Phantom Thief Red

Red Gets Kidnapped!

5

Shin Akigi

ILLUSTRATION BY Shu



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New York

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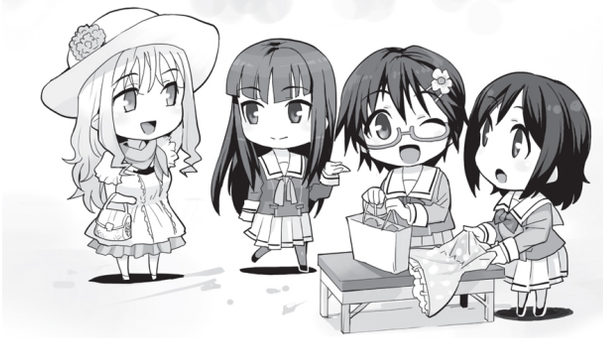
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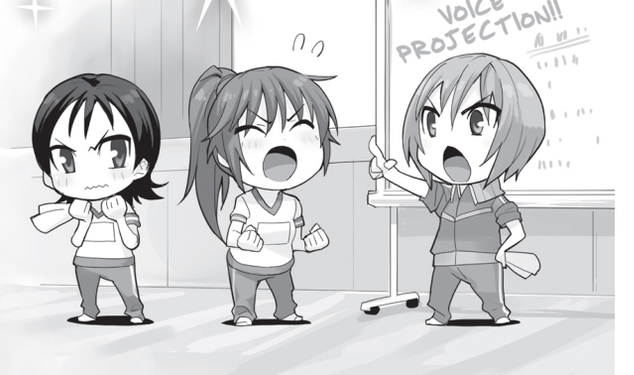
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Afterword





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.



Minatsu Segami

A first-year in the theater club. She's gonna be Asuka's acting coach?!



Hibiki Shirasato

The middle school detective that the new media loves. A third-year in junior high.



Misaki & Yuzuki

Asuka's classmates.



Suzuka Yukimura

President Shiori's friend and captain of the theater club.



Shiori Orihara

The Harugaoka Academy's student body president. AKA the Ice Queen.



Kotone Hanasato

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

1
The Mission Was a Big Success!

"Okay, I'm in."

I climbed up a wall and onto the roof of a building.

This was the private home of someone rich. And it was in no way ordinary—you'd think the three-story building was some kind of museum.

The front was blocked off by a giant gate that was decorated on either side with intricate inlays.

Kei said this style of architecture was called rococo, but that sounds more like a yummy snack to me.

The roof I was standing on had a large balcony that overlooked the yard, making me feel like a queen surveying her people!

The yard was filled with flowers, and colorful lights were shining down upon them.

And the reason I was on that roof was…

Red business, obviously!

Once I was in my uniform, I was in the zone.

"So this fancy house and big yard were bought with dirty money."

"That's right. They've been selling stolen paintings on the black market. It was hard to determine, because they masked their crimes in legitimate transactions…"

But! You managed to figure out that the stolen art would be at this manor today, which is why we're here now, with a plan!

I glanced at the item I had wrapped in cloth tucked under my arm.

It's why I brought this.

There was one problem though…

"You need to be extra careful. He's here."

Yeah. Him.

The person in question that had Kei on edge was the Middle School Detective, Hibiki Shirasato, and he was here tonight on security duty.

Hibiki Shirasato was one of the most famous detectives of our time, and he often helped the police with difficult cases. He'd been able to take art theft and kidnapping cases that police had given up on and solve them through deduction alone.

And he was here, guarding our target.

Seeing as this is Hibiki we're dealing with, he's gotta know about the stolen art. My best guess is he accepted the request to work security so he could look into it on his own.

But we don't have time to wait for him to find the proof! There are people out there who need help now!

"Don't let your guard down, or he'll find you."

Duh! I know that!

I picked the lock to the door on the roof and quietly entered the building. The door opened to a hallway that was pitch-black.

There's…no security here.

This seems way too quiet for Hibiki.

"All of the art is kept on the ground floor. No guards are stationed on the roof, though they do make periodic rounds up there. As far as I can tell, they just left, and you'll have some time before they come back."

"Oh, yeah? So that's why you had me come in through the roof this time."

"I'm pretty sure I explained this to you yesterday…"

"Oh… You did?"

I could hear Kei let out a small sigh through my earpiece.

"Ha-ha-ha… Sorry… I always get so sleepy when I listen to your explanations."

"It's fine. This is where the plan starts, so just be careful."

"You got it!"

With silent footsteps, I made my way toward the stairwell. I walked on a thick, deep red carpet, and there were beautiful vases and brilliantly colored pictures decorating the halls.

"Make sure you don't touch any of the artwork. They have an alarm system that triggers with any movement smaller than an earthquake."

Whoa! They have those alarms set in every piece?!

“This isn’t just any old rich person’s mansion. The security system is better than most museums.”

If Kei says it, he means it. I’m going to need to do my best on this one!

Suddenly, I heard voices from up ahead.

“Dad… What’re you thinking…?”

A girl?! And she’s coming this way!

“Hide!”

I instantly wrapped around a nearby corner and hid behind the wall, holding my breath as she passed.

Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap…

“I know you want to keep your art safe, but you shouldn’t let strangers into our house…,” a girl who looked to be around high school age muttered to herself as she walked by. Apparently, she didn’t realize I was there.

Whew… That was a close one…

Getting caught here would spell the end for Kei’s master plan.

I wonder if she’s the daughter of the person who owns this place. She seemed really worried. No mansion is worth hurting people and making your own daughter sad! I’m gonna make sure our plan succeeds, and then you won’t be able to do this anymore.

“Check the ceiling. There should be an entrance to an open area above where you are now,” said Kei, so I stopped and checked around.

I see it! That should do the trick.

I used my grappling hook on an overhead vent and crawled into the space above the ceiling.

As you could probably imagine, it was completely dark in there, so I turned on night vision mode on my sunglasses and scanned the immediate area.

Looks clear to me.

As Kei gave me directions, I moved through the ceiling without making a sound.

“That’s the spot. Do you see any security guards below you?”

I peered through the duct to see what was going on in the room under me.

The space was huge, and the walls were full of art.

“Th-that’s a lot of art! Was this all stolen?!”

“Not all of it. That’s what makes this case so hard; only a few need to be stolen back. This is probably why Hibiki Shirasato can’t do anything about it yet.”

That makes sense… Not that I understand how you guys figure this stuff out either way.

I had a bigger problem to worry about—there were two security guards in the room below.

I could hop down and try to put one to sleep, but that would give the second guard time to sound the alarm—leaving me only one option.

“Do you think you can hit them both with finger bombs from up there?”

“I should be able to. I’m just worried about the cameras.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve already swapped the images. They won’t know what’s happening until they leave their posts.”

Good thinking, Kei!

I aimed my hand from overhead. If I missed, the guards would sound the alarm in seconds.

Careful…

Tap! Tap!

My two pellets of sleeping gas hit each guard on the forehead and broke open.

“Wha…?”

“Oomph…”

I heard two heavy thuds as they fell to the ground.

All right! It worked!

It didn’t seem like anyone heard the guards collapse, either.

“This is a large mansion, so the security guards have teams set up for their rounds. If they had their people spread all throughout, it would be hard for them to respond to an alarm together. We can use this to our advantage and wait until there are no guards nearby to make our move.”

“But don’t you think that’s just what Hibiki would expect?”

“Probably…”

“Probably? Are you really sure about this plan?!”

“It’ll be fine. What you should be more worried about is the next phase.”

Well, I guess if Kei says so, then I probably don’t need to worry about it.

“I’m going to cut the mansion’s power, which will turn the alarm off. You’ll have one minute before it’s back on. You think you can work with that?”

“Yup!”

I braced myself from inside the ceiling.

“Three… Two… One…”

Click!

The lights all went off at once, just as I landed on the carpet below.

I immediately scanned the walls and found the painting I was there for. Kei had shown it to me, like, a hundred times, so I couldn’t forget it if I tried.

It was a portrait of a twentysomething girl smiling. She had long hair and was breathtakingly beautiful.

And tucked under my arm was the same exact picture—a replica that Kei had prepared for me.

“Fifty seconds left.”

Whoops! Better hurry! Only got a minute.

I took the painting off the wall and set it gently on the floor. I compared it to the fake I held in my hands, and I couldn’t tell the slightest difference between the two.

“Thirty seconds.”

Carefully, I set the replica on the wall where the real one used to be.

Let’s just straighten her out, and…perfect! All set!!

“Ten, nine, eight…”

Almost outta time!

I latched my grappling hook onto the ventilation duct I’d come from and shimmied up again, now with the real painting in hand.

The moment I set foot back inside the ceiling, the lights snapped back on in the room below.

Whew! That was a close one…

The door opened up almost immediately after, and in came a security guard.

“There was a blackout! Is everything okay—? What happened here?!”

The security guard came running toward the two sleeping guards and reached for his walkie-talkie.

I stayed hidden up in the ceiling. I couldn’t move yet.

Two or three minutes later, another security guard showed up along with *him*—Hibiki Shirasato. It was easy to pick him out of the group thanks to his trademark white suit jacket.

"What happened?" Hibiki asked the guard who had just arrived.

"These two were put to sleep, but I can't find anything missing. It looks like a failed attempt at robbery…"

"Perhaps…" Hibiki walked around the room, looking at the paintings. After he did a full lap, he nodded to himself with a knowing look. "We have the entrances and exits on lockdown, so the culprit is still in the building. Send team A to the roof, and B and C to the entrance on the first floor."

The security guard nodded at the order. "Team A! We're going to the roof!"

"B and C are this way!"

The guards all poured out of the room—yeah, Hibiki was definitely fully in charge here.

He's always able to talk to adults like it's nothing…

Hibiki was the last one to exit the room—and then everything was quiet.

So far, so good. It was all going according to plan.

"Let's move."

Roger that!

I moved through the space between the ceiling and the roof. My next location was a storage closet on the second floor—the same floor I was already on.

With Hibiki on the job, I knew security was going to be tight, which was why I would hide right under their noses. No reason to jump out and take them on while they were out and about.

I lowered myself into the storage closet. It was organized and tidy, although the layer of dust suggested that it wasn't used often. There was a window, but it was too small to escape through.

I bet they're looking for me all over the first floor and the roof… I guess I'll just chill out here for now. There's still something I need to do, anyway.

A few more minutes passed before Kei spoke up again.

"That should be enough time… Let's go."

It had been roughly five minutes since I entered the storage closet. As per Hibiki's orders, there wasn't supposed to be anyone left on the second floor.

I placed my ear on the door and listened. Everything was quiet.

Slowly, I opened the door before entering the hallway, when—

"I was expecting you'd come out just about now. So that's your target this time around, Phantom Thief Red."

That voice…!

I scrambled to turn around and found a smiling Hibiki Shirasato standing behind me, in his white jacket.

He saw right through me…

"I knew it wouldn't be easy to pull one over on you," I said.

"Of course! Security is already on their way here. I'll catch you this time, Red!"

Hibiki was ready for a showdown, but I just smiled.

"We'll see about that."

"What?!"

A voice came in on the transceiver Hibiki was holding.

"This is Team A. We're on the roof like you ordered us, but there's nobody up here. Are you sure the perp's coming this way?"

"Team B is on the roof as well. Awaiting orders."

"Team C…"

The blood drained from Hibiki's face. "What's going on…?!" he said.

"I wasn't just sitting around up there. I took a sample of your voice from a television interview and re-created it to tell your men to all head to the roof. Even if your voice wasn't perfect, it's hard to tell over the radio."

Well…technically, Kei was the one who did all that. He sent out a message to Hibiki's team that the thief was on the roof while I hid away in the closet. It looks like Kei knew Hibiki would be onto my hiding place.

"Argh! I'll just have to call them again…" Hibiki took out his transceiver.

"Nope, can't let you do that."

Clink!

I flicked a metal marble at the transceiver, sending it flying.

"Ack! Then I'll take you in myself if I have to!"

Hibiki charged, reaching out for me. He was quick.

But not quick enough.

I placed a foot on the shoulder of his arm reaching for me and launched myself into the air, doing a flip over him.

Losing sight of me for a moment, he tumbled to the ground before spotting me again.

“Red!”

“I’m going to give this picture back to its rightful owner!” I called. “Who knows how long it’ll take if I leave it to a famous detective to do it through official channels!”

I smiled slightly before running straight toward the first floor.

With one final glance before I left, I saw Hibiki standing there with total shock on his face. It didn’t look like he was going to run after me.

With the rest of the security team up on the roof, I made an easy exit from the mansion. I found a nearby alleyway where I changed from my uniform back into my normal clothes.

Yippee!

We really pulled a fast one on old Hibiki!

“That plan went off without a hitch…” Kei seemed satisfied.

It was so nice to get a win this time!



2
A Surprise Offer

“Whew, that’s all for today,” I said, humming to myself, and put my notebook into my desk in the classroom.

“You sure seem happy today, Asuka. Did something good happen?” Misaki cocked her head.

It sure did! We outsmarted Hibiki!

I know, I know. Red’s not about winning and losing. But it’s different when it comes to Hibiki. He’s our age, so I don’t want to lose to him!

…I can’t talk to Misaki about that, can I?

She continued to watch me curiously.

Hmm, what am I gonna say? I’m a bad liar.

“It’s nothing special, Himuro,” Kei interjected, lending me a hand. “Asuka is just excited for dinner tonight because it’s one of her favorite foods.”

Wait…is my mood really affected by what’s for dinner that much?!

I shot Kei a glare, but he ignored me and continued to pack his things.

“Oh, really? Asuka *would* be happy about something like that,” said Misaki.

What?! That actually worked?!

I guess that’s all that matters, though.

“What’s wrong, Asuka?” Yuzuki came over, holding a bag in her hands.

She’s gotta go to the home ec club after this, huh?

“That reminds me! I gotta go too!” I picked up my bag and stood.

“Huh? Are you going to help out another club again?” Yuzuki asked, but I shook my head.

“No, it’s Yukimura. She wanted to see me about something.”

“She’s the leader of the theater club, right?”

Yup. Not sure what she wants, though.

“Maybe she’s going to ask you to be in another play, like during the school festival?”

No way! That play was no walk in the park! Besides, the person I replaced in the play is already healed.

I guess I’ll find out when I see her.

I said goodbye to Misaki and headed for the gym, where I was supposed to meet Yukimura. I could see her standing there from behind as I approached.

“Yukimura!” I called out as I ran up to her.

“Asuka. I’m glad to see you didn’t forget.”

Me? Forget? I’d never forget a chance to see you.

Although I do wanna ask…

“Why is President Shiori here?”

For whatever reason, President Shiori was standing next to Yukimura.

“Am I not allowed to be here?” President Shiori said. Her face was very stern.

O-of course you’re allowed!

President Shiori was the president of our junior high’s student council.

Her strict manner of speech and charismatic leadership had earned her the nickname “the Ice Queen.” She was actually super nice, though.

“I’m here to see the theater club.” President Shiori shot Yukimura a glance.

“Yeah, let’s talk about it inside.” Yukimura nudged me from behind into the gym.

There was a basketball hoop set up smack-dab in the middle of the court. The basketball club was using half of the gym floor, with the theater club taking the other half.

There were about thirty people practicing their enunciation, split up into two groups that faced each other and saying lines back and forth.

If my memory serves me correctly, about seventeen or eighteen of the members are performers, and everybody else works behind the curtain. All of them do the vocal warm-ups together, though.

They're all so focused that they haven't even noticed I'm here.

Hm…?

Something seems off, though. Back during the school festival, they seemed so much more passionate and enthusiastic about rehearsal…

Maybe I'm just overthinking…? No, I doubt it.

"Did you notice already? Our club is actually facing a bit of a problem right now," Yukimura told me.

"What kind of a problem?"

"You know how a theater club needs a theater? The culture festival is one time of year when we get one, but only performing once a year wouldn't make for much of a club, so we usually borrow an auditorium outside of school to have more plays."

Oh, really? So does that mean people who aren't students also come to see your plays? That's pretty neat!

"There's a theater hall our club has always used, but about two months ago, a storm damaged the roof. Nobody got hurt, but the hall ended up closing down."

"It did?? Then what are you going to do about the next play?"

"We have to reorganize all our future plans. We've done our best to find a new stage, but there's nowhere we can afford with our budget. At this rate, we might have to cancel our annual play…"

No… You guys were so great during the culture festival. It would be terrible if you didn't get to throw another play…

If I was in the club, I'd be down in the dumps, too. All that practice, and nowhere to show it.

"Is there anything you can do about it?" I asked, and Yukimura answered with a big smile.

"I think so, now that our savior has arrived."

Y-your savior?!

"Let's gather up over here, guys!" Yukimura called out to the theater club members, and they all stopped rehearsing to join us. "I have great news!"

Yukimura stood in front of the entire club, holding out both of her hands.

“What’s going on?” a second-year asked, raising his eyebrows.

“You guys know how there’s a big new theater hall being built nearby right now?”

“The one by the station, right?” said a third-year. “I heard it was for hosting the big stage productions in our town… Why?”

Actually, I remember seeing a big construction site near the station in in the downtown area.

A teasing twinkle appeared in Yukimura’s eye as she answered. “Wouldn’t it be awesome if our club could perform there?”

“Y-yeah, but it’s not like we would ever have the money for it.”

The rest of the club nodded in agreement, but Yukimura was still grinning.

“Heh-heh… Here’s the thing: Our club *is* actually going to be able to perform there!”

““Whaaaaaat?!””

The entire club erupted in shock.

“What’s that supposed to mean, Captain?”

“I’ll let Shio—er, President Shiori take it from here.”

Yukimura took a step back, and President Shiori stepped forward.

“The company that’s going to run the theater hall has reached out to our school. They’ve invited our theater club and band clubs to perform there. And they said we can use the hall for free.”

““Wooo!””

The cheers in response to the announcement were so loud it almost hurt my ears. And they practice projecting and stuff, so I mean *loud*.

Although I’m not sure I understand what they’re so excited about…

“I think we should celebrate by writing a new play for the event. What do you guys think? We have until the first Sunday of June to get ready, so about a month and a half!” Yukimura said with a big smile. You could tell she was excited.

“I-isn’t that a bit soon, Captain?! A new play…”

“We would only have time to rehearse during lunch and after school… Do you think we can pull it off in time?”

The club members, on the other hand, were not so sure.

Still, Yukimura was grinning. “Why do you think I called the president of the student council here?”

The members didn’t know; instead they all looked to President Shiori for an answer.

“The student council has decided it would be appropriate to allow the theater club to hold an overnight summer camp at school, using the upcoming weeklong vacation. We’ve already received permission from the school, and we’re allowing the band club to do the same. All that’s left is to decide whether or not you all want to.”

President Shiori looked out to the members, who nodded among themselves.

““Let’s do it!!””

They all agreed.

“I thought so,” said Yukimura. “And wouldn’t you know it, we already have a script! Kaho, if you would.”

With that, she signaled to one of the theater kids to come up to the front. The girl named Kaho, a second-year, was holding a stack of paper.

That must be the script.

“I actually started writing this script with the captain awhile back…”

“That’s right! And she wrote it with specific casting in mind for the roles.”

So they already know who’s gonna play who?

“Some of the newer club members might not know this, but occasionally, we write roles for performers to make use of their personalities and abilities. There will be no auditions for this next play, which means we can start rehearsing today! I’m sorry for going behind your backs, but you’ll thank me when you see how good the script is.”

While Kaho was talking, Yukimura started passing out some of the scripts, and the members began flipping through its pages.

“I’m not worried about the script if Kaho wrote it, but… Oh, is this one me? This is gonna be fun!”

“Whaaat, I have to play a girl?!”

“But look, it’s the perfect role for you!”

The actors all laughed together.

I guess they all trust Kaho with the script.

“I’m glad you guys like it. There’s one more thing…,” Yukimura said before turning to me. “I actually had you come here for this play, Asuka.”

Who, me?

I wasn’t sure why I was being called up all of a sudden, but I shuffled over next to Yukimura. She placed her hand on my shoulder before continuing.







“There’s actually a part in there that was written for you. Kaho came up with it after she saw your performance during the culture festival. It’s a side role, with only a few scenes, but it’s an important one. I read the script and thought you would be perfect for it, too. So, what do you say?”

Uh… Huh?

Wait, whaaaaaat?! This can’t be happening!

“B-but I’m not even part of the club… And I don’t know the first thing about acting…”

The only reason it worked out during the culture festival was because I was in an action scene and didn’t have lines. I knew that better than anybody.

If you expect me to have lines and act, then I don’t know what to tell you.

“Oh wow, this really is the perfect role for Asuka.”

“Yeah, especially flying around the stage.”

Some of the club members were reading through my scenes, and they seemed convinced.

“I know you can’t join the club because of your family commitments, so you don’t need to worry about that. We’ll teach you everything you need to know, too. All that matters is whether or not you *want* to do it.”

Yukimura was staring straight at me, and I could feel the rest of the club watching me, too.

Hmm… I mean, Red just finished a heist, and Kei already told me we won’t have another job for a while, but…

“Did you have fun during the festival, Asuka?” Yukimura asked, still staring.

The school festival… Although I was only in that one action scene, it was a lot of fun. I could feel this burning heat inside of me, and it wasn’t the same as when I’m Red.

If I had the chance to feel that way again…I wanted to take it!

I looked up at Yukimura. “Count me in!”

Yukimura clapped her hands and smiled. “That’s the spirit! You heard her, guys! She’s gonna help, but this is our show! Remember, theater is a team effort; even if you didn’t get a part, you’re just as much a part of the show as everyone onstage! Let’s do this!”

““Okay!””

The club all cheered at Yukimura's speech.

"Thanks again, Asuka," said one of the kids in the club.

"This time, you've got your own role, so we'll whip you into shape."

They were all smiling and encouraging me, and I could tell they were happy.

Hm…?

I felt the piercing eyes of one club member staring straight at me. I nonchalantly scanned the group until I noticed a girl standing away from the crowd—she was a first-year student, just like me. She had large eyes and black hair just above her shoulders, and she was making direct eye contact with me.

Wh-what's got her glaring at me like that?!

"There's a lot you're gonna need to learn, and I'm sure it will be tough at first, so I'm going to assign you a teacher," Yukimura told me. "Minatsu, would you mind helping her?"

When Yukimura said her name, the girl I'd just noticed stood right up.

Oh…

But her glare was gone now, and her expression was more nonchalant. "Okay! You got it, Captain!" she called back in a clear voice. I guess this was Minatsu.

What's going on? That girl definitely didn't look like someone who wanted to help teach me a few seconds ago… Maybe I misread her? It didn't feel like it, though.

"Nice to meet you, Kouzuki." Minatsu walked up to me.

"O-oh, yeah. Nice to meet you, too. I really know nothing about acting, but I'll try my best," I said, holding out my hand. I offered it for a handshake, but Minatsu walked right by me and my extended hand. Maybe she just didn't notice?

Uh… Is this really gonna be okay? Now I'm pretty worried!

Well, whatever! No use in letting it get to me. If I'm gonna do this, I'm gonna have fun!

"Kei! You there?"

I dashed into our room and looked at the desk. Kei was there, clacking away at his keyboard as usual.

He didn't respond to me, either, as usual. I knew he was listening, though.

"Get this—I'm gonna be in another play!"

"……Uh-huh…," he replied after a long pause, and he didn't sound interested at all.

But I guess an answer is better than no answer at all.

"So to practice for my role, I'm gonna spend the week off from school at a workshop the theater club is holding on campus. Will that be okay?"

I waited for Kei to answer. If we had any Red work, I wouldn't be able to participate in the workshop, and I would have to bow out of the play.

I know I told them I'd do it, but I can't skip out on my work as Red.

"Should be fine. We don't have anything scheduled…"

"Oh, really? So it's all right if I focus on rehearsal then, huh?"

Woohoo! Now I can go to the workshop and really give it a hundred percent! I'm starting to get excited!

But wait a second… Is it really okay for me not to be here during the week we have off from school? It's always the busiest time of year for my dad. I wonder if Kei and his dad will be okay here alone together…?

"It'll be nice and quiet without you here for a change," Kei commented.

H-hey!

I glared at Kei, but he seemed content.

Geez! Sure, it's not like I can cook or clean or do anything when I'm here. But would it kill him to at least pretend to be a little sad?! We're supposed to be partners!

That said, Kei and I have been spending a ton of time together ever since we started Red. Maybe a few days apart will be nice for the both of us.

"Just make sure you come and watch the play!"

"I might. If I feel like it…"

Brr! Why is he so cold?!

Hmph! I'm gonna put on such a good show you'll beg to come and see it. Don't come cryin' to me if you miss it!

3
What Kind of Role?

“You really surprised me when you said you’d be in another play.”

“And you actually have your own part this time. That’s so cool!”

Misaki and Yuzuki were both excited to hear the news.

It was after school, and we were hanging out in the classroom. Homeroom had just ended, and everyone was busy getting their things ready to go home.

I’d be surprised too. It’s not like last time where I took someone’s place for the action scenes either. I never thought I’d get to be in a play before. I’m actually gonna have to act for real this time.

“Do you think you’ll be able to memorize all your lines?” Misaki said with a worried look.

“It’ll be fiiine! It’s not like I have a ton of them.”

“But you can barely remember a single line of math formulas,” Kei commented from the side.

Oof… I bet he’s still mad that I got such a bad grade on my math test. And after all that time he spent tutoring me.

But math and algebra are different! They ain’t Japanese!

“Oh! I should tell you this, Asuka,” Yuzuki said to me with a bright expression. “The home ec club is going to help with the costumes for this next play.”

“What?! Really?! I’m excited to see what you make, Yuzuki!”

“So does rehearsal start today?”

“Ah! Look at the time! I’d better go!”

The second I stood up to go, I heard a voice call out to me.

“Kouzuki! Let’s go!”

It was a loud, somewhat low girl’s voice. I turned around to find Minatsu standing at the doorway to our classroom.

“See you guys later!”

I rushed out of my chair and over to Minatsu, leaving Misaki and Yuzuki behind. Minatsu turned around without saying anything and began walking.

Is she angry…? We barely got to talk at all yesterday.

"Um, is it okay if I call you by your first name? You can call me Asuka, if you want," I offered hesitantly, but she just gave me a side glance and didn't even turn.

"We're gonna be late, Kouzuki."

Oof. I don't know why, but Minatsu doesn't seem to like me very much… She's my teacher, and she taught me a whole lot yesterday, but she makes everything she says feel kind of mean. I saw her giving me a death stare while I spoke with Yukimura, too.



I wonder what I did to make her hate me so much…?

We're both playing smaller parts in the play, so I'd really like to get along if we can. I bet I'm gonna feel a bit depressed later because of this.

By the time we arrived at the gymnasium, the rest of the club was already there.

"You guys are late!" Yukimura called out to us as we ran up.

"'Cause of Kouzuki…," Minatsu muttered to herself.

Ack… She's not wrong, though.

"I think that's everyone. We have all the scripts ready, so please come up and grab one."

Another kid was standing behind Yukimura with a big pile of papers.

Oooh, the scripts! Look how thick they are.

Yukimura explained the story to us yesterday. It takes place in medieval Europe, back in the time of lords and ladies. The story is about a commoner boy, played by Yukimura, who falls in love with a noble woman. Their love is forbidden because of their difference in class, so the boy kidnaps the girl, and they run away together, meeting a bunch of different people along the way… It's a love story!

According to the club members, this would be their first time doing a romance play with the current cast. Most of the plays up until now had been action-oriented.

Yukimura would be playing the lead, and a second-year would play the love interest. Just like last time, Yukimura would be wearing boys' clothes to play the part. I heard that was because they didn't have enough guys in the club.

"Here's your script, Asuka. We're counting on you," Yukimura said as she came up to me and handed me my copy. For a stack of paper, it was pretty heavy. "I want you to read through the script and learn your own role and the gist of the story overall."

I opened my script and saw a long list of characters and the cast that would play them. Under that list was a list of the students on the crew.

I looked through the cast.

Ah…

Near the bottom of the list was my role, "The child who shelters the couple and saves them… Asuka Kouzuki."

I'm gonna save them…

Reading that made me smile, and my chest filled with warmth and happiness.

I get to have that same feeling I had during the culture festival…

"Once you're finished checking the scripts, we're gonna start warm-ups and enunciation practice! Those of you onstage, practice extra hard. The third-years will help the first-years. We don't have a lot of time, so we're gonna have to be strict."

Yukimura listed off our marching orders.

I got to catch a glimpse of her at work back during the culture festival, and I knew she was different when it came to the theater club.

Even though she's playing the lead, she still has to run the rest of the club. I could never do that.

"The teacher who watches our club doesn't have acting experience, so Captain Yukimura takes charge for things like this," Minatsu said from next to me, watching Yukimura.

"Wait. Does that mean she has to run the club all by herself as a student?"

"That's right. We try to distribute the work among ourselves, but we can only do that because Yukimura is our leader. It goes without saying she's also great onstage!"

That's for sure! I got to be onstage with her before. I felt like she was pulling me into the story with her awesome acting.

"You sure know a lot about Yukimura, Minatsu."

And I'm just glad you're having a conversation with me for once!

As soon as I spoke, Minatsu turned her head away from me, almost like she'd caught herself.

"N-not any more than anyone else…! Now c'mon! We need to warm up. Don't slow us down, okay?"

Hm? Is it just me, or is she blushing? Well, whatever.

I need to get rehearsing!

4
Summer Camp!

“Man, I love mornings!”

I was jogging through town. The cool morning breeze felt nice as it brushed by. This wasn’t my usual early training session, though.

Today was the first day of our week off from school—and my first day of theater camp!

“Look at you go, Asuka. You’re not even breaking a sweat,” Yukimura remarked as she jogged next to me. She wasn’t falling behind at all.

“You’re the first person to ever keep up with me during our warm-up runs,” she happily added.

You’d think the theater club was all artsy stuff, but it actually required a lot of physical activity.

“If you run out of breath onstage, it ruins the scene. Getting the stage ready and rehearsing is hard work, too,” was how Yukimura explained it.

Usually, the club ran on the school’s sports field, but during the camp, they were running a big circle through town around the school for about two miles. I usually ran six, so it wasn’t as intense.

Nevertheless, Yukimura was head and shoulders above the rest of the club when it came to physical fitness.

I looked behind us.

“Captain… Asuka… You guys are…too fast… *Huff, huff…*” A third-year was having a hard time behind us.

Once Yukimura and I finished our run, we headed over to the field, where we did some stretching.

“Look at you guys! You’re already exhausted!” Yukimura said. “Finish your stretches, then come to the gym for some sit-ups.”

The rest of the club was pretty much out of breath by the end of the jog, but Yukimura was completely fine, even though she was probably a little winded, too.

"Onstage, you have to speak clearly, no matter how much action is taking place," she said. "It's important to practice speaking properly even when you're out of breath."

Uh-huh! The audience would get thrown out of the story if everyone was huffing and puffing through their lines.

Ah.

Within the next batch of club members who arrived I saw Minatsu. She was barely standing at this point.

"You okay?" I ran over to her and handed her a towel. She seemed somewhat flustered before taking the towel.

"I'm…*huff, huff*…fine…"

She definitely didn't look fine, but after wiping herself down with the towel, she started her stretches.

"Make sure you actively control your breathing while you stretch. It's gonna be hard, but there are no breaks when you're onstage. That being said, I want you to speak up if you're not feeling well. Especially the first-years."

Everyone nodded as they followed Yukimura's directions.

After we finished stretching, we started doing sit-ups. You need a strong core for projecting your voice, or so I was told.

Yukimura and I were the first to finish the two sets of fifty.

When everyone was done, Yukimura called out to the rest of the club: "That's the end of our warm-up. Now, let's get ready for rehearsal."

The club then dispersed throughout the gym. The cast all either rehearsed scenes or rehearsed the choreography. The stagehands began making the set, and the dress coordinators gathered in a separate room to work together with the home ec club on the costumes.

I never realized before how many people are involved in making a play possible.

"We'll start from act two, scene three!"

I was paired up with the performers that I would be acting with, and we went over our choreography.

I only just figured out my lines—is my acting really gonna cut it?

"You should be okay here… No one comes this way."

As soon as I said my line, a third-year student stopped the rehearsal and came over to me.

“Asuka, you sound like a robot,” she said. “Try to really get into the character this time. Again.”

Guess there’s a lot more to acting than just memorizing your lines. This might be harder than I thought…

“Then we should go to town! It would be so much fun,” Minatsu said in a loud, clear voice.

She’s perfect for the role!

After acting with her, I learned Minatsu was one of the best performers even as a first-year. She was the first to learn all her lines, and the words felt so natural coming from her.

“That was great, Minatsu! Do it the exact same way onstage.”

The third-year watching our rehearsal had no criticism for Minatsu.

“How’s rehearsal going?”

Oh, it’s Yukimura. She’s coming to check on us during her break.

Everyone lit up when she came over.

“I wish I could say it was going better. I think we’ll be ready in time for the show, though.”

“I can see you guys are putting a lot of effort into it!” said Yukimura.

“Definitely. We’ll get there! Right, guys?”

““Yeah!””

Everyone was ready to jump back in. Even Minatsu’s usual cold expression was wiped away for a happier one in front of Captain Yukimura.

Hmm, I can’t help but feel like I’m dragging everyone down. I wonder if I’ll be up to speed in time. Now I’m getting a little anxious.

Yukimura then turned to me. “What do you think, Asuka? Think you can handle the role?”

“Um, I still have some work to do… I did manage to memorize my lines, though.”

“I see… Here, could you try saying something out loud for me? Let’s do some voice training,” Yukimura said before taking a few steps back.

I’m not sure I understand what’s going on, but I’ll give it a try.

“Make it loud.”

I took a deep breath.

“Ah, eh, ih, ooh, eh, oh, ah, oh…”

I started doing the same voice training we did during rehearsal. Evidently, this “ah, eh, ih” sequence was a popular voice training method. It was good for checking whether or not you’re opening your mouth properly, or so I was told.

“Stop. That’s what I thought. I noticed you do this during rehearsal too.”



Hm? What does she think?

"Asuka, you're still not using your stomach to project your voice. You're gonna hurt your throat, and then it'll be hard to keep your voice stable. When you move around onstage, it is hard to keep it the same pitch if you speak from your throat."

"Y-yeah, it is hard sometimes."

"Speaking with your stomach will definitely fix that."

"Huh, I always thought my voice was louder than most."

Kei is always sure to let me know when I'm being loud, after all.

"Speaking with your stomach isn't the same as increasing your volume… Actually, it's probably hard to understand if I just explain. Here, let me show you. Listen." Yukimura went to the far corner of the gymnasium, near the entrance.

The other club members stopped what they were doing and watched, too.

"Ah, eh, ih, ooh, eh, oh, ah, oh, ka, keh, kih, kooh, keh, kah, koh, sah, she, shih, sooh, she, soh, sah, soh…"

Yukimura didn't fumble a single word. Her voice resonated throughout the entire gym.

Wh-whoa…

She wasn't just loud; she was extremely clear.

And she's so far away!

"The captain really is incredible…," Minatsu said, looking on at Yukimura with passion in her eyes.

"See what I mean?" Yukimura asked as she walked back over.

"I wish I could say yes, but I still don't quite follow how *I'm* supposed to speak like that."

"You'll figure it out soon enough. First, you need to learn to breathe with your stomach. Try putting your hand on your belly and focus on expanding your stomach to breathe. That alone will make a big difference."

I put my hand on my stomach, took a deep breath, and…

Wow! There it goes!

"When you can do that automatically, it will be a lot easier to project your lines, and the audience will be able to hear you better. This role is meant for you, so I want you to really get it down!"

Breathing with your stomach, huh? I'd better master this before we finish our summer camp.

“Remember, everyone, this is Asuka’s first rehearsal, so I want you to really teach her the basics. We can’t rush her just because we don’t have a lot of time. Got it?”

“Yup!” The older students all nodded.

I can tell I’m kinda dragging them down… I mean, I’m the worst one at acting out of anyone here by a long shot.

“Captain, we should probably get ready for lunch soon,” Minatsu said, and Yukimura checked her watch.

“Wow, look at the time. I’ll leave you to it then, first-years.”

During our summer camp, it was our responsibility to prepare our own lunches. Since it would be difficult to leave the school grounds to go get lunch every day, we received permission from President Shiori to use the home ec club room. There, we would make everyone’s food for the week.

Today was the first day, and it was the first-years’ turn on lunch duty.

There were ten first-years, including Minatsu and me. We would be making food for almost fifty people, which included home ec members who would be helping us with the play preparations.

I’m anxious to see if we can even do this. Especially with me on the job—I’m terrible at cooking.

It wasn’t just me. All the first-years seemed nervous. Well, except for Minatsu. She seemed perfectly fine.

She must be confident in her cooking skills.

As soon as we entered the home ec classroom, we all put on aprons and laid out the ingredients we would be using for lunch that day.

I think we’ll need three large pots for this many people.

“We don’t have a lot of time, so let’s each work on something different. Asuka, could you peel the vegetables for us?” one of the other kids asked me.

“S-sure…”

Okay, peeling, huh…

Me, Minatsu, and the other students began washing a giant mountain of potatoes.

I picked one up and carefully began peeling it with a knife.

Slice.

Whoops… I accidentally cut out a big chunk of the potato.

I tried again, doing my best to keep the knife against the skin of the potato, but every time I would accidentally cut out more and more of the potato itself.

By the time I finished peeling my potato, it was almost half the size it was when I first picked it up. And it took me forever, too.

“Asuka… You’re not that great of a cook, I see.” One of my fellow potato-peelers was staring at me with an eyebrow raised.

I didn’t know what to say to that.

“What did you do in elementary school when you had to cook stuff during home ec?”

“I was in charge of tasting the food! …Ha-ha, not really, but sorta? I was in charge of adding the final spices—I have a knack for getting flavors right.”



“Really? Then we can have you do that for our curry, too.”

“I might be able to do that! That’s the one thing I know I can handle when it comes to cooking.”

“You still have to work while we are making the actual food, though. Here, I’ll peel the potatoes, and you can focus on washing them. You’re only getting in the way here.” Minatsu didn’t even look at me as she focused on peeling a potato.

Ouch, that hurts. But Minatsu does peel about two times faster than any of the rest of us, though.

“O-okay. Sorry, everyone.” I put my things down and I went to leave, and noticed the other students give me a look of sympathy as I left.

Over at the sink, a girl who seemed to be watching the entire scene whispered over to me. “Minatsu is so mean, isn’t she? She thinks just because she can act a little that she can boss us around. She never has anything nice to say.”

“I think she sees you as a rival because she was the only first-year student to get a speaking part until you came along. She could be a little nicer, though.”

So Minatsu isn’t very popular with the club in general. It looks like I’m not the only one she’s mean to.

Come to think of it, I haven’t seen her hanging out with anyone else in her year. When I showed up at the cooking station earlier, she was already quietly peeling potatoes.

I glanced over at Minatsu, who was busy at work without paying attention to us.

Sliiiiiice…

In an instant, she had peeled it as thinly as possible—and all at once. The skin looked like a long string on the cutting board.

“Wh-whoa!”

I’d seen my dad do that before, but he’s a professional. Minatsu was my age.

I realized the other students at the station were all captivated by her ability.

“How did you get so good at that?” I said without thinking.

Minatsu flicked her gaze over at me. “I’ve always had a knack for it. I have to cook for me and my sister because my mom works late. You’re pretty awful at it.”

Agh. I mean, I am, I guess. I just can't seem to get the hang of it no matter what I do. I'd better not tell her that my dad is a professional Italian chef. I really would rather eat food than make it.

"Now get back to work!"

O-okay!

I scrambled over to the sink to wash the dirty dishes and utensils. This was something I was much more used to.

After about an hour, we finished the curry. And by *we*, I meant Minatsu—she took charge halfway through.

The rice finished cooking as soon as I was done with the dishes.

"Good job, Minatsu!" I called to her, and she looked over at the sink with surprise.

"Did you finish washing all those dishes…?"

"Yeah?"

I hope I didn't forget anything.

"Your dishwashing is much better than your cooking, then."

You think? I'm the one who always washes them while my dad cooks at home.

It's good to wash everything while dinner's in progress to keep the sink nice and clean—it makes it easy for the people doing the actual cooking. I'm glad my dad taught me that.

I was more excited about testing the flavor than doing the dishes, though.

"Asuka and Minatsu! We're bringing the food down to the gym!"

"Coming!"

We worked together as a group to carry the big pots of curry and rice down to the gymnasium.

"Wow! That smells delicious!"

The moment we stepped through the door, everyone rushed over.

I bet they're really hungry. I sure am!

Man, we cooked for fifty students. This is gonna be a sight to see.

"This tastes great!"

"I was worried when we left the first-years in charge of lunch, but this might taste better than anything we could've made."

From what I could hear, people were happy with our work.

I looked over to Minatsu, who seemed relieved.

“Wow, Minatsu. This does taste really good,” I told her.

She glanced over at me before sighing. “I wasn’t the only one who made it, you know.”

“I mean, all I did was the dishes.”

“That’s an important job too… Although I wish you were a little better in the kitchen.”

“Ha-ha-ha… I’ll try to figure it out. Maybe I’ll be able to peel a potato before the camp’s over.”

“I hope you’ll at least be able to do that,” Minatsu said with a shrug. “The same goes for your acting, too.”

Yup! I’m already prepared for our afternoon rehearsal!

5
“Become One with the Role”...?

The sky outside the windows in the hallway was already pitch-black.

“Ahchoo! Ugh, it’s pretty chilly here...,” I said, shivering. Even though it was getting warmer these days, it was still cold at night.

After we finished our rehearsals, we used the high school’s showers to freshen up.

I looked at my watch, and it was already past nine o’clock.

Being at school this late feels kind of strange.

“Don’t catch a cold, Kouzuki.” Minatsu stared right at me.

“I’ll be fiiine! I haven’t caught a cold since preschool.”

“You know what they say about people who don’t catch colds.”

“Hm? What do they say?”

“I was asking you.” Minatsu cocked her head to the side.

Hmm... “Idiots” don’t catch colds, was it...? And here I thought we were starting to get closer.

But no, there’s another wall. I mean, she even still calls me “Kouzuki.”

“There.”

Minatsu glanced toward the end of the hallway, where there was a light turned on.

“Wow! When did you guys do this?!”

We entered the room, and it was packed with futons. I wanted to jump into the sea of soft fluffiness.

“Did the older kids do all of this?”

The first-years were all in the showers until then, so it couldn’t have been us. This meant that the older students did all of the work for us.

“That’s right. You guys made lunch for us today. We don’t want to make you do everything, so we handled this. The boys will be

sleeping downstairs, of course," Yukimura said from the far corner, smiling. "Once you guys pick out where you want to sleep, we'll head to bed for an early night. We have to be up early tomorrow."

"Okay!" we responded, and the first-years went to pick our spots.

After a game of rock paper scissors, I ended up on the hallway side of the room.

"Turning off the lights now!" one of the older students said, and then the room was dark.

I snuggled into my futon. The doors were closed, but this close to the hallway, it was a little cold.

"Minatsu, do you mind if I scooch a bit that way?"

I pushed myself a little bit close to Minatsu, who was next to me.

"Why…?" Minatsu groaned sleepily. She must've been tired after long day of rehearsals.

"'Cause I'm cold," I said, and without waiting for her to answer, I snuggled up next to her back.

Oh yeah, this is way warmer.

I was almost certain she'd give me a flat no, but to my surprise, Minatsu said nothing.

Huh?

I realized I could hear soft breathing coming from her futon.

Minatsu was already asleep. I listened in closely; most of the room was already asleep.

Everyone must be tired after all that rehearsing. So am I—trying new things can really wear you out.

I closed my eyes, and it didn't take long for me to join the rest of the room.

Hm…?

My eyes opened slightly when I thought I heard a noise. The room was dim.

I turned my head to look at the clock, and it was still two o'clock in the morning. Was the dim light coming from the moon?

Ugh, I woke up… Maybe I should take a little walk.

Careful not to wake up Minatsu, I quietly slipped out of my futon.

I threw on my school trainer jacket and went into the moonlit hallway.

The school sure does look different at night.

It was so quiet, even the air seemed still. The only noise I could hear was my own footsteps.

You'd think school at night would be a little creepier, but it really isn't. Maybe that's because Red always breaks into buildings during the nighttime, though.

"……Right……"

Huh? Did I just hear a voice? But who would be awake this late at night?

It's not a ghost, is it…?

I began to walk toward the source of the voice and could hear it growing louder.

Is it coming from the gym?

I left the school building and headed for the gymnasium, but I couldn't hear the voice anymore.

Maybe I went the wrong way. But I definitely heard it coming from this direction.

The gym door was left slightly open. I peered through the crack in the door.

Ah…

"Why can't I hear you?! I know you're there right next to me! So why…?"

It was Yukimura. Her hair was disheveled, and she was shouting.

This is one of the scenes from the play—but it's the heroine's line.

The moonlight shone down on Yukimura like a spotlight. She was so much more intense and dramatic than her usual self—it was captivating.

"Oh, Asuka? Is that you?" Yukimura turned around and looked at me with surprise. "What are you doing up?"

"I woke up. What about you? Isn't this a little late for rehearsal?"

"I couldn't sleep. I thought maybe some rehearsing might help wear me out, but then I got into the zone," Yukimura said with a wry smile. "Want to chat for a bit?"

She waved me over, so I went and stood next to her.

I looked up and at the full moon through the gym's windows.

"You weren't practicing your own lines in the play just now, were you?"

"You picked up on that? Yeah, those were the heroine's lines."

Why is Yukimura running someone else's lines? Isn't she the main guy?

This question must've been written on my face, because Yukimura answered what I was thinking.

"Our club doesn't have a lot of boys, so I usually end up taking on the male roles. I guess I just wanted to try a change of pace. I have the entire script memorized either way."

"Wait, you have this entire thing memorized?!"

"That's right. I'm the lead, after all. You never know when you'll have to ad-lib when something goes wrong, and the best way to do that is to know everyone's lines."

She said it like it was nothing.

"I don't think I could memorize that whole giant script. And you were even acting out the main girl's part too. That means you have every scene laid out in your head, huh?"

"No one can do it when they first start out. The more you practice, the easier it gets to memorize lines, do the choreography, and project your voice. You're good at sports, so you probably understand this, but—take basketball, for example. You need to practice dribbling and shooting three-pointers so that you can actually do it in a game. One big difference with acting starts before the technique, though…and that's how you become one with the role."

Yukimura took on a more serious look.

"Become one with the role?"

"That's right. Every character that steps onto the stage is a living person. Each one has a life outside of the scene that is shown on the stage. It's a performer's job to picture that. How would your character study at school, go shopping, hang out with their friends; stuff like that. A performer pictures all those details to create their personality and how they would act, then learns to become it. That's what acting is. And that's what becoming one with the role is… Although I stole that explanation from someone else."

Is that right? This is my second time working with the theater club, but I've never looked at it this way before. No one ever explained it like that to me.

But she's right. Even though it's all acting, we are depicting real-life people. And they have lives outside of what you see onstage.

This is true for my character, too, even if I only have a few lines.

As I nodded to myself, Yukimura grinned.

"You don't need to worry about all that yet, Asuka. Just work on properly projecting your voice for now, okay?"

Oh, yeah… If I don't consciously think about it, I still end up breathing using my chest.

Clouds blocked the moon, and the gymnasium went dark. But even in the gloom, neither Yukimura nor I seemed scared. It almost felt like time had slowed to a crawl.

"Can I ask you something?"

A question had popped up in my mind.

"What is it?"

"What made you want to be in the theater club? You're really athletic; did you consider maybe joining a sports club?"

This was something that had been on my mind during our morning warm-up. Yukimura could keep up with me, and her movements on stage were excellent. So it had me wondering why she didn't join a sports-oriented club.



I bet you'd be great at any sport you played.

"Yeah, that's what most people think," Yukimura said, snickering. "When I first came to this school, I wanted to join a sports club. But one of my friends invited me to go see her older brother acting in a college play. The experience was overwhelming, and I knew this was what I wanted to do. So the next day, I joined the theater club."

Now that's what I call a go-getter...

"I was terrible at first, of course. I'd never acted before. I was the worst out of my entire school year. I didn't know how to project my voice or remember the lines... I used to go crying to Shiori about how I had no talent."

Whaaat?! It's hard to imagine, looking at you now.

"But I'd played sports all my life, so I was good at practicing. I knew if I wasn't good at something, I could practice until I was. If I didn't know something, I could study the technique. And somehow, I ended up the captain of the theater club. I know I'm not the type you'd expect, but one thing's for sure: I love the theater club, and everyone in it. That goes for you too, Asuka." Yukimura showed me a warm smile.

"So even you weren't always good at acting. Then that means there's still hope for me!"

"You betcha!"

She nodded her head firmly.

The clouds passed, and the moon shined down on us once more.

"We'd better get to bed. We have rehearsal in the morning," Yukimura said, guiding me out of the gymnasium.

I'm starting to feel sleepy, too.

The two of us snuck back into the classroom, and I quietly slipped into my futon.

I made out Yukimura waving quietly to me in the darkness.

Good night!

6
An Unexpected Guest

Bing bong bang bong…

A loud bell rang out throughout the gymnasium.

At this point in the day, the props team was pretty much done with the stage.

Our spirits were high as we went to start dress rehearsal in the afternoon.

“All right, let’s take a little break!” Yukimura called out, and everyone let out a relaxed sigh.

We each went to where we had our things and drank whatever drinks we brought.

Even though this isn’t an action scene, I guess putting a lot of passion into rehearsal works up quite a sweat.

I was taking a sip of the sports drink I’d brought for the camp when I noticed someone out of the corner of my eye.

Hm…?

“Rehearsal is going well.”

I heard a voice from the second floor of the gym, and I looked up to find President Shiori watching us.

And that pretty girl next to her is…Kotone?!

There’s a guy in a white jacket behind them…

Woof, is that Hibiki Shirasato?! Wh-what’s he doing here?!

I wasn’t the only one surprised to see President Shiori.

“Shiori, what brings you here so early in the morning?” Yukimura asked President Shiori when she came to the first floor.

“We have guests with us today.”

“Guests… You mean those two?” Yukimura glanced over President Shiori’s shoulder for a quick view of Kotone and Hibiki.

“Yes. This is Kotone Hanasato. She’s a representative of the Hanasato Group, which is in charge of building the new theater

hall. She was the one who suggested it be free for students to use."

The club members erupted in chatter. Guess no one knew she was such an important person.

Which makes sense. You'd think Kotone is just any other attractive college student.

Kotone took a step forward with a smile.

"Hello, everyone. I came to meet the different schools that will be performing at our new theater hall and give you words of encouragement. I want our theater hall to be a place loved by the locals, so I'm hoping to always keep it free for students to use," she said, surveying the club. "I'm looking forward to your show. So please give it your all! I've brought some food for your rehearsal, so please try some if you'd like."

Kotone is always so generous!

Several of the kids *oohed* excitedly, and Yukimura stepped forward from the group.

"I'm the captain of the theater club, Yukimura. Thank you very much for giving us the opportunity to perform. We're going to do our best to make the show amazing."

She held out her hand for a handshake with Kotone—something Yukimura would be thoughtful enough to do.

"Hey… Is that boy next to her who I think it is…?"

"I think it's the Middle School Detective, Hibiki Shirasato?"

"He's even cuter than he is on TV."

"I wonder if we can get an autograph?"

I could hear the theater club getting excited over Hibiki. He was standing a few steps behind Kotone and the others, apparently waiting on her. He was his usual self in his trademark white jacket with his arms folded in front of him and that cool, calm, and collected expression. He was so annoying.

But wait… What's going on? He seems slightly out of it today, like his mind is somewhere else. I wonder if he's just out of it. Or maybe he's not feeling well.

Heck, why is he here with Kotone in the first place? They didn't figure out that I'm Red, did they…?

As much as I wanted to say hey to Kotone, it was hard to do it in front of Hibiki.

What should I do?

“Oh?”

“You’re that…”

As I thought to myself, both Kotone and Hibiki noticed me at the exact same time.

I instinctively ducked a little bit into the crowd, but…

“Hibiki, you know Asuka?”

“I’m surprised *you* know her, Kotone.”

Hibiki looked at me with surprise.

“So you’re a student at this school, huh.”

Oh boy. This is bad. Come to think of it, Hibiki came to our school during the cultural festival, too.

The two of them walked over to me together.

“It’s good to see you again, Asuka,” said Kotone.

President Shiori turned and gave me a look that said, *What’s going on here?*

Uhhhh, it’s kind of a long story, President Shiori.

“I-it’s good to see you too, Kotone. Thanks again for the other day.”

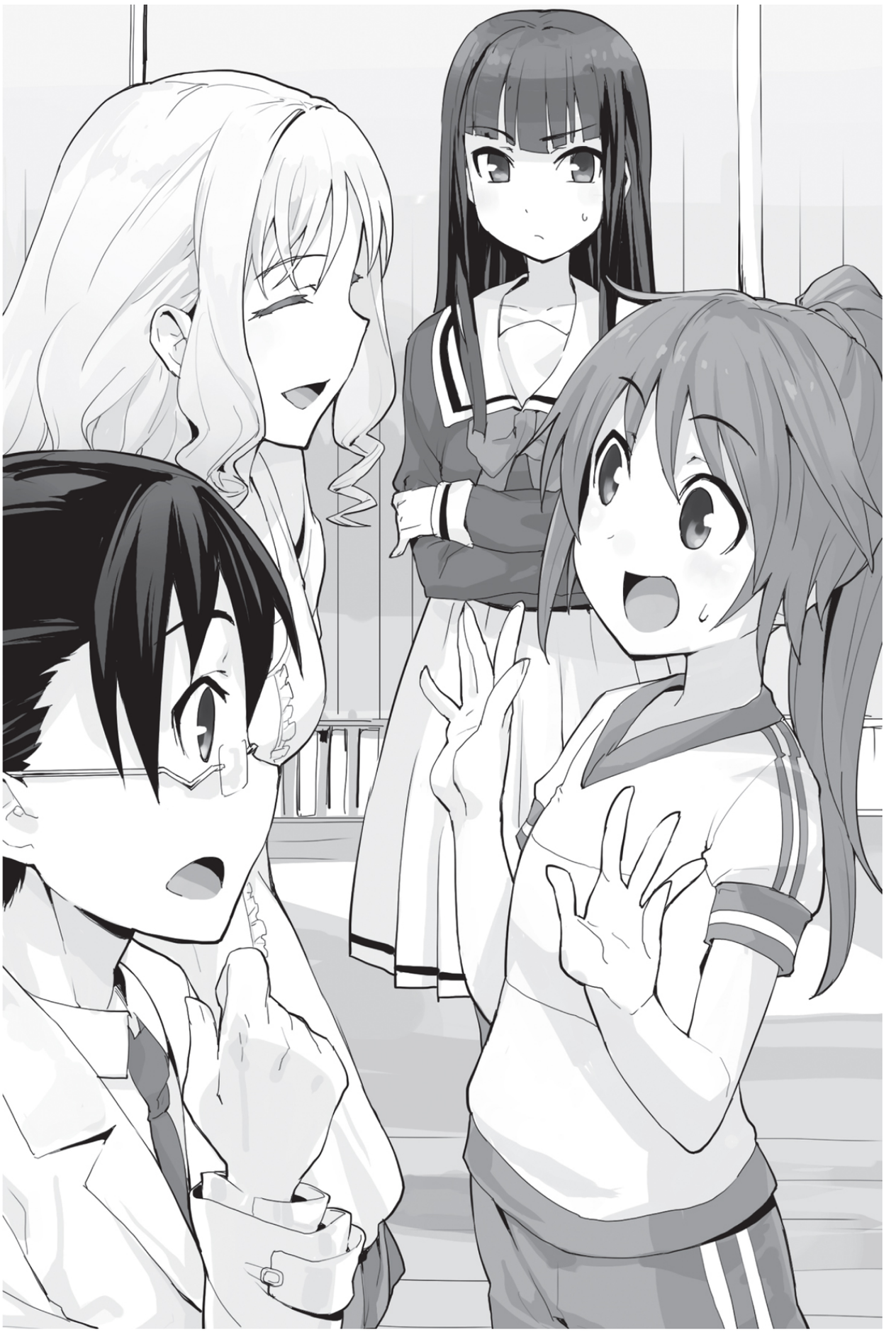
I could feel the entire theater club staring at me from behind as I smiled and responded.

“The pleasure was all mine. But I am curious—where did you meet Asuka, Hibiki?” Kotone turned to Hibiki.

“……”

“Hibiki?”

“Oh, my apologies.”



Hibiki, seemingly lost in thought, was caught off guard by the question. That wasn't like him. In fact, he seemed generally tired.

"I told you about the hostage situation at the sky towers, right? This is the friend of one of the girls who was held hostage."

"She was also on the SS *Flower Song* where it was hijacked. We actually became friends during the cruise."

"I see, yes, that incident. Wow, this girl has a knack for being near trouble."

Uh-oh. He's still as sharp as ever, even if he is tired. Uh, maybe I should change the topic of the conversation.

"So, um, how do you two know each other?"

Another incident, maybe? Whatever the case, I can't help noticing Kotone called Hibiki by his first name. That sounds a little too personal for her to simply be hiring him as a detective.

"We're childhood friends. We grew up near each other."

"Wait… Whaaaaaat?!"

"I know, right? I always ask him for help when I have questions for a detective."

I bet Kei would be surprised to hear that. Although I wouldn't put it past him to already know about their relationship.

I was opening and closing my mouth like a fish when Hibiki stepped in. "Kotone, we should probably be going…"

"Yes, we wouldn't want to slow down your rehearsal… Break a leg, everyone!"

With that, the two of them began making their way for the exit. I ended up following President Shiori to see them off.

"I didn't know you were in the theater club, Asuka," Kotone commented as we walked.

"Well, technically, I'm not, but I recently helped out a bit, and they wanted me to be in this next play, too. It's just a small part."

"Is that right?" she said. "Well, it's definitely something for me to look forward to. Good luck memorizing your lines."

Kotone and Hibiki both stepped into a big black van that was waiting for them outside of the school.

"Are you going to visit more schools today?" I asked Kotone.

"We are—eight more, to be exact."

Busy as always, huh?

"I'll be seeing you then, Asuka. You too, Shiori."

The car revved up and drove away. President Shiori and I waved goodbye until we couldn't see them anymore before returning to the gymnasium.

Uh? Why is everyone looking at me like that…?

"Aaasuuukaaa…"

Wh-what is it?!

"What was that all about? Why are you friends with such important people?!"

The entire theater club flooded me with questions.

"Oh, you know… It's actually a long story…" I stepped back; this was getting intense.

"You're always so full of surprises, aren't you, Asuka?" Yukimura said with a laugh, then patted me on the head. "It is what makes you Asuka, though."

The theater club all seemed to agree.

"I am interested in hearing the story, though," said President Shiori. "How did Kouzuki become friends with the granddaughter of the Hanasato Group?"

You too, President Shiori?!

"Right? As captain of the theater club, I'd like to know, too," Yukimura said jokingly—although her eyes were completely serious.

Sandwiched between her and President Shiori, I felt like there was no escape. Behind me was the entire theater club, too.

Aw, man… I guess I'd better give them the short version of those two incidents. I don't know how I'm going to tell them anything without hiding what I actually did, though… Ugh… Kei's gonna kill me when he finds out I told everyone.

7
The Worries of a Middle School Detective

“I’m freeeeee!” I shouted, taking up a lot of space to stretch my arms as I walked down.

The barrage of questions ended up taking my focus off rehearsal, and although I managed to come out unscathed, I was dead tired.

I’m just glad it’s time to go buy ingredients for lunch, or else I’d still be back at the gym getting interrogated.

“But wow, Asuka! You’re so cool. Not only are you incredible at sports, but you’re friends with famous people.”

“Yeah! I was so surprised when the middle school detective Hibiki Shirasato said he knew you.”

“It’s really not like that. It was more of a coincidence than anything.”

The two other first-years with me were still excited about what’d happened. The third, however, had been quiet this entire time and was just turning around to say…

“Enough with this silly chit-chat. We need to hurry if we don’t want to get in trouble.”

With that, Minatsu turned back around and stormed off.

“What’s her problem…?”

The other two girls frowned as they watched Minatsu go.

H-hey. You can’t talk to people like that, Minatsu. We’re supposed to depend on you…

I calmed the two down before scurrying forward to catch up to Minatsu.

“Hey, Minatsu. What are we making for dinner tonight?”

“……” Minatsu just kept on walking.

Come on, now. We’re both going to the same place, either way.

The four of us were in charge of buying dinner. Minatsu was sent with us since she was the most experienced chef out of all of us.

Everyone's counting on you, and that sure is something. It's not just your cooking, either—you're the best actor out of all of us by a long shot. A lot of the older students said you were perfect.

If only you weren't so harsh all the time, you wouldn't make yourself as much of a target…

We arrived at the supermarket, and each of us picked up a shopping basket. We were going to need a lot of baskets to buy all the ingredients we needed.

Minatsu stood in thought for a moment before stepping forward and dumping groceries into our baskets—multiple cabbages, bell peppers, tomatoes, and heads of lettuce.

Next was the meat section, where she piled up sliced pork and chicken thighs into our baskets.

"M-Minatsu… Is it just me, or are you putting all the heavy ingredients into my basket…? I have, like, five cabbages in here…"

"You're the only one of us strong enough to carry that much cabbage, Kouzuki. We'll split the load up before we head back to school."

"Th-that's true, I guess. Maybe we should've brought a boy or two for this, in retrospect. But I'm liking what I'm seeing, so it's all good."

"Oh…? Do you know what I'm going to make with all this?" Minatsu turned and stared at me with surprise.

Oh, she finally looked at me.

"Hmm, with these ingredients, I'm guessing you're making twice-cooked pork and fried chicken. Am I wrong?"

"That's spot-on, actually… You can tell that just by looking at the ingredients?"

"I sure can! My dad has me go out and buy ingredients for him all the time, so I can pretty much figure out what's for dinner by looking at the shopping list."

"If only you could use that memory for learning your lines…"

"Yeah, ha-ha… I wonder why it doesn't work like that."

"You really are a strange one, aren't you?" Minatsu said with a look of disbelief and a shrug.

We paid for the mountain of ingredients before heading out of the store. Just as Minatsu promised, we split up the groceries into bags that all weighed about the same.

This time, however, it was Minatsu who was red in the face under all the weight.

“You know what, maybe I should take on a bit more of the load. You look like you’re having a hard time.”

“I-it’s fine! I can handle this much,” she said, but the way she could barely walk straight told a different story.

She’s a stubborn one.

The four of us began the trek back to school.

I helped the other two by taking on a little bit of their load, but about halfway through the trip back, Minatsu suddenly stopped.

“What’s up?”

I thought maybe the weight had finally gotten to her, but that wasn’t the issue.

“I’m sorry… I forgot to buy the doubanjiang sauce. You guys can go ahead without me.”

“I think we would be okay without the spicy bean sauce. I mean, we’re already halfway back.”

“No… It’s the most important part… I’ll go get it!” Minatsu said before turning around and heading the other way.

“Wait, I’ll go with you.”

“You two can head back first. You should make it in time for lunch.”

“Okay, we’ll tell the captain where you are.”

The two other girls nodded before picking up the heavy groceries and continuing their walk.

I watched them go a bit before hustling to catch up with Minatsu. We’d already gotten halfway back to the school, so we could end up being late. I definitely wanted to be back before afternoon rehearsal.

Minatsu knew this more than anyone, and she was walking really fast. The palms of her hands were bright red where she held the grocery bags, and I was starting to get worried.

“Here, Minatsu. Let me hold some more for you.”

“I’ll be fine… I want you to head back first.”

“I already said I’m going with you. Wait—where are you going now?” Minatsu turned a corner we didn’t take before. This one

led into a neighborhood. “It’s just a little shortcut, because we’re in a hurry.”

“You sure?”

“I live near here, so I know the area.”

Dipping through narrow alleyways and downstairs, Minatsu knew exactly where she was going.

On the other hand, I didn’t have a clue as to where we were, and I knew I’d get lost the second I lost sight of her. Just as I hurried along to match her pace, I heard…

“That’s why I’m telling you, we shouldn’t walk…”

Hm? That voice sounds familiar…

“Hey, Kouzuki. Is that…?” Minatsu stopped in her tracks as well and pointed to an open plot of land. It was a secluded spot next to a run-down factory—and there, we saw none other than Kotone and Hibiki.

I thought they were supposed to be visiting schools…

“I know, but if we just drive everywhere, this won’t be the break you need from everything— Oh!”

Kotone scrambled to cover her mouth with both hands to stop herself. She glanced awkwardly at Hibiki and responded with a shrug and a sigh.

“I knew that’s what you were up to… I figured something was up when you wanted me to come as security for you, even though there was no news of an incoming crime.”

“Well, you’ve just been so tired all the time these days. It isn’t good to overwork yourself, you know,” Kotone said worriedly.

“That doesn’t mean we should go walking through neighborhoods we’ve never been to only to wind up lost. You even made us leave our phones.”

“If we brought those, my security outfit would find us with their GPS, so it’d defeat the purpose…”

Slumping over, Kotone seemed defeated. It was hard to imagine her ever feeling that way, given her usual refreshing bravado. That being said, Kotone had to have a forceful side to her for her to drag Hibiki out of the house against his will.

“Kotone… Do you think I’m doing something wrong?” Hibiki asked, suddenly shifting to a more serious expression.

“Where’d this come from? What are you talking about?” Kotone said with a troubled look.

“You know what happened during my most recent job.”

“You mean when Phantom Thief Red appeared?”

“Yes… I knew the owner of the mansion I was guarding had stolen art within his collection. I intended on bringing this fact to light, but Red stole the art first. That meant the original crime came to light on its own, the stolen art was returned to its original owners, and the criminal was arrested. I don’t think I could’ve produced the same results this fast…,” Hibiki mumbled as if he was thinking aloud.

“Hibiki…” Kotone stared back at him.

I didn’t know Hibiki Shirasato had so much on his mind…

“Kouzuki… If you’re planning to go up and talk to them, I’d rather you do it soon.”

Minatsu, on the other hand, was eyeing me while she waited.

Whoops, sorry. It was kind of hard to butt in… Although, yeah, we should probably help them if they’re lost. The least we can do is guide them back to a main road.

“I’ll go see if they need any help. Wait here for a sec.”

I started walking away from Minatsu and toward the two—and then I noticed something from the corner of my eye.

On the opposite side of the road, there was a man coming down the street in a worker’s uniform. At a glance, he seemed like any old worker you’d see around town.

But there was something strange about it all. The way he walked, I could tell he wouldn’t be easy to sneak up on or attack. I wasn’t sure what sort of physical labor he did, but there was something distinct about his gait.

Hibiki and Kotone had their backs turned to him, so they didn’t notice him. Meanwhile, the man was making no noise at all.

I noticed a slight grin on the man’s face.

“Kotone! Behind you!” I shouted before my mind could catch up.

“?!”

Both Kotone and Hibiki looked over at me as I ran toward them.

No, not this way! Figure it out!

The man rushed toward Kotone.

He’s holding something!

“Watch out!”

Finally noticing the man, Hibiki placed himself between him and Kotone, but in that exact moment, the man pulled out something and pointed it at Hibiki.

“Gragh…!”

In the next instant, Hibiki’s body shuddered, reeling back as he fell to the ground.

Is that…a stun gun?!

“Hibiki!” Kotone ran toward her friend. “Who are—? Ack!”

The man used his stun gun on Kotone, then caught her as she collapsed to the ground.

He’s not kidnapping her, is he?!

“Not so fast!”

I started sprinting toward the man, when—

Jolt.

—I felt a shiver run down my spine.

“!”

There’s someone behind me?!

Before I could turn around to look, I felt a heavy thud on the back of my neck, and my consciousness instantly began to go.

I can’t believe this is happening… How in the world did they get so close to me without me realizing it?

Minatsu…

As my consciousness faded, I could hear voices in the background.

“What should we do with these other two?”

“Let’s take ’em,” said a deep male voice. “Kids make good hostages. Forget the detective; he can’t do anything to stop us.”

My vision went black.

I’m not…gonna let you get…away with this…

8
Kotone and Hibiki's History

Clack, clack, clack…

Mm…?

The noise sounded far away at first as I slowly woke up.

Huh? What was I doing again…? I think I went to buy ingredients for dinner with Minatsu and the other girls, but we had to go back, and… Oh!

Kotone got kidnapped!

I opened my eyes as much as I could.

"Asuka, are you awake?"

"Kouzuki."

I could see Kotone and Minatsu in front of me.

"Kotone and Minatsu! You're all right…! Ouch!"

I tried to get up, but I winced at the pain spreading down my neck.

"Don't get up too quickly. Your neck's all red and swollen."

My neck was warm, too. Though I didn't manage to see him, the guy who popped out of nowhere behind me was the one who did this. He managed to get me before I even sensed he was there.

Sure, I wasn't focusing as much as I should have been, but I'm supposed to be Red… I can't believe he got me like I was any other regular girl…

I bit my lip out of frustration.

The same goes for Kotone. If only I'd realized what was going on a few seconds earlier, she may have been able to escape. But instead…

"Does it hurt, Asuka?" Kotone looked over at me worriedly.

"No…" I quietly shook my head.

I can't call myself Red like this…

I could feel my eyes welling up with tears as I bit my lip even harder.

“What, just one failure and you already want to call it quits?”

Kei?!

I couldn’t help but look around, but…there was no way he was there. I didn’t have my earpiece in, so I couldn’t have heard his voice just now.

But his words woke me up anyway.

I know Kei would never quit—that’s for sure. He’d think of a way to bust us out of here!

“No more regrets!”

I spoke to the two at a normal volume, and they looked back at me, surprised.

“Asuka…?”

I slowly propped myself up.

I’d better figure out how hurt I am, first. My neck…hurts, but I can deal with that. My hands are tied behind my back, and it doesn’t look like I can break out of that. My legs…are not tied up, so they can still move.

I bet they skipped my legs because they thought I’m just some kid. Yeah, you guys are gonna regret that later.

Next, I need to figure out where we are.

There are a bunch of cardboard boxes in this room, so maybe we’re in some sort of storage space? There’s one door and a small window near the ceiling; that’s where the light is coming in.

If we’re gonna bust out of here, it’s gotta be through the door, but they definitely have someone guarding it outside.

Okay! I think I’ve figured it out.

I may not be Kei whipping up escape plans left and right, but I can at least figure out my surroundings.

Clack, clack, clack.

Hm?

The noise I heard when I woke up was still there. It was Kotone, tapping what sounded like a pen on the concrete floor.

The pattern seemed to be random, instead of any specific rhythm.

“Does this bother you?”

Kotone saw me watching her hands, and she turned around to show me what was indeed a pen.

“It’s just a good luck charm.”

A good luck charm? That’s not what I’d expect from you in this situation…

“Asuka and Minatsu, I really am sorry you two had to get caught up in all of this,” Kotone said, bowing her head down and looking at the ground.

“H-hey, don’t say that. I mean, you got kidnapped too.” I stumbled over my words to try and respond.

“But it was me they were after. I never thought in a million years they would try something like that in broad daylight. This is all my fault, and I’m very sorry about this.”

“Do you think we’ve really been kidnapped…?” Minatsu asked, and I could tell she was scared. She wasn’t panicking, but you could tell she was trying not to cry.

“Yes. The culprits have kidnapped me to demand a ransom—or something else—from my grandfather. They’ll come for me when the time comes, and when they do, I’ll make sure to have them set you two free. So you don’t need to worry.”

You’re too hard on yourself. This isn’t your fault, Kotone.

“What’ll happen to you when they free us, though?”

“I’m the hostage they want the most, so they probably won’t do anything too severe… Hibiki is there for me, too.”

Hibiki… He was zapped down by the stun gun. I wonder if he’s okay. He seemed a bit off even before the attack.

“Hibiki is that boy detective, right? The guy who kidnapped you seemed to walk right through him.” Minatsu sounded annoyed, but Kotone didn’t let that get to her and smiled back.

“Yes, but it’s all right. I know he will come to my rescue… Like he used to.”

Used to?

“Did something happen to you two when you were little?”

“It did… Seeing as we have some time on our hands, would you like to hear a little story?”

“I was kidnapped when I was in the sixth grade.”

Th-this isn’t your first time?!

Minatsu’s eyes were wide, too.

“Like now?”

“That’s right. I was held for a ransom. I believe it was July, and I was on my way home from school. It was my fault for taking the back roads and trying to go home alone because I got into a fight with my grandfather…”

So you’ve always had a chauffeur, even when you were in elementary school. It’s a shame—making little pit stops while on your walk home is the best part of coming home from school. I’d hate to be stuck in a car every day.

“A man with a face covering pulled me into his car and took me to a storage facility. My eyes were covered, so I couldn’t see anything, and they threw away my phone that had GPS on it.”

“Sounds scary! So you had no way of knowing where you were or calling for help?”

“My family was thrown into disarray when they realized I was gone. The police were at my house, and my grandfather, who is usually quite scary, left work to come home.”

“Yeah, I’d go home too if my granddaughter was kidnapped.”

“No, my grandfather is a stern, imposing man. It was unthinkable for him to put family over work. Up until recently, I couldn’t even look him in the eye when I spoke to him. I realized, however, that he’s at the top of an organization that employs tens of millions of people around the world, and he carries the weight of that burden on his shoulders.”

Tens of millions…

Minatsu and I looked at each other. I couldn’t even picture that many people.

“I mean, that sounds like a big job for one person, but he’s still your family, right? You must be really lonely.”

“Yes, maybe. But when I was little, I always wondered how he could be my grandfather in the first place. The fight I mentioned before was less of a fight and more of me getting angry because I thought he didn’t care.”

“Of course that’s not true! He’s family; he’ll always care.”

“I understand that now. Or, well, I guess you could say I learned it when I got kidnapped the first time.” Kotone smiled a little as she reminisced. “Where were we? Yes—the criminals who kidnapped me held me for ransom. They wanted one billion yen.”

O-one billion?!

Both Minatsu and I listened with our mouths agape.

“To be honest, I thought it was pretty low for a demand from the Hanasato Group. That being said, the kidnappers wanted it soon, before my family had time to work with the police.”

Kotone explained calmly, this like it was just how the world works.

One billion was low*…? Kotone really must be super, ultra rich.*

“The only solution the police could come up with was to pay the ransom. But there was no guarantee I would be safe even if my family did what the kidnappers asked. While this all happened, there was one person who kept searching for me.”

“I bet I know who that is…”

Kotone smiled at me. “That’s right. It was Hibiki. He was only in first grade back then, but the Shirasatos lived near us, so Hibiki and I had the chance to meet each other a few times before. His grandfather was formerly the police chief, and his father was a government official who worked with the police, so his family was well-to-do. Hibiki told me once before that he comes from a long line of police officers.”

A long line of police officers… Unlike me, who’s related to a long line of thieves—we’re basically cat and mouse. I bet even our ancestors used to butt heads.

“So Hibiki tagged along with the police and snuck into our house, but no one noticed a first-grader was there because of all the commotion. It was an emergency, after all. Once he was in, he started gathering information. He was able to get the kind of information the police don’t share with anyone else from the gossiping maids and butlers. They were in and out of the room where the police were to bring them food and drinks.”

W-wow, that doesn’t sound like something any normal first-grader would do… I always knew Kei wasn’t normal, but Hibiki gives him a run for his money.

“I learned this later, but what Hibiki wanted to listen to the most was the sounds in the background of the kidnapper’s phone calls to my home.”

“What sounds?”

“Trains, and the sound of the caller’s shoes, and the sound of a steam whistle. Those three things came through over the phone.”

“I see. Well, even I could figure that one out. A steam whistle means there was a boat, and there aren’t a lot of spots where you

can hear both trains and boats now, are there?”

“At first, that’s what the police thought as well, but there were no such places nearby.”

Minatsu seemed surprised by this, too.

“There was one spot he could be driven to, but it was too far from the tracks to hear the trains going by, and the police didn’t have the luxury to go check every storage facility at every train station. I was being held captive, after all.”

“But Hibiki was able to figure out where you were using those sounds, wasn’t he?”

Kotone nodded. “That’s right. He explained his thought process to me later—that just because you could hear both a train and a boat didn’t mean there was actually one nearby.”

“Uh…huh? I’m not quite sure I follow…”

“I couldn’t, either—I had no idea what he meant by that. But think about it. The sound could’ve been coming from a TV or a computer. It would’ve been easy for the kidnapper to play random noises like that.”

So the kidnapper played fake sounds to throw you off his trail?

“Nope. According to Hibiki: The kidnapper’s actions were spontaneous and unplanned—he knew that as soon as he learned I was kidnapped after getting into a fight with my grandfather. So Hibiki considered another possibility.”

Another possibility?

Both Minatsu and I were fully engaged in the story at this point, leaning forward to listen.

“That a sound effect just so happened to be caught in the kidnapper’s phone call.”

Ah…

“So Hibiki called his classmates and asked if they knew a department store or mall that had a play area on its roof with boats and trains.”

“Why on the roof?”

“I’ve never been to one, but I hear it’s common for department stores to have tiny theme parks on their roofs for children to enjoy.”

“Oh, yeah! I used to go to those when I was little!”

“Hibiki said the sound quality of the attractions there was good enough to sound real, and that the boats and trains usually made

noises when you rode them. He asked his classmates if they had any idea of a place that had both, and someone did. There was just one department store that had both."

"So that's where you were? I don't know, the roof of a department store doesn't sound like a good spot to keep someone captive."

"Hibiki went to the top floor of the next building over and staked out the scene. It was July and very hot that day, and the kidnappers had me captive in a room with no air conditioning. I remember how much they were sweating. Though they tried not to open the windows, the heat got the best of them eventually."

"That isn't what Hibiki thought would happen, was it? No way…"

"From his vantage point, Hibiki had noticed some men who seemed restless. He later told me he 'didn't have evidence, but knew it was them.'"

"If he found out that much on his own, then I bet the cops took care of the rest after that, huh."

"Unfortunately, no. The police trust him now, but back then, he was just an elementary schooler. He tried to make his case to the police, but they didn't listen."

That makes sense. Sure, he is a boy genius middle school detective now, but back then, everyone probably treated him like they did any other kid.

"So Hibiki waited for the police to leave for the deal with the kidnappers before heading out to rescue me himself."

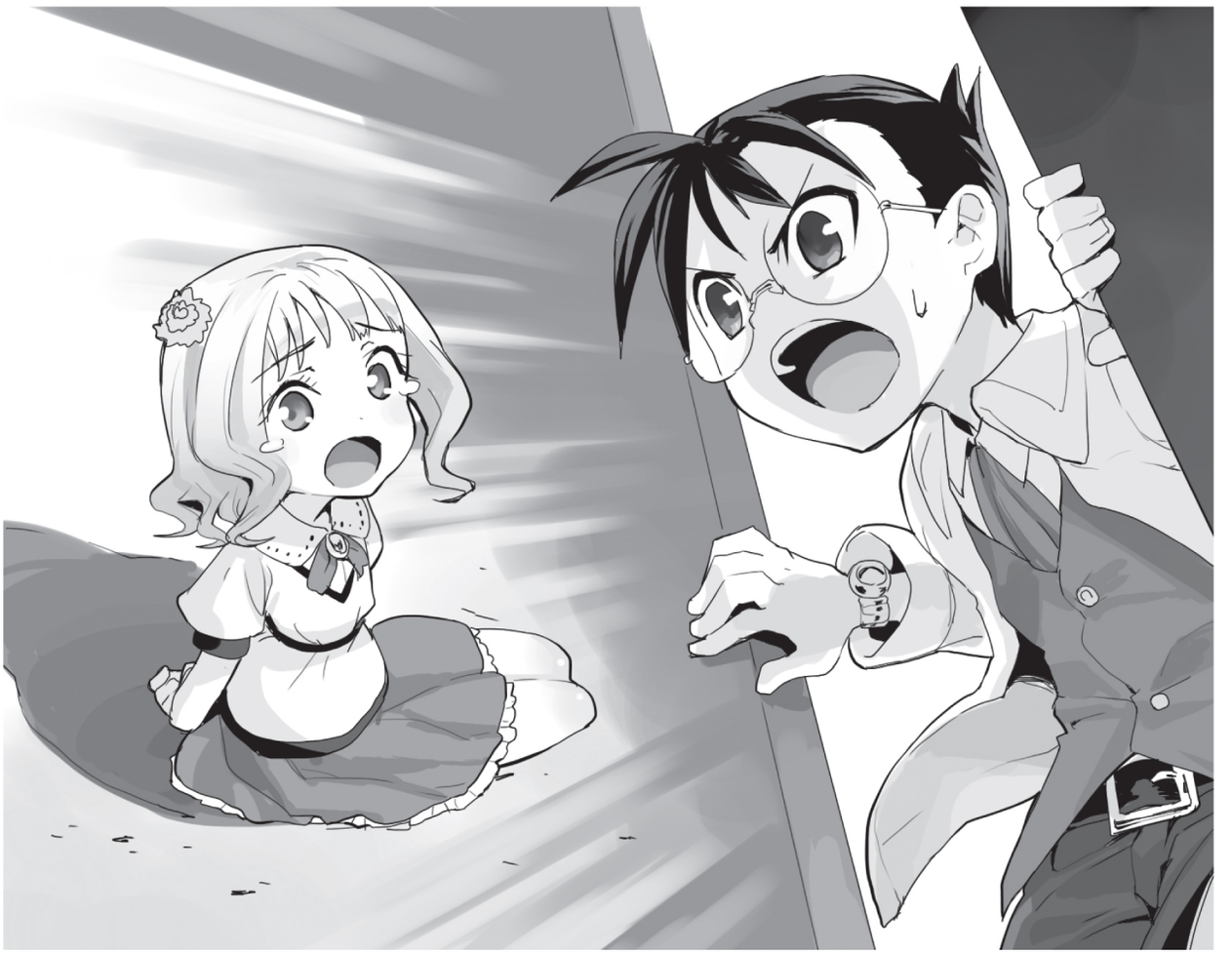
Kotone's eyes were warm and nostalgic as she recalled the memory.

"After he came and got me, he called the police and had the kidnappers arrested. Looking back on it, the two kidnappers were pretty incompetent, but since there were two of them, this was my only way out."

That must've been Hibiki's first case, huh? Either way, it definitely doesn't sound like how a first-grader would think or act…

As Kotone finished her story, she looked up at the quiet light that seeped in through the small window. It was faint, but we did have a little bit of light.

She stared at the light for a few moments before slowly turning back to us.



“Just like then, Hibiki won’t give up. He’ll come for us again. I know he will.”

Minatsu and I could see how determined Kotone was.

“I’m convinced…,” said Minatsu. “I’ll believe in both of them—Kotone and Shirasato.”

“Me, too!” I added, though I wasn’t as cool as Minatsu.

That being said, we shouldn’t leave it to him to do all of the work!

If only I could contact Kei…but he has no way of knowing I got kidnapped at summer camp.

I’ll need to figure a way out of here on my own this time.

Although the thought of that makes me kinda nervous…

“Thank you both.”

There were tears in Kotone’s eyes as she smiled.

I don’t think I’ve ever seen Kotone make that expression before. She must be close to a breaking point if she’s making a face like that.

I wish there was a way we could send a message to the outside…

“Shhh.”

Kotone’s eyes sharpened as she gazed at the door. I tried to listen closely as well.

Clack, clack, clack…

We could hear footsteps coming from outside.

Is that the kidnapper?!

9
Their Escape Plan!

The door opened up, and some men wearing work uniforms came into the room. There were three of them, two of whom I was seeing for the first time now.

“Kotone Hanasato. You’re coming with us.”

The man who spoke was the same one who hit Hibiki and Kotone with the stun gun earlier. He must’ve been the leader. I guessed he was in his midthirties, and he was clearly very well-built, judging by the way he walked and carried himself. The same went for the two men behind him.

Kotone looked straight at the man as she got up from the floor.

“What about these two?”

“We only need you.”

“No! I can’t leave them alone here. You can take me where you want, but please, release these two.”

“Are you trying to bargain with the people who kidnapped you? You really are a Hanasato, aren’t you? I’m afraid I can’t do that, though. They saw our faces. We can’t let ’em go until it’s all over.”

The leader sounded very confident.

“What are you after? Money?” asked Kotone.

“Who knows? You sure don’t need to.”

“Whatever it is, your plan will fail. The Hanasato group is more than prepared for these sorts of things.”

“You say that, but it was awfully easy to kidnap you.”

The leader shrugged, and Kotone bit her lip. I could tell the men had no interest in hearing her out.

“If you do anything to hurt these two children, just remember that I will pay you back for it.” Kotone glared at the man.

“Simply do what we say, and the hostages will be fine, capiche? Our organization has rules for these sorts of things, too.”

Organization? So there’s more to this than just the kidnappers—there’s someone pulling the strings. Just like what happened on the SS Flower Song.

“Very well… Then please, hurry up and take me away.”

“You’re coming quietly? That was easier than I thought it’d be.”

“Don’t misunderstand… I will take the time it requires to persuade you,” Kotone said, staring straight at the man.

“Hmph.” He was as smug as ever.

Argh! I wish I could just beat him up! There’s only three of them, so I bet I could take ’em, but…I can’t. It would be too dangerous for Kotone and Minatsu.

Gah! This is so annoying!

Kotone looked back at us while she walked toward the men.

“I’m going to go now. You both will be safe, so don’t worry about anything.” Kotone tried to encourage us with a smile.

The men led her out of the room, and they shut the door behind them. I could hear their footsteps moving away, down the hallway.

“What’s going to happen to us…?” Minatsu whispered, as if she couldn’t hold it back any longer. Well, of course she was scared. This was a terrifying situation for a normal middle school student to be in.

“We’ll be fine, Minatsu. Kotone will negotiate with them to let us go.”

“How can you be so optimistic?! You have no idea what’s going to happen!”

As soon as she said this, she flicked her head up and glared right at me.

Slam!

We heard a fist being pounded against the door.

“Pipe down in there!” shouted a deep voice. Guess that guy was our guard.

Minatsu and I looked at each other in silence.

“Sorry…,” Minatsu finally whispered. “I shouldn’t have yelled at you.”

“It’s fine; don’t worry about it.”

It's totally understandable to not be yourself. I mean, I probably would've rushed the guys earlier if I wasn't secretly Red.

The question was: What could we do?

The man in charge said he wouldn't let us out of here until it was all over, but who knew whether he'd actually do that. We'd already seen their faces.

And I couldn't just change into my Red costume and go save Kotone because I was stuck here with Minatsu…

I'm gonna have to bust Minatsu out of here before I go help Kotone! Hibiki might be on the case, but I can't let him do all the work.

"Minatsu… Let's try to escape."

"We can't do that." She shook her head. "It's way too dangerous. We're better off waiting for somebody to rescue us."

I understood where she was coming from. Waiting for help was definitely the best option for a regular middle schooler.

But I'm not your regular middle schooler.

I whispered back to her. "It'll be fine. The kidnappers are all focused on Kotone right now, so we should be able to slip right by."

"And what about the guy guarding the door? And did you forget that we're, you know, tied up?"

"Oh, I've already figured that out!" I said before rubbing the hands tied behind my back together, and before long—one of my hands was free.



“Ta-dah.”

I showed Minatsu the empty rope.

“H-how’d you do that?! It’s tied so tight for me…”

Shocked, Minatsu tried to do the same thing, but she could barely move her hands.

Yeah, there’s a trick to it. My dad taught it to me before, but I only just remembered it.

“What is *with* you, Kouzuki…?” Minatsu was getting more and more confused.

Uh, whoops.

The last thing I needed was for her to find me suspicious—Kei would kill me.

“Oh, um, you know. I like to go camping, and stuff. You learn a lot about ropes in the great outdoors.”

“Is that right…?”

Although she was still acting suspicious, she seemed to accept my explanation.

“So what if our hands are free?” she went on. “It doesn’t change the fact that there’s some guy outside the door watching us. Not to mention, the door is locked from the outside.”

I had to think about that one. This was supposed to be Kei’s job.

The easy thing to do would be to kick the door open and beat up whoever’s outside.

I mean, it sounds like there’s only one guy anyway.

“Hey, Kouzuki?”

“Oh, sorry. Lemme get your rope undone.”

“No, it’s not that. I think I have a good plan.”

“A plan for what?

“A plan to get us out of here.”

“Seriously? You sure?”

“It might be dangerous, but you’re right—anything is better than waiting here anxiously. And besides…”

Besides?

“That girl from before, Hanasato—she seemed genuinely more concerned about our safety than her. If we can help her out, I don’t mind doing something a little dangerous.”

“Minatsu…!”

“How can you smile like that in this situation?”

Oh, right.

“So, what’s the plan?”

Minatsu looked at the door. “Come closer and I’ll tell you.”

I scooched up next to Minatsu.

“So here’s what we’ll do…” She explained her plan to me.

“Wow! That might actually work.”

“Shh,” Minatsu said, and I covered my own mouth. “Not ‘might’—it needs to work, if we’re going to try it.”

For sure! We’ll break out of here, all on our own!

10
Minatsu's True Feelings

"Shut up! This is all your fault, Kouzuki!" Minatsu yelled at me.

"What, you want to blame this all on me? You're so selfish! How was I supposed to know this would happen?! And don't forget that it was your brilliant idea to have us take that dumb shortcut!" I yelled back at her, matching her energy.

"And? They were *your* friends! If you hadn't tried to approach them, we wouldn't be in this mess! You're so annoying! You're like a walking jinx!"

"How can you even say that? You saw what was going on! How could you not care? You don't care about anyone else around you!"

"Hey! Would you two shut up in there?"

The man outside the door yelled at us again, but we ignored him!

Minatsu and I stared each other down, both red in the face.

"You don't think I care about other people?!" she shouted. "What makes you say that?!"

"You might be the best actor out of all of us! But that doesn't mean it's okay to keep to yourself and ignore us!"

"What does that have to do with you?!"

"It has *everything* to do with me! You're part of a club! No matter how good at acting you are, you can't spend all your time offstage acting like a big jerk to everyone! Or is it fun for you to always be alone?!"

"Y-you're the last person I want to hear that from!" Tears welled up in Minatsu's eyes. "You have everything already, and that's why you don't need to care! You're always the special one!"

"Special?! Me?! That's all in your head, Minatsu! I'm normal…"

“Normal people aren’t friends with people like Hanasato and the Middle School Detective! And President Shiori! And Captain Yukimura!! They always treat you extra special!”

“Th-that’s not true…”

“It *is* true! Why are you the only one Captain Yukimura has any hopes for?! I know way more about acting than you, and I’m a way better actress! So why?!”

The door swung open. “Listen here, you little brats! If you can’t shut up, I’ll make you shut up with some duct tape— Wait, what the—?!”

The man who came storming into the room stopped and stared wide-eyed at me and my plank of wood waiting for him by the door.

“Take this!” I smacked him in the back of the head with a two-by-four.

Thud!

The man passed out limply onto the floor.

“Did it work…?” Minatsu was cautiously peeking at the unconscious man from afar, but I walked right up to him.

Looks like it did. He’s out cold. Even if he is a bad guy, I tried not to hit him too *hard, so he’ll probably wake up soon.*

“Let’s tie him up before he comes to.”

We took the ropes the kidnappers used on us to tie the man up.

That oughta do it!

“It worked…” Minatsu let out a sigh of relief and wiped the tears away from her eyes.

“Wow, your acting really is something! I can’t believe you actually got so angry you cried.”

“Y-yeah… That’s easy stuff…” Minatsu looked away.

Hm? I was trying to compliment you…

“But forget about that! We need to get out of here before someone else comes.”

I looked at Minatsu, and she kept her face turned away from me as we headed toward the exit.

She’s right; we definitely can’t afford to be waiting around here.

I poked my head out of the door to get a look at the hallway, which extended out to our right and left. There was a bit of a curve toward the end, which made it impossible to see the far

edge on both sides, but there was no one else on watch outside the door.

“Whew… The coast is clear,” I said, and Minatsu let out a sigh of relief.

“Let’s go.”

Minatsu and I left the room, and I held out my hand for Minatsu to hold onto. She flinched away at first, but then she took it and squeezed. I could feel her palms sweating.

“Let’s try this way first.” I pointed to the left. My guess was purely instinct, but that was all I had to go on.

Minatsu nodded nervously.

The two of us moved slowly down the hall, careful not to make too much noise with our footsteps. It was almost scary how quiet the hallway was.

The state of the floor and walls made me think the building was fairly old, but it wasn’t dirty, which meant it was well maintained…

I wonder where on earth this is. There are more doors, too; I wonder if they lead into rooms similar to the last one?

“Hey, Minatsu, where do you think—? Is something the matter?”

I glanced over at Minatsu, who seemed completely lost in thought. “Kouzuki… I think I’ve been here before…”

“Wait! Seriously?! Then maybe you’ll be able to figure out where the exit is.”

“That’s why I’m so confused. I can’t seem to recall—”

“Shh!” I interrupted Minatsu, putting my finger over my lips. It didn’t take long for Minatsu to figure out what I meant, and she immediately stopped speaking.

We both listened closely.

Clack, clack, clack—more footsteps.

Someone’s coming?! This is bad! We’re in a hallway with nowhere to hide! They’re gonna see us!

I was about to panic when I felt a tug on my arm.

What was that?!

I turned to see Minatsu pointing at a tool locker down the hall.

We might be able to hide in that!

Minatsu and I scurried over to the locker and opened it, careful not to make any noise. It was empty.

What luck! There's nothing in the locker.

The two of us wasted no time getting into the locker. It was a tall, thin locker, so we had to hug each other tight to fit.

Minatsu's exhausted breath brushed up against my face. I could almost hear her heartbeat.

Clack, clack, clack, clack.

The sound of the footsteps was getting louder. Both Minatsu and I were barely breathing.

"Why's do I gotta sit there and watch some twerpy kids? What a load of bull…"

The footsteps stopped right in front of the locker. We could hear the man speaking to himself and held our breath. I could just make out the man's work uniform through the air vent in the locker door.

But not for long; he must have squatted down.



A few seconds later, the man stood up and started walking again—maybe one of his shoes was untied.

We watched as he went by and listened as his footsteps grew quieter and quieter. Roughly ten seconds passed before the hallway went completely silent.

H-he didn't find us…

The two of us quietly opened the locker door, and I rolled out. I checked our left and right. The coast was clear—there was no one around.

I finally let out a big sigh of relief. I'd been holding my breath the entire time.

"That worked… But what were we gonna do if there was something in the locker?"

"I knew there wouldn't be." Minatsu was also catching her breath as she emerged from the locker.

"Why's that?"

"I remembered."

"You remembered what?"

"Where this place is."

"Really?! Where?"

"This is the old theater hall we used to hold our performances in."

What?!

The two of us checked our surroundings.

She was right—a hallway this long with a curve made sense for a theater.

"I've been here a few times before, so I'm sure of it. We're near where the dressing rooms should be," Minatsu said, looking relieved.

I'm glad to hear we're somewhere familiar! Who knows how we'd get out of here without even knowing what kind of building we were in.

"The older students and graduates all performed here… This is where I saw our club perform before I joined the school, and where I decided I would join after I saw Captain Yukimura's inspiring performance. I've always wanted to come back here as an actress… I just never thought it would be like this." Minatsu ran her gaze over the hallway once more. "I wanted to perform

here someday, with Captain Yukimura. That's why I begged my parents and sister to let me be in the theater club."

Come to think of it, you did mention that both of your parents work, and you make dinner for your sister.

"But… Yukimura is so obsessed with you…"

Huh?! Wait…were you serious about what you said before?!

"Hold on!" I said. "Yukimura is only being nice to me because I don't know the first thing about acting. As far as I can tell, she treats everyone pretty much the same. I'm sure you of all people should know she's not the type to play favorites!"

Minatsu looked down at the ground. Her hair covered her face, so I couldn't see her expression. "I know…," she said quietly. "You didn't do anything wrong… I'm just jealous."

"No, no. I know I said you don't understand how others feel, but you need to know how other people feel to act—Yukimura told me that."

"She did…?" Minatsu looked up.

"An amazing actress like you has to know a lot about how other people feel—there's no way you don't. I'm really sorry I said that earlier." I smiled a little as I apologized to Minatsu.

"M-me too. I'm sorry I'm always so mean to you and the other girls…"

She apologized back, but she didn't look at me.

"Minatsu… If you ask me, I think Yukimura is really counting on you. That's why she put you in charge of teaching me without a second thought."

"Yeah, I know… And when I remembered coming to this theater hall, it reminded me that this was where I wanted to be. When I saw Captain Yukimura and the theater club perform here, I knew this was the club I wanted to join, and I wanted to act my heart out." Minatsu raised her head. "I'm really sorry for having such a bad attitude all this time…"

She hung her head again.

It's fine! Seriously!

"We going to be in a play together, so let's work together to make it great."

Then, Minatsu gave me a grin.

I think this is the first time I've seen her smile!

“Yeah, and thanks again… There’s still so much I need to learn from you.”

“I’m still gonna be a strict teacher, you know.”

“Whaaaaaat?! But I thought we were friends now!”

“Being friends is different from teaching acting lessons. Anyway, I’m pretty sure I know where we are.”

Aw, come on! But at least I have some hope.

11
They Found Us…!

“There should be a back door this way.”

With Minatsu guiding, the two of us cautiously progressed down the hall. The hall was lined with doors here and there, and we had no way of knowing when one would open up.

We listened carefully as we moved forward, waiting for anyone to come.

“There,” Minatsu whispered and pointed down the hall. “That door leads onto the stage, and there should be a door to our left that leads outside.”

Woohoo! We’re gonna make it out of here!

Minatsu seemed relieved, too.

“Let’s hurry up and—”

Just as I invited her to go, it happened.

“Hey! The hostages are loose!”

We heard a loud voice calling from down the hall.

Oh snap!

It was the man we’d hidden from earlier; he was on his way back after figuring out we were gone.

I looked at Minatsu and could see she was panicking.

We gotta hide! This way!

I grabbed Minatsu’s arm and ran down the hallway, opening the first door we came across. I closed it behind us and put my ear against it.

I could hear the man running by—his heavy footsteps grew quieter once he passed the door.

Looks like we slipped by him again, but we can’t stay here much longer.

And I just jumped in a random door, but what is *this room…?*

It was too dark to see properly, but I could make out some large machines in the shadows.

“I think we’re backstage, where they keep the machinery,” Minatsu said quietly as she scanned the room.

We moved carefully toward the far end of the room, where there was a small light.

It looked like we were on a side stage. I quietly looked out at the stage, where I could see four or five men in work uniforms. They all seemed really intense, and they looked ready to move.

It’s them, for sure.

“What are you after? Why did you kidnap me?”

Is that Kotone?!

We crept forward, careful not to make any noise, to see the source of the voice.

Ah…



It *was* Kotone, and she was standing with the men around her. She didn't seem scared at all; in fact, she seemed even more confident than usual.

The light coming in through the windows close to the ceiling shined down on her like a spotlight on an actress. The whole scene was very dramatic.

The men were keeping their distance from her, as if they were in awe.

One of the men stepped forward and spoke up. "We merely want the head of the Hanasato Group to step down." It was the same guy from before—the leader.

"So this is all to intimidate my grandfather?!" Kotone's expression changed.

"Yeah. I think he'll comply, seeing as we have his granddaughter."

Those rats! They want to use Kotone for evil! I'm not gonna let that happen!

"My grandfather won't listen to a thing you say. And what do you stand to gain if he steps down, anyway?"

"You'll have to sit tight and see. I don't need to tell ya."

That smug jerk… I'll wipe that look from your face! Once I get Minatsu out of here, I'll come straight back and clobber you all!

"What are we gonna do?" Minatsu whispered, bringing me back to the moment.

Oh, right! We gotta escape first!

"Let's go back, for now," I replied quietly. I slowly went through the side stage.

Minatsu nodded and followed me.

"Ah—"

I felt like I heard a barely audible cry, and I turned to find Minatsu tripping over a cord that was on the floor. I scrambled to turn around and support her, but I couldn't stop her from tugging on the cord with her foot.

Crash!

The piece of machinery attached to the cord fell over.

"Who's there?!"

Yikes!

The men all swarmed into the area, and I swiftly jumped in front of Minatsu.

“It’s you two… How’d you get out of the closet?! Where’s the guy I had watching you?” the leader yelled at us.

“We just received a call. They found the guy tied up,” said another man.

“I shouldn’t have treated you like the children you are. We’re gonna have to keep you locked away extra tight, it looks like.”

The men came closer.

What are we gonna do?! Maybe I can fight our way out of this, like when I’m Red. But, then they might figure out I’m no ordinary middle schooler.

Faces were flashing through my mind:

Misaki and Yuzuki, President Shiori and Yukimura…

“Asuka, Minatsu! What are you two doing here?!” Kotone called out as one of the men held her back.

Kotone, Minatsu…

Now’s not the time to worry! I need to save these two. I can think about the consequences later!

I clenched my fist and took a step forward.

“K-Kouzuki…?” I could hear Minatsu’s voice wavering.

I’ll protect you!

I steeled my nerves for a fight, when—

Wham!

—the doors to the theater flew open.

Wh-what’s going on?!

“*Huff…huff…* I finally found you…Kotone.”

It was a boy wearing a large white coat that had a few more dirt stains than before, dripping with sweat and trying to catch his breath.

But there was no mistaking it; it was the one and only Middle School Detective, Hibiki Shirasato!

12
Hibiki's Battle!

"How did you find us?"

The leader walked toward Hibiki with fury in his eyes. But Hibiki didn't relent; he pulled out a small square device from his pocket.

"This is a transceiver. I know you broke Kotone's phone so we couldn't follow the GPS, but I guess you failed to find the bug I placed in her pen. Kotone's Morse code was all I needed to find this place."

Morse code… I think Kei said it's a way to convert sounds to letters of the alphabet and send messages.

Ah! So that's why Kotone was tapping her pen earlier… And how she knew Hibiki would come.

Good job, Hibiki!

"Huh, you don't say. I guess they don't call you the Middle School Detective for nothing."

The men looked away from us and focused on Hibiki.

Looks like we're safe, for the time being. Now we just need Hibiki and the police he brought along to— Wait a sec…

Huh? Whenever Hibiki comes barging into a scene, he always has police with him, which is why I expected this time, too.

So why's he alone?

"So, how many police are with you?" The leader's cautious expression slowly shifted into a grin. "Let me guess, twenty? I know you didn't come here alone."

"……" Hibiki didn't respond.

Wait, he didn't actually come alone, did he? Why would he do that?!

The leader was back to his smug self. "They didn't believe you, did they? That we kidnapped Kotone Hanasato right in front of

you, just like how Red snatched the stolen paintings from you before. I bet the police have lost faith in you."

Whaaaaaat?! It isn't all *Red's fault that the police aren't with Hibiki, is it?!*

"I knew I wouldn't need the police to capture the likes of you. That's all."

Though Hibiki's tone remained unchanged, he had to be bluffing in these circumstances.

I mean, it's one versus like five guys. At this rate, they're gonna capture Hibiki too.

But Hibiki was still calm. "Besides… You don't actually think I came here unprepared, do you?"

"What do you have up your sleeve?" the leader asked, and Hibiki activated something with his phone.

Ring-a-ling-a-ling-a-ling-a-ling!

The alarm sounded out of nowhere.

"What did you do?!"

At the same instant, water erupted from the ceiling above the stage and audience seats—it was the sprinkler system for a fire. The spray was going in every direction.

"Why you little—!"

The men all covered their faces, but the water was relentless. They were drenched within seconds. We, on the other hand, managed to slip over to a nook in the side stage, where we avoided getting wet.

"I made a few tweaks to the fire alarm system before coming in," said Hibiki.

He stood in the entrance, completely dry, watching the men get soaked.

So you did come prepared. Nice job, Hibiki!

Then he pressed another button on his phone, and the water system settled down.

"Tsk! So we're a little wet—what does that matter?! C'mon, boys! Get 'em!"

The men, dripping with rage as much as they were water, marched straight for Hibiki.

Hibiki, however, headed into the audience chairs, ready to meet them halfway.

Nice moves! That limits the number of people who can come at you at once.

“Argh!”

One of men let threw a punch at Hibiki, only to fall flat on the floor.

It didn’t look like Hibiki struck back just now… What just happened?

“Gragh!”

The men all began to fall over, one after another. Within an instant, he’d brought down five guys.

Wait, is Hibiki actually super strong?

“You… So that’s why you set off the sprinkler!” the leader howled in frustration.

“Too bad you didn’t figure it out sooner. Water conducts electricity, which helps this pack just enough punch.”

Ah! Hibiki has a stun gun of his own! So this was your plan all along!

“Circle ’im! He can’t take us all on at once!” the leader called, and the remaining men began to spread out. This time, they approached him together, instead of going one by one. I guessed about ten men were within the audience seats.

This looks bad… I don’t think he can take them on if he’s surrounded.

Should I pop out and help? But if I do anything too effective, he might figure out that I’m Red.

What else can I do…? There has to be a way I can help without revealing who I am…

“Gah!”

Hibiki zapped a guy who came from his left with a stun gun, then just barely managed to make it in time to zap the guy coming at him from his right.

Although he only needs to poke them with the stun gun, these guys all look like trained fighters. This might be hard for him to do alone.

Nevertheless, Hibiki smiled as he wiped the sweat from his cheek.



“That all you’ve got?” he taunted, getting one man to jump out at him. With a swift jolt of electricity, Hibiki took the guy out, only to charge the group head-on immediately after. He was going to try and push the group to break through them—it was better than getting swarmed.

This had better work! I prayed as I watched the scene unfold.

“Ack!” Hibiki just barely dodged a punch and zapped the guy out of commission before moving onto the next attacker.

“C’mere, you!”

This time, his stun gun didn’t hit its mark. The group of men was getting used to his tactics and knew how to dodge it.

“Hibiki! Behind you!” Kotone called out, but it was too late. The man behind Hibiki had already landed a hit.

“Agh!”

Hibiki tumbled down onto the floor.

Oh no! He’s not gonna make it. Okay, there’s no other way! Right now, the men are focused on Hibiki. I can use this as a chance to get Minatsu and Kotone out of here.

I crouched down, ready to spring up, when I felt a cool breeze hit my back.

“This way!” a voice suddenly called to me.

Which way?!

Then, the lights went out.

13
Orders from Phantom Thief Red?!

“Asuka! This way!”

That voice!

I followed the voice through the darkness until eventually I could see a section of the floor lowering, about three by six feet. Soon, there was a hole in the floor of the stage.

I didn’t have time to think, so I tugged Minatsu’s arm, urging her to follow me. She was startled.

I nodded to her. “Sorry about this,” I said, hoisting her up and holding her in my arms.

“Come down, six feet.”

I could hear the voice coming from within the hole. Holding Minatsu, I plunged down onto the stage.

I felt weightless for a moment, before gravity pulled me down.

Tap!

Just as the voice told me, there was a floor about six feet under where the hole was.

I stuck the landing!

And though it was dark, I was able to land unscathed thanks to the voice coming from the darkness.

“This way!”

I heard the voice again, whispering to me. I put down Minatsu, and the two of us ran toward the source of the voice.

“Wh-what’s going on…?” Minatsu whispered to me.

“I’m not sure, but I think…”

We followed a figure that was running up ahead of us into a different room. Once we were inside, the person finally turned around to face us.

“I’m glad you two are okay.”

The figure turned on a small light, and both Minatsu and I went wide-eyed.

“Yukimura! And President Shiori! I thought I recognized your voices, but…what are you two doing here?”

“We can’t stay here for long, so we’ll explain that later,” Yukimura whispered, as she listened for what was going on outside.

“What was that hole that opened up in the stage?”

“Oh, that’s a trapdoor. It’s used to make performers disappear mid-show in an instant. Oh, and we left some dry ice going up there, so it’s making a little smokescreen. They shouldn’t be able to find us anytime soon.”

So that was that cold breeze.

“Let’s get moving,” President Shiori told us, and we all nodded.



“We’re far away from the exit now, though…”

“Did you forget who I am? Our club has performed here dozens of times, so I know this place like the back of my hand, including the way out,” Yukimura announced confidently.

Oh, yeah! Yukimura is as dependable as always!

She slowly opened the door and peered into the hallway, carefully looking to her left and right.

“It looks like there’s no one here… We’re going to turn off our flashlight, so make sure you don’t lose sight of the person in front of you.”

Yukimura stepped out of the room first, followed by Minatsu, President Shiori, and then me.

We progressed down the hallway, careful not to create too much noise. Yukimura guided us through the darkness without showing the slightest sign of being lost.

We went down the hall, turning right, and then left. My body felt heavy as we moved, due to both the darkness and worry that the kidnappers could pop out at any time. I realized that there was sweat running down my back, and I could hear the nervous breathing of Minatsu and President Shiori in front of me.

We came to a split in the hallway, where Yukimura stopped in her tracks. Minatsu and President Shiori both looked at her with confusion, and she responded by putting her finger to her lips. She wanted us to be quiet.

We listened closely.

Clack, clack, clack…

Footsteps?! Someone’s coming this way!

President Shiori and Minatsu motioned to hide, but Yukimura stopped them.

“I’ve got this.”

Though she looked nervous, she was giving us a thumbs-up.

What are you going to do, Yukimura? Are you going to try and knock them out? It may be dark, but they’re trained fighters, so they won’t go down easily.

Clack… Clack…

Huh?

Yukimura suddenly took a step out into the hallway and spoke to the man who was farther down the corridor.

“There’s no one here. Head back to the stage to help,” came a deep voice.

“Oh, yeah? All right. Be careful; we think the kids are still in the building,” said the man.

“You got it.”

He went back down the hallway. Once we could no longer hear his footsteps, Yukimura heaved a sigh. “Whew… Glad that worked.”

D-did you do what I think you just did?

“I acted like a man. Given the darkness and the distance, I thought it might work.”

W-wow! You really did sound like a man!

“That’s our Captain,” Minatsu said, looking at Yukimura with a sparkle in her eyes.

“Glad to see Minatsu is back to her usual self, too,” I added.

“What?” Minatsu shot me a glare.

“Oh, nothing. Anyway, we should hurry on out of here.”

“Yeah, I doubt that’ll work a second time,” President Shiori said, and Yukimura nodded in agreement.

We continued to move carefully down the hallway until we could see sunlight coming in through a window. Yukimura carefully opened the door.

“We’re good to go. There’s no one here.”

She peeked outside before beckoning us to follow her with her hand, and we followed her outside.

The bright sunlight blinded me as we left the building, but it was more than welcome—we’d finally managed to escape!

“We’re not in the clear yet. Let’s run,” Yukimura said before she broke into a sprint, followed by President Shiori, Minatsu, and then me at the rear. Yukimura looked back at us, making sure to match her pace to President Shiori and Minatsu.

I looked behind us and saw we weren’t being chased.

This means the men are focused on Hibiki and Kotone… Hold on a little longer until I can come back, Hibiki!

“*Huff…huff…* We should be okay here.” Yukimura stopped when we arrived at a supermarket parking lot.

“Yes, there’s no one suspicious-looking here,” President Shiori said after looking around us.

There was a mother with her child, a young couple, and some elderly people; the peaceful scene you'd expect to see outside of a supermarket.

I let out a sigh of relief before looking at Minatsu, who was smiling calmly. As soon as she noticed me looking at her, her expression reverted to her usual scowl.

Wait a second… I know this place; it's the supermarket we went to earlier. We were this close the entire time…?

I could tell Minatsu had realized the same thing; she looked as surprised as I felt.

"I think we can explain what happened now. I'm sure you have a lot of questions," Yukimura said.

"Yeah! We were too busy escaping back in the theater hall to ask questions, but I have so many. To start off with, why did you two come to our rescue?"

I knew President Shiori was clever and Yukimura was a go-getter, but how did they find a spot it took Hibiki so much effort to find?

"That's fair… I don't know if you two will believe us, but…" It was rare for President Shiori to sound so unsure. "The truth is… I received a call from Phantom Thief Red. That you two…and Hanasato had been kidnapped."

Huh? Phantom Thief Red—you mean me? Well, I didn't call anybody, so that leaves one possibility:

Kei?! He must've realized something was wrong and helped out!

"I didn't believe it at first, but we couldn't contact either of you, and they knew all about what happened at the school festival."

I see! It would be hard to believe if someone called you and claimed to be Phantom Thief Red, but only President Shiori, Kei, Hibiki, and I know about what happened at the culture festival.

"Shiori told me what happened, and honestly, I didn't believe it at all. It was so sudden, and why would Red contact us? But not too long after the call, Hibiki came back to our school to see if you two made it home, so we decided to believe Red."

What happened?

President Shiori could see my confusion and continued. "Phantom Thief Red gave us the rundown: 'Hibiki Shirasato will appear at the school and ask if Asuka Kouzuki and Minatsu Segami have come back. I want you to secretly follow him out

when he leaves.' It was so hard to believe, but when Hibiki Shirasato appeared asking about you two, Suzuka and I hurried to follow him."

"So that's how you figured out where we were. Hibiki must've been too preoccupied to notice you two were following him. But even if you were following him, coming to save us was way too risky."

"Yeah, we thought so, too. But I knew that theater hall inside and out, so I asked Phantom Thief Red to let us help. They were reluctant to agree at first, but eventually agreed to help on the condition that we would follow their instructions. We wanted to do anything we could to help our cute classmates!" Yukimura said, and she and President Shiori smiled at me.

I bet Kei couldn't say no to these two. Once he knew the location, he could get a blueprint of the building for him to find a safe way out, too.

So he was their navigator, like he usually is for me.

"Originally, I thought about going in as a decoy, but Red didn't like that idea. They said, 'the last thing we should do is give them more hostages.'" Yukimura chuckled ruefully.

Yeah, that definitely sounds like Kei.

"But Red sure is cool, right? I've gotta say, I'm a fan," she went on, and I couldn't quite tell if she was joking or not.

Oh…? I guess that's nice to hear, but I'm not quite sure how I feel about that…

"Now we just need to figure out how to help Detective Shirasato and Hanasato…," President Shiori remarked with a worried look.

"I'm worried about them, too, but we already called the police, and Red is on the job. They should be okay."

"I agree, Shiori. We did what we could. It was dangerous, but we saved our friends."

"Yes… I suppose we should leave the rest in their hands," President Shiori said with a nod, as if she was trying to convince herself.

The truth is, if they didn't come for us…I don't know if we would've made it out. I might've had to do something that revealed I'm actually Red, too.

“Sorry…,” Minatsu said. “You guys had to put yourselves in danger for us.”

“That’s not right, Minatsu,” Yukimura retorted.

“Huh?”

“When someone helps you, you’re supposed to say, ‘Thank you.’” Yukimura gave Minatsu an encouraging look, and Minatsu’s expression brightened.

“Okay, Captain Yukimura!”

That’s right! I’d rather be thanked than apologized to, too.

Minatsu and I looked at each other.

“Thank you both!” we said.

“Yeah! We should probably head back to school now,” Yukimura replied.

She, President Shiori, and Minatsu began walking home, but I stayed behind.

I can’t go back like this—not yet. There are still people waiting for me!

I called out to the three girls. “Um, sorry, but I, um…I need to go to the bathroom really quick!” I said, then darted into the supermarket.

“Hey, wait! Asuka!” I heard Yukimura shout.

“You guys can go on ahead without me!” I yelled back.

I continued weaving through the aisles until I passed through the rear exit.

I was heading back to the theater hall at a full sprint. Back when we were escaping, I had to slow down for President Shiori and Minatsu, but not anymore.

“Here should be a good spot.” I dipped into an empty alley and changed into my Red uniform. I put my earpiece in, and I already had a signal.

“Asuka. Where are you?”

There was Kei, with his usual uninterested voice.

Even though we’d only been apart for a few days, hearing Kei’s voice felt like a breath of fresh air. My heart was a little warmer now.

“I just got back to the theater, so I’m right outside,” I told him, and a smile spread across my face.



“Right. And the other three are safe?”

“You betcha! I heard you called Yukimura and President Shiori.”

“Yeah. I knew I couldn’t come out with Hibiki on the scene, after all.” Kei sounded a little bitter.

“True, true. You’ve spoken with him on the phone before, too. He already knows there are at least two of us—we don’t need him getting any more clues. One thing I’m curious about, though—how’d you figure out I was kidnapped?”

Hibiki was the only witness there, after all.

“The perpetrators called the Hanasato family to make their demands, which had the police rushing over to their house. Hibiki Shirasato was also in communication with the authorities. It didn’t take long to figure out.”

“Wait, so you’re spying on the Hanasato family?”

“Let’s just say I have a way of knowing when something’s up. I’m keeping tabs on the Fantasista case. Anyway, the problem was that you and Segami were kidnapped. Setting aside Segami, I was really worried when I found out they had you.”

“You were actually worried about me?!” Kei? Worried about me?

“Of course I was. I know how short your fuse is—the Asuka Kouzuki I know would’ve gone on a rampage against the kidnappers,” Kei said nonchalantly.

“Ah… Right… Well, that kinda sucks to hear. You don’t need to make me sound like some kind of beast that’ll wreak havoc without someone to mind her!”

“Am I wrong?”

Well… I mean, I have approached culprits as Asuka Kouzuki once or twice before.

“Okay, Asuka. What are you going to do next?” Kei asked me.

“That should be obvious! I’m gonna save Kotone and Hibiki. Why? Are you against it?”

“No. We’re Phantom Thief Red—we can’t let the bad guys get away,” Kei said with utmost confidence.

“I agree!” As soon as I said that, I wondered what was going on inside.

I hope they’re okay.

“Hibiki is holding his own thanks to the power outage, but there’s too many of them.”

Then I’d better hurry up and go help!

I’m gonna save ’em both!

14
A One-Day-Only Tag Team Fight!

As soon as I entered the theater, I could hear shouting from far away.

It's coming from the stage—that's Kotone and Hibiki!

The lights were back on at this point. Kei said he didn't do anything, which meant the kidnappers had fixed the lights.

"What's the situation, Kei?" I asked as I ran down the hallway.

"I can't tell the details. The security cameras are all off. I've managed to turn a few on, but I don't have the full picture yet."

Bummer... This building is going to be destroyed, so the security cameras must've been turned off.

"Instead, I managed to get my hands on a blueprint. I know how long your stride is, so I should be able to give you directions based on the number of steps."

"You say that like it's nothing, but I bet that's super hard to calculate. I'm glad you've got a plan, though."

"I always do. I want you to take a right in ten steps."

Sure enough, there was a right turn ten steps down the hall from where I was. I followed the path straight for a while after.

"Okay, be careful. There should be someone watching the next left turn."

I stopped at Kei's warning and peeked past the corner, and there was indeed a man in a work uniform standing guard.

"We need to keep going without raising the alarm. Put him to sleep."

"You got it." I flicked a pellet filled with sleeping gas at the man.

"Ugh..." The man went down with a thud.

"Now, move forward a little and there should be a vent that leads to the space above the ceiling. I want you to take that space into the stage area."

“The space behind the ceiling? You sure we have the time to go the long way? I’d much rather take them on directly!”

“There’s too many of them, so we’d be at a disadvantage in a head-on fight.”

Even if Hibiki did manage to take out a few of the kidnappers, there was just too many of them to begin with. Kei was right—the careful approach was probably better.

Following Kei’s directions, I passed through a vent into the space above the ceiling and headed for the stage.

After a decent amount of crawling, I eventually saw a light. There were steel beams sticking out over the stage, and under them was a walkway. I could also see the stage lights hanging under the walkway.

“You’re above the stage now, and they’re right below you. Don’t make a sound.”

It was definitely a tall order, and Kei said it like it was the obvious thing to do.

But…I’ll try!

I carefully lowered my leg onto the walkway, then grabbed one of the steel beams, trying not to make a sound before I lowered myself.

Whew… I did it.

I hid above the walkway as I listened in. I could hear voices coming from below.

“You should give up, kid. You’ve done good for being outnumbered.”

I peeked over the ledge and saw Kotone and Hibiki.

They had their backs to the wall, surrounded by the kidnappers with nowhere to go. Hibiki was covered in cuts and bruises, while Kotone stood in front of him to protect him.

“Kotone, I want you to run away while I hold them off,” Hibiki said.

“What are you talking about?! You know I’d never do that!”

Kotone shook her head, and Hibiki didn’t argue further. I guess he was expecting that response.

With determination in his eyes, Hibiki glared at the group of men.

I need to hurry up and save them!

I wanted to jump down and help as soon as I could.

“Calm down. Everything is ready on my end. Let’s do this.”

You got it!

I dropped a stack of papers I’d collected along the way back, which all fluttered down to the stage like a snowstorm.

“What the—?”

The men all looked up in confusion. I was hiding behind the walkway, so they couldn’t see me. Still, the falling papers had the men on edge. This was part one of Kei’s plan.

“This better work…”

I’d folded a note that I threw down together with the papers. All the paper was falling at once, but I’d tried to give the note a little extra momentum.

If Hibiki misses this, then the plan’s a bust…

“……!”

Hibiki squinted and managed to pick out the paper in a heartbeat.

I think *he saw it…*

“Take this!”

Hibiki picked up a two-by-four and threw it at the men.

“Ack! So we’re gonna do this the hard way, eh?”



The men jumped back away from the plank of wood, and Hibiki used the opening to squat down and snatch the note.

Perfect! It worked.

Hibiki discreetly opened the message, hiding it from the men. He scanned it quickly, then threw himself on top of Kotone to shield her.

"What do you think you're doing, kid?!" the leader shouted.

Here goes nothing!

"Hey! Up here!" I shouted down at the group, and they all looked up.

Almost immediately after this—

"Ack!"

"It's so bright!"

"I can't see anything—!"

Kei had managed to hack the twenty-something stage lights, point them all directly down at the men, and turn them all on at once. Lights this powerful would easily blind anyone who looked directly into them for a significant length of time.

Once the lights were on, I jumped down onto the stage.

"Hibiki!" I shouted as I charged at the men.

"Why, you little—!"

One of the men made a wild swing at me, but I ducked and swept his legs out from under him with a low kick.

"Wagh!"

First, we needed to escape from the stage.

"Hiyaaah!" I grabbed a different man by the arms and used his momentum to throw him.

This should give them a chance!

"Don't let them get away!" the leader shouted, but the men still couldn't see anything. Meanwhile, the three of us managed to get off the stage and ran through the audience seats.

Okay, I think we can get away now.

"I appreciate your help. But you're Phantom Thief Red, right? Why are you even here?" Kotone said with confusion. Though she was wary of my presence, I got the sense that she trusted me.

"Let me guess…," said Hibiki. "You have eyes on the Hanasato family. That's how you realized there was a kidnapping taking place."

There was a strong twinkle in his eyes as he looked at me.

“That’s right, and I thought you could use some help.” I stared him straight back in the eyes.

“So the power outage from before was your work, I take it…” Hibiki said bitterly. I guess getting saved by Phantom Thief Red didn’t sit too well with him.

“I’m glad you came to help Kotone. Thank you for that. But why?”

Hibiki was holding his left arm, and I noticed he was bleeding.

Kotone must’ve noticed too, because she produced a handkerchief and began to treat his wound.

It’s in character for him to not ask for help in a time like this…

I took a single step closer to Hibiki.

“Hibiki Shirasato. Whether you accept it or not, we’ll do the work we believe in. Right now, that means saving Kotone Hanasato. Maybe our goals are more common than you think,” I suggested.

“But…I can’t accept how you do things,” Hibiki said, looking slightly conflicted.

Kotone, who was working on patching up his arm, quietly added, “Hey, Hibiki. You’re a detective. Even if it feels like you need to take the long road, you pursue justice in your own way, and there’s nothing you have to change about that… That’s what I like about you—the brilliant detective Hibiki Shirasato.”

She’s right! That’s why everyone trusts you.

Hibiki glanced over at Kotone, then back at me, and our gazes met.

A few seconds passed. Hibiki was the first to cave.

“You’re right, Kotone,” he said. “I forgot what was most important to me.”

“Hibiki!”

“Yes… It seems our goals do align. For now, at least.”

A grin appeared on his face.

“That’s what I like to hear. Today, we’re on the same team.” I smiled back.

That settles it!

Hibiki and I both glared back at the stage. The men there were starting to get back on their feet, and they all glared back at us. Their faces were red and angry.

“I’m going to rush them head-on. I want you to take out anyone who tries to come at me from the side!”

“You got it!”

I was in much better shape than Hibiki, so I could still fight.

I knew if we fought among the chairs, the most people who could come at me effectively was two—I’d seen Hibiki use this tactic earlier.

“C’mere, you!”

The men rushed me with their fists up.

I flicked a sleeping gas pellet I had in either hand back at them. Each one broke against the attackers’ foreheads and the two men fell to the ground, asleep.

There’s more where that came from!

I jumped over the sleeping pair, crouched low, and charged the men behind them.

“You think you can take us head-on, you little pipsqueak?!”

One of the men who had his fists up like a boxer sent swift punches my way. I reached out and grabbed one of his punches when it was at its most extended and wrapped around the man.

“Gah, what are ya—?”

The man began to squeal, but I already had my hand on the back of his neck. I pretended I was going to push him forward, but then wrapped my other arm around his neck, pulling him backward and flying into the ground.

“Gragh!”

The man was knocked out cold.

You may be bigger than me, but aikido lets us fight on equal footing!

“Whoops!”

The next men came at me with a kick. I stepped back to avoid it, and I glanced at Hibiki. He was in the middle of his own fight.

If that’s the case…

“Hibiki!” I called out and our eyes met. I kicked off one of the seats and flew up into the air.

“What’s that supposed to do?!” the man in front of me shouted.

Sorry! This attack wasn’t for you.

I flipped midair into a spinning jump kick that hit Hibiki’s foe. The man didn’t have any time to react, and as my powerful kick

hit the man square in the side of his neck, he fell flat onto the ground.

Meanwhile, Hibiki used the confusion to grab him by the arm.

“Hiyah!”

With perfect form, Hibiki took down the man with a shoulder throw. Caught completely off guard by the sudden switch, the kidnapper didn’t even have a chance to defend himself before he hit the ground.

Now that’s what I call a throw! Now that you mention it, I think I heard Hibiki has a black belt in judo.

We swapped places again and took on the incoming men.

“This is ridiculous… There’s only two of them!” the leader said to himself as he backed away.

He was the only one left of the twenty-odd men.

I glanced over at Hibiki. Our eyes met, and we nodded to each other.

We then both charged the leader together—until I almost immediately stopped in my tracks.

Shudder…

I felt a chill run down my spine. Something dangerous had me in its sights.

What is this feeling?!

I cautiously shifted my eyes toward the source, where I saw a lone man. He had tanned skin and sharp eyes that homed in on me and me alone. There was also a large scar across his nose that suggested he’d seen battles.

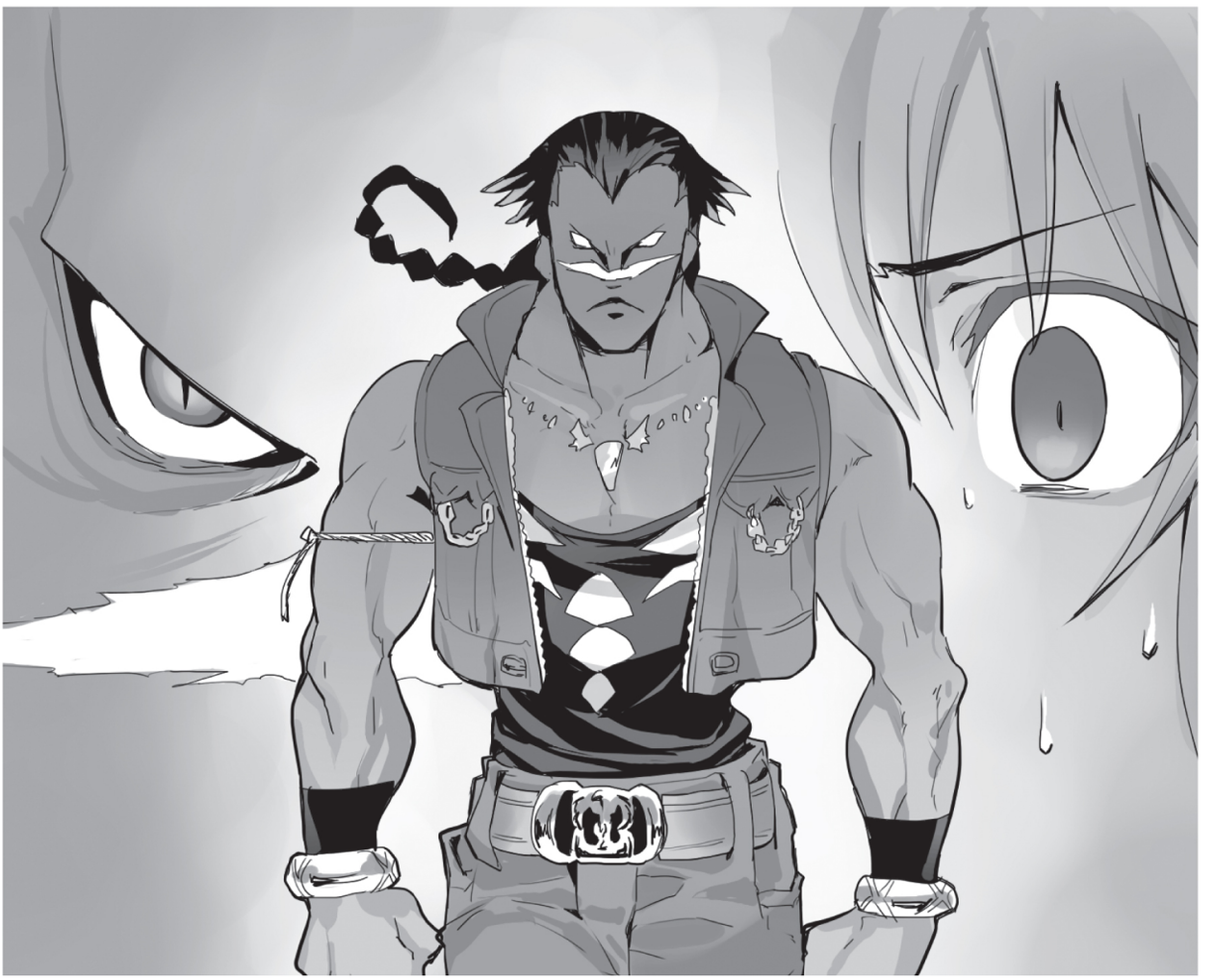
He must’ve been at least six-foot-two, and I could tell that he had trained hard—his arms looked like logs, and his chest was massive. He seemed a little younger than my dad, but this guy was probably a little more buff.

This is the man who got me from behind!

My chilly spine told me so.

“Who are you…?” Hibiki stopped and stared at the man with doubt.

“Stop! This one’s different!” I shouted, but as I did, the man made his move.



With speed unimaginable for his large frame, he closed in on Hibiki.

“Wha—gragh!”

Within an instant, the man was planting a kick on Hibiki, who went flying back and landed on the floor.

“Hibiki!” Kotone yelled.

“Guh…”

Well, at least Hibiki could manage a groan; that meant he was probably still in the fight.

I stepped back and put myself between the man and Kotone and Hibiki.

Looks like I’ll have to deal with this guy.

“Finally deciding to join us, Falcon?” the leader said with a smile.

“The guy’s name is Falcon? He looks Japanese to me, though…”

“It must be a code name. He’s the one who got you, isn’t he?”

“How’d you know? I never said anyone ‘got me’ in the first place.”

“I thought it was strange when I heard you were kidnapped at all. There aren’t many people out there who could pull that off. I assumed you might’ve gotten caught trying to protect someone else, but I can see someone like that pulling it off.”

“This is my first time actually seeing him, too. But I can tell just by looking at him that he’s different from anyone I’ve fought so far. He’s like a tiger mixed in with a pack of dogs.”

“Looks like these two really did a number on you, eh?” Falcon said to the leader.

He completely ignored our presence, like we weren’t even there.

“I can’t argue with that, sir,” the leader said. “These kids are a pretty tough bunch…”

Is Falcon in a higher position than the ringleader is?

“I didn’t ask for excuses. I’m only here to help. Once we deal with these kids, I trust you’ll follow through with the plan?” Falcon said before looking straight at me.

I could feel the pressure bearing down on me—it was like he was staring right through me.

“Y-yes, sir! I don’t know who they are, but they’re strong…” The leader glowered pointedly at me.

“You don’t know?” A smug sneer stretched across Falcon’s face. “That’s Phantom Thief Red.”

“Huh?! You mean *the* Red…?” The leader took a few steps back.

Wait, what’s going on? I never told them my name. But this Falcon guy knows who I am just by looking at me? And hey, I’m not conceited enough to think I’m famous or anything.

“To think we’d meet in a place like this. Interesting. Let’s see what gave Fantasista a run for his money.”

Fantasista?! How does he know about Fantasista? And he knows that I beat him…!

“This guy must be a part of the organization Fantasista mentioned. I didn’t expect to bump heads again in a place like this, though. You good to go, Asuka?” Kei asked.

Ready as I’ll ever be! I got caught off guard before, but not this time. Maybe if we can take this guy out and get him arrested, we can learn more about Fantasista’s organization!

“Let’s do this,” Falcon said curtly before taking a step lightly forward. Within the blink of an eye, there was a fist flying inches away from my face.

He’s fast!

I twisted my body, just barely managing to dodge the blow. I could feel the wind brush past my cheek.

That’s one powerful punch. And his big fists look like they’re made of stone. If he lands even one hit, it’ll take me out.

I jumped back to create some space, but he wasn’t going to let me do that.

“Is that all you’ve got?” Falcon did a side kick with his left leg, but I ducked under it. Again, the wind was strong enough to blow my hair.

If that kick landed, I might’ve lost my head. But now’s my chance!

Sliding under Falcon’s leg, I got in close.

I can get an attack off from here.

“You’re naive.”

As I clenched my fist for a punch, Falcon pulled up his right leg.

He’s gonna knee me! I can’t dodge it!



I crossed my arms in front of me to try and protect myself just as the heavy blow landed.

“Guuuh!”

The attack lifted me off the ground and sent me flying back, but I managed to reorient myself midair and end up on both feet.

“Oh…? You know you couldn’t dodge it, so you leaped back to dull the attack, did you?”

Falcon eyed me down.

“Owww…”

I can barely feel my arms. Even though I managed to cancel out some of the attack, it still hurt a whole lot… And I haven’t hit him once. I don’t know if it’ll even hurt him. Maybe if I can get him to give me an opening, I can perform my fa jin move.

Ah!

This was when I noticed Hibiki, who was on the ground behind Falcon, sending me a message with his eyes.

All right, you got it! I’ll trust you!

As soon as I steadied my breathing, Hibiki made his move.

He latched onto Falcon’s legs. “Now, Red!”

Nowhere to run now, Falcon!

I made sure I was right up next to him before planting my right palm against Falcon’s stomach.

Fa jin is what I used to beat Fantasista! It should work again!

“Hyaaaaaaah!”

I pushed with every ounce of strength I had.

Falcon may be tough, but there’s no coming back from an attack like—

“Huh…?”

My hand hit nothing but air. I was almost pulled over by the force of my attack but managed to catch my balance before looking up.

“That would’ve hurt…if it hit.”

The tension in Falcon’s expression loosened somewhat.

No way… He figured out how to get away from my fa jin?

Hibiki was now reeling in pain while he held his arm.

“He kicked Hibiki Shirasato away with his heel using minimal movement and back-stepped away from your attack.”

All in, like, a split second?! If fa jin won’t work, then how am I gonna beat him…?

“Now it’s my turn.”

I didn’t have time to think before Falcon’s log-like arms were flying this way.

Not able to react quickly enough, I was forced to block with my arms again.

“Ack!”

I tried to stay on my feet, but the attack was just too strong. I scrambled to get back up, but Falcon was standing there staring down at me.

His fist came swinging down.

I can’t dodge him!

I could only try to block again.

“It’s over.”

He’s gonna get me!!

I gritted my teeth, bracing for the impact, but it never came.

Slowly, I opened my eyes, and—

“Looks like our time’s up…,” Falcon whispered to himself as he gazed toward the door.

Sirens were approaching from off in the distance.

It was the police!

“Hmph… You lucked out this time, Red. I just hope you’re a little stronger the next time we meet,” Falcon said as he turned around and walked the other way.

“Falcon! Where are you going?!” called the leader, who’d been watching the fight from afar.

“We failed this time. Give it up,” Falcon replied as he opened the door and left the scene.

He’s gonna get away before the police get here. What should I do…?

I glanced over at Kotone and Hibiki.

Hmm…I can’t leave these two behind to pursue him.

I let out a long sigh. All my energy left my body, and I couldn’t get up.

That fight with Falcon might’ve been more intense for me than I thought.

“Shoot…”

The leader limply stumbled onto the floor. He seemed to have given up. All of the other men were knocked out cold on the ground, so I decided to let the police take care of the rest.

“Hibiki! Are you okay?” Kotone was running over to her friend, and there were tears pouring down her cheeks and onto the floor.

I went over closer, too.

Hibiki was in bad shape, especially where Falcon kicked him.

“The police will be here soon,” I said. “I’m glad you’re safe, Kotone Hanasato.”

“Phantom Thief Red… I’d like to express my gratitude once more. Thank you.” Kotone faced me and bowed.

“I have to go. And when we meet again…”

“We’ll be enemies,” Hibiki finished. “But…you saved us, and I thank you for that…” He held his hand out.

Is this…?

Though I hesitated at first, I reached out and grabbed his hand.

His handshake was firm, even though he was so beat-up. Our gazes met one final time before I yanked my hand back and got out of there.

15
A New Curtain Rises!

Everyone was on edge. I was in the dressing room in the new theater hall, along with Yukimura, Minatsu, and the entire theater club!

That's right! Today's the big day!

"Minatsu! We don't have enough people to do all the makeup. Do you think you could get the first-year students for us?" one of the older students asked.

"Sure! I'll be right there," she called, then came running over with her own personal cosmetics box.

After the kidnapping, I returned to the school in one piece, which was good, but…there were police waiting for me at the school. Which made sense, given the whole kidnapping thing.

Me and Minatsu and Yukimura and President Shiori all had to tell the police what we saw. But despite the commotion, President Shiori managed to convince the school to allow us to continue our summer camp.

"Kouzuki," said Minatsu, "would you mind helping me out with something? Captain Yukimura wanted me to bring colored duct tape and sandwiches to the stage area for the older students. Could you bring them for me?"

"You want me to do it?"

Before, Minatsu never would've asked me to do something that Yukimura wanted her to do—she'd want to do it herself. But ever since the kidnapping, she'd started to rely on both me and her other fellow first-year students more.

Although she still calls me Kouzuki…

I took the colored duct tape and sandwiches from Minatsu and went into the hallway.

"Oh, Kei and President Shiori! What're you doing here?"

The two were waiting outside in the hallway.

"How are the preparations going, Kouzuki?" asked President Shiori.

"They're going well! We're as ready as we'll ever be—I'm just glad we were able to finish our summer camp! Get ready for a show that'll knock your socks off!!

"Except for Asuka's scenes. Your socks will be fine during those," Kei mumbled from the side.

"Hey! I'll have you know I rehearsed my butt off for this! My mentor Minatsu and Yukimura and the older kids all helped me, too! You won't even be able to *find* your socks after you see my performance!"

"I guess I have something to look forward to, then."

Huh?

That was oddly sincere for him, so I didn't know what to say.

Kei turned to President Shiori. "We'd better be getting to our seats."

What? Already?

"I'm not affiliated with the theater club," he added. "I was just helping President Orihara find the dressing room."

Oh, I see.

With that, Kei returned to his seat in the audience.

"So, why did you want to come here, President Shiori?" I asked.

"I've actually seen everything I need to see. I just wanted to check to make sure you weren't impacted by the kidnapping too much. I'm looking forward to seeing you onstage. Break a leg."

"Thank you! I will!"

President Shiori left, looking satisfied.

Now I'd better get going, too!

I was finally wearing my costume and performing one last check. It was almost showtime.

Knock, knock.

Someone was at the door.



“Who could that be? The show’s about to start,” Yukimura said as she opened the door.

“I’m sorry about coming at such an inconvenient time, but it was the only time I could make.”

It was Kotone and Hibiki. One of Hibiki’s arms was in a cast, and he was covered in bandages. Kotone came over to where Minatsu and I were.

“I’m sorry for getting you involved with another dangerous incident,” Kotone said to us while giving a deep bow.

“It’s fine… You had it way worse than we did, and just look at Detective Shirasato.”

“This is nothing, really,” Hibiki said with a wry smile. “Besides, there’s still much work to be done on my part. I don’t have time to stop and rest. I realized I need to grow stronger and more sure of what I believe in.”

Hibiki was brimming with confidence and conviction.

Looks like someone is back on their feet. Yeah, I’m definitely not looking forward to meeting him again as Red. I may have made a new problem for myself…but it’s kind of nice to see him recovering.

“Thanks for coming to see us,” Yukimura said to Kotone, speaking for all of us. “We’re going to put on a show that will make you glad our theater club is performing here.”

“Yes, I look forward to seeing you all onstage. Now, go put on a brilliant show.”

Kotone and Hibiki then left the room.

“Is everybody ready? It’s almost time.”

Yukimura surveyed the theater club. She was wearing a male costume that the home ec club was proud of making—and she looked really, really cool.

My heart is starting to race. I have all my lines memorized, and practiced projecting my voice as much as I could, so…I should be okay.

“Um, Minatsu. Does my costume look okay?” I asked.

I was wearing a green dress. Yuzuki put it together for me, so even though it was a simple costume, it was super cute!

“Here, let me see.” Minatsu examined my costume. She was in a dress similar to mine, only it was yellow.

“Here, the bowtie is all out of shape.” She adjusted the ribbon that held my dress together, then said, “That should do it.”

Minatsu finished tying the bow and looked up, her eyes resting right on me.

It was her usual glare—the one I'd seen many times before—but it was a little different.

"I'm not going to let you outperform me, Asuka," Minatsu told me.

She blushed a little before turning her face away.

Ah…

It didn't hit me until a few seconds later.

Did she just use my first name?

"All right, everyone! Time for the show!" Yukimura called out.

""Okay!""

We all responded in unison. And then, one by one, we filed out of the dressing room.

I watched Minatsu go, then followed her.

"Hey, Minatsu!" I said. "You're on! I'm gonna give you a run for your money!"

Minatsu turned around, grinning ear to ear, and nodded back.

Afterword

Hello there! This is Phantom Thief Red's recordkeeper, Shin Akigi.

Asuka had to deal with a new play this time—and she got to go to theater camp! Sounds like fun.

"As for me, I was just concerned she might cause more problems for the school."

Oh! I know that long, black hair and sharp face—President Orihara?! What's the Ice Queen doing here?

"I was out on a walk and found myself here… Oh, and you dropped something."

Ah! That's my copy of Kei's secret message. I wanted to try and break the code, but completely forgot about it. But…I wasn't having any luck.

"844266557777…?" President Orihara is tilting her head to the side.

It's supposed to be some sort of secret code. Do you have any idea?

"A code… Yes, I think I understand now."

Yeah, it's really hard to— Wait, did you just say you figured it out?!

"Yes, the key is a cell phone."

A cell phone?

"Look at the number keys."

Let's see… 8 is T, 44 is H 'cause it's the second letter on the key, then A, N, K, S. 'Thanks'! That's it!

"I believe that should be the answer. I really must be on my way now. I have a student council meeting. Goodbye."

Oh, there she goes. President Orihara, please help Phantom Thief Red out when you can.

Ah, one last thing. Phantom Thief Red can get themselves into really sticky situations. Just make sure you never try to follow their example, okay?

With that, let's both look forward to their next adventure!

Shin Akigi

PHANTOM

Presented by Shin Akigi & Shu

Thief Red


I WON'T LET ANYONE STEAL FROM UNDER MY WATCH...NOT EVEN PHANTOM THIEF RED!
PHANTOM Thief Red
Name: Hibiki Shirasato
Height: 5'4"
Weight: 110 Pounds
Blood Type: A
Birthday: May 3
Likes Deduction, English tea
Respects Sherlock Holmes
Dislikes Loud places, Phantom Thief Red
Hobby Logic puzzles
Skill Judo
Current Obsession Reading old cases solved by famous detectives, and capturing Phantom Thief Red

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