerly talking together and made our way to middle of the venue.

“Whoa! Check out the food!”

There was a giant table that was packed to the brim with different types of cuisine. At a glance, the food seemed more Western-style than Japanese.

“It’s a standing buffet,” Kei whispered.

“What’s that mean? Don’t you normally stand to get food from a buffet?”

“No, we’re supposed to stand and eat instead of sitting. Just think of it as an all-you-can-eat buffet while you stand.”

Oh, I see. I was wondering where we were supposed to eat all this food.

"Anyway, how are we supposed to protect anything in this crowd…?" I said quietly. "We probably won't be able to find Kotone."

"No, we can find her." Kei pointed, and I followed his finger to see Kotone standing right next to the stage.

She was greeting a group of middle-aged men in suits. The men seemed like higher-ups from various corporations.

Around the meet and greet was an entourage of burly bodyguards.

"We don't need to worry about her now. What we need to be careful of is if she goes on stage alone."

Okay, you got it!

I felt Misaki tap my shoulder from behind. "C'mon, Asuka. Let's go get some food."

"Oh yeah… Let's go."

Is it okay for us to just start eating?

My deep thought must've been written on my face, because Misaki looked at me in confusion.

"Who would've thought Asuka wouldn't go straight for the food, huh? Are you feeling ill?"

"N-no, it's not that."

"Then why do you keep looking around? You seem really focused on something."

Geez, Misaki. You're so observant.

"You should go grab something to eat," said Kei. "I'm not feeling hungry at all."

R-really? If Kei says it's okay, then I guess it's okay.

I left Kei to join Misaki and Yuzuki to enjoy the food.

Talk about luxury—this food is incredible!

Oven-baked red king crab, duck foie gras, white radish with half-baked eggs, grilled beef fillet, salmon confit with a vegetable terrine, tomato farci…and at least ten different kinds of cakes for dessert!

Oh? You're probably wondering why I know so much about different food names, huh. Well, the names were written on cards placed in front of each dish.

“They all look so tasty!” I snatched up everything I could grab and built a giant mountain of food on my plate before returning to Kei.

It looked like Misaki and Yuzuki hadn’t returned yet.

Kei wasn’t focused on Kotone like I expected, but on other spots around the venue.

“Are you looking for Fantasista?” I whispered to him.

“Yeah, that too.”

That “too”…? Is there something else other than Fantasista to be worried about?

Kei didn’t say anything—he only shrugged.

So he’s keeping me out of the loop on something this time, too, huh? Well, I guess I can count on him to teach me when it matters most.

“So where’s Fantasista?”

“I imagine he’s disguised himself as a guest or crew member, but I have no idea who he is yet.”

That’s what I figured. It’s like trying to figure out which cloud is cloudiest. We don’t even know what he looks like without his mask.

“There you are, Asuka. That was quick.”

It was around then when Misaki and Yuzuki returned with their food.

“Yup. Sorry, I went ahead and already started eating.”

“That’s fine and all, but…don’t you think you have a bit too much food?”

“It’s fiiine. I actually took less than I wanted to.”

It’s just four plates.

“You sure do eat a lot, Asuka.”

The two of them both seemed surprised.

You think so?

“It’s because she does so much athletic stuff. It probably makes her hungry.”

Yeah! That’s it, Yuzuki!

“So how about dessert?” I said.

Misaki stared at me in disbelief.

We were talking as we walked through the crowd when I accidentally bumped shoulders with someone.

“Whoops, sorry.”

“No, excuse me.”

Ah…!

It was the boy who caught me when I was about to fall at the puppet museum, and now he was in a tuxedo.

What's he doing here…?

"To think I would run into you here. What a wonderful coincidence. Perhaps the two of us truly are bound by fate," the boy said with a grin.

H-how can he say such embarrassing lines like it's nothing?!

"You know what, I don't believe I caught your name. I'm Kyouya Orito. Who are you and your friends?" he said. Kyouya's eyes were large and light brown, practically golden, with a tint of moss green around his pupil. They weren't like the eyes I usually saw with Japanese people, and I felt like I could get lost in them.

"Asuka…?"

I could hear Misaki whispering my name from far away.

"Hey, Asuka."

I snapped out of my stupor and realized Kyouya had taken my hand.

"Wagh!"

Surprised, I snapped my hand back.

Wh-what does he think he's doing…? It's like he was hypnotizing me.

While I was internally freaking out, Kyouya addressed Misaki and Yuzuki with a smile. "I remember seeing you two as well back at the display. You ladies are all dazzling tonight. Deep blue—intelligent, yet cute. And antique rose—beautiful, like the rose it's named after. I bet whoever has the privilege of escorting you is lucky indeed."

Misaki and Yuzuki both blushed while they fidgeted.

Kyouya's one weird guy. Nothing he says sounds real, almost like they're lines from a TV show.

Just as we were speaking with him, the venue went dark.

Wh-what's happening now?! I thought, just as the stage lit up to reveal Kotone walking quietly toward center stage.

Oh, it's starting! Now's the time I gotta watch out the most!

Kei shot me a glance from across the room before refocusing on the stage.

I know, I know!

When Kotone arrived at center stage, she slowly turned to face the audience. Around her neck was the Black Tear, which she'd shown me back up on the deck.

"Good evening, everyone, and welcome aboard to the *Flower Song*. We're so very happy to have you here as guests."

She spoke with a much calmer, more mature tone than the one she used when it was just the four of us. She seemed so calm and collected, despite having to speak in front of so many people.

She was so elegant as she smiled at the crowd, and everyone was falling under her spell.

Wow, and she's not too much older than me…

Clap, clap, clap, clap, clap.

The speech concluded smoothly, and the crowd erupted in applause.

I let out a sigh of relief as I joined in on the clapping, but when I glanced to my side…

Oh…?

…Kyouya, who'd been standing next to me, looked on with sadness. His eyes followed Kotone as she moved off the stage.

I wonder why he's so sad…?

Just as my mind started to wander, he snapped out of it and looked straight at me this time.

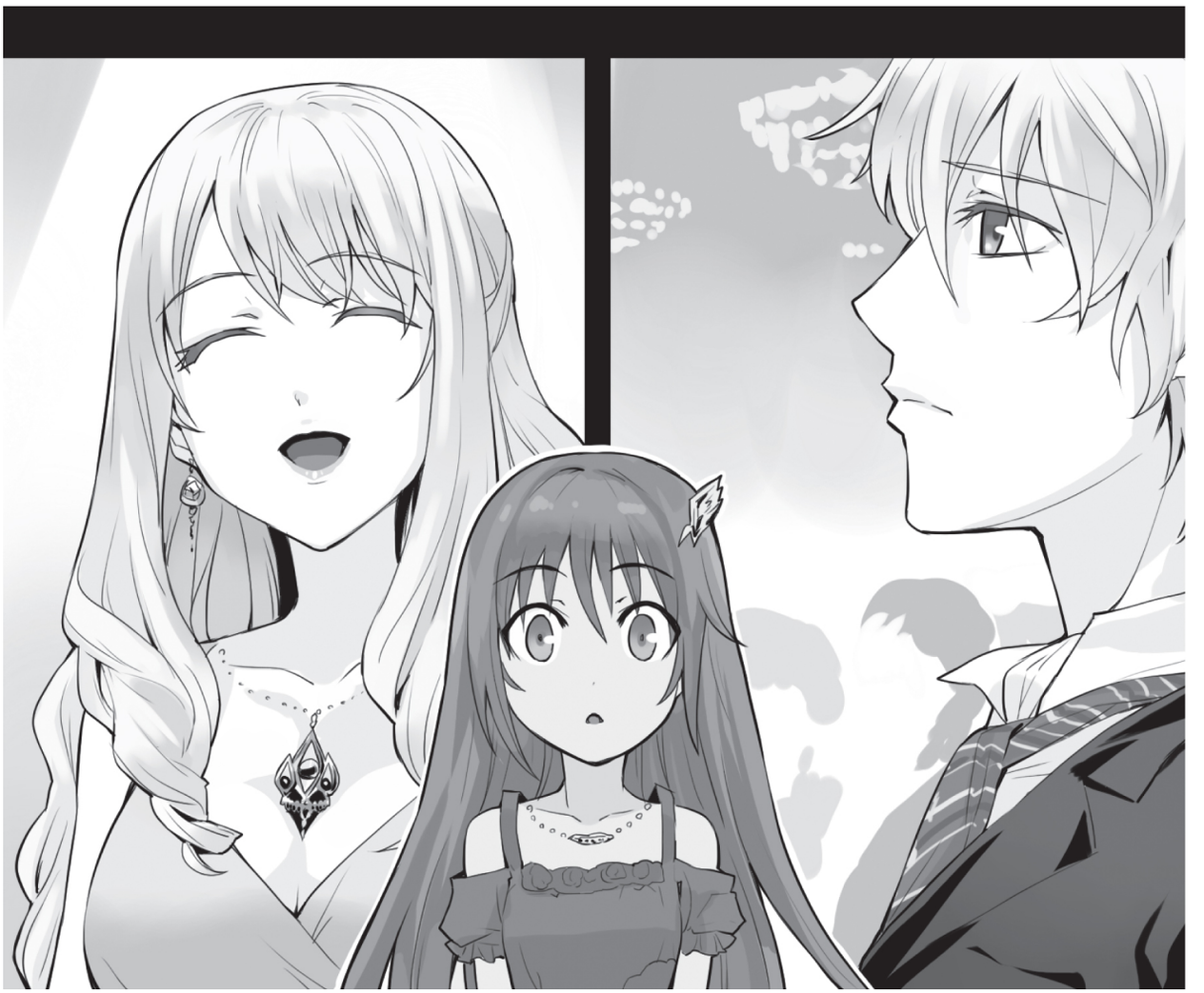
Whoops. Feels like I was peeking at something I shouldn't have.

But he simply smiled as if nothing had happened.

Maybe I'm just overthinking things…?

As I thought this, though, the lights went out once more.

"What is it this time?"



Murmurs erupted throughout the crowd.

What is it?! Is it Fantasista?!

Just as I rushed to search for Kotone…

…the lights flashed back on.

It was so bright that I had to squint to see anything, but when I could finally make out my surroundings, I realized the spotlight was shining straight down on me!

Huh? What the—?!

When this happened, Kyouya, who was standing next to me, grinned before raising his hand above his head.

Uh…huh?

A black silk hat flew through the air to his hand, and he produced a short magic wand from inside it.

Wait? Huh? What's happening?!

With a melodramatic flair, he flicked the wand, and…

Pop!

…a small, cute noise rang out, and in his hand, he held a big bouquet of red roses.

"What?! Where did that come from?!"

"For a lovely lady such as yourself." Kyouya got down on one knee and respectfully held up the bouquet for me.

It was a gesture only he could pull off.

"Uh, thank you…"

Without really thinking about it, I accepted the bouquet, and as soon as I did, the audience erupted with roaring applause.

O-oh right! I forgot we had a spotlight on us!

With that, the lights went out again. This time, there was only a brief moment of complete darkness before the stage lit up once more.

"N-no way…!"

And on the stage was Kyouya.

But he was just right next to me! There's gotta be almost a hundred feet from here to the stage. How'd he do that?!

Wearing his silk hat and holding his magic wand, Kyouya smiled.

Almost immediately after, the microphone rang out with an announcement.

"We have a surprise for you tonight! Ladies and gentlemen, we present to you the genius magician who's taken Europe and the

Americas by storm—Kyouya!”

I could hear a few women in the audience reacting to the performance.

“Did he say Kyouya?!”

“I had a friend whose wife went to one of his shows in France, and she said his performance was a sight to see.”

“He doesn’t usually perform in Japan, though. We’re lucky to get to watch him tonight.”

The wealthy women were all excited about the sudden news.

Kyouya gave a deep bow to the enthusiastic crowd. “Ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to the *Flower Song*. And allow me to make this a night you will never forget.”

He snapped his fingers, and in the next instant, something began to flutter down from above.

Those are flower petals! And he’s filling the venue with them.

“It looks like rain today. But a little flower rain never hurt nobody.”

Wow! It’s so pretty!

“And the sun always shines most after the rain. Let’s add some sunlight.” Kyouya whipped his right hand once before producing a crystal ball the size of a bowling ball, which he held out in one hand. “This little sun of mine, I will send it to you to shine.”

He flipped his hand over, dropping the ball under it. Naturally, the ball fell to the ground…or not? No, it was floating!

“All right, sun—can you shine bright for me today?”

The ball seemed to listen to Kyouya, as if it had a mind of its own. We all stared as it flew up to the ceiling.

How’s it doing that?!

“Hmm, maybe this sun is a bit too small to brighten up everyone’s day.” Kyouya tilted his head before producing a second ball. “Here, let’s have this one help.”

This new ball flew toward the center of the venue at an impressive speed.

Wait. They’re gonna crash into each other?!

Boom!

A loud sound rang out. The audience members reacted with shouts, covering their heads from the debris, but nothing came falling down.

We all looked up to see that the two balls had grown into one large crystal ball.

And inside it…

“Is that a sunflower?”

“It is, indeed. The flower that blossoms toward the sun. Perfect, if I do say so myself. With a sun this big, it should brighten up the room,” Kyouya said, before snapping his fingers once more, causing the crystal ball to begin to shine.

“Wow!”

The crowd cheered.

Boom!

There was another noise, and something began to spread out. No one hid for cover this time, though.

What came fluttering down was…yellow flower petals.

The whole event hall was like a fantasy world filled with flowers.

“Wooooooow!!”

Clap, clap, clap, clap, clap, clap, clap, clap, clap!
Clap, clap, clap, clap, clap, clap, clap, clap, clap!



The venue burst into cheers and applause. Everyone was really worked up now.

After a brief pause for the applause, the stage went black once more, but this time, the rest of the venue lit up.

“That was incredible!” Yuzuki exclaimed with excitement, and hearing her voice brought me back to reality. I realized I’d been clutching my hands the whole time. I could feel my face blushing, my body was warm, and my heart was racing.

I don’t think a show has ever gotten me so excited before.

“What’s going on? These are real sunflowers, aren’t they?” Misaki said with a confused look.

No idea. This feels like real magic.

“Kyouya. He debuted in Europe and became an instant success as a magician thanks to his unbelievable illusions and his good looks,” Kei said in a sober tone.

“Did that show have no effect on you at all? Wait, you don’t know how he did those tricks, do you?”

“Who knows? It would be against the spirit of magic if I told you either way.”

“True, true. But still. You could give me a little hint, couldn’t ya? You’re so stingy.”

I glared at Kei, but he ignored me and focused on the venue.

“Odd. I thought he would’ve used this show to his advantage…” Kei tilted his head in thought as he said this.

Oh, whoops! Sorry. I completely forgot about the Black Tear.

I hurried and looked around to find Kotone surrounded by bodyguards, clapping and smiling.

“Hmph! What a dumb trick.”

Hmm?

I knew that voice. I turned to find that heavyset rich guy we’d seen earlier on the deck.

I didn’t realize he was here. He was taking a bite out of a large piece of meat in his hands.

He wasn’t eating during the show, was he?! I can’t believe this guy! That show was out of this world!

“All right, I’m fueled up and ready to go. Let’s get the real show on the road, boys. Gah-ha-ha-ha!”

The man wiped the sauce off his hands with a napkin, which he discarded on the floor, before motioning to his entourage, who all followed him out of the venue.

Oof, what a jerk…

“Is there something wrong, Kei?” Misaki asked.

“No…”

I looked to see that Kei had also been watching the scene the same man just made.

Oh? I don’t think Kei knows that guy, seeing as he didn’t come to the deck with us.

Hmm, well, I guess it doesn’t matter. He’ll fill me in when the time is right.

I think I want to take a second to bask in how amazing that show was, though.

13
A Beautiful Trap

“Are you and your friends enjoying the show?”

Hearing a voice, I turned to find Kotone behind me.

Whew! I’ve been looking for you all night.

Kotone had been nonchalantly deflecting conversations throughout the night when she finally made her way to our group.

On the stage, the show had changed to a game of bingo with lavish presents. My card was pretty spread out with marked-off boxes.

Now wasn’t really the time for bingo, but I couldn’t leave Misaki and Yuzuki high and dry and ignore the event while I stood guard.

Kei was also on watch, but nonchalantly.

Misaki answered with a smile, “We’ve been having a great time, Kotone! The food is amazing, and the magic show you just had was incredible. We’re having so much fun with all these events.”

“Well, it makes me happy to hear that. Your dresses look fabulous.”

Heh-heh.

I turned to Misaki and Yuzuki, and the three of us shared a smile.

Something about Kotone saying it makes it feel extra special.

Hold on a second! Whaaaaat?!! Where’s the Black Tear?!!

“I took your advice and put it back in its safe after getting off stage. It’s well guarded now.”

Kotone must've noticed I was worried, because she told me before I could even ask.

Whew… That's a relief to hear. I did think if Fantasista was going to go for the necklace, it would be while she was wearing it.

I wonder what's up with him anyway? Did he give up? No way.

"Is something the matter, Asuka?" Kotone asked me.

"Oh, no. Nothing wrong here." I shook my head. I couldn't tell her that I was still worried.

"Look, Asuka! It looks like the next show is about to start." Yuzuki pointed at the stage.

The spotlights clicked on, and a familiar group of five high-school-aged boys was standing on stage. And they were all super hot.

"Is that The K's?!"

Huh? The K's? Like the ultra-popular boy band you see on TV?

"It is! It definitely is! Yaaaaaah!"

Even Misaki, who was always so calm and collected, was screaming.

"You're right! Wow, I didn't think I'd ever get to see them in person!"

I gave a quick look around, and every girl in the audience was approaching the stage.

"Thank you, everybody! The New Year is almost here! Let's ring it in with a bang!" One of the singers called out, and it could be heard throughout the venue. A fresh wave of excitement quickly swept over the audience.

The boy band immediately began their first song.

Oh! I know this one!

It was from a commercial, so everyone knew it. The crowd was already worked up!

Even Misaki and Yuzuki were following along with the dance and hand gestures, copying what they saw on stage.

"This is so great!" I said to Kotone, but it looked like she couldn't hear me over the music. Instead, she looked back at me and simply smiled and nodded.

"C'mon, everybody! Fifteen minutes until the New Year's countdown! Let's all go up front and count down!" the vocalist said, pointing toward the exit.

"Whoo!"

Anticipating the next event, the entire audience began to converse among themselves.

Kotone, who was right next to me, however, seemed a bit confused.

Hmm? I wonder what's wrong?

Though it was odd, we were forced to go along with the audience due to the sheer volume of people already moving toward the exit.

"What an amazing cruise!"

"Everything the Hanasato Group does is amazing!"

We could hear the other audience members talking excitedly as we moved to the deck.

There are so many people here!

The nearly one thousand passengers seemed to be moving all at once.

"We should go, too! Come with us, Kotone!"

We followed the crowd and emerged onto the deck.

It was cold outside, but it actually felt good after all that red-hot excitement!

"Whoa…"

Gazing out at the deck, there were so many people. Some of them didn't even have coats on; they sure looked cold.

BOOM!

Then all of a sudden, I felt a loud sound reverberate in my stomach.

Wh-what was that?

The sky lit up.

Crackle, crackle, crackle……

Just as I raised my head, a firework had gone off, leaving a giant flower blossom in the sky.

It's so pretty! Is this why we were brought up to the deck?!

BOOM! BOOM! Crackle, crackle, crackle.

There was a fireworks show happening out at sea, in front of the boat.

Since they're so close to us, I can feel each boom in my entire body. And I've never seen fireworks this close before, and so many. This is wild!

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Blue, red, and yellow fireworks went off, one after the other, and the audience was cheering.

It's like the entire cruise has been put inside a bouquet!

I heard the vocalist from The K's call out over the fireworks.

"All right, everybody! Let's all count down together! Thirty—!"

"Thirty—!"

"Twenty-nine—!"

"Twenty-nine—!"

BOOM! Crackle, crackle, crackle.

The fireworks grew even more intense with the countdown.

Whoa! This is all so exciting!!

I looked over at my friends, and they were smiling.

"Twenty-five—!"

"This isn't right…"

I heard the comment and turned to see Kotone, who looked concerned.

"Huh? What's wrong?"

"It's just odd, is all. We didn't have fireworks planned for tonight's event…"

"Oh… Huh? Then what is all this?"

"I don't know…but I find it hard to believe someone would throw a fireworks show without telling me first…"

What does that mean? Then who's setting off these fireworks?

As I was growing more and more confused, I felt a tug on my arm. I turned to see Kei, all sweaty and worried.

"Let's go, Asuka."

"Go where?"

Kei wiped his forehead. "Before it's too late…"

Huh?



I wasn't sure what he was saying, but if Kei wanted me to do something, then there was definitely a good reason.

I turned to face Kotone and my friends once more.

"Kei isn't feeling so well. We're going to head back down first."

"Huh? Is Kei all right?"

"I think he'll be fine after he rests a bit," I said. "You two can enjoy the rest of the show without us."

I lent Kei my shoulder before heading back to the stairway that led back into the hull.

It was difficult to push through the heavy crowd, but we eventually made our way to the stairs.

It looks like almost everyone is out on the deck.

Once Kei and I reached the empty hallway, we began to run.

"What's going on, Kei?" I asked.

"A popular band drawing everyone outside… The entire boat on the deck… Even if you weren't aware of the plan, mass psychology would cause most people to follow along. And the fireworks show gave everyone something to focus on. There are less people on the boat, and the explosions are good for masking sound. It's the perfect distraction."

"Distraction"… You don't mean—?!

"If it's not the Hanasato Group setting off those fireworks, then the only other person it could be is Fantasista."

14
Get Back the Black Tear!

I'd better get changed into my Red outfit!

I ran as fast as I could down the hall, but when I turned around to check on Kei—

"—Kei?!"

—I turned to find him flat on the ground a ways behind me.

H-hey!

"You okay?!"

I ran back to him and propped him up, and I noticed his forehead was drenched in sweat now. His face was pale, and he was breathing heavily.

"Sorry… Running made my seasickness worse…," Kei whispered with what little voice he could muster.

He was in a really intense battle with his nausea and dizziness

"Is it so bad that you can barely move?! And you've been ignoring it the whole time?!"

"What was I…supposed to do…?"

Ugh! I'm such an idiot! And here I was enjoying myself during the party, leaving all the work to Kei…

I didn't realize how bad he was feeling…

I'm the worst partner ever!

"Now's not the time, Asuka…"

R-right. I can't be down in the dumps right now.

Okay…!

"Kei, I need you to hold out just a bit longer for me!" I said, putting both of my arms under Kei. I stood up, lifting him up with me princess-style.

"H-how…? What're you…?"

“Trust me! Shut your mouth if you don’t wanna bite your tongue!”

This is my first time lifting Kei, but I know I’m strong enough to run with his weight!

With Kei in my arms, I dashed as fast as I could down the hallway.

For turns, I veered to the side to create a curve, letting me turn more tightly on corners and getting us to our goal ASAP—Kei’s room.

“Kei! Your card key!”

Kei fished out his key and swiped it in the door. It opened with a *beep*, and I went right in, dropping Kei on the bed.

“Eugh…”

He was beyond pale. I could see him gritting his teeth to hold back his nausea. I ran into his bathroom and changed into my Red uniform in a flash.

I grabbed a bowl by the sink before returning to the room.

“Use this, Kei! And here’s your computer!”

I handed Kei the bowl, and he looked up at me with a contorted expression.

“Asuka… What are you…going to do…?

That should be obvious!

“I know you’re in pain, but I need you to hold out just a little bit longer and be my navigator! I don’t want your effort until now to go to waste, so it’s my turn from here!”

“Are you sure this is the right way?” I asked Kei as I ran down the hallway as fast as I could.

I’d better stop myself from thinking about Kei’s condition for now. The reason he held out for so long was to defeat Fantasista, after all. If I let this opportunity Kei created for me slip away, then it will make all that effort for nothing!

I knew Kei would pull through for me, so I focused on running. Thankfully, most people were up on the deck, leaving the hallways empty for me.

“Yeah… This is the way… If the fireworks and illusions were the work of Fantasista…then he’s definitely going for the Black Tear as we speak.” Kei’s voice sounded weak even through my earpiece.

“How do you know where the Black Tear is? Kotone said she had it locked back in its special safe.”

“I was able to figure it out because she said it was special. I have a schematic of the Flower Song*’s construction, and the only spot that makes sense is the bottom of the ship.”*

I stopped. I’d reached the door to the stairwell that led to the lowest floor.

The lowest floor would be the machinery room. It was where the ship’s engine was, so nobody but cruise operators were allowed down there.

But seeing as this is an emergency, I should be clear to go, right?

I looked around once before taking the door handle. It opened up smoothly, with no resistance. It was unlocked.

“Down the stairs is the machinery room—it’s where the boat’s power source is.”

I slid into the door.

Clang, clang, clang, clang, clang, clang, clang.

I could hear the machinery ringing out in the dim light.

It was dark, but not so dark that I needed any night vision equipment.

The bigger obstacle was all the heavy machinery; the room was pretty packed, without a lot of room to move.

It was hard to believe that this was the same boat as the luxury cruise above.

I needed to be careful; I didn’t want to accidentally bump my hands into any of the moving parts.

“There should be a door that leads to the room where the safe is coming up on your right. You’ll be able to—”

“There it is!”

I saw a big door with two guards unconscious in front of it.

Since it could be a trap, I approached with caution, but the two men were out cold.

“Fantasista must’ve gotten to them…”

Duh!

The door to the storage area behind the guards was open enough for one person to walk through.

I looked through cautiously. I could still hear the machinery, but no one was near the door.

I quickly jumped in, hiding behind some crates near the entrance.

Slowly, I peered out to get a better sense of the room. There were piles of wooden crates and cardboard boxes all throughout the room. The ceiling was high; it appeared to be between thirteen and sixteen feet.

"Honestly, this looks like any regular old storage space. Do you think there's a safe here?"

"Those boxes are a disguise…to make it look like a regular storage space. I'm sure only a few members of the ship know about the actual safe, so they needed it to look like normal storage…"

Avoiding a collision with any of the boxes, I walked toward the back of the storage space.

"Ah!"

In the farthest corner of the storage area, there was a giant black safe built into the wall. It was at least eight feet tall, and about as wide as I could stretch both my arms out.

That's not the problem, though!

"The safe is…"

The thick door to the safe was…half-open?!

I walked closer to take a peek inside.

"Geez…," I accidentally said out loud—there was a whole mountain of cash and blocks upon blocks of gold stacked up inside the safe.

Everything seemed organized, though; it didn't look like anyone had touched anything.

In the center of the money, there was a fancy leather jewelry box sitting snugly on top of a cash pile.

I picked the box up. "Oh no!"

Th-there's nothing in it…!

The velvet padding inside the box was empty!

He beat us to it! Fantasista has the Black Tear!

"Calm down, Asuka. Only eight minutes and twenty seconds have passed since the start of the fireworks show. Even if some ally of Fantasista was in charge of the distraction, it would take a few minutes to knock out the guards and unlock the safe. And the only way out of the bottom floor is the way you just came, but you didn't run into anyone."



“Which means…?”

“That there’s a good chance Fantasista is still on the bottom floor.”

“But I don’t see him down here…?!”

Shiver.

A cold sensation ran down my spine. In an instant, I ducked down.

SHINK!

Something flew over my head and lodged into a wooden crate behind me.

Is that…a card?

“Well, well. Quite the instincts you have there. I thought I managed to ambush you, but I suppose Phantom Thief Red is better than that.”

I leaped back immediately and took on a fighting stance.

In front of me, wearing a black tuxedo and silk hat, was—

“Fantasista!!”

I glared back at him.

“So we meet again, Phantom Thief Red.” He was grinning beneath his mask.

As he did so, he fanned out his deck of cards, then snapped it back—but somehow, it was in his left hand now, fanned out again.

“Wow! How’d he do that?!”

“Now’s no time to be impressed, Asuka.”

Oh right. Sorry. It’s just so flashy…

“You managed to solve my riddle, I see. It’s too late, though,” he said.

Then, he closed his card fan once more before flicking his wrist, revealing a glimpse of darkness—it was the Black Tear.

“We’re not too late! I’m not letting you get away with the Black Tear!”

“We’ll see about that…” Fantasista grinned roguishly.

What’s with this guy’s confidence? Sure, he managed to get the Black Tear, but it’s not like I’m just gonna let him walk out of here.

And yeah, maybe he got away last time, but I’m not gonna let that happen again!

“There’s no need to glare at me. From here on out, I will be putting on a private show, especially for you.”

“A show…?”

“That’s right. I’m calling it: Fantasista’s Great Escape.”

“Y-you know I won’t let that happen!”

I moved forward in an attempt to close the distance between the two of us, but as I did—

—a sudden announcement rang out over the speaker system.

“This is Kotone Hanasato. I have proof of your thievery. You will not be able to get away. The police are ready to arrest you back at the port. Give yourself up now… I repeat…”

Is that the intercom?! What is Kotone saying?

“Surprised?” said Fantasista in Kotone’s voice. “This is what she sounds like, right?”’

“Huh? What?! What the heck?! Why does Fantasista sound exactly like Kotone?!”

“I’ve read it’s possible to mimic anyone’s voice with enough practice…but the bigger problem is what he just said, Asuka.”

And that is?

Before Kei could answer me, Fantasista spoke up. “Now, my fair lady. Do you have the leisure to spend any more time with me?”

“What do you mean?!”

“Oh, you’ll realize soon enough…but I do find you a bit strange —a phantom thief like me, but you stop thievery,” Fantasista said with genuine curiosity.

“There’s nothing about us that’s alike! You’re a crook who steals people’s things for fun!”

“You think these big heists are just fun and games that surprise people, don’t you?! But I’m not gonna let you steal Kotone’s family treasure simply for that!”

“My mission is to provide entertainment for people as a phantom thief. People enjoy seeing the impossible made possible —it strikes awe in them and touches their hearts. I’m an entertainer, an artist. What’s wrong with that?”

“It’s totally wrong! You’re stealing people’s valuables to do it!”

“I only steal from the wealthy—they hardly feel the loss.”

“You’re wrong!” I looked straight at Fantasista. “It’s not about whether or not you have money. It’s about how that person feels about the thing! If you steal something that matters to someone, it’s going to hurt them!”

Fantasista shrugged back at me.

I had to ask. “Isn’t there…someone important to you? Or something, like a treasure?”

I mean, stealing from people just for entertainment is…just too cruel!

When I asked, though, something changed about Fantasista’s presence.

“An important person? A treasure?”

Though he was still smiling, he took on an intensity that sent a chill down my spine.

“Not at all.”

What’s going on…? Is he angry? But why?

I couldn’t tell what he was thinking behind his mask, but the change didn’t last long.

“Yes, indeed. If there is something I value, it’s my audience—their cheers of joy.”

He quickly reverted to his usual, unbothered self.

Aw, geez! This guy! I don’t have time for this!

“Fantasista! I’m Phantom Thief Red, and I’m going to take back the Black Tear and the clock from you! Get ready for a fight!”

I got down low in a fighting stance.

I’m not going to lose!

The instant I did, though, I heard Kei’s voice coming cracking in through my earpiece.

“—No, Asuka. We need to fall back.”

Uh…womp womp, I guess? C’mon, Kei!

His orders caused the mounting tension to fall so flat, I almost fell over, too.

“Something felt off, so I looked into what was going on in the ship, and we’ve got a problem. We’ll have to take care of Fantasista later.”

“Later? But…”

Fantasista looked on with his arms folded as I hesitated to step forward.

It’s almost as if he knows I can’t attack…?

Kei finally told me what was happening.

“Himuro and the others are in danger!”

15
Saving My Friends!

“What’s that supposed to mean?! Tell me now, Kei!” I yelled back at Kei as I dashed through the hallway.

When I left that storage room, Fantasista had “ta-ta”ed me with a little wave. Ugh, I was so angry, I could barely see straight.

He challenges us to a battle, gets a one-up on us, but we manage to catch him. The battle was just about to start!

Even if these were Kei’s orders, I’m so mad that we had to let him go.

My anger evaporated the moment I heard what Kei had to say next, though.

“There’s another crime unfolding on the deck right now.”

Huh? Another crime?!

“I thoroughly researched the Flower Song *when we received Fantasista’s declaration of his next mark, and that’s when I figured out there would be a concurrent crime.”*

“And you decided not to tell me about it?!”

“Calm down, Asuka. We can’t solve both crimes. Not while we’re up against Fantasista. I wanted to keep our focus on him. That’s why I leaked the second crime to the police, so we wouldn’t have to worry about it. I figured we could have the police wait back at the port, ready to arrest everyone all at once. I managed to confirm the presence of the other criminals, too.”

“Ah, so they were at the party earlier. What kind of people would be up to no good?”

“You said you saw a rich guy on the deck, right?

“Yeah. He was a big fat guy complaining at a bunch of scary guys in black suits.”

“He’s the boss of a criminal organization that steals and sells jewels.”

Ah…so he was a bad guy!

“I never thought Fantasista would use his presence against us. This is a big miscalculation on my part.”

I could hear the frustration in Kei’s tone.

“Wait, so what’s going on right now?”

“You heard the announcement earlier.”

“Yeah… No, he wouldn’t!”

“Yes, the criminals have no way of knowing that Fantasista’s announcement was fake. They think their cover has been blown, and now they’re panicking and trying to hijack the boat. They have hostages and are holed up in the control room.”

“H-hostages?! Wait, you don’t mean…?!”

“Yes, they have Himuro and Harukawa.”

Misaki and Yuzuki?!

I stopped in place; it was like all the blood in my body had drained.

—I’m gonna make them pay for this!!

I sprinted forward, practically flying down the hall. I almost came slamming into some people walking in the halls, but I managed to swiftly sidestep them, never breaking my stride!

“Calm down, Asuka! The other passengers will see you!”

“Don’t tell me to calm down! My friends are in danger! How can you act so calm, Kei?”

“That’s why we need to maintain our wits about us. Asuka, we’re going to save them, no matter what. I will use all my brainpower to make it happen. Believe in me.”

“I… I will… Right… I’m not the only one who wants to save them. Sorry, Kei. I got so angry that I lost sight of what’s important. Phantom Thief Red is both of us. I can’t let myself get ahead of us.”

Kei could hear that I had calmed down a bit and began speaking slower for me.

“I hate that we have to do this, but…let’s forget about our match with Fantasista.”

“You’re right… Right now, we need to focus on saving Misaki and the others.”

“Exactly. Let’s focus all our energy on this. So here’s the plan: We’re going to enter from the space between the ceiling and the roof.”

“Got it!”

I picked up speed again, this time finding a hallway with no one in it.

After scouting out where the roof was, I shot a wire toward an air duct. I made sure the wire was secure before pulling myself up to the ceiling. It was a lot more cramped up here than in a skyscraper, but there was enough room for me to get around.

I followed Kei’s directions until I was over the control room, careful not to make any noise. I peered into the control room from above a gap in the ceiling. The control room was much larger than I’d pictured.

It looked like it could fit up to around ten people maximum. At the front of the room was a large window, and I could see that the fireworks were still going on.

A man stood in front of that window, barking orders as the fireworks went off behind him.

“You! Hurry up and turn the boat like I told ya to!”

It was the heavyset man, and he was screaming at the crew member steering the ship.

According to Kei’s research, this man was the boss of the underground jewel-theft organization.

Next to him were two more men in black suits, who had Misaki and Yuzuki in their clutches.

The two of them had blindfolds on, with their captors holding them by the back of their necks. I also noticed a twinkle coming off something dark that was pointed at them.

“Are those…guns?! Those jerks!!”

“I know, but if you jump into that small room right now, they’ll use them. It would put Himuro and the others in danger.”

“You have a plan, though, right?”

“I’m still thinking… This is a difficult situation.”

It was rare to hear Kei describe a situation as difficult. We must’ve really been out of options.

I could see my two friends shaking in fear with the guns pointed at them. There were tears coming out from under their blindfolds.

You guys must be so scared… This is awful…

I clutched my fist.

If that guy squeezes that trigger even a little bit…!!

“Kei! We’re out of options! It’s do-or-die!”

“That’s not a plan that’ll work.”

But!

That was when it happened.

“Stop this immediately!” someone said, storming into the room.

The men all reflexively swung their guns toward the source of the voice, who was…

K-Kotone?!

“G-get outta here!” the man screamed at her, but Kotone remained steadfast, staring him down. I hadn’t seen her this intense before.

“I’m here to propose a trade. I am the eldest daughter of the Hanasato family. You should recognize me from the party earlier; I gave the introduction for the show. I believe I would make a far more valuable hostage. Exchange those children for me!”

“So you’re the daughter, eh? Ya know, I do remember seein’ you.” He grinned. “Fine, have it your way. But only one. Don’t want you slippin’ off and leavin’ us in the lurch.”

“No! I won’t run away!” Kotone shouted back at the man in desperation.

“Sorry, toots. Can’t trust ya.”

The man wasn’t willing to negotiate with her on this.

Watching him makes me so angry! If he didn’t have Misaki and Yuzuki held hostage, I’d hop on down and give him a knuckle sandwich!

“Fine… I’ll exchange myself for one of them, then.”

“That’s it; I like a lady who knows how to listen. If we have a Hanasato hostage, we might be able to negotiate with the police.”

“Argh! What are we gonna do, Kei?! Now they have Kotone…”

“All right, finished. Just in time, too.”

Kei!

“I’ve hacked the boat’s system. Your chance will come when they exchange the hostages. I want you to jump down and take control of the situation. Can you do it, Asuka?”

“You bet your computer I can! Just watch!”

“Your target is the two guns the men in suits have. You only have one chance.”

“Got it!”

I took a slow, deep breath to calm myself down.

I attached my night vision scope and got ready to pounce as I watched the scene below unfold.

“We can’t give our hostage up first ’cause she might run away. You start comin’ this way, and we’ll let the girlie go at the same time.”

One of the suited men held out Yuzuki. She had a blindfold on and was trembling horribly. I could see tears running down her cheeks—this was so awful to watch.

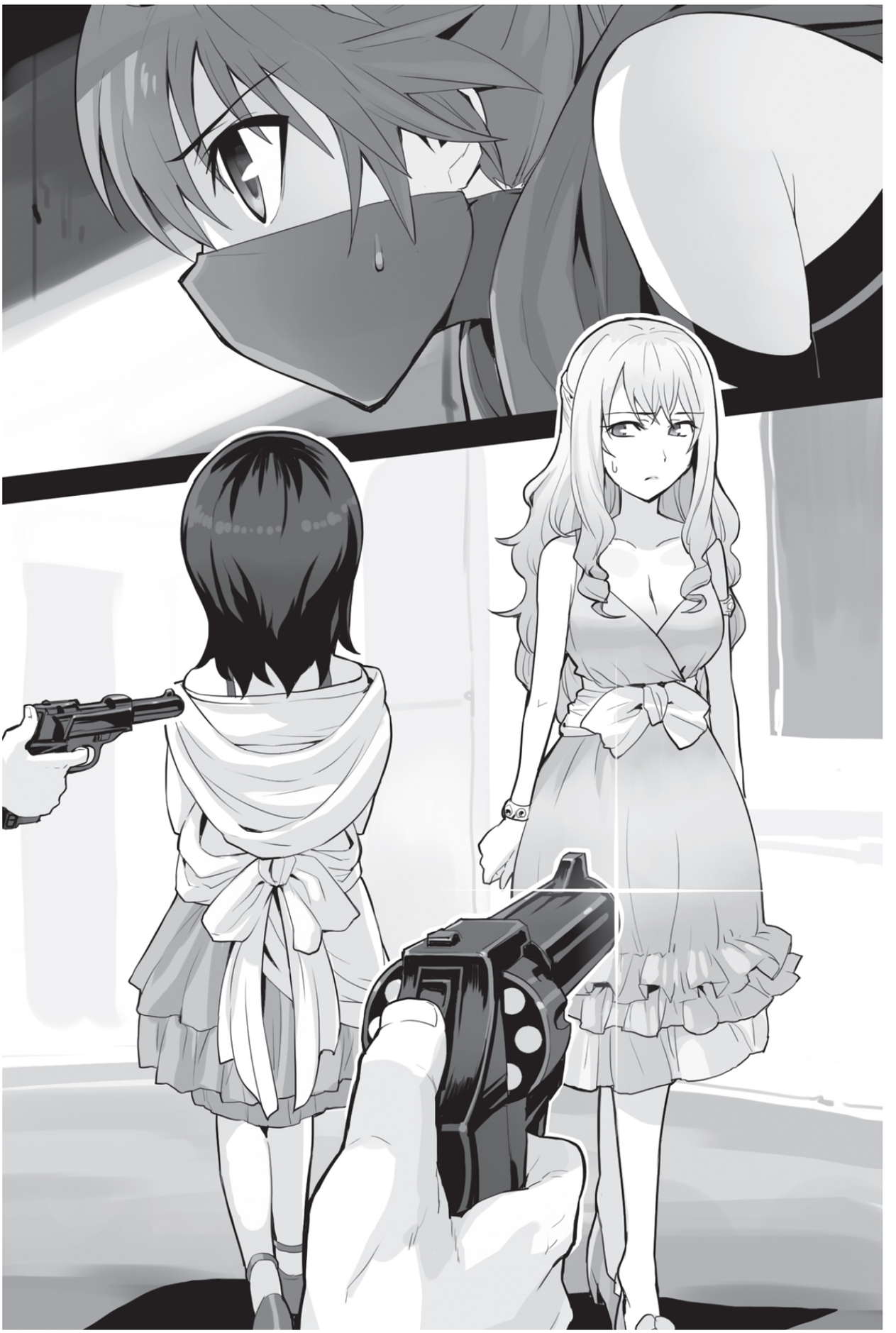
“Sorry, Yuzuki. Follow my voice and come straight this way. Keep going until you reach the door, okay?” Kotone instructed.

“O-okay…” Yuzuki’s voice was shaking.

“Asuka. I’m going to cut the lights as soon as they cross paths. You ready?”

Kotone started walking slowly toward the man in the suit. Yuzuki started walking at the same time.

One step, two steps, three steps… The distance between the two of them grew smaller and smaller.



“Get ready in three, two, one… Go!”

Click.

In an instant, all the lights in the control room went off, and everything went completely dark. At the same time, I busted through the vent and landed on the floor below.

“What the—?! What’s goin’ on?!” the man cried out in confusion. His suited underlings were also so caught off guard that they couldn’t respond yet.

Now’s my chance!

I zeroed in on the gun that belonged to the man holding Misaki hostage.

“Hiyah!”

With a high kick, I knocked the gun right out of the man’s clutches. I brought my other leg up and jumped off him like a springboard.

“Gragh!”

This sent the man stumbling back and away from Misaki.

This time, I locked onto the second man. He was holding his gun out, pointing it toward Yuzuki and Kotone.

Not gonna happen!

I flicked a finger bomb filled with sleeping gas.

Tap!

Though it just barely hit its mark, the pellet bounced off the man’s forehead, causing him to fall back limp.

Perfect! Now I can save…

“Enough!”

Huh?!

I turned to see the boss carrying a weapon, and it was pointed at me.

“Asuka!”

Oops. I didn’t think the boss would be armed, too!

“I don’t know who yous are, but you’re gonna pay for your meddlin’!”

The boss was shaking with fury. He could pull the trigger at any moment. And if I dodged out of the way, it could hit Misaki or Kotone.

What should I do? Go all in and try to hit the gun out of his hand? There are at least five steps between me and the boss. That’s more than enough time to pull a trigger, but…it’s all I got!

It was a split-second decision, and just as I was about to make it…

Thud!

…something moved so quickly, I couldn't quite catch it.

In the next instant, though, the gun the boss had been holding was flying through the air.

"—I think that's enough roughhousing for one day. ☆"

That charismatic voice was totally out of place in this standoff, and the lights in the control room turned back on.

The boss was on the floor, knocked out cold.

And…

…there was a man in the middle of the room who was also totally out of place.

"That was quite the pickle you were in, little Phantom Thief Red."

"You… You…"

"Asuka."

Thanks to Kei's warning, I managed to change my voice in time before speaking up.

"What do you think you're doing here?! This is all your fault in the first place! And didn't you run away earlier?!"

"I wanted to give you a proper good-bye. But it seemed like you needed some help when I got here, so I thought I'd lend a hand. Was I a bother?"

Fantasista looked around playfully. I could see Misaki, Yuzuki, and Kotone were all fine behind him, and the two underlings were already taken care of, too.

Everything's okay now.

After giving a sigh of relief, I turned to face Fantasista once more.

"Um, uuuugh…"

The last *thing I want to say to him is "thank you," but he did kinda sorta just save us.*

Before I could say anything, though, Fantasista picked up a duffle bag off the boss.

"H-hey. What is that, exactly?"

“This? The jewels these criminals brought along for their client. Seeing as they won’t be needing them anymore, I thought I would take the opportunity to repurpose it.”

“What? No! Give that back!” the boss wailed from the floor.

Fantasista looked down at him. Fantasista was normally pretty playful, but this time, his eyes were as cold as ice.

“I didn’t say you could talk. You went and stole these jewels behind our backs. I’ll have you know, our boss is livid with you.”

“‘*Our boss*’?”

Were Dad and Uncle K right about Fantasista working for a crime ring?

The man let out a whimper and a gulp.

“Your boss, huh… Are you workin’ for—? Gragh, oof!”

“*Non, non, non.* I think that’s enough out of you. There are people here who can’t hear that.” Fantasista stepped off the now-unconscious man and faced me. “Well, my business here is finished.”

“H-hold on! I’m not letting you get away this time, Fantasista!” I said.

“Fantasista?!” Kotone cried. “So you’re the thief who stole the Golden Mechanical Clock?!”

Offering no time to stop her, she walked straight up to Fantasista. He didn’t move.

“I am…and I’ll also be taking this.” He took out the Black Tear as he said this.

“Hey! Why do you have that?! We sealed it away in a special safe!”

Kotone couldn’t believe what she was seeing.

“A safe like that is child’s play for me. I suggest finding a better model next time. I don’t give advice to everyone, but you’re an exception.”

“‘Exception’? Come to think of it, I feel like I recognize you from somewhere…,” Kotone said with an inquisitive look on her face as she peered at the parts of Fantasista’s face that weren’t hidden by his mask.

For a brief second, Fantasista’s eyes twinkled, but he quickly turned away.

“It seems I’ve overstayed my welcome. With that, I must bid my lovely audience adieu.”

“Nope, you’re not getting out of here. The room’s too small. There’s also security waiting outside!”

“Yes, if I were an ordinary criminal. But it’s simple for an artist of my caliber to change the impossible into the possible.”

“The impossible into the possible?”

Kotone stared at Fantasista with confusion.

“Are you a fan of vanishing acts?” Fantasista took one step back as he said this. “For my next trick, I shall disappear into thin air. Behold, as I open a gateway that transcends time and space! Bye now!”

He held out his right hand.

Snap.

The moment he snapped his fingers—

FWOM!

—a pillar of flames rose up from the floor to the ceiling.

I reflexively put myself between Misaki, Yuzuki, Kotone, and the flames, but it disappeared only a second later.

“Aaaaaah!”

I don’t see Fantasista! This is same thing he did back at the puppet museum! He got away again!

Meanwhile, Kotone’s nerves had been through enough, and she slumped onto the ground. I wanted to do the same, but in the next instant, a swarm of bodyguards stormed the control room.

“Ms. Kotone! Are you all right?!”

“Yes, I’m fine. Please apprehend these men. They are criminals who tried to take over the ship. How are the passengers? Is everyone safe?”

One of the bodyguards came forward.

“As you guessed, panic is beginning to spread through the ship, which may cause a commotion.”

“I understand…” All of a sudden, Kotone pulled herself together. She was a leader—the person responsible for the Hanasato family. “I’ll go.”

I heard Kei’s voice. *“Now’s your chance to escape, Asuka.”*

Got it! Phantom Thief Red being here would definitely make things more complicated.

While everyone was distracted, I swiftly climbed back to the vent I came through. I knew Misaki and Yuzuki would be safe with Kotone.

Below, I could hear the security outfit explaining the situation to passengers who asked.

It would help me escape without anyone noticing.

—But.

I bit my lip.

I let Fantasista get away with the Black Tear. I knew he would be tough, but…I also knew that when I took the challenge. And I lost! To a guy like that! We lost*!*

I had to leave the scene as quickly as possible, but I couldn't get myself to budge.

I was chewing my lip and thinking about how badly we'd messed up when I heard a buzz in my ear.

"Let's do this, Asuka."

Huh?

"Do what?"

Kei's voice was full of strength. *"It's not over, yet."*

16
What Phantom Thief Red Believes In

“It’s all about misdirection,” Kei was saying.

I was already on my way to the spot Kei sent me, running at full speed.

“Who’s Miss Direction?”

“It’s a psychological trick that magicians use. Like when a magician wants to distract you from a card trick, he asks for a coin from the audience. The question is enough to make the crowd focus on that, right?”

“Yeah. I’d probably be checking my wallet.”

“That’s the exact moment a magician uses to prepare the next part of his trick.”

“What?! Really?!”

“That’s the principle behind the tricks Fantasista pulled on us.”

“But that means…!”

“That’s right, he’s still on the ship.”

I ran up the stairs and out onto the deck. I could feel the cold breeze hit my skin.



There was nobody on the deck but me…

…and someone else!

That must be him!

“Not so fast, Fantasista!” I shouted.

The tuxedo-wearing figure jolted before turning around. It was the first time I’d seen him surprised.

“Oh…? I didn’t expect you to catch up with me. Perhaps I underestimated you.”

“I can see right through your puny tricks!”

Well, Kei can…

“*Sigh…* You’re the first to unravel my dazzling illusions. I must admit, I feel a bit shocked.”

So he said, but he certainly didn’t look or sound shocked. That confidence was still front and center.

“I’m gonna take back the Black Tear—and that clock while I’m at it!”

“You want to end this here?”

“You bet your top hat I do! And I can’t believe you put those poor girls in danger!” I glared at Fantasista. The cold wind was blowing on me, but I couldn’t feel it at all. My body was hot with anger.

“I think it’s a stretch to call that situation *my* fault… Well, so be it. You’ve earned it, catching up to me here. I’ll entertain your challenge a bit.”

The moment he finished this sentence, the smile vanished from his face.

Shiver.

In the next instant, I felt the hair rise on my neck.

Wh-who is this guy…? From his stance to his ability to keep his distance, I can tell he knows what he’s doing!

He knows martial arts. In fact—I bet he’s a master of something!

“Be careful, Asuka.”

I know!

An instant later, I rushed at him. He held firmly on to the black duffle bag, not moving an inch as I closed in on him.

Got ’im!

Using the momentum from my dash, I threw my weight into a punch.

“Nuh-uh, that’s not gonna work,” he said. He almost sounded bored.

Fantasista switched the direction he was facing and brought his leg up for a kick.

Guh!

I managed to dodge it by the skin of my teeth by getting low to the ground, but I could feel the wind from that kick against my hair.

If one of those kicks actually hits me, it’ll knock me out!

I came flying back up, throwing an uppercut toward his chin.

Whoosh!

Fantasista swiftly tilted his body to avoid the blow before jumping back.

If I can’t hit you with one attack, I’ll throw a whole bunch! Overhead jab! Low kick! Middle jab! Spinning kick!

I sent forward a combination of strikes, but Fantasista avoided them all.

Why can’t I hit you?!

“My turn.”

Whoosh!

I dodged to the right based on sound alone—just in time to see a swift punch land where my head had been.

I had no way of seeing that coming…! I can’t let him strike back!

I was in an awkward position now, and I threw out a kick to try to rebalance.

No!

Just as it would have connected, Fantasista disappeared. In his place was a pink ball of…something?

“What—? Huh?!”

My foot landed on the ball, which flew back and—exploded? Into a cloud of flower petals?!

“Ack! What’s this?! I can’t see anything!”

It was completely blocking my vision.

Without time to swat the petals away, I heard another sharp *whoosh* coming toward me, and I reflexively jumped out of the way. A little pain ran across my cheek, which started to bleed. Guess I didn’t completely avoid it that time.

“I’m surprised you dodged that one. Very nice.”

Ugh, this guy makes fun of me every step of the way! But he's managing to keep up with me even with a duffle bag in his other hand—heck, he's kinda winning. It's not just his illusions—his attacks and martial arts are the real deal. He might be as fast as my dad…

How can I win this?! What can I do?!

"Is that all you have for your turn? It's my turn now." Fantasista came closing in on me in the blink of an eye.

He's definitely fast!

I didn't have enough time to step back.

Expecting to meet his attack with my own, I let loose a high kick.

In the next instant, however, Fantasista vanished again.

"—!"

Another balloon.

I know it's a trap, but it's too late to stop!

Thwack!

I kicked the balloon, popping it and releasing some kind of powder.

"Ow! What is this?!"

I knew it was dangerous to close my eyes, but I had to. The powder had gotten into them, and it burned. I was already tearing up.

I can't open my eyes!

Whoosh.

Something's coming!

On pure instinct, I threw both my arms up to guard my front.

"Wagh!"

I was hit with a powerful force that I couldn't fully deflect, and I flew backward through the air.

Without being able to see, I had no way of knowing whether it was a kick, a punch, or something else.

"I hope you enjoy the tear powder. I'm terribly sorry, but I truly must be on my way. Your eyes should be back to tip-top shape within an hour. Please do forgive me. Now, as you can no longer see, I believe that settles this little bout of ours. Would you mind staying back here for a bit for me? Unconscious, of course."

Still as unbothered as ever, Fantasista drew closer.

Wh-what should I do?! I stepped backward.

The pain in my eyes wasn't letting up. I couldn't open them at all. How was I going to fight Fantasista in complete darkness?

I can't do it…

"Asuka, can you still fight?"

"Kei! I can't see anything…"

"I'll be your eyes."

"Huh…?"

"You heard me. You think you can do it?"

—You know what? I think I can!

"No! I know I can! After all, it's the two of us who make up Phantom Thief Red."

"Perfect. There's one way I can think of that can get the drop on him. If you use it, you'll get one chance to retaliate. You'll only have a brief second to pull it off. You think you can do it?"

"I've got a move in mind that might work. It's a super-special technique!"

"Let's go with that, then. Time to fight back!"

I could hear Fantasista's footsteps getting closer. I purposefully stayed where I was, waiting for him. Though it was completely dark, I wasn't worried. I had Kei acting as my eyes for me.

We can do this!

"Looks like someone's given up. I love it when kids know how to listen."

I could feel Fantasista close to me.

"Right!" Kei called, and I threw a right elbow.

Fantasista gasped. "Can you see already?! What the…?!"

Ooh, sounds like he's confused. I'd be confused, too. You're fighting someone with their eyes closed!

I felt him moving.

Here he comes!

"*I'm* the one full of surprises, not you!"

"In front of you! No, to your left!"

I threw a low kick to my left.

Ah! He dodged it!

"How do you know?! What is your trick here?!" Fantasista yelled at me. Now he was angry.

"What's the matter? What happened to all that confidence?"

"Hmph, it doesn't matter. If you can't see, then I'll just have to avoid fighting hand to hand."

I sensed him create some distance.

Here it comes! This is what I was waiting for!

“Asuka!”

I know!

I opened my eyes. Everything was still blurry, but since I’d kept them shut tight for so long, I had an idea where Fantasista was!

“C’mooon!” I shot my grappling hook toward Fantasista.

“You’re not going to get me with that!” Fantasista lightly stepped to the side, causing my grappling hook to hit a chair.

Gotcha!

“Here we go!”

I pulled the trigger, and within a split second, I was close enough to reach Fantasista.

As I let the grappling hook bring me forward, I concentrated on planting my palm right into his stomach. Fantasista’s eyes went wide, but he didn’t have time to escape!

“Game over!”

Dropping my hips down low, I shoved out my palm, slamming into him with all the power in my body.

Direct hit!!

At the same time, I could feel a tremendous impact hit my ribs.

“Gu-hagh!”

The two of us bounced off each other, both falling to the deck. As Fantasista hit the ground, I could see a black diamond necklace tumbling out of his clothes.

The Black Tear!

Screwing up my face, I picked up the Black Tear. Once I had it in my hand, I succumbed to the pain, holding my left side and falling to one knee on the deck of the ship.

I didn’t think he would kick me there…but I think I hurt him worse.

I looked toward Fantasista to check, when…

Wait, what…?

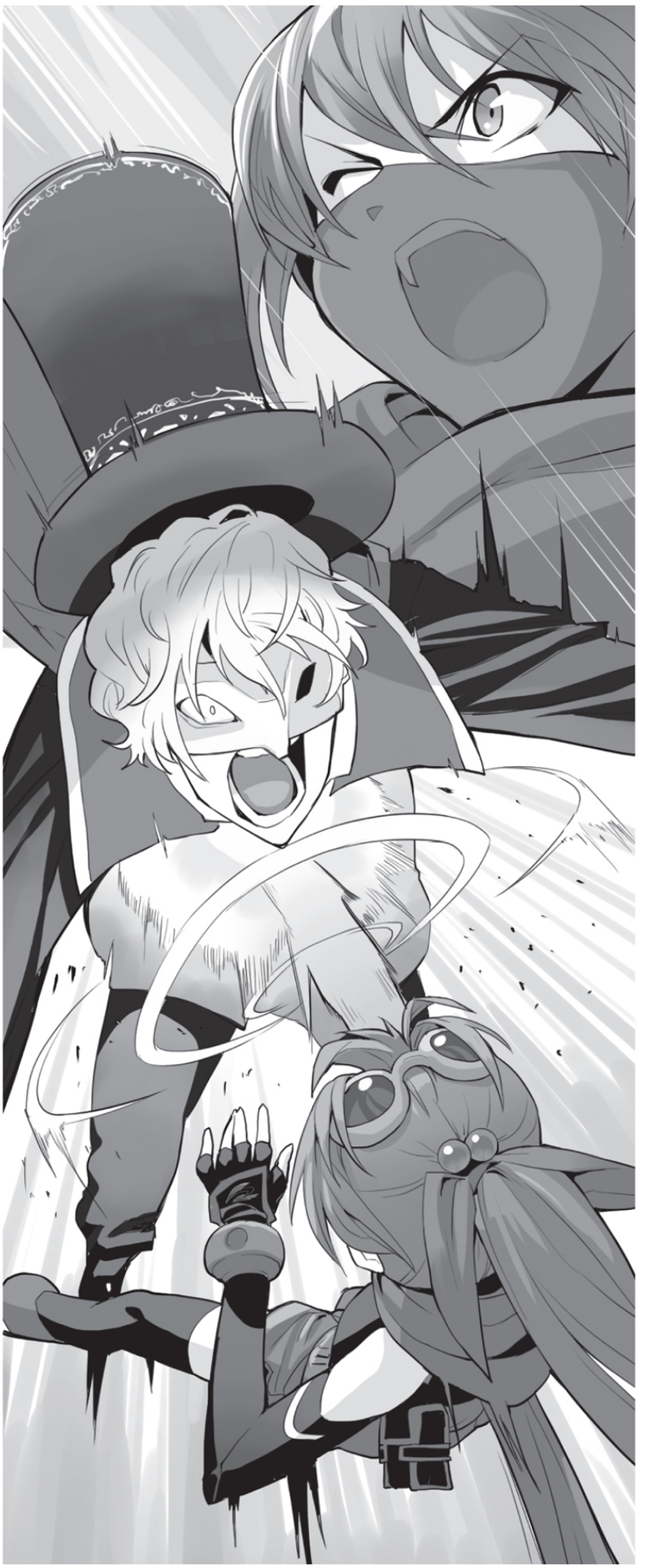
The force of the attack had shifted his mask off his face, and he was in the light—so I could see his identity.

“No… No way…?!”

“Yes way… It’s me, Kyouya Orito, the magician.”

“*What?!* I mean, you guys both perform magic tricks, but…”

“So…” Fantasista gasped, holding his stomach. “Not only did you beat me, but you managed to take back what I stole, too. What an absolute failure. The boss is going to be really mad at me for this one…”



Looks like that fa jin *my dad recently taught me really packs a punch. He's not getting up any time soon after that.*

"Huff… Puff…"

Not like I'm doing too great myself, though.

The pain in my rib cage made it difficult to breathe. Still, I managed to sit up off the deck and point my finger straight at Fantasista.

"If you ever steal something for fun again, I'm gonna steal it all back. That's how Phantom Thief Red does things!"

I'll do it as many times as it takes, too!

"I see… Is that your *credo*?" Fantasista's glowering turned into a smile.

"Credo*"? What's, like…clay dough?*

"It's belief*, in Italian."* Kei translated for me.

Oh. Okay, that one's on him—there's no reason to bust out random Italian, is there? Actually, I think the guy's from Europe, right?

"Hey, Fantasista. If you give back the golden clock, I'll consider letting you go this time."

"I'm afraid I can't do that." Fantasista shook his head.

"Why not?!"

Do you not realize the situation you're in?!

"Because…the clock is mine."

It's yours? What are you talking about? It's Kotone's…

"I knew it," Kei whispered to himself.

Huh? Knew what? What's this all mean?

"Asuka, ask him this: Are you Kyouya Hanasato?"

"'Hanasato'…? What are you talking about?"

"Just do it."

"Fine! But you're gonna fill me in later, 'kay?"

I turned and looked over at Fantasista.

"Fantasista… Are you Kyouya Hanasato?"

"?!"

I could see Fantasista's facial expression tense up at the comment.

"How did you know…?"

Wait, what?! So your real name is Kyouya Hanasato, and not Kyouya Orito? But would that mean…you and Kotone are siblings?

“I looked into why the Hanasato family treasure would be stolen, and I learned that the original heir to the Hanasato family was a son who disappeared seventeen years ago. His name was Kyouya, too. This would make him Kotone’s younger brother. The reason for his disappearance is unknown, but…ever since, Kotone has become the new heir.”

But then…

“S-so you’re actually Kotone’s younger brother…?”

Fantasista let out a big sigh. “Well…I made a truly huge error in underestimating you… Yes, I am Kyouya Hanasato. And here’s the evidence to prove it.” Fantasista stuck his hand down his collar and produced a ring that was tied around a chain. It was a gold ring with a black diamond in it.

That black diamond looks just like the Black Tear!

“This ring was once a family treasure of the Hanasato family, similar to the Golden Mechanical Clock and the Black Tear.”

Actually, Kotone mentioned something just like that…

“I’m the true heir to the Hanasato family. So this was all supposed to be mine. It was taken away from me seventeen years ago, so I simply took it back.”

“But that’s…”

“Selfish? Let me tell you one thing. I came back to Japan to get revenge on the Hanasato family, who abandoned me.”

Abandoned you? And revenge…

“So what? Do you hate Kotone because of it?!”

I saw…how you looked at her when she was on stage earlier!

There was pain in Fantasista’s eyes when I said this, but he shook his head, as if to shake off the pain.

“That’s right. I’m here for revenge, and that goes for Kotone, too!”

Though still in a weakened state, Fantasista stood as he said this.

He hasn’t recovered already, has he?!

“Asuka!”

I know!

I got up as fast as I could to chase Fantasista—but I couldn’t make it!

Fantasista placed his foot on the side rail of the deck.

“Phantom Thief Red. I’ll be back to take the Black Tear. You hold on to it for me for now. Until we meet again.”

He leaped off the boat into the ocean, and I heard a loud *splash*.

I ran up to the side of the cruise ship and peered over the railing, but it was too dark to see anything.

“I messed up! I can’t believe I let him get away…”

“You hit him with your strongest technique. He’s going to be feeling it for a long time, and it’ll affect his ability to move. Not to mention, we got the Black Tear back… I think that was a tie.”

“You think so…?”

Yeah… You’re right. I slumped to the ground.

“I really thought we were going to lose back there. I wish I could just go to sleep here…”

“It looks like now’s not the best time for that.”

I could hear a commotion coming from downstairs. It sounded like cruise security was coming up to the deck.

“Kei… This is over…isn’t it?”

I picked myself up and began to run.

“Yup… It’s finally…over…”

Thud.

“Kei…? Are you there?”

17
Morning on the Cruise

“Misaki! Yuzuki!”

After I got back to Kei’s room, I changed into my dress lightning-quick before running to the infirmary. I knew my friends were all right, but Kotone had wanted them to go there.

“Asuka!” Yuzuki was crying as she leaped up and gave me a hug.

“Aw, there, there. I’m glad you’re safe, Yuzuki.” I hugged her back and held her head.

Oof, that kick to the ribs still hurts like heck, but I’m just happy these two are okay!

“I’m so glad to see you, Asuka. I was so worried,” Misaki said in her usual tone. She was sitting there, lounging in a folding chair like nothing had ever happened. *I bet anyone who saw her would have no idea.*

But I’m not anyone! She doesn’t think she can pull one over on her bestie, does she?

“I’m happy you’re okay, too, Misaki!” I ran up to her, grabbing both of her hands and pulling her in for a hug.

“H-hey! Asuka!” she called out, startled.

“Misaki, you don’t have to act all mature after going through something so scary! We’re best friends, you know!”

“Asuka…”

I could hear a sniffle coming from my chest, where her head was.

I knew it. Misaki tends to act tougher than she feels.

Knock, knock.

There was a knock at the door, and we turned to find Kotone standing at the entrance.

“Kotone!”

“How is everything with the passengers…?” I asked.

I was worried after seeing that commotion earlier.

“It’s fine now that everything has calmed down. I turned the hijacking into a part of the show. The cruise was full of surprises, so it was a little touch and go, but people have accepted the explanation.”

“That’s good to hear…” I let out a sigh of relief.

Wow. Kotone sure is incredible. She handled a big mess like this all on her own!

Kotone stood up a little straighter; even though the commotion was over, she still seemed super focused.

“Misaki, Yuzuki, and Asuka… I’m deeply sorry for what happened on this cruise.” She bowed all the way down to a ninety-degree angle.

“Wh-why are you apologizing, Kotone?!”

I had no idea what to do, and we all just stared at her.

“This cruise ship belongs to the Hanasato Group. Therefore, everything that happens on it is my responsibility.”

But that’s not fair!

“It’s all that Fantasista’s fault,” I said. “He’s the one who caused all the problems, not you!”

“But if I was a better leader, I could’ve kept you two from danger. I truly am sorry about everything…”

“We don’t blame you one bit, Kotone. We’re thankful, actually. You were the first one to come to our rescue when things got dangerous,” Misaki said. Yuzuki nodded, too.

Kotone looked like she still had more to say.

You’re too hard on yourself, I thought. *Wait, now that we have Kotone here, there’s something I need to give her…*

“Kotone! Hold out your hand, please.”

“O-okay?”

Kotone looked at me with surprise on her face. I stared back with a big smile, and she timidly held out her hand.

I clasped her hand with both of mine.

“I found this in the hallway on the way here… I think it belongs to you?”

With that, I let go.

And in the palm of her hand was the twinkling Black Tear.

“Why is this here…? I thought Fantasista stole this, too…,” Kotone said with her eyes open wide.

“Who knows? Maybe he dropped it during his great escape. He did kind of seem like a dunce, ha-ha-ha…”

I laughed and looked at Kotone. I knew it was a bad cover story, but I didn’t have the time to sneak it back into the safe at the bottom of the boat.

Kotone held the Black Tear with both hands and stared at it.

Hmm… I wonder if she suspects anything.

She snapped her head up and looked straight at me. “Thank you! I owe you so much for this, Asuka!” Kotone said with the brightest smile I’d ever seen.

Phew! Now it’s all over…

Just as I let out a sigh of relief, Yuzuki noticed something. “Hey, Asuka. When did you tie your hair back up?”

My what…? Oh, my hair… Aw, whoops! I forgot I put it in a ponytail when I switched into my Red uniform!

“Oh, you know, I’m just so used to this hairstyle, it felt weird letting it down.”

“Is that right? Your hair looked great earlier, too, though.”

She seemed to accept my excuse. I glanced at Misaki and Kotone, but neither of them appeared to be watching me.

Whew. Looks like I’m in the clear for now.

Ugh, I can’t believe I let Fantasista get away, and with the Golden Mechanical Clock. It’s so frustrating to think about!

That said, I wonder if what Fantasista said was true…?

“Is there something the matter, Asuka?” Kotone asked with a curious look. Apparently, I had been staring at her while I thought.

I couldn’t ask her about what I’d heard, though. Not until I knew whether it was true, at least.

“Oh, look! The sunrise!”

At that exact moment, Yuzuki called out to us, pointing at the large window in the infirmary.

From the window, we could see the morning sun peeking over the horizon. The pale-blue sky was blended with a soft shade of pink.

“Wow…”

The morning sunlight streamed into the infirmary, and Kotone squinted against it.

“It’s like nature’s magic…,” she said.

It is! Like an illusion of light that makes everything shine. No magic trick can beat this, eh!

Knock, knock.

Someone else at the door. We told them to come in, and the door opened.

“I’m glad…everyone’s…all right…”

Kei?! What are you doing up? You surprised me when I got back to the room earlier and you were passed out on the bed.

“We’re fine! You’re the one who doesn’t look so hot, Kei.”

“Just a few more hours to endure…”

I guess for Kei, a luxury cruise is something that needs to be endured. I’m a little surprised he came to check on Misaki and Yuzuki when he was feeling this bad, though.

I was staring at Kei, and our eyes met. His gaze flicked down to my ribs.

Ah… Are you worried about my injury, too?

I gave Kei a small nod.

Still hurts a bit, but it’s just a bruise. It’s not like anything’s broken, so I’ll be fine!

Kei then looked outside with his usual disinterest.

I know you can’t ask about my injuries, but the least you could do is act a little *sympathetic, maybe?*

As per usual, I could never read what he was thinking.

“*Yaaaawn…*” Yuzuki covered her mouth. “I’ve been up all night, so I’m feeling a little sleepy.”

Now that you mention it, I was running around all night, too. My body feels so heavy right now.

“There’s still some time before the cruise gets back to shore,” Kotone suggested. “Maybe we should use that time to rest.”

The four of us looked at each other.

“We got to see the sunrise. You guys want to just chill out for the rest of the trip?”

“Sounds good!”

“I agree!”

Then that settles it!

I bet I'll fall asleep as soon as I hit my bed.

I wondered what Kei thought, too, but seeing him, I knew he was also ready to pass out.

Yeah, he definitely needs some sleep.

But hold on… I feel like I'm forgetting something.

The sunrise? A boat? a cruise? Oh… It's New Year's Day?!

"Oh right! We haven't said it yet!"

I looked at everyone else.

"Said what, Asuka?" Yuzuki tilted her head to the side curiously.

"Oh, you know!"

"Ah, you're right!" said Misaki. "Nobody's said it yet."

"That's true. I almost forgot, too." Kotone nodded as well.

Kei…definitely knew what I was talking about.

"Okay, let's say it together!"

Everyone nodded, and as one, we said:

""""Happy New Year!""""



Afterword

Hi there.

I know it's a sudden question, but have you ever wanted to be a phantom thief?

I have.

When I was younger, I wanted to be either a phantom thief or an ace detective.

To make sure I was ready, I broadened my knowledge by reading the newspaper from front to back and observing people all over town. But whenever I decided one of those people must be carrying something dangerous and followed them, they always turned out to be an ordinary shopkeeper or something…

Clearly, I didn't have what it took to be either. What a disappointment.

But I didn't let that stop me. Maybe I could write stories! I mean, Lupin and Kid were storybook characters anyway. If I became the recorder of their adventures, I could watch phantom thieves from closer range than anyone else!

That was when Asuka and Kei popped into my head.

At first, I wasn't sure such young kids could be phantom thieves, but Asuka and Kei had some really incredible powers. I sure did worry about them, though. Asuka was always jumping into trouble, and Kei never stopped staring at his computer with that poker face. Would they be okay?

(If only they knew what it's like to keep an eye on them!)

But eventually, they made a break for it.

I was as surprised as you.

…Hey, is that Asuka making a peace sign like she owns the world? Sheesh, one compliment and there they go.

Asuka and Kei are still new at all this, though, so I hope you'll be cheering for them.

Speaking of which, I hope you'll be cheering for me, too, as their recordkeeper. ☺

One last thing. Asuka did a lot of dangerous and violent things in this book. Please do not copy her under any circumstances. They only got away with it because Asuka trains all the time and Kei knows everything.

I can't wait to see you when their story continues!

Shin Akigi

Hi there! Asuka Kouzuki here. Heh-heh, are you surprised? I actually asked Akigi (the writer) if I could send you this letter! I just wanted to say thanks to you myself! Kei does, too, I think, but he's still off doing whatever it is he does. I wonder where the heck he went...? Either way, that's not what this letter is about! Back on topic... Thanks so much for always reading Phantom Thief Red! Knowing all of you are here for me makes me feel ready for anything!

I check out the comments sometimes when I secretly borrow Kei's computer-- Oh, but don't tell him that! He'll get super mad at me.

Akigi also shows me your letters! You guys are the best! When the going gets tough, like it did this time, I just remember what you and Kei have said to me, and I always find a way! So I wanted to thank everyone for that, too!

That guy this time was SUPER annoying, but Kei and me are gonna do our best phantom thieving yet, so I hope you'll be there for it! And we're both rooting for you, too. I know life can be hard sometimes, but you got this!

That's all for today! See you next time!

PS: There's a note on Kei's desk, and I think it might be a message for all of you.

844266557777

Asuka

PHANTOM Thief Red

Presented by Shin Akigi & Shu

PHANTOM THIEF RED ④



PHANTOM
Thief Red 6

Name:
Kei Kouzuki

Height: **5'0"**

Weight: **88 Pounds**

Blood Type: **AB**

Birthday: **January 23**

Favorite Foods Coffee, toast

Favorite Subjects Math, physics

Dislikes Public transportation (and cars), getting along with people (his own age), chocolate

Hobbies Admiring the works of geniuses

Current Obsession Planning for Red's jobs

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