

New Phase

Part 1 of 5

Series #1 in the Teach the Sky Continuity

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New Phase, Part 1 of 5
Copyright: Robert V Aldrich, 2014
Published: 2014/03/07

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The classroom air was stagnant.

Despite being mid-spring, with its biting cold mornings and mild afternoons, the sun coming in through the windows that lined the side of the classroom heated the room and stilled the air. It also had the side effect of making concentrating almost impossible.

Shotaro Kodana sat in the fourth of six rows, in the left-most column of the classroom seats. His dark blue jacket was unbuttoned halfway down and the sleeves rolled up to his elbows as he fanned himself with his hand. The teacher at the head of the classroom was writing something in English. In the heat, though, the distance seemed to stretch into infinity. No matter how hard Shotaro tried to focus, the teacher and his alien words were just too far away to focus on.

His eyes trailed towards the heat and out the window. Three stories down, in the athletic fields of Otomo High School, he spotted one of the gym classes. A few of the gym classes had switched to the summer attire and this was one of them. His inability to concentrate suddenly evaporated when he spotted a dozen or so girls doing calisthenics in very short-shorts and t-shirts. Like any sixteen year old boy, Shotaro was immediately transfixed.

From his pocket came a slight rumble. He was suddenly snapped back to his immediate surroundings and looked nervously around the dull, overheated classroom. The teacher at the front, an older man who seemed especially capable of not noticing the condition of his students, was still droning on about participles of the English language. The students were mostly zoned out. At least two that Shotaro could see were obviously texting on their phones.

Shotaro took out his phone, the source of the rumble. A touch screen unlike the more fashionable flip phones, his phone informed him of a message waiting for him. It was from Saya Miyamura. Shotaro smiled, both amused and irritated, and looked to his right, to the girl with dyed blonde hair and a disapproving look. Shotaro made a show of taking his time to check his message.

The message read 'PERVERT!'

Shotaro made an equal show of closing the message. “Jealous?” he whispered to Saya.

“How am I supposed to take your overtures seriously if I see you spying on suspecting young girls?” Saya whispered across the narrow gap between their desks. “From afar, no less. Don’t even have the gall to ogle them in person?”

“I ogle you in person,” Shotaro whispered back, leaning towards her to smile.

“Pssh,” she dismissed. “You call that ogling? That’s more like...lazy self-imaging.” She looked away with pretend indignation and an exaggerated longing. “However can I believe your promises of bliss if you’re objectification of me is so second-rate?”

“I objectify you more intently than any other girl,” Shotaro promised her in an overly-sincere tone. His phone began to vibrate again. Shotaro immediately muted it.

“Another lover I should be jealous of?” Saya teased him. Shotaro began to answer and Saya undid a button on her blouse. This revealed nothing but the notch of her collar but it set a fire inside Shotaro’s mind as he stared, transfixed on the next button. “So easily broken.” Saya rebuttoned her shirt, looking hurt. “Still just a little boy.”

“Hey, I’m—” he began.

He didn’t get the chance to finish. The triple-chimes of the class bell struck. The teacher at the head of the classroom, with a dizzy look, glanced up at the clock in surprise. “Oh my,” he said. He turned around to the students and smiled apologetically, as though he felt bad for depriving them of their continued delight of his education. “Well, see you tomorrow,” he said rather absently before he began to gather his things.

In the gap between classes, every student in unison took up their phones. A collective symphony of the chimes of button-presses echoed through the room as everyone checked their messages and status updates. For Shotaro, he pulled up the text he’d received while flirting with Saya.

“Got some underclassman to send you a picture of her panties?” Saya teased Shotaro. She fell silent when she saw the look on his face. The normally handsome and carefree Shotaro was worried.

“It’s from my mom,” he told her.

“Your mom?” Saya repeated, mirroring the worry on Shotaro’s face. “What’s it say?”

“Don’t trust them,” Shotaro read to her. He looked at his friend, finishing “They aren’t our friends.”

Saya leaned over the gap between the desks and looked at his phone. “Nothing else?” she asked. Shotaro shook his head. “Your sister was copied,” she observed.

“Miya’s a good girl. She doesn’t check her phone during school,” Shotaro said. He looked at Saya, puzzled and worried. “Mom doesn’t send stuff like this. She doesn’t really even text, except when I’m out too late.”

“Which is all the time,” Saya tried to tease, hoping to see Shotaro’s smile. It did appear, but it faded like sand through fingers. “Can you call her?”

“She’s got to be at work, they can’t...” he said, already starting to dial in spite of his certainty of failure. He didn’t complete the number.

“Mr. Kodana?”

Shotaro and Saya both looked up like they’d just been caught doing something wrong. At the head of the class was one of the school security guards. “Mr. Kodana,” repeated the guard over the heads of the class that had fallen perfectly silent. “I need you to come with me to the office.”

Shotaro’s jaw dropped. He looked down at his phone.

‘Don’t trust them. They aren’t our friends’ remained on his screen.

Saya looked at Shotaro, then to the security guard. “He’ll be right there,” she said with a cheerful smile. She smacked Shotaro on the arm and jerked him out of his malaise.

Shotaro quickly gathered up his things, stuffing his notepads into his briefcase/backpack. As he slung it onto his shoulder, he looked at Saya. ‘Call me’ she mouthed to him. He nodded and started towards the front of the room where the guard waited.

The security guard, in a dark blue uniform reminiscent of a police officers’ uniform, walked just ahead of Shotaro. They crossed practically the length of the school, down long hallways that were lined with the sliding doors, most of which were open to manage the heat from the windows. That meant the walk was filled with glancing eyes and incriminating whispers of ‘he’s in trouble again’. More than a few looked justified, like they had expected to see a delinquent like Shotaro escorted out of the school by security.

“What’s this about?” Shotaro asked, his eyes and voice averted from the guard.

“There’s someone here to see you,” said the guard, an overly tall man who was very thin, despite the slight bulge around the belt.

Shotaro didn’t ask anything more. He remained quiet, one thumb stuck in the shoulder strap of his book bag, until they arrived at the office. Through the hard plastic door that looked sturdier than it really was, Shotaro saw the familiar frosted plastic window behind which waited the secretary. An old woman who knew enough to judge everyone and knew too little to be right about it, she had thin little glasses that looked more for effect than to address any actual vision issues.

In the seats to the right, towards the principal’s door, Shotaro saw his sister. Two years younger, she was dressed in the uniform of the middle school across the street. “Miya,” Shotaro said, stunned. His little sister looked more confused than worried. “What’s going on?”

“Mr. Kodana,” came a voice from within the principal’s opening door. Shotaro and Miya both turned as out with the principal stepped a man in a black suit that looked more expensive than some cars. “I’m Hayao Minase. I’m the director of special projects, the

division over your mother's department at Eighty-Four Industries." He smiled very comfortingly. "There's been a bit of an incident. Nothing's wrong and your mom is fine," he quickly assured them. "We're just here to take you to her."

'Don't trust them' flashed through Shotaro's mind. 'They aren't our friends'.

"Miya's all ready to go," Hayao said with a gesture to the young girl like he was a proud uncle. "Shotaro, why don't you run to your locker and get your stuff? I have a car waiting," he said, like riding in the car was an honor. "We'll leave directly from school."

"Sure," Shotaro said. He nodded and gave his best good-boy-smile. "Just give me a minute." He turned and headed out of the office, acutely aware of the school security guard following a few steps behind.

The lockers weren't far from the school office. Meant more for storage than daily use, Shotaro's locker was in the very middle of the double-stacked lockers made of blued metal. He undid his combination lock quickly before he glanced over the top of the lockers at the security guard that had waited by the pair of steps down into the locker area. Unsure of what to do, Shotaro went ahead and opened his locker.

Inside his locker, placed atop his books was a plain cardboard shoebox. Written hastily on the top of the box was 'Don't trust them'. It looked like his mother's handwriting. Shotaro took the cardboard shoebox out of the locker and opened it.

Inside was a black and dark blue device that looked like a cross between a watch and a bracelet. It fit on the back of the hand, with clasps around the palm and ridge of the hand, as well as between two fingers. The display sat firmly on the rear of the hand itself. On the top of the box was written 'Watanabe Park'.

Shotaro picked up the watch, studying it. It didn't look particularly valuable or even all that stylish. The body was made of dark metal that looked colored from production, not the result of deliberate aesthetics. The arms that secured it to the back of the hand were an unremarkable blue. He slipped it onto his hand, curious if it would fit. He had only a little trouble adjusting it. Wearing the watch, a new sense of paranoia hit him. He looked over the lockers and could see the security guard waiting, growing impatient.

Shotaro crouched down a little, hiding behind his locker. He took out his phone and called texted Saya 'I need a distraction to ditch security'.

Almost immediately, he received from her 'No problem'.

An instant later, Shotaro heard a loud a shriek from a distant side of the school. He peaked over the lockers and saw the security guard turn, speaking into a walkie-talkie clipped onto his shoulder. The guard began to walk quickly away, heading into the heart of the school. "Saya, I owe you," Shotaro said as he dashed for the office.

He slipped past the door and managed to peek inside. Miya was still sitting next to the principal's office, kicking her feet back and forth, a little bored. Shotaro could see Minase speaking with the principal, but they had mostly retreated back into the office itself with the door half-closed.

Shotaro quickly texted his sister, saying 'ask to go to the bathroom'. She looked puzzled and texted him back.

'Why?'

Shotaro sighed, knowing time was limited. He texted her back 'JUST DO IT!!!'

Miya exhaled irritably. She raised her hand, still kicking her feet. "Principal Minamoto? I have to go to the bathroom."

Given the most tertiary of permission, Miya hopped up and headed out of the office. She stopped abruptly in the middle of the doorway when she saw her brother crouching down by the door. "What are you doing?" she gawked.

Shotaro was about to reprimand her for stopping in plain sight when a shout came from behind. He looked back and saw the security guard coming back. "Run!" Shotaro yelled, grabbing Miya's hand and breaking into a sprint.

Shotaro and Miya ran into the lockers and dashed out of the school, their sandals clapping as they bypassed the shoe stalls. They broke out onto the sidewalk that ran in front

of the school itself. Shotaro started running to the right, practically dragging his younger sister behind him.

“Why are we running?” Miya yelled, panting as her hand grew heavier in Shotaro’s grasp.

“Because...” Shotaro realized he didn’t know how to explain it. “Just keep up!” They approached the edge of the school grounds, only to see a security guard appear around the corner at the intersection. “Run!” Shotaro yelled again, dashing to the left, his sister screaming behind him.

They ran across the empty street and ran for an alley between two tall apartment buildings. Trash cans dotting the narrow space they were running between, the ground was slightly slanted in towards the drainage ditches that ran through the middle of the alley, broken up occasionally with metal drains.

Shotaro slowed to look back, seeing the security guard giving chase. “This way!” he yelled, pulling his gasping sister after him. They darted down an intersecting alley and came out to a street, both of them running to the left now. Shotaro slowed, letting his sister catch her breath without stopping.

“What’s going on?” Miya demanded, gasping, her face contorted in pain.

“Mom’s in trouble,” Shotaro told her, looking in every direction at once as they walked down the street, passing open stores on their left.

“What happened?” Miya asked, finally able to form complete sentences again.

Back out of the alley they’d just come, Shotaro spotted one of the school security guards. “Go!” he said, ushering Miya rather than running. They crossed the street, the security guard coming after them in a brisk walk.

Shotaro led Miya through the glass doors of the shopping mall only a few blocks from the school. Immediately before them were the short escalators up half a flight to the main shopping area, the steps down to the grocery below street level, and the taller and steeper escalators that went to the high-end boutiques more than a story overhead. One

glance at his options and Shotaro went running up the steeper escalators. He didn't let Miya slow down until they reached the top. Glancing back, he saw the security guard spot them. "Dammit!" Shotaro cursed and he ran with Miya.

The shopping mall had white tiled floors and low ceilings with numerous inlaid lights overhead, connecting the tiny specialized shops like veins running between muscles. Each shop was encased primarily in glass, giving them complete exposure, but the grid-like pattern made it easy for Shotaro and Miya to disappear quickly.

Rather than run farther to the back, Shotaro immediately darted down the first perpendicular path he could find, running between a chocolate shop and a purse store. He reached the far wall and a fire escape exit. He just about ran through the door before Miya shouted "You can't!" She pulled him back, to keep him from slamming into the alarmed door.

Surprised he'd missed it, Shotaro ran along the rear wall until they came to a storage center door that was thankfully held open by a shoe. Shotaro shoved it open and the two kids ran through, darting past two daytime shift workers sharing a joint.

They ran around two stacks of boxes with the names of stores Shotaro didn't recognize and knelt down behind them. Shotaro was panting a little, but Miya collapsed, gasping. They could hear the shouts of the two day-shift workers calling after them but the two men clearly hadn't even stood from the turned-over buckets they'd been sitting on.

"What's...going on?" Miya gasped, slumping her back against the pallet of boxes. "Why did you kidnap me from school?"

"I didn't kidnap you," Shotaro said, darting his eyes around the pallet. Satisfied they weren't being followed for the moment, he turned around and slumped down next to his sister, the situation catching up with him. "Look, mom's in trouble."

"Yes, and that guy was going to take us to her!" Miya exclaimed. She smacked Shotaro on the shoulder. "Why'd you kidnap me?!"

Shotaro turned, about to yell at her, but instead took out his phone. “Mom wrote this, just before I got taken to the office.”

Miya took the phone and read the message aloud. “Don’t trust them. They aren’t our friends.” Her anger at Shotaro faded as worried confusion overtook her.

“In my locker,” Shotaro further explained, “I found this thing in a box.” He held up his hand, showing her the watch on the back of his hand. “On the lid, mom had written ‘don’t trust them’ and ‘Watanabe Park’.”

“You’re sure it was mom?” Miya asked.

Shotaro shrugged. “It looked like her handwriting.”

Miya hit Shotaro again. “This is just a prank!” she yelled at him. “One of your lowlife loser friends did this!” She turned and faced away, beginning to hyperventilate like she was running again. “Oh god, we’re going to get expelled. This is going on our record. I’ll never get into a good university.” She looked more panicked. “I’ll have to go to a crappy loser high school like yours.”

“Hey,” Shotaro protested.

“I’ll never get a good job,” Miya kept whining.

Rather than argue with Miya on her verbal rampage, Shotaro looked at the watch itself. It had a digital display that looked like it was the time, but it showed ‘89:63’. Shotaro checked the time on his phone, as if just to be sure. He set his phone aside and studied the watch a little more closely.

It was almost like a metal claw cupping the back of his hand. Atop the metal frame was a watch-like face with a dial along the edge. In the middle of the face was a digital display with the four digits, still reading ‘89:63’. Momentarily curious as to how to adjust the time, Shotaro shifted the dial beneath the display one click to the right, to the 2 o’clock position. Doing so caused the digital display popped up slightly. The high school boy panicked and pressed it back down, and in doing so left the world.

The new world was purple. Or rather, all light was purple. All the light fixtures that had been recessed into the ceilings and lined the cinderblock walls of the storage space were giving off light purple light rather than the usual white or stained-yellow light. There was also a strange silence to the space, like there was no sound.

Shotaro stumbled to his feet, panicking. He looked down at Miya who was looking to where he'd been. "Miya!" he shouted at her. His voice sounded sharp and crisp, like he was shouting in a metal hallway, the high-pitched echo traveling forever.

Miya didn't hear him. She looked around, increasingly panicking. Shotaro reached for her and she turned away from him. He bumped into the pallet of boxes but it was like slamming into a wall a full run. He legitimately feared he'd broken his hand. He fell back and grabbed his fingers, wincing in pain. When he looked again, Miya had stood up. She was starting to cry, terrified beyond words and all alone.

A thought occurred to Shotaro and he looked at the watch. He clicked the dial back to the left one time, facing up at 12 o'clock. The digital display popped up and Shotaro pushed it down frantically.

Shotaro reappeared right in front of Miya. His astonished and terrified sister stared for just a second and then hit him in the chest. "Don't do that! Whatever...that was!" She hit him again, just to make sure he knew she was serious. She hit him a third time, then fell onto him, crying. He wrapped his arms around her, staring up at the ceiling, strangely overjoyed to see white light again. He hugged Miya as she hugged him. He even teared up a little himself.

The moment passed and Miya pled and simultaneously demanded, "Where did you go?"

Shotaro looked down at the watch on his left hand and shook his head. "It did something." Miya followed his eyes down to his hand and stared at the thing that had taken her brother from her, even for a moment. "I was...everything was purple," he told her. His mind traced back through the day like he was reliving events in reverse. "Mom left this in my locker."

“How?” asked Miya.

Shotaro shook his head. “I don’t know.” He looked at it again. “Maybe this is something she was working on.”

“Mom’s not a scientist,” Miya said.

“She’s an engineer,” Shotaro half-corrected, staring at the device.

“But she works on...communication stuff. Satellite TV and the internet,” Miya said. “She doesn’t...make...disappearing watches or whatever this is.”

Shotaro looked at his sister. He took her by the shoulders, as though he were steadying her. “We’ve got to find mom. This, her, all of it. It’s all...connected or something.” Miya nodded. “But we can’t tell anyone about this.”

“Why not?” Miya asked. “Why don’t we go to the police or something?”

“The company guy was talking to the principal,” Shotaro insisted. “He said he was a director. He had me escorted out of class by one of the school security guards. He got you out of school too. You think he doesn’t have pull with the police?”

“But...” Miya asked defiantly.

“Look, until we find mom, we can’t go to the police,” Shotaro told her. “We can’t trust them, okay?”

“The police or the company guy?” Miya asked. “Just because you don’t like police because you’re a juvenile delinquent doesn’t mean...and besides, we don’t even know the company guy was a bad guy. Maybe mom’s...maybe he was going to...”

Shotaro let his sister’s defense flimsy out. “Something about him felt wrong to you, didn’t it?” he asked rhetorically. Miya wanted to protest but couldn’t argue with him. “We have to find mom.”

“But—” Miya began again.

“You really think mom would leave this with me – with US – and not be in trouble? And it not be important?” Shotaro said. He looked at the watch. “Mom’s never done anything like this in her life. She doesn’t even jaywalk! This thing is why she’s in trouble. I’m sure of it.”

“I’m not,” Miya said defiantly.

Shotaro sighed and stood. “Look, just trust me on this.” He took Miya’s hand. “We’re going to find mom.” He helped her up off the floor and, hand in hand, he led her out.

The two shift workers were gone so Shotaro was able to peek out through the storage center doors. As he did, he spotted two men in black outfits like military men. They immediately turned towards the door when it shifted open. They looked right at Shotaro. “Crap!” he exclaimed, leaping back.

“What?!” Miya asked, grabbing onto his arm.

Shotaro looked from the door to his sister. He glanced around the storage room, and then his eye dropped to the watch. “Hold on!” he told her, turning the dial to 2 o’clock once again and slapping the digital face. Shotaro was once again in a world of purple. But Miya hadn’t joined him. He could see her, but she clearly couldn’t see him and was panicking. Worse, the door to the storage room was opening. Three suited men were coming in.

Two of the men were staring right at Shotaro.

There was something distinctive about them. They weren’t made out of purple like everything else, but appeared illuminated purple by the light. They weren’t in the normal world being observed by Shotaro – they shared his new world.

The first of the men grabbed for Shotaro, catching his arm. “Got it!” he called, pulling Shotaro’s left hand – and the device worn upon it – towards the door. Shotaro stamped his feet into the ground to resist being pulled. He stopped in his place, like he’d propped himself against a wall. The other man in the suit grabbed Shotaro by the collar of

his school uniform and pulled as well. “You’re coming with us,” said the first man, groaning in effort to move the boy like he was trying to pull a parked car.

Shotaro let them pull him for a second, and then he hopped free of the ground, causing them both to fall forward with the release. He turned the dial back to 12 o’clock and slapped the digital display again, reappearing in the normal world. His appearance startled the third suited man, giving Shotaro time to grab Miya’s hand and yell again “Run!” They dashed around the man who leapt to catch them but managed to get ahold of nothing.

Through the storage doors, they burst into the shopping mall. Suited men dotted the hallways. Shotaro ran to his right, dashing deeper into the mall. The men moved to chase him as Miya tried desperately to keep up. Shotaro turned left at the first intersection and then left again at the next, now with a clear view of the exit. He began to sprint faster but found himself dragging Miya rather than pulling her. He glanced back and his sister, as if reading his mind, yelled “I can’t keep up!”

Shotaro pulled her until they reached the escalators and stopped, looking back at the suited men cloistered around the escalator but didn’t follow them. “Why aren’t they—” Shotaro began to ask when he heard Miya gasp. He turned and looked down to the base of the mall.

Hayao Minase stood at the base of the escalator with a dozen men in suits behind him. His arms crossed, he stood in a defiant posture, looking more amused than annoyed. “Give us the—”

He didn’t get the chance to finish because Shotaro vaulted over the side of the escalator, landing on the shorter pair of escalators going onto the main floor. “Stop him!” Hayao yelled as Miya awkwardly leapt to follow her brother.

Miya landed on the hard metal that rattled the delicate machine. The steps stuttered and stopped, tripping up the men pursuing them for just a second. It gave Shotaro time to reach back and grab Miya’s hand and again lead her running. They darted into the mall proper with higher ceilings and brighter lights. The shops were larger too, with full walls rather than merely transparent glass.

Shotaro raced down the main hall, Miya in tow and falling behind. They came to the first major intersection of the shopping mall and skidded to a halt, looking around. Plenty of directions to go, but down all of them were more men in suits coming right for them. “What do we do?” Miya yelled.

Shotaro, surveying their dwindling options, grabbed up a trash can and threw it at the nearest storefront window. The trashcan cracked the glass and Shotaro, yanking Miya after him, kicked it hard. The glass fractured further and then broke with a second kick. Disappearing into the store, they ran past shoppers and confused storekeepers. Shotaro kicked a table full of clothes, causing it to teeter over and fall in their wake, spreading confusion behind them.

Shotaro and Miya reached the rear of the store as the store manager appeared before them. He readied to shout but Shotaro ducked under his arms, Miya following him. They both rushed into the rear of the store. They made a beeline for the far wall where a door out onto the loading bay waited. They leapt down off the loading bay platform and onto the pavement leading out to the street.

“What now?” Miya asked as they half-jogged to the street.

Shotaro stopped at the street and looked both ways, seeing no one for a moment. “Come on,” he told Miya and they started running again.

At the front of the mall, Hayao Minase typed on his phone. A man in a suit approached with an apologetic look on his face. “I’m sorry, sir. They children have gotten away.”

Minase didn’t react for a moment. Instead, he just kept on typing. Once he’d completed his message, he sighed as he put his phone away. “Keep looking,” he told the man. Once the suited man was gone, Minase dialed his phone and looked around, making sure his men weren’t within easy listening range. The phone picked up and Minase said immediately, “They escaped. There was silence as he listened. “No, we know they have the shifter. The boy’s even used it.” More silence. “We’ve got a team and police at their home,

and we have several additional scenarios for where they may also go. We'll get them in no time." He nodded, as though in agreement and said "Yes sir." He hung up the phone and looked around again, whispering "Damn."

Tokyo was golden.

On the side of a hill, layered like steps, Watanabe Park was glowing as the afternoon transitioned to dusk. Looking out over the magnificent city, it was alit by the reflections off the glass and walls of the city that stretched almost out of sight. The air was growing cold and that warm breezes were fewer and farther between, stirring the trees with just the beginning of green leaves dotting their branches.

Shotaro sat on a park bench in the middle of the park, staring at the watch and looking at nothing. He was turning the dial around and around, clockwise and then counter-clockwise, the digital display remaining the same, unmoving. The dial had six positions, 12 o'clock and then equal points around the dial. He turned the dial back to the top and faced ahead, tapping the display down. Nothing happened as he remained in the glowing, golden world of dusk overlooking Tokyo.

In front of him, Miya was sitting on the swings, swaying back and forth. The swings were like some throne of protection for her as she stared at the city, like she expected at any moment for it to finally yield and give her back her mother.

"Remember when mom used to bring us up here every Sunday?" Miya asked distantly, the chains of the swing squeaking as she slowly swung forward and back, like a metronome. Shotaro perked up when she spoke. "We'd get ice cream bars when we were

leaving. You'd always get a Spiderman ice cream bar." She looked over her shoulder at her brother. "Why'd we stop coming?"

Shotaro looked at the ground and was surprised when a droplet of water hit the dirt. He worried it was raining and he looked up, only to see the clear city sky. He felt a drop on his cheek and realized it was a tear. He dabbed it away, then stared at his wet hand. "I stole some money out of a woman's purse," he confessed, almost against his will.

"Why?!" Miya gawked at him.

Shotaro looked down, embarrassed. "Mom didn't have any money for ice cream. And she told me that we weren't going to be able to get ice cream bars, and she was afraid you'd be sad. I thought..." He didn't feel compelled to finish explaining himself. He looked away as a few more tears dripped down his cheek and onto the ground. "She's not coming," he said abruptly, the realization pushing more tears onto his cheeks.

Miya turned away from her brother and faced the city. The wind picked up. The trees rattled more than rustled and a biting cold came down out of the sky. Miya pulled her arms close, shivering a bit in her middle school uniform. She stopped swinging.

Shotaro was looking at his phone now, scrolling through the messages he had from his mother. They were all 'look after your sister', 'try not to get into trouble', and 'come home safe'. Only the last was anything different. Only the last was 'don't trust them'.

"They aren't our friends," Shotaro said aloud, not needing to read the text yet again. The seven words were burned into his mind.

"What do we do now?" Miya asked, turning in the stagnant swing to look back at Shotaro. "We can't go home." Shotaro didn't answer. He just stared at his phone like he expected it to ring again. "Why isn't mom here?"

Shotaro stood. He walked to the swings and took Miya's hand from the chains. "Come on," he told her, both kindly yet honestly. "We're on our own."